

REPEAT PERFORMANCE

by K. Linden

Part Two:

"Vlad!"

Dracula's head shot up. "Who dares to...?"

Miss Murray stepped out of the gloom. "The others, they are at the fortress."

He laughed. "Dear Mina, my mortal guards...."

"Are gone. You paid them in gold. They sleep in the gutters already, after reveling in their wages."

"What!" Dracula's eyes flashed red. "I must go, then." He glanced down at Purdey, still entranced, in his arms. "You will see to her?"

Mina smiled sadly. "Another, Vlad?"

He lowered Purdey to the ground, then approached Mina. Pushing the hood back from her head, he stroked her hair gently and kissed her forehead. "You know that I love you. But it is not the same as these others. Love among our kind is different."

Mina sighed, snuggling against him. "I know. But you take such pleasure freely."

Dracula looked up. "I must go, now. But we shall continue this discussion later?"

Mina nodded shyly, kissed him, and watched him run across the roof. Launching himself into the air, he shimmered into a small bird-like form and flew away.

Mina bent down and touched Purdey's shoulder gently. "Child? Arise, there is much for you to do this night."

Purdey shook her head and rose unsteadily. "Miss Murray..." she asked. "What? Dracula!"

"He has gone. You are safe, he has not touched you."

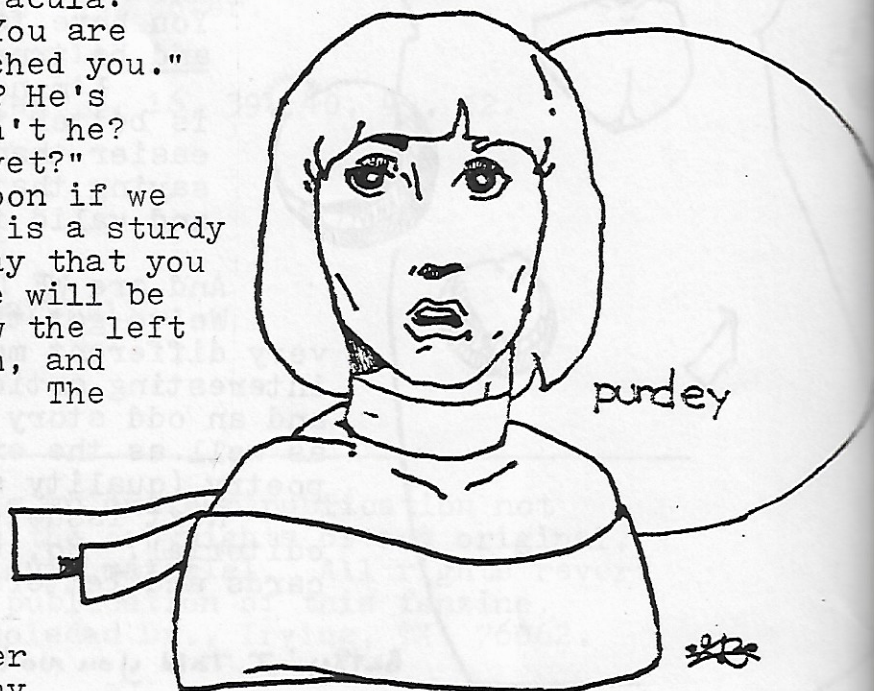
"Gambit? Steed? He's gone after them, hasn't he? He doesn't have them yet?"

"Not yet, but soon if we do not hurry. There is a sturdy horse downstairs. Say that you come from Mina and he will be given to you. Follow the left fork, past the stream, and continue on the road. The horse will know the way."

Purdey climbed down the side of the stable, then looked up at Mina. "And you?"

"There are faster means of travel for my kind. Hurry Purdey!"

Purdey found the horse and went on her





way, wondering what she could do, if she were in time....

\*\*\*\*\*

The room was dark. There were no torches on these walls. Moonlight streamed across the balcony, barely edging into the room. Gambit turned to go, but noticed a chair in the shadows and a huddled shape.

"Karen?" he asked. As he moved across the room, he could see her more distinctly. Her head shifted and she whimpered slightly.

"Karen, it's Gambit," he whispered soothingly. Her face was bruised, her gown ripped. Her arms were tied behind the chair and her feet were bound together.

She opened her eyes, blinking. "Gambit?" she mumbled. "No, you must go! He'll be here soon...soon..." Her voice ended in a moan.

