

NIGHT & DAY

Once in a vision I came on some woods
And stood at a fork in the road.
My choices were clear yet I froze with the fear
Of not knowing which way to go.
One road was simple; acceptance of life.
The other road offered sweet peace.
When I made my decision
My vision became my release.
—"Netherlands"—

She pressed herself into the gully, afraid the slightest move would betray her. At one point she thought she saw *Him* standing above her, his red eyes piercing the underbrush in search of her. Karenina waited for him to move, to call out her name, or to kill her where she lay, but he moved on, distracted by something else.

A sigh of relief escaped her when she saw him pass, but she tensed immediately. A rosy glow was spreading across the eastern sky.

The sun was rising.

Karenina fought her urge to panic and instead began to review methods of escape. Suddenly, she laughed. There was no reason for her to fear the rays of the sun any longer, she was not a member of the undead.

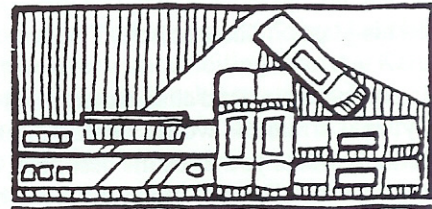
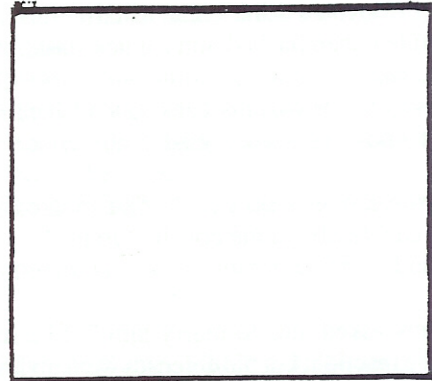
Her spirit lifted, she easily evaded the mortal search teams he employed during the daylight hours. Even they couldn't stop her from her destination—the home of John Steed.

Sunday afternoons were just the right time to catch up on unfinished business, which was precisely what Steed was doing. As he was replacing a volume on the bookshelf, he heard a noise and became aware of some movement on the study patio. He turned, made certain that his umbrella was close at hand, then called out, "There's no point in hiding any longer. I know that you're out there."

The curtains on the glass doors revealed only a shadowy outline. The handle turned, the doors moved inward....

Steed stepped forward in surprise, then stopped, astonished at the sight that greeted him. His mind fled back to another time, when the same beautiful woman had stood in a similar doorway on a comparably glorious afternoon....

He paced, frustrated at his inability to act. There must be



some word, any word....

"Steed?" She stood in the doorway, smiling. Her dark curls were tucked under a fur cap, making her brown eyes sparkle.

"You're alive!" He threw his arms around her but quickly regained his lost composure. "When we didn't get any word, we thought...I didn't expect to see you again."

"We almost didn't make it," said Karenina softly. Then, she laughed. "Matthew said he didn't dare come back without me, he didn't like the idea of facing you alone."

Realizing how close they were, Steed released her and stepped back. "We both know how rare a commodity you are. How did the mission go?"

Karenina turned away and took off her cap. "As well as could be expected."

"Can I offer you a drink? The usual?"

She nodded, then flashed him a quick smile. "Yes, thank you."

He moved to the bar, his back toward her, and poured. "You don't know how very glad I am to see you. And Matthew?"

"As always, not a scratch." She cleared her throat, placing her cap gently on the couch. "John?"

He turned, handing her the drink. "Is something on your mind?"

"Matthew asked me...to marry him." She searched his eyes for some reaction, but his defenses went up immediately. They were the eyes of a gentleman, seeing all but telling nothing.

"And...?" His question was toneless, emotionless.

"I haven't answered yet." She turned away. "I'm going to say...yes."

He raised his glass. "Cheers, then. The best for both of you."

Immediately something had changed between them. She spoke quickly, as if afraid the words wouldn't come out. "I think that Matthew wants you to be his best man, but..."

He bowed his head slightly. "But, you'd rather I didn't? If you wish..."

"You know that my parents are dead." She touched his arm lightly. "I was hoping you'd give me away." Tears formed in her eyes, but she brushed them off with her gloved hand. "I'm sorry that it sounds so...cruel!"

He put his arms around her, wondering if she would cry. She didn't, she never had. This was the closest to tears that he had ever seen her. "When will the wedding be?" he asked gently. "How are the plans progressing?"

"We have...one more mission. I think it's in Rumania, of all places." Karenina pulled out of his embrace and gave him a half-smile, her tears were gone. "I should go now. I have to see Matthew later. He'll wonder why I'm so upset. Goodbye, John. Thank you for understanding."

She had kissed him quickly and then left as quietly as she had appeared. Karenina had thanked him for his understanding, but he didn't understand. He had lost again. Why was it always his duty to understand, his duty to lose gracefully?

That was the last time he had seen her. She and Matthew

were reported missing in Rumania three weeks later.

"Steed?" Her voice trembled slightly. He had seen her again almost six months ago. She had been a member of the undead, beyond his reach.

But now? Her face was flushed, bruised. Her clothes were torn and mudstained, her skin covered with scratches. And...she was standing in sunlight!

"Steed?" she asked again, plaintively. She stumbled forward, falling into his arms, and allowed him to help her to the couch.

"Karenina, how...?" He poured a glass of water, guessing that to be better than alcohol, and forced her to drink it. She sputtered and choked, but seemed to calm down as she swallowed.

