

Blood Vow

By

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Mornings were just not Alex's best time of the day. He rushed around the kitchenette, the drying slime of hair gel on the palms of his hands, a tenacious ash threatening to break off the cigarette dangling from his lips. He spun in a circle while trying to tuck in his black and grey dress shirt leaving streaks wherever his hands pushed the fabric into his khaki slacks. He reached over and stirred his instant coffee and as he leaned over to grab the sugar the ash from his cigarette plunked gracefully into the hot liquid.

He looked down and sighed, blowing the remnant ash flakes from the cigarette all over the counter top. Alex pulled back his lips and grabbed the cigarette butt with his teeth then spit it into the cup where it splashed with a satisfying sizzle. He looked at the clock on the wall "Fuck!" He was late every damn Monday morning.

Alex sighed again as he heard Sam's bare feet slapping the hardwood floor of the hallway. His sister, Samantha, had become his 'temporary' roommate over the last six months after she had screwed up yet another promising

relationship -- this time with someone that Alex had actually liked-- and lately he had been forced into playing the mean older brother that needed her to get a job to help pay the bills.

Alex's salary wasn't bad for a single man in his late twenties. He could buy the toys he enjoyed, go to nice restaurants when he wanted and hit a few night clubs for cool brews and jazz whenever he had the chance. Since Sam had moved in though, he had been paying her court costs and lawyer expenses for a drunken driving charge within her first week as his roommate and buying all the food and drinks that her and her frequent overnight friends could consume when they had the munchies or were building up their energy for another two hour bout of loud animal sex.

Alex was broke and jealous, sober and hungry, and very late for work, once again.

"Hey Allie," Sam chirped as she bustled into the sad excuse for a kitchen with a cracked tile floor and one small countertop space. She opened the refrigerator and grabbed two cans of cola, letting the door close on its own while she stacked one can on top of the other in order to free her other hand to grab a box of cookies that had been left open on the counter.

"You talk to Ed today, right?" Alex asked as he pushed the coffee cup ashtray away from the edge of the counter.

"Yum, I do."

"Christ, Sam. Don't start like that."

She looked at him with feigned innocence. "Like what?"

"He's my *boss*, Sam."

"But he doesn't know you're my brother." Sam grinned mischievously at him. Alex could only sigh yet again. He had secretly finagled a job interview for Sam at the small office building where he worked. They had needed an administrative assistant for a number of months and he had finally found a way to get her into the door without anyone knowing they were related.

His boss, Ed Rayboon, was a stickler for corporate policy and any sort of nepotism would definitely not be tolerated. Alex figured that if Sam was hired they could keep the secret for a while and break the news once she had proven herself indispensable at her job. At least that was Sam's plan. Alex worried about what routes Sam might take to make herself indispensable to Ed.

Alex started and looked quickly at the clock. He grabbed his pack of cigarettes from the counter and whirled for the door. "Behave, Sam." he called out as he left.

"I will. Don't worry. I'll make sure that I'm all sexed out before I meet my new boss." She yelled back as she carried the two cans of pop back to her bedroom.

"Tart!" Alex yelled as the door slammed behind him.

"Jealous!" Sam yelled back.

His drive to work was uneventful and full of traffic. As he took Route 4 that cut through and over the congestion of the downtown traffic, Alex could see his favorite little fishing hole coming up on the right. He had spent a few evenings there last summer, building a fire and drinking some beer with his buddies. They had never caught much more than a slight buzz, but it had been relaxing nonetheless.

Now as he approached the pond, slightly hidden by weeping willows and high weeds, he thought he could see the reason for the lack of fish. It looked like the head of an otter or maybe even a beaver floating underneath some of the low hanging whip-like branches of a willow tree. Were there even beavers in this area? It had to be an otter, they ate fish. Or do they? He questioned himself for the rest of the drive to work.

Alex had to park his Grand Prix in the row closest to the street, a true sign to the boss of how late you arrived

when the parking lot was full from the early-risers and on-timers.

It was during the walk in that he began planning his work day. He had been developing web sites for almost six years, growing with the technology from static text and geeky picture billboards on the internet to full-blown dynamic applications that could work through the internet or company intranet, keeping the employees chained to their jobs way past the normal work day schedule.

He knew that he had two pressing deadlines with two separate clients, but he should be able to wipe them out by mid-afternoon. He still had to get some graphics back from the art department and see how they would flow with the new portal he was creating for a huge client whose president was a close friend of Ed's. -- *No pressure there.* And of course he needed to start flowcharting the content management system for a municipal website that he would need to start coding towards in the next week or so to keep that impending deadline.

His cubicle was function not form. He had no personal pictures tacked to the fabric walls, no favorite cartoon character emblazoned on his mouse-pad. The flimsy overhead shelf that hung tenuously above his monitor and keyboard was packed full of programming and graphics books. Dry

reading for the most part and extremely confusing to someone not already educated in the more basic programming languages.

