

Cozenage

Steven Carlton

“He’s a good boy,” the social worker said. “It’s just a real tragedy what he’s been through.”

“So it seems,” Kyra said, sipping her tea delicately. She looked over the rim of her cup at the youth sitting on the sofa across from her. He was ten years old with the haunted eyes of someone much older. Those eyes gazed stoically at the carpet as the two women discussed him as though he weren’t there. “You say both previous foster parents are dead?”

“Yes, both dead,” the social worker, a woman dressed entirely in beige except for a metallic nametag which read “Margaret,” replied. “It’s a miracle he’s not more traumatized than he is. The woman died of apparent blood loss, similar to his real mother’s death. The man hung himself.”

“That’s an odd way to go in this day and age.” Kyra sat her cup down. She nudged the plate of chocolate chip cookies closer to the boy and smiled when he took one. He looked up at her, smiling thinly. “Do you think you’ll like staying with me?” she asked.

The boy looked quickly at the social worker who nodded encouragingly. “Sure,” he replied with a shrug. He bit into the cookie.

“Good,” Kyra said. She leaned back in her chair regally. “I think he’ll be fine. Just fine.”

Margaret’s face slackened momentarily, like a truck dropping into neutral before changing gears. She brightened and smiled. “Wonderful!” she exclaimed a bit too enthusiastically. “I just knew when his case came across my desk that you were the one to contact. What with his special circumstances and all.”

“Indeed,” Kyra said noncommittally. She watched the boy chew and swallow then gave him a warm reassuring smile. “Milton is such a heavy name. Do you have a nickname? Something you prefer to be called?”

“Dane,” the boy replied promptly. “It’s my middle name.”

“Dane,” Kyra repeated. “Intriguing. You can call me Kyra.” The corners of his mouth turned up in a smirk. “What’s funny?” she asked.

“You don’t want me to call you ‘mom’ or something like that?”

It was her turn to smile. “No,” she said. “I’m not your mother.” She said it so bluntly that it seemed to take the edge off his humor. His smile receded and he bit into the cookie again with the snap of sudden ire. Kyra stood, and the social worker followed suit. The woman left a flurry of comments and instructions as she trailed Kyra to the door.

“If there’s a problem, you have my home number,” she said as she stepped out into the overcast evening. She peered over Kyra’s shoulder, checking to see if the boy was out of earshot. “You really should be careful,” she warned.

“I always am.”

“Be extra careful this time. His mother’s corpse was identified, but there was no trace of his father in the ashes of the house.” The social worker wrung her hands anxiously, casting nervous glances in all directions. “There’s something unwholesome about all of it.”

“You worry too much, Margaret,” Kyra spoke soothingly. “I have plenty of protection against intruders. You know that.”

“I know.” The woman hesitated a moment more, then turned and hurried down the walkway to her Volvo without another spoken word. Kyra closed the door firmly, put on the chain and turned the deadbolt, then turned to the small keypad on the nearby wall and activated the alarm system. Dane was on his third cookie by the time she returned to him.

“My, you do have quite the hunger, don’t you?” she said and pretended not to see the strange look he gave her. He put the cookie, half-eaten, back on the plate. “Would you like some milk with that?” He shook his head then wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

Kyra studied him, looking down from her height like an eagle sizing up prey. “Well, it’s late, and we should go to bed, I suppose. Follow me. I’ll show you to your room.”

She could hear his heavy footsteps behind her, trudging uncertainly at her heels as she led him through the winding halls of the house. “This is my bedroom,” she said, touching the door in passing. “If you need me, feel free to wake me. And this will be your room.” She threw open a door a short ways down the hall from her own. His face remained

neutral as he peered through the opening at a single bed, a small wooden desk adorned by a gray metal lamp, a dark mahogany wardrobe, and a cloth shrouded table beside the bed.

“It’s not much,” she said, noting his expression, “but that’s because I didn’t know what you like. We’ll buy new furniture for you once you settle in. I promise.”

“You aren’t married,” he commented, staring into the room.

“No.”

“Why not?”

She sighed. “I’m not the marrying type,” she said by way of explanation. “You may have guessed, but I’ll tell you I’m quite well off when it comes to money. I have plenty of companions, and for me that’s enough. Now, off to bed with you. I have guests coming in the morning, and I need to sleep. So do you.”