Gambit undid her wrists quickly. Nothing seemed broken. He bent to undo her feet and felt her hand on his head.

Karenina felt the hunger grow within her, a wild beast that tore at her innards. Blood within reach...so close.... She leaned closer to Gambit and rested her freed hand on his head. She felt the hot tear on her cheek and saw it splash to the floor, blood red. Crying out, she pushed him away, knowing what she had become once more, what she had almost done to him....

Gambit stood up, surprised. She had been strong before, but in that condition? He stepped forward as she tried to stand. Her legs gave out and she fell into his arms. He eased her down to the floor, her back leaning against a wall.

"We'll never get you down the cliff like this," he muttered.

"Leave!" she said hoarsely. Her lips were cracked and dry. "Leave me here."

He knelt down next to her. "Steed's here. And Purdey. We came to get you."

"How touching!"

Gambit looked up at the mocking tone and saw a tall man standing on the moonlight flooded balcony. He had no shadow.

With two giant steps, Dracula reached Gambit and stood over him, lifting him to his feet with one hand. Angered, Gambit moved quickly, striking Dracula with rapid blows. He managed to free himself and push Dracula back.

"I see your talents were not overestimated, but underestimated," said Dracula in surprise. "What a mortal you are!"

Gambit paused, also surprised. Those blows would have crippled any other man.

"Gambit, go!" cried Karenina. "Leave, before it's too late!"

"I can't leave you here," said Gambit. He eyed Dracula, waiting for an opening.

Dracula feigned a blow, ready for attack. Easily evading Gambit's counter-blow, he clasped his hands tightly around Gambit's neck.

Gasping, struggling, Gambit tried to free himself. The fingers could have been steel, they were so stiff and unyielding.



Slowly, they tightened, blocking off what little passage was left.

Dracula smiled at Karenina. "Shall I strangle him slowly? Or snap his neck cleanly?"

Karenina staggered to her feet. "No, Master! I promise you anything...anything you want." Her voice softened. "He is only a mortal, do not kill him, please...."

"You ask me?" roared Dracula. "You, a traitor, filth! I gave you the rule of my people, gave you the power to enforce my will. And you betray me for what? The chance to be nothing but mortal ash once more! If you will have Death as your master, so be it. Death will have this one also."

Karenina ran to Dracula, pulling futilely at his arm. "Master, no! Anything!"

"The serum?" asked Dracula quickly.

"Yes, if it still exists...the serum!" breathed Karenina.

"And...you?" Dracula laughed suddenly, pushing her to the floor with a sweep of his arm. "As if I had any wish for you. As if you had any worth! Look!"

Karenina looked down at the floor and moaned. Although the moonlight shone upon her, she cast no shadow. She sobbed, but no tears would come. Now she was fully undead.

Dracula tossed Gambit across the room, then leaned down and offered Karenina his hand. Looking up into his eyes, she took it, and he lifted her up. "Now, you are of my kingdom! Before, you were never one of mine, carrying that mortal remnant, that shadow, like a banner. You were a legend among my kind, did you know that? Your name was whispered among the night winds, you were feared as I am feared, even by my race. Now, you grovel for the life of a mortal?"

A red tear slipped down Karenina's face. The last remnant of her humanity, the tear, was caught by Dracula. He wiped it from her cheek with a finger. Then, he walked her out to the balcony, both propelling and supporting her. "You are mine," he repeated. "Shall I break your spine and toss you into the lake below? Come morning, you would be dust upon the waves." He sighed, adding gently, "My anger is spent. Tell me, now... Does this serum exist?"

Karenina stared down at the dark waters below. "No," she murmured.

"Yes," called Steed from the doorway. "It does exist."

"Another mortal?" asked Dracula quietly. "Ah yes. Come." He took Karenina's arm, drawing her into the room with him.

Gambit moaned and shifted on the floor. Karenina looked up at Dracula. He did not deign to look at her, but waved his hand in a gesture of dismissal. She ran to help Gambit.

Steed held Karenina's vial out before him. "I have the serum. You may take it, in exchange for our lives."

Karenina looked up in horror. "No! Steed, don't give it to him!"

Dracula nodded. "There is honor in your terms. I will accept. I only wish it for my Mina...."

"Did you call, my love?" Dracula turned and found Mina was standing on the balcony. She stepped forward and kissed



him on the cheek. Surveying the room, she asked, "All this for me, my love? Or for your anger and your pride?"

"Mina?" asked Dracula softly.