Alex's mornings always went fast and coming in late didn't help matters. Don, another web developer that dwelled in a cubicle down the faux hall of fabric walls, stopped by and invited him to a smoke break. They went out the glass front doors, the only doors in the small building, to relax for a few minutes by the aluminum ashtray slash trashcan that stood in the perpetual shade of the front awning.

By unspoken rule, discussion of work was not permitted during lunches or smoke breaks. They spent the next few minutes talking easily about what new movie trailers they had downloaded and what new albums were due for release so they could start looking for them on the 'Net.

Don had already put out his butt and was waiting for Alex to finish up when Ed stuck his head out of the front doors. "Hello gents," he said easily. Ed always kept a casual relationship with his employees. He was very approachable and had a good sense of humor but was always working. He lived in work mode.

Don and Alex smiled and said their hellos while Ed dumped a light tan liquid from his coffee cup into the

mulch next to the trashcan. Ed's head disappeared back behind the glass as the doors shut. Alex struck a philosophical pose, finger on chin. "Behold a man too busy to drink his tea while it is hot."

Don chuckled. "I know. He must waste about twenty cups worth a day. Hope he owns stock in Lipton."

Alex's day was winding down after he had finished the two priority sites. He had snuck a call to his sister after lunch to make sure she was still going to make it to the interview. She told him she had received a call from Ed on her cell phone earlier asking her to come after hours because he had forgotten an important meeting was already set for that afternoon.

"Well, that's why they need more assistants around here. To make sure that all the meetings are kept." Alex joked about the change in plans but silently worried what his sister might try to guarantee her position when no one else was around.

He could try to find an excuse to work late but he knew it wouldn't go well with Ed. Alex would have to explain to him why he was working late when it seemed that everything was under control. Ed Rayboon kept his finger on the pulse of his company and someone staying late to

work meant there was an issue that needed tending to and he would begin to lose trust in his employee.

Alex shut down his email, kicked on his screensaver with a three button punch and left for the night. He drove home hoping to catch Sam before she left. The apartment was empty, he'd missed her. He tried her cell phone but she wasn't answering. He couldn't shake the bad vibes he was feeling but he had to let his sister make her own choices.

Ed Rayboon was in mid-sentence of writing an email when he could smell her arrival. He took a moment to linger on the scent. It was familiar yet different. Within the moments it took her to reach the front door he had recognized the familiarity; she was related to Alex. He heard a small tapping on the front doors. He finished up, typing with extraordinary speed and sent the packets of information bursting through the Internet. As he stood he grabbed his half-filled cup and took it with him to the doors. He welcomed the young woman inside and reached past her to dump the remains of his cup outside, relocking the doors behind her.

He took her in with a long slow look from top to bottom, enjoying what he saw. She was dressed in a white

blouse tucked into a short, tight skirt. The heels on her shoes were not outrageously high but did help show the muscle tone of her calves.

She surprised Ed with her forwardness. She exuded sexuality and played off of it very well. Before he knew it they were already in the private room hidden behind his normal office sharing a bottle of Bordeaux that was at least 120 years old. They had merely introduced themselves to each other and she had started to play. She leaned in the proper directions for giving hints of flesh and promises of more.

They were already past the point of speech. Their eyes locked and he moved in, gently taking her glass from her. He nuzzled into the side of her throat and took in her scent. He licked her from the dimple beside her collarbone up to her earlobe and nibbled gently on the pill of flesh, letting her earring clack against his teeth.

The move was intoxicating to Sam and she let herself enjoy the sensation as she laid back onto the desk taking Ed down with her. She couldn't believe the way she was behaving. Since the moment she had met him there had been an animal urge to have him inside of her, thrusting, grunting, sweating as he pounded into her. She had been

able to keep control for this long but now that he had made a move she was giving herself to him completely.

She could hear fabric ripping as he released her breasts and she didn't care what damage he did to her clothes. She wanted them off badly. His tongue flicked over her nipples and he squeezed them forcefully so that the near-hurt was pleasurable.

Her stomach muscles started a slow spasm as he moved down across her belly, pulling her skirt down as he moved lower. His tongue licked her small runner of pubic hair and he moved down to thrust his tongue inside of her. She could hear his breathing increase as the flexible muscle of his tongue sank deep and began circling slowly inside. She reached down to pull him up -she wanted badly to feel him inside of her- and grabbed handfuls of his hair. His hair felt wrong. It was longer and more grainy-feeling than she had imagined it would feel.

Ed was no longer there. In most respects he was still there, he could still think, could still form logical thought, but he had changed. That bitch had grabbed at the fur along the sides of his face right below his ears. The animal within Ed let loose a growl that shook the walls and

desk. He could smell that even through her fear, the bitch had felt a tremor of pleasure at the vibration.