"He's after me," she gestured anxiously with the half-filled glass. "I had to sneak in. He has spies out front, I'm certain of it. I've been on the run for a week." She shook her head. "Or is it two? I can't hold out any longer...."

"Karenina, Karen, calm down." He caught hold of her shoulders and steadied her. "Go back to the basics. Remember your training." Steed watched the panic in her eyes drain away as she disciplined herself. "Now...report."

Karenina finished the glass of water, then breathed deeply. "He's following me."

Steed nodded. "Who's following you?"

"Dracula!" She hissed the word.

Steed sighed. "I suppose we should try a different track. Why was he following you?"

She smiled, then laughed. "John, are you blind! Just look at me. I'm mortal again!"

Her hand was warm and he could feel her pulse running fast. She was breathing deeply, her cheeks were flushed...he had been blind, blinded by her presence. He kissed her hand, releasing her. "Welcome back among the living. How did it happen? After you...left, I did some research. I was under the impression that you'd embarked on a one way journey, that there was no way back."

"There isn't, not normally." Her eyes were shining and she clasped his hand tightly. "After I left, as you put it, I began to realize how much of a prisoner I really was. I'd been deluding myself, believing that I'd found a better way. But it was only a living death." She touched his cheek. "What is it about you that always reminds me how wonderful life is?"

"I enjoy life," said Steed cheerfully. "I live it."

Energy flowed through her voice. "I can't fault that argument. Anyway, I started listening to gossip. I heard of a vampire that had become human again, but I couldn't get any details. No one seemed to know anything."

"But, you *did* find him?"

"I had my training to fall back on. Plus, I was one of Dracula's wardens, they were afraid not to tell me what I wanted. It seems that one of the gentleman's relatives was a bacteriologist. The vampire, Denning, gave the relative a sample of his blood. From what I understand, the bacteriologist

discovered an anti-body."

Steed was astonished. "Vampirism is a virus?"

"I'm not certain. A virus has something to do with it. After all, the body is transformed, it becomes something other than human." She frowned. "I'm well aware of that. I persuaded Denning to let me in on his secret."

"By threatening to let Dracula in on it as well, no doubt."

"That did have something to do with it. But Dracula found out anyway." Karenina had grown more agitated and shivered occasionally. "I guess I'd gotten sloppy, and Dracula is naturally suspicious. I'd taken the anti-body and had become human again by the time Dracula attacked. And I didn't want Dracula to get his hands on that formula, so I set the place on fire. Denning and his relative killed one another trying to escape Dracula."

Steed shook his head. "If the formula and its creator are gone, why is Dracula after you?"

"He thinks I've betrayed him." She hung her head. "And in a way, I have. He's set on revenge and wants to make an example of me. And then, I've got this." She pulled a chain from beneath her jacket, upon which hung a vial of clear liquid. Carefully unclasping it, she handed the vial to Steed.

He held it up to the fading light and shook it slightly. "The anti-body serum?"

"Denning had some around, just in case." She stared at the vial. "I thought you'd be interested in having it."

"Interested, of course! I'll get the lab boys on it immediately." Steed rose and crossed to the phone, where he picked up the receiver. After a second, he stopped and dropped it back into its cradle. "It's Sunday, the lab will be closed by now. It'll have to wait for tomorrow. As for you," he turned to Karenina, "you look like you could use a good, hot bath."

"If you wouldn't mind," she said hesitantly. "Then I'll be on my way."

"On your way?" Steed seemed surprised. "I wouldn't think of it. You'll stay here."

Karenina stood. "John, Dracula may be a tyrant, but he's no fool. When he realizes that I'm here...."

"But he doesn't know that." Steed walked back to her. "You mentioned spies before?"

"Yes, mortals. People he tempts with the promise of immortality." She spat out the words. "Promise! A curse is more like it!"

Steed caught her hands. "And you're certain that you weren't followed?"

"I don't think I was followed, but...I can't be sure." She shook her head doubtfully. "I know he has men watching key places and that this is one of them. I couldn't put you in that kind of danger. Sometimes I think you're the only one who can keep me sane. You're my only link...."

"To the past, the old days," finished Steed quietly. He looked at her critically and realized that there was no difference between the woman before him and the woman who had left him twenty years ago. Her eyes had grown darker and more impenetrable, if that was possible, but she looked untouched by age despite that. "Yes, I suppose that I am."

She hugged him. "Steed, I didn't...."

He pulled back slightly, just enough to look into her eyes. "In memory of 'the old days', stay for just a little while. I'll think of someplace to hide you, someplace to keep you safe from him."

Karenina nodded, smiling. "All right, you win. you always win." She pulled away. "I can find the guest room, just put that," she indicated the vial, "in a safe place."

"You can count on it." He watched her leave the room, then began to search for a hiding spot for the vial.

"John?" She was standing in the doorway.

"Yes?"

"I forgot to ask. How is Purdey...and Gambit?"

He felt a quick pang near his heart, then dismissed it immediately. She never noticed that he'd skipped a beat. "They're fine, Karenina. In fact, I'll ask them over tomorrow morning to see you."

"As a surprise?" She smiled at him. "Please don't tell them that I'm here, or that I'm mortal again."

Steed smiled in surrender and spread out his hands. "How could I deny such a charming lady?"

She touched her finger to her lips, thoughtfully. "You never have."

Steed hung up the phone. Margo hadn't been pleased that their dinner date was cancelled, but he'd make it up to her. Later. There were more important things to consider at the moment.