Mina turned to Steed and indicated the vial. "May I?"

Steed handed her the vial.

"It is for me?" she asked again.

"Yes," answered Dracula. "For you, beloved." His face was a mixture of adoration and curiosity.

"So, you do love me," she mused. Mina stepped past Dracula and onto the balcony. "Do we really need such as this, beloved? Our ways are different, true. But is there not beauty? Is there not love?"

He turned to face her, as she leaned with her back against the balcony railing. "There is," he admitted.

"Will you love me still, then, if I refuse your gift?" she asked softly. Mina raised the vial above her head, then hurled it violently to the rocks below.

Dracula moved quickly to the edge of the balcony, but Mina stopped him with a touch of her hand. He turned to face her. He smiled. "Let us begin again, then. I thought that we would need that..." he indicated the rocks below.

"We don't," assured Mina. She slipped her arm around his waist.

Dracula turned back to the others. "You might get her downstairs," he said to Steed, indicating Karenina. "I have ~~ear~~th prepared for her there." The horizon began to glow. He left Mina and walked over to Karenina.

She looked up at him, almost pleadingly. He patted her head gently. "The mortal will be well, little one. You brought this upon yourself. Although, I admit, I must share part of the blame. Sometimes my anger..." He kissed her forehead. "You are free from me, little one. But, should you ever have need of me..." Dracula smiled, then turned and walked to the balcony. He took Mina's arm as they stood at the edge, then leapt over the railing, out into space.

Steed lost sight of them for a moment, then saw two large bird-like shapes flying over the lake....

The horizon was turning pink. He turned back to the room and saw Karenina flinch at the small ray of light the filtered in through the balcony. His heart ached as he watched her drag herself into the far shadows.

Purdey bounded into the room breathlessly. "Did I miss the party?"

Steed motioned toward Gambit. "I think he's broken something, from the position he's in."

"What happened?" Purdey checked Gambit out quickly. His arm had been broken, probably from a fall, but it was a clean break and could be set easily.

"Dracula was here." Steed peered intently at Purdey. "Are you all right?"

Purdey smiled. "Miss Murray got me out of a tight spot. Relieved?"

"I knew you could handle yourself."

Purdey tended to Gambit. "He took on Dracula, didn't he?"



"I didn't see it, but I heard most of it. Yes."

"When will you ever learn, Gambit?" asked Purdey in despair. She heard a small sigh and glanced at the shadows. "Karenina?"

Steed nodded. "I have to move her...."

"There's a room next door with a west window."

\*\*\*\*\*

"Karenina?"

"So tired....," she mumbled. "So hungry...." She blinked her eyes, trying not to sleep. "Steed?"

"Yes?" He held her head in his lap.

"I died tonight. I'm...one of them again."

"I know." Steed paused, cursing himself. "The soil downstairs, you won't be able to use it...."

"I'll die in the sunlight," she whispered. "I'll die... like Matthew."

Steed recalled what she had told him, how Matthew had been locked out in the sunlight by Adela, the woman who had made him a vampire. Somehow, he couldn't picture Matthew's face at that moment, the moment he knew he would die. Matthew had been the optimist, always so certain that there was a way out. But everything repeated itself...everything. He looked around the room and his glance fell on the umbrella.

The umbrella! He twisted the handle and removed the vial from the interior. He knelt beside Karenina, propping her up beside a corner. "Karenina, I can help you. I have the serum."

Karenina turned her face to the wall. "Mina destroyed it, I saw her. Lying won't make my death easier, Steed."

"I switched the serum in case...just in case." He weighed the vial in his hand. He couldn't force her to take it. It would have to be her choice. "Will you take it?"

Karenina turned her head, looking up into his eyes. "Matthew...died. You will. We all will." She paused. "Do you want me to live?"

"Yes," said Steed gently. "Always."

She watched him open the vial and smiled. "I could never refuse you anything."

"You never have."

\*\*\*\*\*

Gambit and Purdey strolled into the room and saw Steed replacing a book on the bookshelf. "The cast comes off tomorrow," proclaimed Purdey.

"And none too soon for me," exclaimed Gambit. He poked at the sling with his good hand. "It will be weeks before I can get this arm back into shape again."

"If one of the nurses doesn't break your other arm before that," quoted Purdey.

Steed chuckled. "It's good to see you back to normal."

"Where's Karen?" asked Gambit. "I wanted to tell her the good news."