When she finally raised her head to look down at him, her fists releasing his fur, he was inhaling her scent deeply into his nostrils. She began a scream but it was cut short by his next growl. He grabbed her by the hips and yanked her even closer to his face. He snapped down on her, his huge maw of razor-sharp teeth plunging deep, and gave a sharp twist of his head.

He released his grip on her. His twist had snapped her pelvis and most likely caused spinal damage. Regardless, she didn't move, stuck in a silent scream. He growled again, this time with pure lust; the feeding was more satisfying than any sexual arousal. He rose above her, his back claws digging into the desktop, and sniffed her fear, and come and piss.

The creature that was Ed Rayboon slowly descended, sniffing and huffing loudly. The bitch was quivering with fear and frozen shock. He moved back down and licked the blood from her ripped flesh. He moved back up contemplating his meal. Where to begin? The stomach was a nice start. He would leave the sweets of her heart and liver for last, after adrenalin had basted them thoroughly.

Alex tried calling her all evening and all the next morning after he awoke. He had left at least ten messages on her voicemail. She had pulled this crap before, not letting him know where she was or if she was even still alive, but this time it felt truly *wrong*. He was worried.

Throughout his morning ritual of getting ready for work he redialed her number repeatedly, there was still no answer. His drive in was a blur except to notice that what he had thought was some beaver or otter's head had to actually be a log anchored in the water, for it was still in the same place as yesterday.

Alex arrived early to work and was able to grab a better parking space. He didn't see Ed's little Miata in the lot and he didn't see Sam's clunky Citation around either. There were a few employees in already and surprisingly, Don was already there sucking down a cup of coffee.

He forced himself to focus into his work. She would be alright. Everything would be fine. She must have seduced Ed and they had left together last night. Everything would be fine.

He continued that litany until he opened his email and saw that Ed had written the employees a blanket email explaining that he would be out of the office the next few

days as an emergency trip to the west coast was necessary to keep a favored (and filthy rich) client happy.

There is no way that Sam would leave like that without telling him, he thought. Maybe she would. His worry gave way to anger. And the anger was a familiar emotion when dealing with his sister. He found he could get back to his work easier with anger humming in the background instead of dread.

Alex kept to himself most of the day, even ignoring Don's repeated invitations to smoke outside. He just kept pushing out the work and found that by the end of the day he was actually ahead of his self-imposed schedule of work. He grinned without humor at how being pissed at his sister was a great motivation in his professional life.

The apartment was empty and Alex felt lost. Sam would have called by now, telling how much she was enjoying the California sun and Ed, and then going into way too much detail of what exactly she was enjoying. He slept fitfully as one ear strained to hear a phone call throughout the night.

In the morning it did ring. Samantha's car had been found deserted about twenty miles from their apartment, ten from the office. Her cell phone had been in the car also, which led them to calling Alex since his number was set up

as number one on speed-dial. There was no Samantha to be found.

Alex was numb. He didn't even realize that he was getting ready for work until he was already fully dressed and reaching for his car keys. He stared at them for a few moments wondering what to do. He clenched them tightly in his fist. Ed had something to do with her disappearance. Ed. With blind determination Alex ran out of his apartment and sped to work.

What did he know about Ed? Alex had worked there a couple years but realized he really didn't know much about his boss. They held annual Christmas parties and such, of course, but it wasn't as though Alex had ever been invited to Ed's house or went out for drinks with him after work. The more he thought about it the more Alex discovered that he knew practically nothing about the man. He traveled a lot. He made wise business decisions. Did he even have a girlfriend or, hell, a wife somewhere?

By habit, Alex glanced at the pond as he flew past it. He slammed on the breaks without even checking for traffic behind him. What had he just seen? His car fishtailed and he slid out past the shoulder, throwing gravel before coming to a stop. He hopped out and started running towards the pond.

On Monday he had seen what he thought was some otter or something and yesterday it had proven to be a log hanging static out of the water. His glimpse this morning had shown him that the dark patch sticking out of the water was moving once again. He had stopped on instinct. It was the same instinct that had proven to him that something was wrong with his sister.

He ran down the slope of grass that led to the pond and jumped a wire fence that provided no protection whatsoever. As he approached he could make out the shape more distinctly. It was a head. A human head was poking out of the dark water. He rushed to the pond's edge and ran out into the water until it became too deep and he had to dive in and begin swimming.

The man's head was just above the water line, his throat barely visible. He was cocked at a forward angle so that if his neck wasn't holding his head up he would surely drown. He could barely turn his head to look at Alex as he loudly approached. He was mumbling something through swollen lips that Alex could not comprehend.

Out of breath and splashing madly Alex tried to talk to the man, reassuring him that he would get him out of the water. Alex treaded water for a moment to gather some

strength and dove, submerging into the dark water, trying to find the binds that held the man.