“I don’t sleep much,” he said, but he moved into the room and sat on the bed.

“At least try,” she said. She started to close the door. “I have the feeling your luck is about to change.”

He stared at her, then at the door as it closed. He waited for the click, the sound of the lock engaging. He was mildly surprised when it did not come. The mattress was soft, and through his window he could see the front lawn, the empty driveway. He lay back on the pillows with a sigh and settled in to wait.

The clock on his nightstand told him three hours had passed before he rose silently from his bed. He crept shoeless to the door and opened it. Freshly oiled hinges turned noiselessly, allowing him to slip into the hallway like a wraith. He crept to Kyra’s door and opened it slowly. He could see her sleeping form on the bed. Her breathing was slow and steady with the rhythm of sleep.

Her room was much larger than he had expected. Her bed was wide, guarded on four corners by tall posts and watched over by a fringed canopy of thick cloth. The walls, broken only by the door through which he had entered and another set made of glass leading outside to an expansive patio, were adorned with hundreds of photos, the memories of a lifetime hung within wooden and metal frames, a thousand silent faces watching as he drifted soundlessly to her side and gazed down at her.

For a moment, he had to fight an urge to turn and run. It was not necessity that drove him onto the mattress by her side, although his stomach growled in anticipation. He had not wanted his foster mother to die. It was *him* who had drained her and left her for dead. The man, seeing the horrible truth of what had been done, had chosen to abandon hope

and life rather than face the awful truth. If only *he* had been so kind as to do the same for Dane.

Kyra looked so peaceful in the repose of sleep. She lay without covering, her hair spread over her pillow like a fan around her head. Dane inhaled slowly, quietly tasting the scent of her skin on the air. His mouth watered. It was wrong, he knew that. His mother had taught him to feed without killing, but that was not what *he* wanted. And Dane knew the consequences of disobedience. He knelt on the mattress beside her, then when she did not wake he put his leg over her, straddling her midsection. He bent over her, feeling a rush of excitement as his lips peeled back and his teeth emerged.

He put his mouth to her throat and bit. The flesh parted softly, allowing a burst of fluid to rush into his mouth. It was sweet, like crimson honey flowing over his tongue and dripping down his throat. He pressed his lips feverishly to Kyra's neck, eager for more, drawing her essence into himself. His thirst, his terrible aching thirst cracked and fled as he swallowed, the demon of his curse subsumed by blood.

His nostrils filled with her heady scent as he took a long, shuddering breath. He pulled back, releasing her, intoxicated by the enormity of what he was doing. It was a curse to be so weak, to allow himself to succumb so easily to joy of feeding. His last time had been his first, but like a virgin who gets the first taste of the bliss between a woman's legs he found he was hungry for more, and that hunger doomed him to drink at the well of darkness until his body crumbled to ash. But as the blood pooled in his stomach and ignited a fire which raced along his veins, burning away the last shred of his mortality, he discovered he could not bring himself to care. This time it was different.

He started to lower his head to drink again when her voice filled his ears with a resonant thunder, sending a chill through his heated form. "No," she said firmly but kindly. "You've had enough." She looked down upon his startled face with silver eyes that shone like renegade moonlight. He felt her hands on him, as unyielding as stone. There was a prickling on his skin, like the touch of claws on fingertips, then she lifted him effortlessly off her body. She sat up and turned, swinging her feet to the floor, still holding him aloft as though he were an infant. She gazed at him that way, too, like a mother would gaze upon a newborn child. After a moment, she settled him gently on his feet and released him.

Dane began to tremble. Her smile did nothing to reassure him. Those terrible silver eyes judged him, looked past the shell of his flesh and his soul squirmed like an insect trapped beneath glass. The wound on her neck closed as he watched. Her blood faded into her pearly skin leaving behind no blemish or sight that it had ever been breached. "Don't be afraid," she whispered. "I won't hurt you."

"What are you?" he asked, finding his voice. He took a step back, edging away from her.

“You are too young to ask such a thing,” she said. The silver faded from her eyes leaving behind a deep-sea blue. “But perhaps being older means you are too wise to ask. I forget what it is to experience the world as something fresh and new.”

