

Rubies

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A six year old can survive on cats - two or three, if one drinks carefully. But at that age I was wasteful and kept so many of them in my tower, there was barely room for me to sleep. I used to hunt them nightly through the forests that surround our castle and bring them home in handfuls, dangling by their tails and spitting furiously. Papa indulged me, though he gave dire warnings about the danger of scratches, and I grew used to hearing my family discussing my 'problems' when they thought I was not listening.

"She's a strange one, that Kryssa," Grandpa was fond of saying. "Always off on her own. She'll come to a bad end."

This used to make me giggle. Even at six, I knew I knew that none of my family would ever *end*. Papa was five hundred years old, Grandpa more than a thousand, my eldest sister nearing two hundred. *Ending* was a great joke - would that I had known.

But I was very young, and only just beginning to experience that disquieting hunger even a menagerie such as mine could not soothe. Grandpa was first to notice. He had a word with Papa, then with my sisters, who argued among themselves for the privilege of escorting me on my first flight.

It was Viellah who came to my room one evening before the sky was truly dark and sat on the window seat swinging her bare legs, curling vines around the fingers of one hand and fending off cats with the other. Her hair, black as mine, glittered with diamonds that outshone the early stars. She seemed nervous.

"Don't poke that one around," I grumbled as she tipped a long-haired tabby off her lap. "She's pregnant. Due to kitten any day now."

"Ugh! I don't want it breeding all over me." Viellah screwed up her pretty nose. "Don't know what you see in the scrawny beasts."

"They're beautiful." I reached down to stroke those around my feet, made defensive by her tone.

"But no longer satisfying, huh?" she said, sly. Her dark eyes glittered at me through her fringe. "I know where we can find something truly beautiful tonight. How about it, Krys? Do you want to come?"

I sat very still, my hair prickling. The breeze that rustled the creepers around my window came in and stroked my skin. I shivered. "Where? What?"

My sister giggled. "Better than cats. Better than a kitten, even. Come and see!" And she did a backward flip out of my window, her hair flying like crows' wings as she fell.

"Vi!" I craned out after her, and saw her laughing on her back in the moonlit grass several hundred feet below. There were diamonds everywhere.

"Come on, Krys! Jump!"

I shook my head, not liking the look of the fence posts only steps away from where Viellah had landed. "You're crazy, Vi!" I called down into further floods of giggles.

By the time I had run down the spiral tower stairs, my sister was already on her feet and dancing into the forest, her bare feet white on the dark path. I followed her for an hour or so, unquestioning. But when she started scraping leaves off the shell of a gleaming silver pod I balked, suddenly scared.

"Where are we going?"

Viellah covered me with the broken blooms of bind flowers. Their petals clung sticky gold in my hair. "Don't ask so many questions. Just get in."

"But-"

"In, I said." Her long fingernails dug into my elbow, threatening to draw blood.

"Vi, please..." I stared at her hand in terror.

"Oh, don't worry so! Grandpa said you were ready to fly tonight, and I'll look after you.

Or-" Her look turned sly again. "-do you want to be a kitten-sucker forever?"

"No!"

We were inside the pod before I knew it, and the cushioned canopy clicked shut over my head. Rich red silk kissed my flesh, reminding me so forcibly of bed that I was nearly asleep before Viellah pressed for takeoff. Just as well. The sensation of flight unnerved me to panic proportions. I struggled against the confining cushions until my sister held me tight.

"Silly," she murmured. "Silly, Krys, silly. It's all right. We're only flying. It'll be worth it, my darling, I promise. Just relax a little."

Gradually my fear subsided, so that I was able to look out at the moon floating past the windows of our pod. I began to enjoy the glitter of the stars. Then came the landing in thick

woodland close to a cluster of strange, squat houses with darkened windows. No candles, no sign of life other than owls hunting through the trees. A ghost town, I decided, wondering why we had come.

But my sister knew better. "Shh," she cautioned. "They're asleep."

"Asleep? During the night? What sort of people sleep at night?"

"Mortals," Viellah whispered back. "People who end after a mere hundred years, sometimes sooner."

"Why should they want to do that?"

She giggled at the expression on my face. "They don't want to. They just do."

"How silly."

"They are silly. But you'll like them. Come." She took my hand and led me to the nearest house, where I felt the heat of many bodies. My blood rose rapidly, making me tremble.

"Steady," Viellah said. "I'll show you the best way this time, then you can fly as often as you like." For all her big sisterly knowledge, her hand was just as unsteady as mine.