He paused at the phone, debating whether or not to call Purdey again. He had left a message on her answering machine an hour ago. Perhaps he should try Gambit? No. He couldn't call them over without telling them that Karenina was there. He wasn't about to break his word to her.

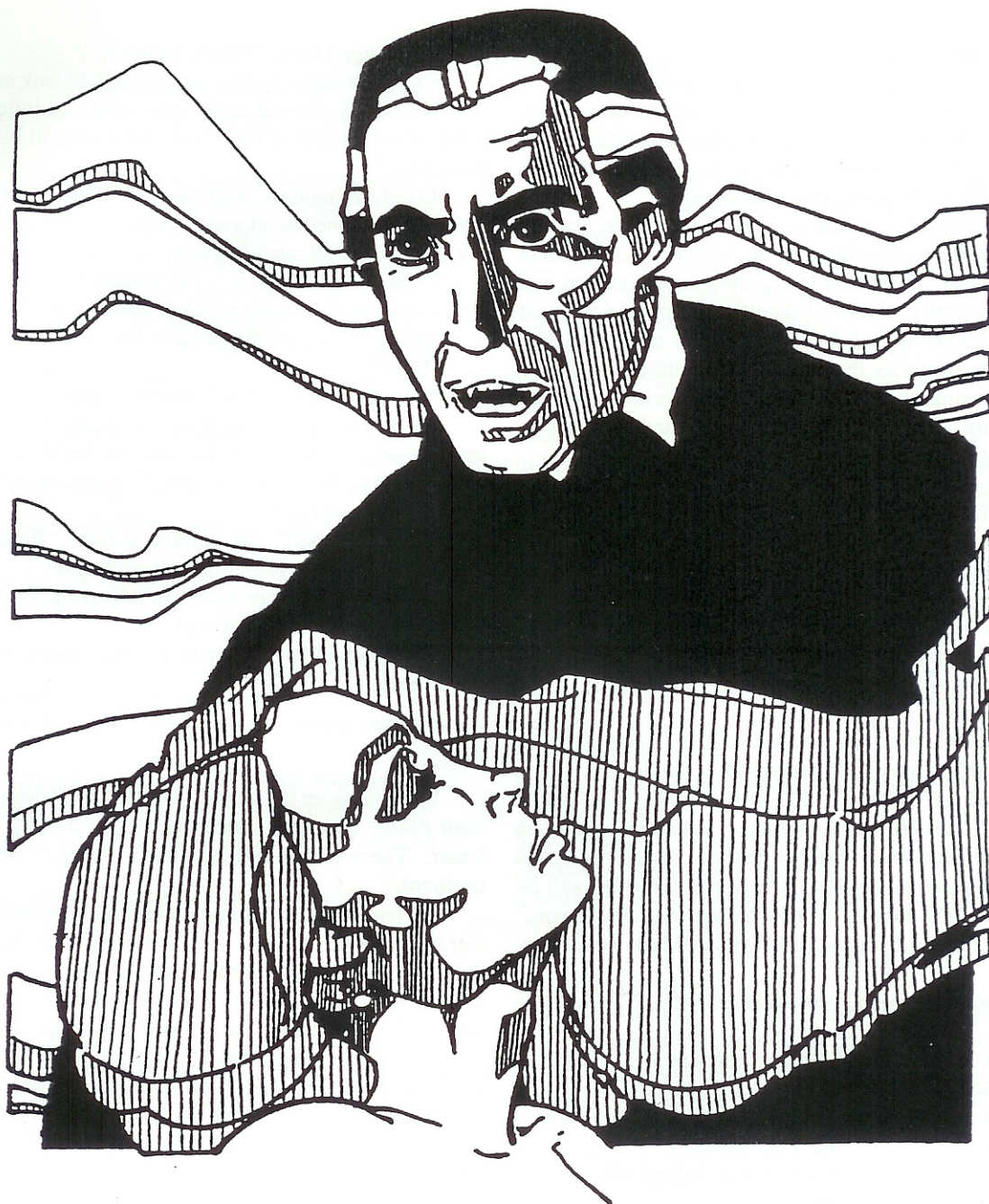
The clock chimed one. She'd slept for six hours, but she'd need far more than that. And when she awoke.... He had no food there. He couldn't risk taking her out, or going out alone. Perhaps he could amend his message to Purdey to include some groceries.

A crash sounded from upstairs. Steed raced up, mentally noting his preventive measures; the holy medal around Karenina's neck, the garlic, what little he had, placed around the windows and doors. No undead creature could enter without first being invited in.

A cold breeze blew toward him, the door to Karenina's room was open. He saw her lunge for the tall man standing by the window, the knife she held slashing across his cheek. He merely laughed, holding her hand aloft, and crushed her wrist until the knife fell.

Steed threw himself into the room and at the creature, roaring something lost quickly to the unnatural wind. He careened from the wall, repelled by a glancing blow.

Dracula's face was solemn. He held Karenina tightly against him, making her seem pale and colorless against his dark cloak. She struggled, trying to escape his hold. Dracula whispered something into her ear and she paused in her



struggle, noticing Steed's presence for the first time. She shouted something, but the words were swept away by the wind.

Staring at Steed, Dracula seemed close enough to touch, yet he still remained across the room. "I claim only what is mine," he said above the wind. "My quarrel is not with you. For your own sake, do not follow."