He could feel that the man's feet were tied together and reaching up he discovered that the man's arms were bound tightly behind his back and tied to a strong branch from a long fallen tree that jutted up crookedly keeping him at such a tortuous angle. Alex pulled on the branch to launch back up to the surface. He gasped for air as he broke through the water.

"I'll get you out of here soon," Alex gasped. "Just hold on. I've got you." While performing an awkward doggie paddle with one arm, Alex propped the man's head up to let his neck rest.

"Oh, that's what I needed," whispered the man.

Alex ignored the odd comment and held his head for a few minutes then warned the man he was going back under. Through the murkiness Alex felt his way along the knots that held the man's arms to the tree. He was able to pull some of the rough hemp through a few loops but had to resurface once again.

A few gasps later Alex was back down loosening the bindings. After three more returns to the surface the man's arms were free. What Alex hadn't thought of was that the man's arms were completely useless and the knots and

his neck were the only things keeping him above the water. Alex broke the surface to find the man slowly sinking under the water, all his strength depleted.

Alex screamed a few loud curses and reached for the man. He pulled him up and turned him around to float on his back. The man's legs had not been attached to the tree so Alex began hauling him towards the shore by grabbing his shoulders and kicking backwards. Eventually they reached the shore and it took all of Alex's remaining strength to haul him out of the water and into the soft mud at the bank.

Alex collapsed next to the man, completely spent. They laid there for a few minutes, neither one of them speaking, as they took long pulls of air into their lungs. Finally, Alex propped himself up on an elbow and looked over at the man. He was ruddy looking from soaking so long but Alex assumed under normal circumstances he would have a dark complexion.

The man looked over at him with dark brown eyes that soaked up all the remaining light, leaving bruised pockets above his cheeks. His hair was dark black and long and he had a thick moustache and goatee. If he didn't have all that damn hair, Alex mused, I might have noticed him sooner in the water.

Without saying a word the man stood up, and stretched his arms out wide and then bent at the waist, waking up the unused muscles and loosening up the overused ones. He made quick work of the ropes binding his ankles together. When he straightened back up Alex was amazed at how quickly he seemed to be recovering. A darker tone had already started to resurface to his flesh and the swelling in his lips was receding.

"Young man," he grumbled in a rich voice, "I believe you have saved my life." Alex could only nod in mute agreement. The man spoke in a relaxed tone that hinted at a formal upbringing. Calling him 'young man' when they looked to only be a few years apart in age seemed very odd also.

The man filled the silence once again with his voice. "Call me Booker."

"Booker." Alex immediately felt like an idiot repeating the man's name back to him. Alex stood slowly, already sore from the recent exertion. "I'm Alex."

Booker nodded at him, a devilish grin on his face. He let his hands dangle at his sides and lightly shook his hands out, regaining circulation.

"How did you get there?"

"An old friend decided we were no longer friends."

Alex sighed. He really didn't have the time or frame of mind to deal with this shit. "Yeah, whatever. Glad I could help." Alex gave the pond one last look and started back up the incline to his abandoned car.

"Wait," Booker yelled from behind him. Alex turned with sagging shoulders, the weight of his worry heavily burdening them. Booker caught up to him quickly as though his days in bondage had not affected him. "I owe you a great debt, Alex."

Alex tried to shrug it off but Booker wouldn't accept it. "Listen. I know you are under a great stress." Booker looked him straight in the eye. "I can help you but you won't like it."

Booker had no idea what he was going through, Alex thought. But he surprised him by stepping in even closer and inhaling deeply through his nose. Booker nodded slowly, almost sadly. "Yes, it is." He said more to himself than to Alex.

"What?" Alex began, but again Booker sniffed at him deeply.

"I know it is family. Would it be your sister?" Booker cut in.

"..the fuck?" Alex finished. How the hell did Booker know this?

"We need to talk, young Alex." Booker clasped his hand on Alex's shoulder steering him back towards the pond. As they walked Booker continued. "In the years to come you will look back on this day as the day that the world changed forever."

"Little dramatic, don't you think?" said Alex as they both settled down on a grassy part of the bank.

"Am I?" asked Booker. "Look at me; do I look like someone who has spent - what day is this?"

"Tuesday."

"Do I look like someone who has just spent four nights tied to a log submerged in water? Look at my arms, the rope marks are gone. The swelling of my lips has already gone away."

"I am part of a long line of hunters. Hunters of men."

Alex reached into his shirt pocket and pulled out his pack of cigarettes, they were ruined from his recent swim. He threw the pack down in disgust. "I really don't have time for this."

"Yes," Booker cut in, stopping Alex. "You do have the time for this. Just give me a few minutes."

"Let's say," Booker began. "I have been looking for a specific gentleman for many years. A few times I have been

right there, close enough to smell him, and he eluded me every time. Now over these years he has gained in power and is not the sheepish character he used to be. So when I finally catch up with him this time, he attacks. Attacks with the knowledge of his strength bolstering him so that he finally has gained the means to destroy me."