I heard her panting as we tiptoed through the ankle-deep herbs strewn on the floor to stop smells. We slid under a curtained archway into a small room packed with mortal children, shoulder to shoulder on the floor. Their dirty limbs were entwined in sleep under scanty furs. I stared at them in horror: so close together, and with their flesh exposed to the moonlight! Then I felt the excitement rise again. They smelled sweet.

Viellah let go of me so that she could crawl forward. But then she stopped with a little cry and clamped a hand over her mouth. Tense enough to scream, I jumped. "Vi? What's wrong?" The way the children shifted in their dreams scared me.

But my sister just pinched her nose with her fingers, shaking with suppressed laughter. "Wild garlic!" She indicated the white flowers by her knees, which I noticed were wreathed in a deliberate pattern around the sleeping children. "Phew!" Still pinching her nose, she scraped a passage clear and beckoned to me. "Sorry about the smell, Krys. My fault. I've been here before, and they try to stop me sometimes."

I'd heard about garlic from Papa. Like most of the rumours about us, it isn't true. A nasty stink, yes, and it thins the blood if you eat enough of it, but garlic's hardly life threatening, wild or otherwise. I wondered how the children slept with so much of it in the room, though mortals are said to have an underdeveloped sense of smell. Or, I supposed, they might have simply passed out.

"Try this one, Krys." Viellah was already satisfied, and she seemed anxious that I should be, too.

I eyed the child in her arms. He was tiny, plump, sucking his thumb. A light dusting of gold curls covered his head.

"No more than a few months old," said my sister proudly. "Should be sweet enough for you."

She laid the child against my breast.

My heart banged. A wild throbbing weakened my legs so that I was forced to kneel in order to finish my meal. Sweet he was, and rich; so much richer than my cats that I wondered what I had been missing. My veins sang, my head turned light. I felt as if I owned the world.

"Krys! Krys, come on, let it go now." Viellah's hands tried to pluck the child from me, but I cuddled him close, crooning to him. She giggled. "Look at you! A proper mortal mother."

I blinked at her. The child's heart was fluttering faintly, and he smiled in his sleep. "Such strange hair," I murmured, stroking it. "So bright."

"You can come again tomorrow if you want." My sister firmly took the child away and laid him back on his fur. "Though it's best if you don't visit one place too often. I've a weakness for this town, hence the garlic. Even mortals can get wise if we're careless."

Her warning fell on deaf ears. "I want to take them all back with me." I grasped for the sweet, sleeping children, but Viellah dragged me away with another laugh.

"What are you doing, Krys? Stop it! They're not cats. You can't just steal people's children."

"Why not?"

"You just can't. Come on, we have to go now." She kicked the pile of garlic flowers across the gap in the circle, forcing me to back off with my hands over my nose. "Children! Whatever next?" she teased as we ran to our pod. "Wait till I tell Papa."

"He'll let me keep some," I said sulkily.

"He won't! He hates them."

"Why did he make seventeen of us, then?"

Viellah snorted. "Why do you think he made only daughters?"

This reminded me of something I had overheard Papa and Grandpa discussing, and curiosity overcame my sulk. "Is it true, Vi? About mortal women, I mean. That they breed like cats?"

My sister laughed. "It's true. Though thankfully they don't lay large litters. One at a time, usually."

I was silent in the red cocoon as Viellah drove a wild dance between the stars. The child's sweet blood lingered on my lips and the memory of his tiny, fragile body made my heart ache in a way I felt certain my sister would not understand.

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I quickly learnt to drink from children with the same efficiency as I drank from my cats. I learnt also to keep silent about those strange feelings that came over me from time to time when I held a mortal child to my breast - though Viellah never missed an opportunity to tease me about the way I had wanted to add the babies to my menagerie. I mastered all the tricks - how to avoid detection, how to tell when it was safe to visit a mortal community, when to fly quietly by - and for a while I was happy. Yet, as the years passed, I grew dissatisfied even as I had grown so with my cats, and began to return from my flights irritable and wanting more. Papa watched me with a knowing look in his eye. My sisters, giggling, told me to be patient. Grandpa whispered behind my back. Then, on my hundredth birthday, Papa made me a present of a mortal man.

Even Grandpa went all sentimental when my sisters helped me dress for the occasion. I remember him springing up my tower with a bowl of rubies in his strong hands, bursting in on us just as Viellah was drying my hair.

