

Backslider

By

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I love the feel of night. I love the way the shadows caress my shoulders and obscure my flaws. I revel in coolness that exists in the dark despite the time of year. Most of all, I love how the night brings out the best and the worst in us all, the absence of sunlight a shield that hides our actions, whatever they might be.

I understand now why the old ones hunted at night. The light was their enemy, revealing the natural urge in them considered vile and grotesque by the others. Kerry was an old one, preferring the night despite the freedom of the Inquisition. I never understood, until now.

I had been a backslider for two years, seven hundred and thirty days of hunting and being hunted. I smelled, my clothes were ragged and my hair had twisted into knots so tight a Rastafarian would be amazed. Sometimes I tried to hate Kerry for introducing me to this life, but most of the time I rarely thought of him. I was consumed with the hunger and the pursuit of prey. There was no other feeling.

The inquisitors made themselves known by their attempt at stealth. The abandoned building I called home teemed with the homeless, their coming and going a parade of curses, clanging and crunching. The fact that the inquisitors attempted to be silent gave them away. I crouched in filth, closing my eyes to see with my senses. It was one of the changes that occurred after I began feeding the old way. My entire being transformed, tuned to my prey's existence like a lion instinctively knows the ways of the antelope. The men reeked; their pheromones making them easy to spot. Someone else

lurked among them, a person whose image was less distinct. It was a woman. Her scent was an irritant to me; it seems I was meant to hunt men. Her presence caused a problem, especially if she broke away from the others. She did.

I worked my way towards the rear of the building, expecting to escape out of the rear door leading into a trash strewn alley and into the streets. I was about to turn when I felt cold metal press against my back and a sharp prick in my neck.

“Come with me,” the woman ordered. I expected her to lead me towards her companions. Instead she took me where I was headed, the alleyway.

“Turn around,” she said. I turned and looked into her stern face. She was pretty, strands of black hair escaping from beneath her helmet.

“Remember my face. I’ll meet you here tomorrow.”

“Why should I come back if you’re letting me go?”

“You have a nano GPS swimming in your veins. If you try to leave town within the next forty eight hours I’ll call a team, tell them where you are and you’ll get smoked.”

“I could just turn myself in for redemption.”

She smiled. “Not you.”

I was angry and confused. “Why are you doing this?”

Her face changed, a shadow of sorrow flashing across her eyes. “I need your help.”

I heard chatter spilling from her earpiece and her face became stern again.

“Remember. Here. Tomorrow. Now go.”

She stepped aside and I ran into the alley. The darkness proved no problem for me for the other side effect of my new feeding habits was excellent night vision. I had

morphed into a predator, my physical senses enhanced and attuned to my prey. It was a waste. I wasn't hunting down wary Homo sapiens in dense forests; I was swatting them like flies in a human trash heap. All I had to do was reach out and dinner was served. My only obstacle was the Inquisitors and they were easy to avoid.

Leaving the slums meant changing my appearance. I jumped alleyways and vacant lots until I reached Buckhead then did a quick smash and grab on an upscale jeans boutique. I washed up the best I could at the Marta station and changed. With the exception of make up I cleaned up pretty good. Old memories crept into my head; the days when men looked at me with desire until they saw my fangs. Now they didn't bother. I was just another homeless bitch to be used or avoided, except when they approached me to have a little fun they found the tables turned.

I was hungry beyond belief when I returned to the building. The woman was waiting. She looked different out of uniform, cute, actually. Her long hair was pulled back into a pony tail that teased the small of her back. She wore a white blouse and short blue jean mini-skirt, showing off her toned legs. It was a dangerous way to dress in that part of town, but she was an Inquisitor. She could handle herself. She spotted me and waved me over. She was inside her Jeep as I walked up. The passenger door swung open, almost hitting me.

“Get in,” she ordered.

I hesitated then sat. A grocery bag rested on the floor between us; I knew what it was before she said a word.

“Eat, but not too much. I need you hungry.”

I reached into the bag and pulled out a pulsing blood fruit. It had been so long since I fed on the placebo that I had no appetite for it. I bit into it anyway and was pleasantly surprised. It was better than I thought it would be. Not good, but good enough.

The woman sped off, working her way out of the slums and onto 75/85. We headed north out of the city and into the mountains. We were both quiet, her eyes locked on the road, my eyes locked on her. I was reaching for another blood fruit and she grabbed my wrist.

“That’s enough,” she barked.

I’ve never bitten anyone out of anger, but I was coming damn close.

“What’s your name?” I asked.

“It doesn’t matter,” she replied. “It’s best you don’t know. Better for both of us.”

Our journey ended on a dirt road before a redwood cabin. The woman jumped out the Jeep and ran to the door. I followed as I was expected to. The inside of the cabin was modest, similar to a studio apartment. There was a small kitchen, and old couch and a DTV hanging on the wall. A double bed filled the corner of the cabin, filled by a man hooked to an IV. The woman grabbed my arm and towed me to the bed ridden man.

“What wrong with him?” I asked.

“Cancer,” she said, her voice trembling. “Terminal.”

“So why am I here?”

She looked at me and I couldn’t tell if she was angry or desperate.

“Bite him.”

I was stunned. I looked at her and read the certainty in her eyes.

“So you want me to kill him, to put him out of his misery.”

She laughed. “I want you to do just the opposite. I want you to heal him.”

“Look, if I bite him I kill him.”

She laughed again, which pissed me off. “You should look behind you once you’re done eating. Every person you’ve bitten has lived. Better still, they come back just like you.”

“Bullshit,” was all I could say.

“That’s why the Clergy wants you dead. You’re a vampire virus. It wasn’t supposed to be like this.”

She sat in a metal folding chair by the man’s head and whispered to him in Spanish.

“You people were created to scare people back to the church. You, werewolves, witches, all of you. Once the Redemption began they began eliminating all the freaks except vampires. They saw possibilities in you, clues to immortality. You’re the first one to prove that it’s possible.”

I wanted to sit. No, I wanted to faint, but I was too mad.

“So they want me so they can dissect me and study me.”

The woman nodded. I looked at her man, his skin grayish, his chest barely rising and falling.

“If I bite him he’ll be like me.”

The woman looked at me with pleading eyes. “I know, but he’ll be alive.”

So I bit him. I could taste the cancer in him but I drank. I quickly remembered why I gave up blood fruit. I took my fill then stopped, wiping my mouth with my sleeve.

“Now what?”

The woman stoked the man's hair for a moment then went to the tiny chest at the foot of the bed. She took out a satchel and gave it to me.

"There are documents inside that will get you to Canada. From there you can go to Europe. I've heard they don't hunt your kind there. A few people actually worship you."

For the last two years I existed in a daze, thinking of nothing but feeding. It never occurred to me that I was being hunted beyond redemption. I never considered leaving Atlanta, let alone the country. But if what the woman said was true, I was marked for death.

I took the tickets. The woman tossed me the keys to the Jeep.

"Take it," she said. "I won't need it for a while."

I looked at her and at the man. He was breathing deeper and the color had come back to his skin.

"He'll get hungry eventually," I said.

She looked hopeful. "I know."

"Give him the fruit," I advised. "Never let him bite a person, not even you."

She looked at me and smiled. "Thank you."

I turned away and headed for the door.

"My name is Maria," she called out.

"Goodbye, Maria," I said.

"Goodbye, Tatiana," she replied. "God bless you."

I hesitated, and then stepped out the door into the night.