Booker had been overlooking the pond as he spoke but he stopped to make sure he had Alex's attention. "That was on Friday night. I came across him and we battled ferociously. You cannot see the scars from our battle because they have healed already."

Alex cleared his throat. "You healed in the water?"

"Yes."

"Just checking."

Booker gave him a look from the corner of his eye but continued on. "He left me broken, tied to that broken tree. The funny thing with these creatures is that they are so cliché. When they finally catch one of us they don't usually go for a quick kill, they want us to suffer a slow death.

"Wait a minute. You're talking killing. You mean, like in dead? You kill people?"

"I wouldn't necessarily call them people."

"And what do you call them?"

"Well, we have our own names for them, but you younger ones call them werewolves."

Alex whistled through his teeth. "Alrighty then." He moved to get up. "I'll just be going. Glad I could save you from Lon Chaney Jr. but I have things to do."

"How could you explain the things you've seen?"

"And what have I seen?" Alex exploded. His time had been wasted and he needed to find out about Sam. "I've seen some crazy fucker tied in a pond. For all I know it's some new bondage shit and I untied you before you could get a nut off so now you want to torture me with your crazy goddamn stories." Alex turned to walk away once again.

"She's in the water."

Booker's simple statement froze Alex in his tracks.

"What? Who?" He slowly turned to Booker.

"Alex, your sister is in the water. Her corpse was brought here last night by one of them and dumped in the pond. They made sure I could see it to torture me. They were showing off their latest victim that I couldn't save."

Alex fell to the ground; his knees had become weak and wouldn't support him.

"One of those beasts brought her to the edge so that I could see her, smell her, and they threw her out towards the middle of the pond. I watched her sink, Alex."

"How the fuck would you know who she is?"

Booker shook his head. "I didn't know until you saved me and I could smell you."

"What is this smelling shit? What are you talking about?"

"Alex. Alex, I can do things. I can... I have... powers."

Alex just sat and stared at him. He finally closed his hanging jaw and said, "Show me where she is."

Booker hesitated for only a moment then stood and took a running dive into the water. Alex jumped up to watch his progress but by then Booker had already disappeared into the dark water. He didn't even leave a trail of bubbles. No wake showed his movements below.

Minutes passed.

Sudden splashing ten feet from the bank made Alex jump. Booker's head popped out of the water and he started swimming to shore using only one arm. He kept himself low in the water even when he had to only be wading in a few feet of water. He watched Alex the whole time he approached.

With a grunt Booker turned and heaved a body onto the bank. Alex could see immediately that it was Sam. She was naked and what remained of her skin was gray and wrinkled.

It was as though she had been hollowed out, where had once been internal organs was a dark, wet void. From her collarbone down to her pubic bone everything was gone.

Her thigh was the last part he saw of her before turning to retch and topple over in his grief. It had reminded him of pictures he had seen on the Internet of the victim of a bear attack. Part of her thigh had survived but the lower half had been gnawed away to the bone. Thin strands of skin and muscle hung from the stripped bone, like the grisly remains of a ham partially devoured during Christmas dinner. She had been someone's - *some thing's* - dinner.

Booker broke the silence. "I hunt the creatures that do this."

Alex had been resting on his hip, propped up by one arm and wiping his mouth with the other hand. He wrenched his torso to glare at Booker. "I want to hunt this fucker too."

"You could lead me to him?" Booker knew the answer.

Alex didn't speak again until they were in the car. When he did speak it was guttural and through clenched teeth. "His name is Ed Rayboon. That's who killed my

sister." He glanced over at his passenger. "He's my boss."

Booker looked slightly amused. "Then I assume you are tendering your resignation?"

Alex shifted his focus back to the road and pushed on the gas a little harder.

They made it to Alex's office building without saying another word. Alex broke the silence with a mumbled curse as they pulled into a deserted parking lot. It was not even lunch time yet, where had everyone gone?

"Not a very busy place," Booker remarked.

"I don't know what's going on," Alex said as he undid his seatbelt. "But let's find out if we can get in."

They were approaching the front doors when Booker started to make small gagging noises and had to stop.

"What's wrong?"

"It's pretty bad up there," Booker spat out. "Gods, that's horrible."

"What?"

Booker had his hand over his nose and mouth and looked at Alex. "You can't smell that can you?"

"Smell what?" Alex was exasperated.

Booker took a few steps closer to the building, stopped, took a deep, shielded breath and moved forward

once again. Once he made the doors he dropped his hand and grimaced at Alex as though he was forcing him to do something he didn't want to do. Alex followed him up to the doors.

"What the hell is wrong with you?"

Booker slowly let out his breath and started to tentatively sniff with small whiffs. He pointed to the trash can by the door. "There."

"There what?"

"He's been marking his territory. Your little fuzzy buddy has been pissing in the bushes. And quite often I might add."

"Don't you think we'd kind of notice that?"