He took another step back. He cast a glance over his shoulder at the door, gauging the probability of escape. He jerked his head around as a feathery touch stroked his cheek. She was still sitting on the edge of the mattress, watching him, hands folded on her lap. Her laughter was soft and airy, conveying no hint of cruelty or ridicule. She stood, and what he had assumed to be her sleeping gown unfolded around her, layer upon layer of impossibly thin gossamer cloth, iridescently beautiful. Her blonde hair streamed from her head and spilled like gilded silk over her shoulders.

Dane was frozen, unable to move as she towered over him, still smiling, and brushed his face with the back of her hand. “I am inside you now,” she told him. “I know you feel it. I am a cold fire singing in your veins. Already you are changing. You are *becoming*. I promise you will never know the fate that awaits most of your kind.”

The boy stiffened and presented a defiant face to her. “How do you know anything about *my kind*?” he demanded. “You don’t know anything about me.”

“I know you very well,” Kyra said. “Your mother was a child of darkness, as are you. Your father, though, he was turned, and he never fully accepted the choice he’d made. The hunger for blood drives your kind, a maddening thirst that not all are fit to endure. Your father went mad and drove you mother to destruction.”

“My kind,” Dane muttered, repeating the phrase. “I’m...a vampire.”

“That is one name for it,” she agreed. “I will teach you many more.”

“How do you know so much? How *could* you know about me?”

“The story is in your eyes,” she answered softly. “It is entwined amidst the strands of your soul. The story of our lives is part of who we are.”

Dane brushed his unruly hair back with his fingers and stared into her downturned face. His fear had vacated without notice leaving behind only uncertainty, and he felt adrift. The thirst was gone as well. He could taste the remnants of Kyra’s blood lingering in the corners of his mouth. It was sharply bitter. A warning that he could never again safely feed on her. She had given of herself freely, and he was starting to understand why.

“What are you?” he asked again this time his voice filled with wonder.

“I am something different,” she said. Cold air swirled about her as she turned, her gown rustling like whispered voices. The patio doors opened as she approached, and Dane

followed unbidden onto the stone tiles of the enclosure beyond. The air outside was humid, sticky with the heat of approaching summer. The sky was overcast, hidden behind a layer of darkness. Kyra leaned against the stone parapet and waited for Dane to join her. The city spread out below them in a sea of electric light. It was as if the sky had fallen and lay now beneath their feet. Kyra turned her face upward, and the clouds split open. The rift widened and as it did a cold wind swept down from the west, tangy with the salt of the Pacific. The gap above revealed a swollen moon glowing with a strange golden hue. Kyra closed her eyes and let the light bathe her.

“My people are old,” she said, breaking the silence. “My mother’s mother walked the earth when Rome was a village. The first of my kind was born of Adam’s seed, stolen while he slept in Paradise, given life by Lilith, the Demon Queen. We are *Lamia*. Your kind are but a shadow of what we are.”

Dane gripped the stone railing to fight dizziness. He licked his lips. “You’re telling me you’re a vampire too?” he asked uncertainly.

“No,” she replied and favored him with a kindly smile. “Neither are you, anymore. *Nosferatu* are notoriously malleable. Feed on the dead, you become a ghoul. Drink from beasts, and become a beast yourself. Feed on humans and...” She shrugged.

“I drank from you,” he said. “What does that make me?”

“Special” she answered and laughed musically.

Dane looked down at his hands. They had begun to tingle, like a limb that had been asleep and was now awakening. The sensation was spreading quickly. “What’s happening to me?” he asked, frightened.

“I told you,” she said, once more surveying the city. “You are *becoming*.”

“Becoming what?”

“Ah! That is what we shall see.” She raised her arm and waved her hand slowly as though petting the sky. The clouds obediently rolled together, obscuring the moon and dropping them into shadow. Dane could feel the difference. The moonlight had been an insistent pressure on his skin. Gone, it took with it warmth, leaving him shivering. Kyra stepped close to him and draped an arm over his shoulders. The cottony layers of her garment enfolded him. They sank to the tiles together, he shivering uncontrollably, she cradling him like an infant.