The words reverberated through Steed's skull. Suddenly, he felt a presence behind him, but it was too late. Pain filled his thoughts, then blackness, as the blow from behind took its toll.

"Steed? Are you here?" It was Purdey.

He tried to stand up, then was immediately sorry he had made the attempt, for the room began to swim before his eyes. Leaning back against the doorsill, he surveyed the damage.

Sunlight streamed through the broken window and shards of glass covered the floor. Dracula had wasted no time in entering, but how had he gotten in? The back of Steed's head began to throb as he realized that his assailant, undoubtedly mortal, had gained entry through less supernatural means. Perhaps that had been what Karenina had tried to tell him.

Steed made a second attempt at rising, but this time the room stayed in place. He leaned on the door for support.

"Steed?" Purdey was at the door. "What happened here? I came as soon as I got your message. Then I come in and find the front door wide open and blood on the hall carpet. I've known you to throw some interesting parties before but...."

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The glass pieces by the window were tinted red. Karenina had been standing there last night, barefoot.... "It was a party of sorts, yes. A reunion, you might say." Steed bent down and picked up the holy medal on the broken chain. "Karenina came here yesterday afternoon."

"Yesterday evening?" asked Purdey pointedly.

"No, yesterday afternoon. She's as human as you or I now." He wondered how long she might remain that way.

Purdey was surprised. "Mortal? But, how?"

"Perhaps we should discuss that over a pot of tea." Steed winced as he felt the bump on the back of his head. "And a bit of first aid?"

Gambit yawned. If this were any other Monday morning, he'd still have two hours of sleep ahead of him.

But it wasn't a normal Monday morning. Steed had phoned fifteen minutes ago and told him to get dressed and sit tight. Something big was up, but Steed wouldn't give him a clue. Typical.

The doorbell rang. "Now will you tell me what's going on?" he asked Steed. "Or is it still hush-hush?"

Steed smiled, annoyingly dapper for six in the morning. "It's not hush-hush, simply unauthorized. May we come in?"

Gambit stood aside, spotting Purdey behind Steed. She stopped and straightened his tie. With a cheerful smile, she added, "What's wrong? Not enough beauty sleep?"

Gambit answered with a wan smile, perched himself on a chair arm, and waited.

"All right," nodded Steed. "To the point, then." He sat down and leaned forward on his cane. "Karenina was kidnapped from my place last night."

"Karenina? Karen?" asked Gambit, suddenly interested. "She's here?"

"Was here," corrected Purdey. She stood behind Steed's chair. "And not for long. Someone broke into Steed's last night and walked off with her."

Steed winced. "Leaving me with a painful memory."

"What was the motive? Ransom?"

Steed produced the vial from his coat pocket. "This was part of the motive. Karenina, Karen...was suffering from a rare...condition. This is the cure for that condition."

"The inventor met with an unfortunate accident," explained Purdey. "But not before Karen had taken the serum herself and rescued this bit." She noted Steed's approving nod. They doubted that Gambit would believe in vampires, even after his last encounter with Karenina. They were telling the truth, in a way.

Gambit examined the vial. "They must have wanted this stuff badly. Have you gotten it checked out yet?"

"No, and I don't think that we will. We might be forced to use this to bargain with Dracula for Karen's life."

"Dracula?" laughed Gambit. "You're joking." He stopped laughing when he saw them exchange glances. "You're not joking, are you?"

"I wish I were," answered Steed. "That's the name he

goes by. Purdey has an address for Karen in Rumania. He might have taken her there, or near there."

Gambit stared at Purdey. "You never told me that you knew where she'd gone."

"You never asked me...directly." Purdey looked away guiltily.

"And, there is a problem." Steed removed his bowler, adjusting the rim carefully. "None of this has anything to do with the Ministry. And it could be very fatal. If you'd rather not come..."

Gambit seemed offended by the suggestion. "It may not be Ministry business, but it is our business. Karen's life is a stake in this game. I'm playing."

Steed rose, pulling something from his pocket and handing it to Gambit. "Splendid. I've signed us all out on leave. Here are the tickets, the plane leaves in an hour. Get packed and I'll meet you there."

Purdey caught his arm. "I thought you *were* packed."

"I *am*." Steed kissed her hand, then moved to the door. "I have to see a man about an umbrella." He closed the door behind him.

"Well?" asked Gambit, facing Purdey.

"Well what?" She put her hands on her hips.

"You know more about it than I do."

Purdey shook her head. "About what?"

He pulled a suitcase from his closet and threw it onto the bed. "What does a well-dressed man wear in Rumania these days?"

The train compartment was small, but comfortable, decorated in the wood and red leather of an earlier time. Steed checked his watch, simultaneously wishing that he could make the train speed up.

His first plan had been to beat Dracula to the ancient fortress. Now, he would be lucky to pace him, or arrive shortly afterward. Airfields didn't exist in the primitive mountain terrains, forcing them to debark too many miles from their destination and switch to travel by rail.

The trains were slow and prone to accidents, most travel being completed by horse and carriage. At any other time, he would enjoy the simplicity and elegance of the old ways, but now they slowed his progress. Each lost minute made Karenina's death a certainty.

Still, it was easy to become lost in the unfolding landscape. The Rumanian terrain was untamed wilderness, disconcerting, perhaps, but even more beautiful because of the danger. It reminded him of Karenina.

And perhaps even more, of Matthew.

Their cell was small, slightly larger than the average closet, with two planks nailed against the wall acting as beds.