Booker shrugged. "I don't know, but he has been very serious about marking this place. I'm sure others of his kind can smell it for miles."

"What to ward them off? Bring them in?"

"No, he's making sure that no one else invades this whole area."

Alex jumped. "Wait.. No, it couldn't be. Ed dumps his cold tea out here all the time."

Booker started laughing loudly. "His tea? You wouldn't want to drink that tea."

"You're telling me he's peeing in a cup and then dumps it out right in front of us?"

"You thought it was tea. Although I admit, if he's tinkling in a cup during work all day I'm surprised someone hasn't noticed him with his whanker out in the office."

Alex stood in though with his hand on the door handle. "Well, he does have a pretty big office and a private room behind that." He gave the door a tug. It opened.

"Wait," said Booker. "You need to know. The smell out here is not the smell of the wolf that dropped off your sister."

"Great," sighed Alex. He opened the door fully and both men entered the small office building.

For an office space with many windows and two large glass front doors it was surprisingly dark inside. The overhead lights had been shut off and the blinds drawn. The only daylight coming into the building was through the door they had just entered.

"Ok, this is strange." Alex said quietly.

Booker nodded in silent agreement but his eyes were taking in all of his surroundings, as though he could see danger in every shadow.

"Hello!" Alex shouted into the darkened area.

"So much for surprising anyone," Booker muttered.

"Show me his office."

Alex led him a slight ways down one of the halls made up of one side cubicle partitions and the other solid wall. On the right was a closed door. Alex approached it but Booker took him by the bicep, stopping him.

"The other one is in there, I can smell him."

Alex went ahead and turned the knob, pushed open the door. The room was darker than the outer offices.

"Come on in, Alex," said a familiar voice.

"Don?" Alex stepped into the doorway. Don was sitting in Ed's chair leaning back, his feet up on the desk, smoking a cigarette. "Hi, Alex. Ed called and sent everyone home. He told Julie to cut everybody a check because he wouldn't be back for a couple months. Guess we're all unemployed now."

Alex could barely make out Don's face except when he took a pull on the cigarette and his face shown like a red beacon of flesh and shadow. This was the man that had dumped his sister's body in the pond. Alex kept his fists behind his back as he scooted off to one side of the doorway.

"Oh, I'd bet you still have a job, Don."

Don sat forward and Alex could see him better as his eyebrows rose. "And how do you figure that?"

"Because, aren't you Ed's little bitch? Aren't you the one getting rid of the bodies?" Alex pictured his sister's gnawed thigh bone and swallowed the bile that threatened to rise. "Do you get to eat whatever scraps he tosses his good little doggie?"

Don stood quickly, leaning on the desk with both hands. "You don't know what the fuck you're talking about." Don's voice became deeper and more threatening. "You don't know who the hell you're dealing with."

Alex backed up against the wall as tightly as he could, hoping that Booker would decide to make a move soon.

"You can tell your friend to come in," whispered Don with a snarl. "I can smell him." Don's eyes had begun to glow with a reddish hue as though his discarded cigarette had taken root within his irises. "I know that smell." He turned his gaze back to Alex. "You brought that bastard from the pond."

At the moment Don had invited Alex into the office Booker had stepped back and with amazing agility launched himself onto the top of the flimsy partition wall of the cubicles. Silently and gracefully he extended his arms until he could slowly push back a ceiling tile and

propelled himself into the darkness above. He had crab-walked along the girders of the ceiling structure careful not to put any weight on the weak paneling. He slowly maneuvered himself to above where he thought Don was by listening for his voice.

"That *bastard*," spat Alex, losing all his fear. "Told me about you and Ed. He showed me what you fucking animals did to my sister."

"Your sister?" Don leaned back as though he would howl but only let out a derisive laugh. "That was your sister? My, my, my. Well if it helps any, Ed said her pussy tasted sweet. And her heart was candy."

Alex launched himself at Don. In the few steps it took him to reach the desk Don was already changing. His face stretched and there was the sound of snapping bone as his nose pushed out violently into a snout. Drool spilled out of his misshapen mouth as it started to form into a savage maw of wicked teeth. His shoulders bunched suddenly as though a string had pulled taught to tie his shoulder blades together then they rebounded quickly with a new mass of muscle that shredded his shirt.

The sight didn't stop Alex; he was too far into his fury. He jumped up onto the desk to launch himself at the beast that he had once thought was his friend. In those

mere seconds, Don had become. He was a fully formed beast of nightmares and folklore come to life. And he awaited Alex's attack.

Alex flung himself at the creature but he might as well have been running underwater. Before he could even make contact, one of the beast's hands came swiping out at him, its claws were long, yellow and jagged. They ripped through his shirt and into his flesh. The momentum of the swing and of his leap embedded his chest on those claws and he was sent flying across the room with flesh and muscle shredded to the bone.