"Perfect timing!" he cried. "Here, girl - weave these into that black curtain, and we'll see if we can't make little Kryssa dazzle a bit."

He poured the rubies into my lap, where they pooled like fire against the purple silk of my dress. I was nervous, but such a gift could not go unremarked.

"Thank you, Grandpa," I whispered, running my fingers through the stones, watching them burn in the torchlight. Viellah picked one, threaded it on a cord, and began to fix it into my hair.

"Don't tremble so," she murmured as she worked. "You'll enjoy it. Papa'll have picked a good one for you. He won't suspect a thing."

"What was your first man like, Vi?" I asked.

She stared at the creeper, where one of my cats stalked a branch, its tail shivering for balance. "Wonderful," she said. "Remember your first taste of a child? Well, better than that. Just - wonderful."

So I came to my first man in style, with gold against my flesh and rubies in my hair. Papa set the pod down on the other side of the hill, and I walked the last bit slowly, letting the night breezes caress my skin, stopping at every lake and pool to admire my reflection in the darkness there. Yes, I could see myself. Or, at least, I could see moon-pale flesh shimmering with gold, and the pinpricks of red stars surrounding me: Grandpa's rubies blurred with the millions of worlds above. That was how the mortal man would see me, though not if he looked in the pool. There he might see darkness and be afraid.

His house was a grand affair of white walls covered with roses, lit by cunning lamps hung in strings across the gardens. Fountains arched high over my head, gold and green against the lamps, and servants met me at the door with a cup of wine. I let them lead me to his fireside, where I sat sipping the wine and ignoring their curious glances until the one I had been waiting for stepped into the room. I stood, alight with anticipation, and stared at his golden hair. A cat came and rubbed my legs, but I hardly noticed its small heat.

The man stared back at me with eyes luminous as moon-daisies. He whispered, "They told me you were beautiful, Kryssa, but never that you were a goddess."

Then he took my hand, raised it to his lips, and kissed it.

Viellah was wrong. He was nothing like my first taste of a child. He was like nothing I had ever imagined. Papa had said he was a lord of his people, and told me to call him Arian, yet I never spoke his name that night. I could not speak at all. It took all of my will to force my eyes from the delicate veins of his wrist. I did not know what to expect, but felt certain there should be more to this than drinking from a cat or a child, so I held myself still and waited.

My patience was rewarded. Gently, Arian laid me on the rug before the fire and peeled my dress from my flesh until I was clothed only in hair and gold and rubies. His neck pulsed close to my lips. Blood throbbed in every one of his veins - hot, so hot. I pressed my tongue to his throat, yet still I held back, reluctant to end the song he was making in my body.

"Kryssa!" he cried, arching over me, and something burst like a flower inside me. I struggled away from him then and stared in horror at the rug.

Fear freed my tongue. "Blood! You made me bleed!"

His arms tried to hold me, but I stuffed my dress between my legs and fled, cold, back through the night to where Papa waited in the pod.

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Viellah laughed and laughed when she found out that I had run away without even taking a sip. "You were supposed to make *him* bleed!" she cried, doubled over with mirth. "Enjoying it, were you?" And she mimed the dance we had performed before Arian's fire.

"Leave me alone." I blushed. "I'm never going to try a man again!"

"You will," she said, still laughing. "Now you've had a taste."

She was right. I took a few more children, supped continuously on my cats, but always when I lay down to sleep I remembered Arian's lips on my body like the fire of the rubies in my hair, and the ache inside me became all the fiercer.

So I returned, alone, to his white house and crept into his bedroom to surprise him in his dreams. Perhaps he thought I was a dream, I do not know. Maybe that was why he loved me so freely night after night and made no complaint when I bit him. Maybe that was why it was many years before anyone suspected my true nature. I only know that I was happy as I had never been before, and both Papa and Grandpa were pleased, though they would have had a fit if they thought I was seeing the same man every night. Which is why I kept the love Arian and I shared secret, even from Viellah.

Arian would never have hurt me of course, but I had not counted on the jealousy of a mortal girl whose family was trying for a match with the handsome, rich lord. They set a trap for me which I, vibrant with excitement, did not see until too late.

They chose a beautiful summer's night with moonlight shining on the white stone, stars reflected in the fountains, flower scents heady in the air. Arian had filled the bed with rose petals, in which we rolled until they were crushed to a pulp. They waited for me to bite him so that I would be weak and languorous, then sprang upon me from all sides with ropes woven of garlic stalks and silver crosses to blind my eyes. Hands made rough with fear lifted me naked from my lover, then held me by sheer force against the wall while Arian struggled up from his bed and stared about him in confusion.