“What’s happening to me?” he repeated forlornly. She did not answer, and in a moment he was lost beneath the flood of his own emotions. His mind, he felt, was cracking, splitting apart. The shards sliced into him like broken mirrors each reflecting a different

face. He heard a strange sound and realized it was his own cries of torment. The night vanished from perception as his body gave in to the icy needles pricking his flesh from within and his thoughts spun dizzily toward oblivion.

He sensed Kyra then, her presence creeping into his psyche like the ghost of a dream. His sense of the passage of time became skewed, so he could not tell how long his sojourn of insanity lasted. But she was there throughout, guiding the fragments of his mind back into place, cementing them together, helping him reorder the chaos.

When he at last felt like himself again, the tingling was gone. She loosened her hold on him, setting him adrift on the currents of morning air swirling around them. He opened his eyes slowly, dreading what he might see. The horizon was awash with pinks and violet, the light of the sun infecting the sky and smothering the night. The clouds had dwindled to stringy wisps, and the city looked old and dirty by natural light.

Dane whimpered as the first golden rays of the sun spilled over the distant mountains. The world around him came alive with scintillating refractions, as though everything had turned to crystal while he dreamed in madness. He stood, shakily at first, and cast about looking at everything. He became aware of other sensations. There were a million scents on the wind. A bird flew overhead, and he felt the downward pressure of air from its beating wings against his tender skin. Sounds of creatures in the grass, as well as the noise of the city, filtered through his hearing like resonant spirits. And he felt Kyra's presence lingering in his thoughts, drifting along the edges of ideas.

"You have questions," she said. "I have much to teach you. Your curiosity shines from you like a beacon. Well, *ask* something."

He winced at the veiled ferocity in her voice. Now that he had become aware of her, could sense how powerful she truly was, he realized how he had been tricked. She had known what he was before she ever opened her door to him. She knew what he had done to his foster parents before, picking the details from his mind, and had known he would do so again here. It was the nature of the thing he had been. There had been no need to seduce or entice. She only needed patience. Looking at her, seeing how ancient she was, he knew that patience was one thing she had in abundance.

"How many are there like y— like us?" he asked. She smiled. There was no need to comment on his acceptance of what had been done. He could feel the approval behind the wall of her mind.

"You will meet others in due time," she said. "As you will have noticed, unlike the *nosferatu* our powers do not diminish with daylight. These are differences you can see, but others cannot. You will know your own kind when you meet one."

"So, I'm *Lamia* now? Like you?"

“Not exactly like me,” she said, “but close enough. Just as a human can be turned by drinking the blood of the vampire, so you have been turned by drinking from me.”

He looked down at his hands. “I didn’t expect this,” he said, the words almost a growl. He glanced at Kyra, noting the confusion creeping into her eyes as she tried to sense his thoughts. He had no idea how to erect a wall like she had, a barrier against intrusion, but he found that it came naturally. He squeezed her out of his head as he smiled at her, baring his teeth humorlessly. His blow caught her on the chin, twisting her head savagely. His old strength was doubled, maybe tripled, the power of his transformation filling his body with hideous energy.

“*He* lied to me,” Dane said and struck her again, knocking her down. He moved swiftly to stand over her. “*He* didn’t tell me what you were, or what would happen to me. I wonder if *he* knew. It doesn’t matter.” He hiked up one pants leg and pulled a knife from its sheath strapped to his leg. The blade gleamed in the morning light. “Silver,” he said. “I was going to use it on myself. I still might.” He knelt and drove the knife into Kyra’s chest to the hilt, piercing her heart.

She gasped, clutched at him, then fell back limply. Dane rose from her, leaving the blade. “*He* made me promise,” he said, speaking softly. “That’s why I killed her, the other one. But she was human. Only human. *He* lied to me. *He* didn’t tell me what you were, or that I’d become...this.” He turned away from her and leaned heavily on the stone railing.

“For what it’s worth, I’m sorry.”

The city was coming alive beneath the morning glare. A helicopter passed by in the distance, the thumping of its rotors reminding him of a heartbeat. He stared into the air, his thoughts jumbled, wishing he had the capacity to weep. There was no telling what possibilities lay within his new form. It was possible *he* would know. Dane looked down, trying not to think about what he would have to do next.

The silver knife lay on the stone railing between his hands. Dane jumped back, a numbing shock coursing through him as the icy fingers of terror gripped his heart. He looked down at the empty tiles where Kyra had fallen.