Matthew doubled over in pain as he was pushed inside. He waved Steed away. "There's nothing...you can do," he

was going to stop at a friend's house before continuing to Dashentec. Please, it is only a few minutes walk for me, and it would take you out of your way. My coachman will return for me in the morning."

"Are you certain that we can't drop you off?" asked Steed, helping Gambit load their bags. "As you said, the forests are dangerous."

"Dangerous to strangers, perhaps. But not to those who know the ways of the night." She nodded her head slightly. "Thank you, but no. I shall be quite safe. a good journey to you." She stepped off the platform and walked into the forest.

"How quaint!" exclaimed Purdey, settling herself in the carriage.

"You may regret it later," said Gambit cheerfully. "I've heard these things lack shock absorbers."

"I still think it's quaint," protested Purdey. "Don't you think so, Steed?"

"Hmn? Oh, yes. Quaint may not be the word for it, Purdey. It is charming, but considering the condition of these roads, you might have preferred the Rover." He looked out the coach window, pushing aside the heavy curtains.

Gambit leaned forward. "Steed?"

He leaned back in his seat. "Nothing. It's just that...do either of you connect anything to Miss Murray?"

"No." Purdey looked at Gambit, then back at Steed. "Should we?"

"No, I suppose not." Steed lifted the curtain again. "It would be too much of a coincidence. Still..."

The inn hallway was small, barely lit by the spare and uncovered electric bulb in the hall. Steed handed the wrought iron room key to Purdey.

"Still your idea of quaint?" asked Gambit.

"I wouldn't want to live here." She ran her hand along the sturdy door frame. "But it is charming."

Following her into the room, Gambit dropped the cases onto the floor and fell into a chair. "Now what?"

"We rest," said Steed, checking the shutters on the window. The sun was just beginning to rise. "The sun sets soon after five. I'd suggest we head up to the old fortress by then."

"Why not attack now?" asked Purdey. "During the day, Dracula will be helpless."

"You've forgotten about the others," cautioned Steed. "Not all of his followers are undead. In addition, Dracula may be stronger at night, but he'll also be overconfident."

"You're talking about him like he's a real vampire," said Gambit, yawning.

Purdey and Steed exchanged quick glances. "He *thinks* he's a vampire," explained Steed. "We can exploit that."

Yawning again, Gambit rose from the chair. "I'll just be glad to get some sleep."

"Not yet." Steed caught Gambit's arm, then steered him toward the door. "We have some rumors to spread."

"Rumors?"

"About a lovely lady doing research about the noble

families of the country."

Purdey blinked in surprise. "Then, I won't be coming with you?"

He stepped back and took her hands. "Purdey, I wish you were. You'd be safer."

Purdey touched up her makeup, then rose and lifted the small cross from the heavy wooden table. Turning toward the window, she dropped it in her pocket. Her room was directly above the roof of the stable, but her window still provided an unspoiled view of the sunset.

Steed and Gambit had left two hours ago. For a while, she'd been able to watch their progress, but the dark forests seemed to have swallowed them completely. She smiled as she remembered Steed's anxious warnings, like an old mother hen. He wouldn't put her in this kind of danger if it wasn't necessary, etc.

Closing the shutters, she thought about her position. She was an agent, trained for all sorts of missions. But not this one. There was nothing like this in the books.

Books. Purdey picked up a few books and opened them, leaving them around the room with scribbled notebooks and other academic implements. He'd be here soon, Dracula. A shiver ran up her spine at the thought.

She hoped that she looked enough like a studious author to fool him. Lord only help her if she didn't.

The steep, sloping, approach seemed the most accessible, but it was also well guarded. Climbing the rocky cliff was their only alternative. Inch by inch, the pair made their way up the cliff, surrounded by darkness.

A rock slipped, then a few more. Steed looked up, then felt the small ledge crumble beneath his fingers.

"Steed!" Gambit reached down and grabbed his arm, just as that section of rock crumbled. For a moment, Steed dangled above the dark waters of the lake below, then he was again balanced precariously against the cliff.

"Thanks." He took a deep breath, watching the dark, frothing waters at the base of the jagged mountain.

"Don't mention it." Gambit's voice was steady, even calm. "Would you like to rest for a moment?"

"No, we don't have time." He looked around frantically. "My umbrella?"

"It fell, there."

Steed peered down, finding the spot in the darkness. Then he began to climb down.

Gambit grabbed his arm, holding him in place. "You said we didn't have the time."

"It's important."