Steed frowned. "Gambit...."

"Never mind. I'll find her...." Gambit ran out and



upstairs, calling for her.

Purdey and Steed exchanged glances. A few minutes later, Gambit returned.

"Where is she?" he asked in concern. "Her things are gone. She hasn't been kidnapped...."

Steed sat down behind the desk. "No. No, she decided to leave."

"Leave?" asked Gambit suspiciously. "Why?"

"We decided that it would be the best thing...."

Gambit stalked over to Steed. "We?" he asked angrily. "She didn't decide on her own. You helped her. What did you tell her, Steed? Why did you send her away?"

Purdey put her hand on his shoulder. "Gambit?"

He shrugged it off. "Why did you send her away?" he accused. "I'm waiting, Steed."

"We decided that she had to leave. This place had too many memories for her."

"No, you decided! You decided that this place has too many memories of her. Were you afraid that I might take her away from you? Were you afraid of the competition, Steed?"

"Oh, come off it, Gambit!" said Purdey angrily. "John would never...."

"It's all right, Purdey," said Steed quietly. He leaned forward and touched her hand to stop her.

"Is it true?" asked Gambit. He slammed his good hand down on the desk. "Is it?"

Steed looked him straight in the eye. "I don't know."

Gambit turned and stalked out of the room. They heard the front door slam. An engine started. The sound of tires squealing on gravel drifted in the window on the afternoon breeze.

Purdey perched on the corner of the desk. "He'll be back," she said softly. "He'll get over it."

"I know."

"Gambit didn't mean what he said," she continued. "It's just that, well, he's grown...fond of Karen."

"But what if he's right?" asked Steed.

"Steed?"

"What if I sent Karenina away because I didn't want to lose her to another friend? She wanted to leave earlier, but I convinced her to stay these last two weeks.... Why? Just to send her away? What if my motive was jealousy?"

Purdey laughed lightly. "Jealous? Steed, you don't have a selfish bone in your body."

He smiled. "You flatter me."

"It was Karen's decision," she reminded. "She couldn't be Karenina or Karen any longer. She has a new life and she wants to live it in a new place, with new people. You don't blame her for it, and neither will Gambit, in time."

Steed sighed. "Time...It's always time. There's never enough."

"It's still early," noted Purdey. "Why don't we go for a ride? It will do you good to get out."

Steed smiled in surrender. "All right, you win. You



always win." He escorted her through the patio doors, into the sunlight.

\*\*\*\*\*

Karenina smiled assuringly at the stewardess. "I'm fine, thanks." The stewardess passed on down the aisle, seeing to other passengers.

The smile faded. It was not the flight that worried her, but the fact that she was leaving. Why was she leaving?

Two weeks ago- she woke up screaming in a strange room. That was one reason, the nightmares. How could she forget what she had been? How could she forget what she had done?"

Then, a week ago- Gambit had promised her a fabulous lunch. So, she met him, dressed to the hilt.

He took her to a fish and chips shop. They spent the afternoon sitting on the wharf, laughing, joking, talking.... Then, he had turned his head, just so -the sun had lit his hair, he laughed....

And she saw Matthew. Her heart caught in her throat. She started crying.

So ended lunch.

Three days ago- she'd gone to the theatre with Steed. In the middle of the second act, she'd caught him looking at her. There it was in his eyes, the same look she'd seen years ago. She had loved this man, but knew he was dedicated to his work. Too dedicated to be dedicated to any one woman.

She had chosen Matthew and nearly broke both their hearts. She couldn't do it again.

A shadow fell across her. She looked up in surprise.

Dark hair, dark eyes, impish smile.... "Is this seat taken?"

Accent? Undefinable, although possibly irish. "No, not at all." She smiled.

He returned the smile and swung down into the seat, dropping a briefcase at his feet. "On holiday?"

"I suppose." The agent's trained eye could pick up very little- the ratty turtleneck under the sportscoat could bely a lack of money, or be a charming affectation. "I'm sort of escaping my past," she admitted.

He nodded nervously, then leaned past her to look out the window. He leaned back and peered down the aisle. "So am I." He smiled at her again. "Do you know what movie they'll be showing?"

"Casablanca," I believe."

His eyes lit up. "Really? How wonderful!"

"It's one of my favorites as well."

"I'm certain we'll get along splendidly, Miss...?" He raised an eyebrow.

"Karen, Karenina Bosov."

"Michael O'Leary."

It was going to be a very short trip.