"Look, my lord!" said one of my captors, swinging his cross. A mortal priest. "We'll prove it to you." So saying, he held a mirror to my eyes.

I saw a terrified girl, bound and shivering, with rubies in her hair. Arian saw darkness and staggered away from me, one hand on his neck where I had supped.

"It's not true..." he choked out, staring at me. "Kryssa... tell me it's not true!"

"You know what must be done," said the priest with a sharp gesture.

Almost before I realised what they intended, someone came running up carrying a wooden stake and set the point to my breast.

"*Arian!*" I screamed as they drove the wood deep. Blood spurted out unchecked; more than the scratch of a cat, more than a woman's first taste of love, more blood than I had ever shed before. "Arian!" I struggled to free my hands so that I could stop the flow, but my wrists were held tight behind me in coils of garlic rope. I was more frightened than I had ever been in my life. For the first time, I thought seriously of ending. Then, as my captors watched me curiously, I began to cry.

"All right," the priest said when my struggles had quietened. "This may take some time. We'll put her in the aviary." His lips curled righteously. "In God's light, so she can't escape."

Oh, he knew how to torture me, that mortal priest! He ordered me locked in an ornamental cage of crossed silver, which they hung high above the rose garden, leaving me bound and bleeding inside. I could not see Arian among the faces that watched as the sun rose, and I still do not know if he witnessed my terror of that great light and heat that filled the sky, a light I had never seen in all my long life before that terrible day. I screwed my eyes shut and tried to hide under my hair, whimpering when the rays touched my skin. So hot - so hot - they burned me. Yet I could do little more than curl against the silver bars in pain and fear, while my blood that Papa had always warned me to be so careful of dripped onto the grass, where it splashed the flowers ruby red.

I suppose they must have finally grown bored of watching, for when I next looked around me, I saw it was evening. The sun had sunk behind the wall to give me some relief from its blistering heat, and the garden was empty. Only Arian's little cat stalked the bushes, pouncing at shadows, her body throbbing with life. I stared at her longingly, licked my lips and made twittering noises, but she gave the cage a haughty stare and prowled on. I watched her tail flick out of sight and turned cold inside, though my skin burned still. The wound in my chest was closing, but not nearly fast enough, and I knew that when they came back they would reopen it. Painfully, with the wood, like the superstitious fools they were. A sword would have been more effective. The moon rose in a crescent that swept from heaven to earth, but I took no joy from

the sight. The stars were blurred, and at first I thought there was something wrong with my eyes. Then I realised I was crying again.

"Kryssa?" I had become so weak that I barely felt the heat of his body standing there below me. "Kryssa?" Are you in pain? What's happened to your skin?"

"The sun..." I gasped.

"It's gone, Kryssa. See." As he spoke, Arian wound the cage low and knocked the bars loose. "You can go now. Run, fly, whatever you do." He cut the ropes from my wrists. "Go on. I'm setting you free. Go home, and never come back here again." He stood aside, throbbing with heat and fear.

I lay still, clutching at my chest. "I can't... I'm dying, Arian." I used the mortal word so he would understand. "I've lost too much blood."

He stared down at me a moment, then knelt and bared his neck. "You need blood? So take it. Drink, Kryssa!"

I needed more than he could give. When I left him, he lay peacefully among the roses with a smile on his face as if he slept. On my way out of the garden, I caught the cat and drank with vicious hunger, crying when it was empty, crying for my weakness. Arian had betrayed me. He had looked into that mirror and seen darkness, yet I loved him still.

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Grandpa was angry. Papa forbade me to go out on my own again. My sisters were shocked and worried - though later, when I was healing, Viellah teased me about my sunburn. And I remained many months in my tower room with my cats, waking often from nightmares of sunlight reflecting off the pools of blood in the rose garden.

Comforting red silk covers me when I wake, so I am spared further sight of the sun, but it haunts me because I know it is there. And there is another thing I know since its light touched my body: we have a new Lord Arian.

He lies, even as I do, in a bed of red shadows, waiting until he feels strong enough to face the world. I plan to feed him on kittens, though I fear he'll yearn for more as he grows up. When the proper time comes, I shall give him Grandpa's rubies to thread in his hair so that mortals can see him.

Already, safe in my womb, he has drunk deeply of my blood.

THE END