“I thought I made it clear,” she said from behind him. He whirled to face her, a cry of panic forming on his lips. She was smiling benignly at him. A small rent in her gown was the only reminder of her wound. “I’m not your enemy.”

Dane tried to back away from her. He glanced over the parapet, judging the chances of a successful escape, and stopped as he felt hands like eagle’s talons grip his upper arms.

Kyra's face loomed inches from his, her eyes turned silver again as she stared into his terror-widened orbs. "He can't hurt you," she said. "You are free of him forever."

"Who?" he asked, but he knew already.

"Your father can't control you anymore," she said. "No one can ever do that to you again."

Dane sobbed. He sagged when she released him. "You don't understand," he said. "He can put things in my head. Horrible things. I *had* to kill you."

"Poor child," Kyra said shaking her head. "Killing me wasn't his goal. Having you turned was what he wanted. Just as he's done all your life, he wanted to use you. There's a war raging between *nosferatu* and the *garou*. As you have become, you would make a formidable weapon.

"But your father didn't understand the forces he was trying to manipulate. Search with yourself and you'll see that no one can harm you ever again. What we are transcends flesh."

He was staring at her woodenly. "There's no such thing as immortality," he said hollowly.

"You might be right," she said, "but my experience tells me otherwise."

They both turned as the brush rustled down the sloping hillside. Something large was running toward them. Dane could feel the creature's presence, could sense its inner fury. Kyra smiled, watching him, apparently unconcerned even when a wolf appeared, bursting from the undergrowth and leaping effortlessly up and over the parapet. Its form shifted as it dropped to the tiles. Gray fur and red eyes became brown skin, long black hair, a slim figure rippling with muscle, and a face dominated by coal-black eyes. A nude young man stood where the wolf had been and glared at Dane.

"What news do you have for me, Geiger?" Kyra asked without turning. The man immediately dropped to one knee and bowed his head.

"The mindweaver is dead, my Lady," the nude man replied in a thick German accent. "As you commanded."

"Casualties?" she asked.

"None, my Lady."

She smiled at the man over her shoulder. “Excellent work, Geiger. Your Queen is grateful.”

“What orders, my Lady?” Geiger watched her with shining eyes, the look of adoration freely given.

“None,” Kyra said. “Go back to your pack and get some rest.” The man bowed low then dropped to his hands and knees, transforming swiftly into wolf-form once more. The *garou* leaped over the railing and vanished into the foliage. Dane rushed to the parapet, breath catching in his throat.

“That was a werewolf,” he croaked. He buried his face suddenly in his hands. His voice came out muffled. “A werewolf. I can’t believe it.”

“They prefer to be called *garou* or shapeshifters,” Kyra said. Dane looked up sharply as she laid a hand on his shoulder. “What is it that you can’t believe? That they exist? Or that one was here at my bidding? You’ve been so sheltered, and you don’t really understand what you’ve gotten into.”

“What did he mean about the mindweaver?” Dane asked, his voice forcibly under control. “Who’s dead?”

Kyra tilted her head, amused. “Who do you think?”

“My father?” Dane replied. Then, more firmly, “My father is dead.”

“Yes.” She paused, studying him. “How does that make you feel?”

Dane shook his head, unwilling to answer. She brushed a lock of hair from his forehead. Her touch was cool on his fevered brow. “I told you. You are free.”

“What if I want to leave?” he asked, breath catching in his throat.

“Then you are free to do so. I hope you’ll choose to stay, though.”

“So *you* can use me?” his tone was sarcastic. “You killed my father. I don’t know how I feel about that. I suppose I should be thankful. But I’m not stupid. I know about the war. I didn’t know my father was a part of it, but I know which side I’ll choose to fight on.”

Kyra listened appreciatively and nodded her head when Dane finished speaking. “You think I’m acting to help the *garou* because I have *garou* servants,” she stated. “That’s because you refuse to grasp what I am and what you have become. We are *Lamia*. We are kings and queens of the night people. It is from the loins of *Lamia* that the first

nosferatu and *garou* sprang. This war threatens to destroy the balance we've maintained for hundreds of centuries."