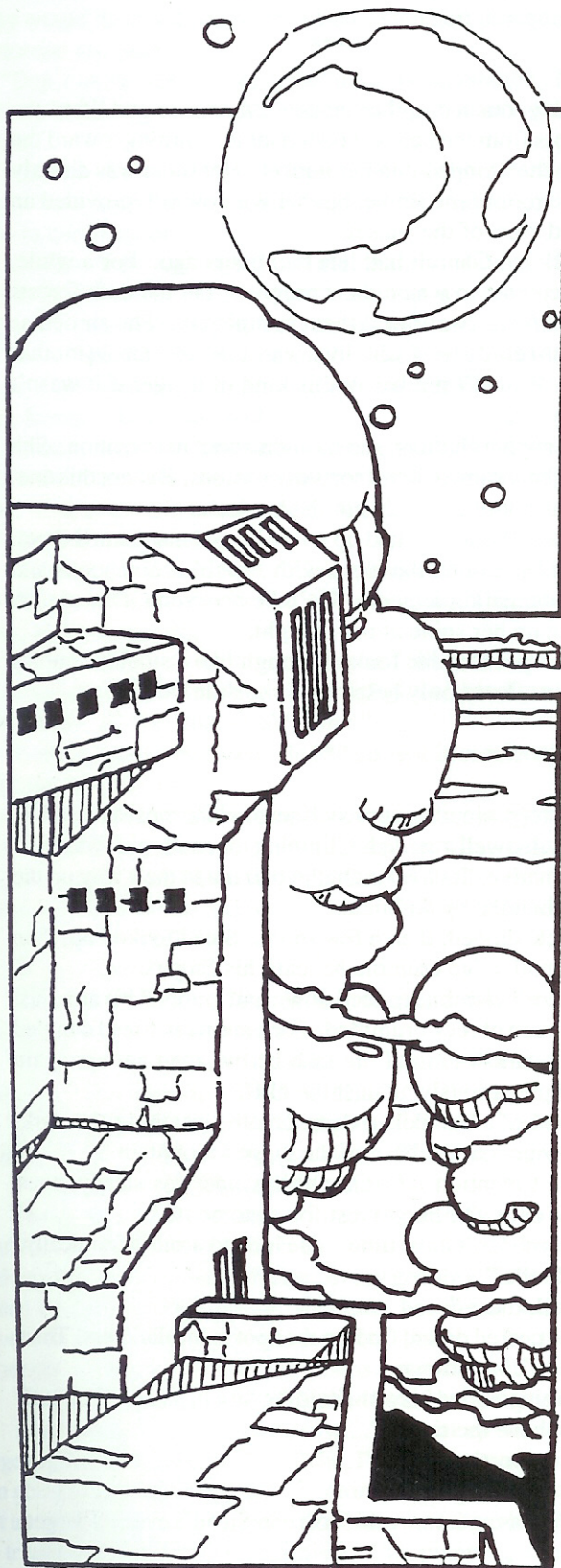
"It's an umbrella."

There was an immovable force in Steed's eyes. "I've got to have it."

Releasing him, Gambit shrugged and started down. "I'll

go. I'm faster...."

Steed watched Gambit scramble down the hard won cliffside and retrieve the umbrella. What did time really matter now, anyway? Karenina was probably dead, or worse....



Ten minutes later, Gambit handed him the umbrella. Steed shook it and seemed pleased; it appeared undamaged. "Thank you. It is important."

Gambit leaned back, staring up the face of the cliff. "I haven't seen us yet?"

"This side isn't watched."

"I can see why." Gambit looked down at the rocks below. "You'd have to be crazy to try it."

Steed smiled. "Or desperate."

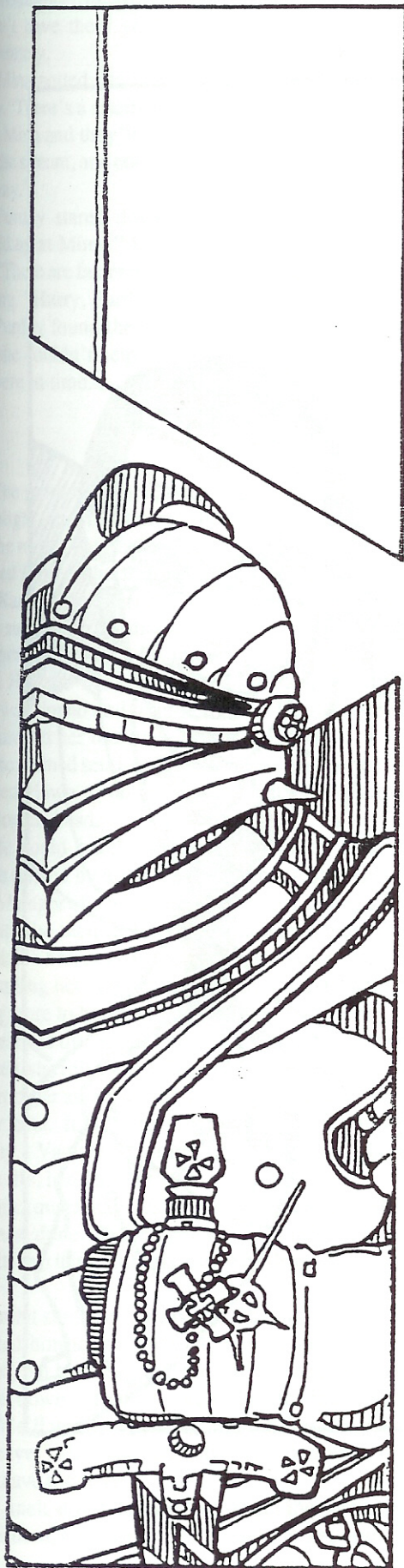
The main wall was nothing but rubble. They made their way through it easily and crossed the courtyard. A rotted door barred their way, but they quickly broke through it.

"Which way?" asked Gambit. He flinched as his voice echoed in the musty stone hall.

Steed indicated the stairs. "You go up, I'll go down."

Nodding, Gambit started up, then stopped when Steed called his name. He paused, then pulled the cross from his pocket, showing Steed that he still had it. Steed waved and turned, taking the lower staircase.





"Superstition," muttered Gambit. He hung the chain over a suit of armor he passed on the stairs.

Dripping water echoed from somewhere. The sound permeated the underground vaults, making the place seem eerier, more sinister.