Booker had not expected Alex to actually attack the fearsome beast. He dropped through the paneling, shredding it like paper on his way down.

Alex had landed half-propped up against the wall and saw Booker burst through the ceiling. Booker landed directly behind the beast and grabbed the fur that had sprouted from the back of Don's neck. Booker dropped with all of his weight with the fur and flesh confidently in his grasp and pulled him down backwards with a violent wrenching of its back. The creature was bent almost fully backwards as though its spine would snap and Booker spun his feet out from under and delivered a deadly upwards kick to the beast. It launched into the ceiling smashing into

panels, support brackets and lighting pods and then came back down with a loud crash onto the desk.

Alex tried holding his chest together with one hand while trying to slide himself over to the wolf-beast lying in pain upon the desk. Booker was already up and hovering over the creature watching it as its arms and legs convulsed. Its eyes were rolled up in its head and its claws were involuntarily making fists, shredding the tender flesh in its palms.

Alex made it over to the desk and forced himself to stand and watch along with Booker. He slowly reached below and opened the desk drawer right beside one of the twitching claws. From the drawer he pulled forth a gold-plated letter-opener over a foot long and shaped like a sword. His gaze never left the face of the creature as he raised the small sword upwards and stabbed it down into its chest.

The creature that was Don heaved upwards with a great breath and swung wildly at Alex. Alex pulled the sword from its chest and ducked below the striking claw, he quickly straightened back up and stuck the creature in the throat, holding on and forcing it back to the desktop. With a long slow gurgle the creature died.

With all of his strength and anger temporarily spent, Alex collapsed to the floor. Booker moved around the desk to stand over him. "Are you finished?"

Alex calmed his heavy breathing and looked up to Booker with a determined glare. "Not until I get the fucker that killed Sam."

Booker nodded as though he expected that answer. "There is only one way to do it. You must become like me."

Alex chuckled. "Adopt a bad accent and grow my hair out?" He laughed a little harder at his own joke until it became a coughing fit that threatened to rip his chest open even further. He fell over in pain, both hands holding his chest.

"It might help you with the ladies, but no, there is something you must do." Then he mumbled, "Before you die." Booker reached over the desk where Alex couldn't see and started working away on the bestial corpse of Don. Alex faded in and out to wet sounds and slight grunts arising from Booker as he struggled to make cuts with the dull blade of the letter opener.

Booker had turned on the overhead fluorescents at some point and the ones not damaged shone blindingly through Alex's eyelids. A warm wetness dripped upon his cheek and

made him stir. He opened his eyes to see Booker crouched down beside him holding something out to him.

"What is that?"

"A little slice of his heart," said Booker as he pushed the piece at Alex. "Eat it."

Alex shook his head weakly trying to fight away Booker's hand. "No."

"You must partake, Alex, if you want to follow your vow."

"My vow?" Alex asked slowly as he took the piece of meat.

"You said that you wanted to kill the beast that murdered your sister. This will help you accomplish that wish. That is your vow."

Alex mustered up as much of a skeptical look as he could aim at Booker but it was still a weak attempt. He started to place the piece of heart into his grimacing mouth but Booker reached out and stayed his hand.

"There is more. It is a vow. A solemn promise must be made, Alex."

Alex cocked his head. "Ok, I promise..."

Booker stopped him. "It is not a promise to me. It is a promise in your heart. It is a promise in your blood. A promise kept on your sister's blood. You must look deep

inside yourself and make sure that if you make this promise it is a decision you can live with forever."

Alex could feel his life slipping away. He was shaking as he fought his body against the shock setting in, knowing that if he gave into the tunneling blackness he would never regain the light. He sank into thoughts that were clear and pure. His sister had never been an angel, in fact, she had been a pain in the ass. She had been slutty and irresponsible.

Samantha had always been an extraordinary burden ever since their parents had died. She had always been able to find trouble in every form and from every angle. But she had also been his sister. She had been full of life and there was never a sad face that shared the same room with her. She had been a bright light and Alex had always tried to keep her from extinguishing that light with her crazy ways.

True, she had been with many men, and Alex had always been jealous that she could hook up with someone whenever she wished while he was lucky to find any takers for months at a time. On the other hand he had always been the first at her defense if she was wronged by anyone. He had always looked after his sister. And now, of all the men she knew, only one man had noticed her passing. Her protector was

the only one that could make sure that her death did not go unpunished.

He would find Ed Rayboon, or whatever name he decided to call himself. He would hunt this monster down and kill him for extinguishing the light in his life. Nothing would stop him. Alex stuck the piece of meat into his mouth and began chewing.

Immediately Alex began feeling different. He hadn't even yet swallowed and he could feel a burning strength flowing through his muscles. As he forced the chewy meat down his throat he could feel his chest tighten as the flesh knitted itself back together. He looked up at Booker in amazement.

Booker handed him another slice of heart while he also partook of some. "Keep eating. You absorb your enemy so that you may fight with the same strength they possess."