As she spoke she seemed to grow taller, or made Dane feel somehow smaller. The morning sunlight dimmed and could not illuminate Kyra's dark countenance. "The death of father eliminates one threat to the stability of peace we are re-forging, but there will be more. There are many, *nosferatu* and *garou* alike who thirst for the blood of their own kind. They would lay waste to the world in their desire to conquer and rule. *I will not let that happen.*"

Thunder rolled across the sky, and when the last echo faded Kyra sagged. The morning was bright again, the light making her seem old and bent. For a brief moment, Dane had a glimpse of how weary with age she was. Then she straightened her back, lifted her chin, and once more became the glowing visage of ancient power. "Your father's insanity may have been divinely inspired," she said with a voice turned tender and reflective. "You may after all be the key I have been waiting for."

Dane swallowed, hardly daring to speak. "The key to what?" he asked.

Kyra hesitated. "I don't know," she said after a moment, smiling ruefully. "The goddess has yet to reveal that to me."

Dane opened his mouth to speak but checked the impulse as he felt a new presence forming at his back. He turned to the house just as a woman appeared in the doorway. She was rakishly thin, her pallid skin made to appear whiter by the tight leather clothing she wore. Her platinum hair was swept back into a bun held together by long needles, and her eyes were hidden behind dark sunglasses. She regarded Dane imperiously. "Good morning, my Lady," she said, her voice clipped and accentless. "The staff is arriving."

"Thank you, Natalie," Kyra said. To Dane she said, "Natalie is my assistant. As you can see, she's *nosferatu*. You'll meet a great many people today. If you stay."

"Then I really am free to go?" he asked, eyeing Natalie suspiciously.

"I said so, didn't I? You have the body and mind of a child, but you'll survive." She looked him over, inspecting him. "Just surviving isn't always enough, though." She moved away from him toward the house. She paused in the doorway. "I won't lie to you. If you stay, you will have chosen a very difficult road. You survived your father, though, so I know you have strength. You attacked me knowing I was more than human, that means you have courage. If you leave, it will only be because you lack compassion."

"I though compassion was for humans," he said.

Kyra chuckled. “We are all human,” she replied. “It’s only a matter of degree.”

When he looked her way again she was gone. Natalie lingered in the doorway, watching him. “Are you him?” she asked after a moment.

Dane snorted. He dug his fists into his eyes feeling weary and confused. “Who do you think I am?” he asked.

“The Prince,” Natalie answered promptly. She took a hesitant step forward then retreated two paces back, as though his proximity was a burden too great for her to bear. “Yes,” she whispered. “Yes, I see it now. You are him.”

“I’m nobody,” he argued. “My father is dead, so that makes me an orphan. My thirst is gone, so I guess I’m not a vampire anymore either. I feel like my childhood’s been stolen from me. I didn’t ask for any of this you know.”

Natalie nodded sympathetically. “I also was born with the dark gift,” she said. “Who can say what is destiny and what is an accident of fate? All that matters is what you are now and where you will go from here. For our kind, the road behind is less important than the road ahead.”

He glared at her. “But I’m *not* your kind, am I?” he spat hatefully.

“No,” she replied unperturbed. “Not yet.” She turned away from him and vanished through the doorway. Dane stared after her, her words rattling around in his mind.

“None of you make any sense,” he said. But he was lying. He had touched her mind for an instant and in that brief contact he had witnessed her belief. He knew beyond the possibility of doubt what she saw when she looked at him. It wasn’t a boy, it wasn’t *Lamia*, it wasn’t anything he could define within the scope of his limited experience. But it was something, and that was better than nothing.

He leaned against the stone railing and looked out over the city. There was nothing there for him. He had been born on the outside of human society, never knowing what it meant to be one of them, one of the sheep. He had missed out on being the hunter, too, thanks to his father’s crazed ambition. What was left?

“What if I don’t want to be a shepherd?” he asked of the air.

Then be a king, a voice said within his head. He smiled as he felt Kyra’s touch withdraw. His wall had opened while he mused, and he closed that barrier again with the sure knowledge that it would not be breached again. Still, the thought could not be chased away. The people here, they looked at Kyra as she thought of herself, as a Queen. Queen of the Night. Maybe it was time for someone to rule the day.

“Yeah,” he said aloud. “Why not?” He turned and went into the house.

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