Steed found the vault containing the coffins after a few minutes search. Surprisingly, it was unguarded. He took one of the two vials from his pocket, the one containing the holy water, and sprinkled it into the earth lined coffins. The wet dirt blackened and burned, steam arose from it and filled the vault. Satisfied, Steed placed the vial beside the one that Karenina had given him. He hoped he wouldn't have to use either.

He searched the other vaults, but found nothing more than rats and mold.

The man was tall, filling her doorway. His clothing was dark and outdated, but the way he wore it was stylish. He bowed elegantly, asking, "Are you the woman requesting information about the local nobility?"

She smiled. "Yes, I am. Please, come in and sit down." Her mirror was turned face down, within reach, the glass of holy water stood on the bedstand, and the cross was in her pocket; all prepared as to Steed's instructions. "I haven't gotten as much information as I'd hoped," she confided, sitting at the table. "The locals are reticent, at best."

Dracula smiled. "They are loyal to their land and their...superstitions. They do not take quickly to strangers and new ways."

Purdey met his gaze once, then looked away. His eyes seemed to draw her away from herself, pull her into some deep black place that she could never escape. She couldn't afford not to be alert.

"Is something wrong?" asked Dracula pleasantly.

"No, not at all. And what was the name of your family?" She busied herself with pen and paper.

He seated himself across the table from her. "My family did not live here, but they helped to secure the area. Tepes, also known as Dracul, the dragon." He leaned across the table, smiling. "What better name for a family that fought the Turks?"

"I...see."

He brushed away a strand of her hair with a long finger, letting it rest against her cheek. "Come, girl, do you think me a fool? I know who you are, where you are from, and when you arrived. I know *you*."

"You have an excellent spy system," said Purdey. She searched blindly for the cross in her pocket.

"I told you that the people are loyal, if only out of fear. And your friends, my guards already have them. Do you know that?" He leaned forward to take her hand, but she pulled the cross from beneath the table and held it before her, pushing her chair to the floor and backing against the wall.

Dracula flinched, but seemed to recover as she backed away. He tossed the table to one side with a flick of his wrist. "You are afraid."

"No!" cried Purdey defiantly. Her eyes met his and somehow locked.

"Throw it away!" he hissed. The blackness in his eyes seemed a vacuum, drawing her in. She faltered, then dropped the cross.

The rattle of the bedtable at her side revived her slightly. Her hand curled around the glass. When Dracula reached for her, confident of his victory, she threw the holy water in his face.

Dracula bellowed in pain. Purdey threw open the shutters and looked down. The stable roof was only a short jump. She ran across the roof, but was stopped in her tracks by the hand that gripped her shoulder. She spun around to fight, but only met his gaze again.

Dracula laughed. "Do you see how useless it is? You are nothing to me, although you could be. Perhaps...." He ran his finger along the curve of her face. "Yes, you have potential."

His head dropped downward.

Vaguely, Purdey felt his breath on her neck, then two slight jabs, like a pin-prick.

"Vlad!"

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

Miss Murray stepped out of the gloom. She had traded her sensible clothes for a flowing blue gown and dark cloak. Her brown hair drifted about her shoulders. "The others," she whispered, "they are at the fortress."

Paying no attention to the limp woman in his arms, he laughed lightly. "Dear Mina, my mortal guards...."

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

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

Mina smiled sadly, as if hurt. "Another one, Vlad?"

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

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

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

Mina nodded shyly and kissed him. She watched him run across the roof, his dark cape fluttering behind him. 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 sleepily. Her eyes shot open. "What? Dracula!"

"He's gone, child." The woman helped her to her feet. "You are safe, he hasn't touched you."



"Gambit? Steed? He's gone after them, hasn't he? He doesn't have them yet?" She clutched the woman's arm desperately.

Mina patted her hand. "Not yet, but soon if we do not hurry. There's a sturdy horse downstairs. Say that you come from Mina and they'll give him to you. Follow the left fork, past the stream, and continue on the road. The horse will know the way."

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

"There are faster means of travel for my kind," said Mina, smiling. "Hurry, Purdey!"

Purdey found the horse and was on her way in minutes. Yet, she couldn't help wondering what she could do, even if she were in time....

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

"Karen?" he asked. As he moved across the room, he could see her more distinctly. Her head moved and she whimpered slightly. "Karen, it's Gambit," he whispered softly. Her face was bruised, as if she had been struck, and her gown was ripped and muddied. Her hands were tied behind the chair and her feet were bound together.

She seemed semi-conscious. He undid her wrists quickly, then bent down to untie her feet. Her hand moved up and rested on his head.

She could barely see for a moment, then everything became diluted by a red mist. A great pain rose up inside of her, the hunger of a wild beast tore at her innards. She gasped involuntarily, then realized that her hands were free. Gambit knelt beside her, untying her feet. She rested her hand on his head, curling her fingers in his hair. At that moment, he was nothing more to her than fresh blood, within easy reach. She could tear his throat out before he could move.

Then, she felt a warmth on her cheek. Slowly the red mist faded from her as she wiped the splash from her cheek and held it in her hand. It was a tear, blood red, the last remnant of her mortality. Vampires couldn't cry and she, who had never cried in life, had lost her right to do so.

With a moan, she pushed Gambit back, afraid of what she had almost done. The hunger was still tearing at her, but she fought it, beat it into submission. She dropped her face into her hands.