"I won't, like, become a werewolf will I?" Alex asked before taking the second piece.

"No, as long as your promise and passion was clear you will be given the strength to attempt that task."

Alex stood while he chewed the next piece. It reminded him of beef jerky but warm and wet. He saw finally the opened body of Don. It wasn't Don, it was

still the creature. "Shouldn't he turn back since he's dead?"

"One thing you will learn," Booker began. "Is that you shouldn't believe all you've seen in the movies. A silver bullet can kill them if you use enough, but so would any normal buck shot. A lot of it. Garlic is probably only used to make the meat taste better for them. It's simple. They're strong, they're fast, but they can die." To accentuate his point he nodded to the corpse. "But yes, he will turn back in about a day."

Alex had swallowed the second piece and reached into the cavity of the creature's chest and ripped out a chunk of heart, larger than any he had yet eaten. He stopped. He didn't know what had possessed him to rip into the corpse like that. His anger, his need to become more powerful to kill his sister's murderer, that was his newfound strength.

He ripped off a slender piece with his bare hands and gave it over to Booker. Alex took a bite out of the remaining chunk, blood had still resided within a chamber and spilled down his chin but he ignored it in his determination.

"Do I need to eat his brain or something too, so I think like one of them?" That thought made Alex stop in

his chewing, the brain would not be a chewy meal, it would be like slimy mushrooms or overcooked cauliflower, he imagined.

"No, his heart will give you the strength to carry on. It will make you strong and fast. You will become a hunter of animals. Of course, you could always eat his balls and see how that enhances you."

Alex reached down reflexively to his crotch. "No thanks, I can live with Little Elvis."

Booker, with a strip of heart sticking out of his mouth, gritted between his teeth, began laughing heartily. His chuckling eventually settled and he could speak again. "Keep eating. I know you can feel the power growing within you but just wait a few days, you will be even better. Remember to eat from each of whom you kill, in that way you will grow and gather more resources and powers."

Between bites Alex studied Booker as he lazily chewed on his strip of meat. "How long have you been doing this?"

Booker pulled the remaining meat from his teeth and gazed away in thought. It was minutes before he finally spoke. "My sister was Etienne Garliot. She was only eleven years old when Jean Grenier attacked and killed her in the fields of our farm at the Bay of Biscay. You know

Jean as Ed Rayboon, and I have been hunting him since 1615."

Alex nearly choked. "1615! You have been hunting this man for almost 400 years?"

"Aye, I have. He is a notorious bastard. The son of a priest, he says his powers were given to him by the Lord of the Forest that wears an iron chain around his neck and constantly chews at it. My Blood Vow is for my sister, Etienne. I am Bucephalus Garliot, the last living Garliot in existence."

"Holy. Fucking. Shit."

Booker turned sharply at him. "Not holy. Not at all. There are things you still do not understand. These beasts, they do not need the moonlight to turn. The myth of the full moon is because that was when we as hunters could hunt them easier at night. And when they were seen the most is when we were chasing them throughout the world, destroying any of their kind we could find."

"We?" asked Alex.

"Yes, there are quite a few hunters in the world. We all have exacted Blood Vows. We are hunters after revenge and we kill any of those beasts we find. But we hunt always and forever for the beasts that have personally harmed us."

Booker tossed down the meat he had been holding as though he had lost all flavor for it. "The problem for us, my friend, is that we both hold the same Blood Vow. One of us and only one of us can find him and kill him."

"Why can't we just work together to find him?"

"It doesn't work that way. You will see. You have not yet been compelled but you will be. Already my compulsions are taking control. I must leave."

Alex reached out. "Please, don't leave yet. I have so many things you need to teach me."

"Don't worry, my friend," said Booker calmly. "You will find other hunters out there that can help you. But as for hunting for Jean or Ed or whatever he has now become, that is a hunt we must both attempt alone."

"What if I kill him first?"

Booker looked him in the eye one last time. "I do not know. Hunters die when they finally accomplish their vow. But we both follow the same fate and I do not know what will become of the other once it is fulfilled."

Without another word Booker turned and left. Alex watched him leave and resumed to his chewing. He would eat every scrap of the heart if it would give him the strength to kill Ed. He was still chewing as he reached down and picked up the piece Booker had discarded.

Three days later Alex stood in his empty living room. All that remained of his personal possessions was packed within a bag that hung over a bulging shoulder. He had sold everything else within the apartment for next to nothing to his neighbors in the apartment complex. He had kept only one thing of his sister's, a thick, worn diary he had found. It was buried in his pack under some clothes, still unread.

Alex could now understand the compulsion Booker had mentioned. He didn't know where Ed was except from what had been said at work, and even that could not be trusted. But he had to move on. He had to hunt. It was a stirring within his soul that he needed to leave, needed to hunt. He would go west and see what he could find.

The End