Gambit stood up, surprised. She had been strong before, but to push him across the floor, in that condition.... He helped her stand, but her legs gave out and she fell into his arms. He eased her down onto the floor, letting her back rest against the wall. "We'll never get down the cliff like this," he muttered.

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

He knelt down beside her, touching her cheek gently. "Steed's here, and Purdey. We came to get you."

"How touching!"

Gambit looked up, when he heard the mocking tone. A tall man was standing on the moonlight flooded balcony. For a moment, something seemed odd, then he realized what it was; the man had no shadow.

With two giant steps, Dracula reached Gambit and stood over him, then lifted 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, something akin to respect in his tone. "What a mortal you are!"

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

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

Gambit looked down at her, then back to his opponent. "I can't leave you here." 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 the young man's neck.

Gasping, struggling, Gambit tried to free himself. The fingers around his neck could have been steel, they were so stiff and unyielding. He felt them tighten, blocking off what little passage was left.

Dracula smiled at Karenina, his fangs gleaming in the moonlight. "Shall I strangle him slowly? Or, should I snap his neck?"

Karenina staggered to her feet, leaning on the wall for support. "No, Master!" She licked her lips, trying to moisten them enough to speak. "I promise you anything...anything you want." Her voice softened. "He's only a mortal, don't 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 me nothing but mortal ash once more! If you will have Death as your master, so be it. Death will have this one as well."

She launched herself from the wall, stumbling across the floor to clutch Dracula's arm futilely. "Master, no! Anything!"

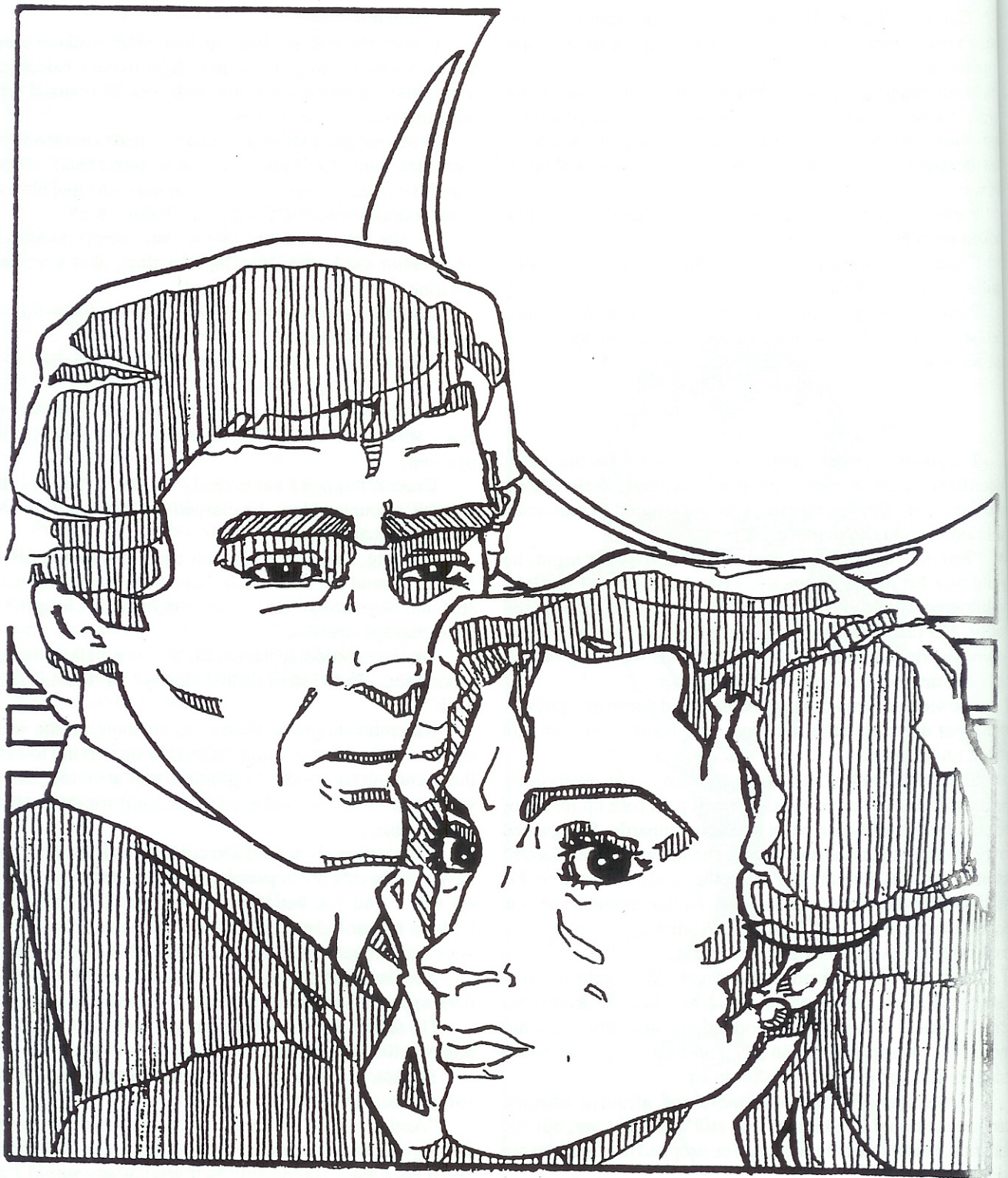
He stared down at her through half-lidded eyes, then released his grip on Gambit slightly. "The serum?"

She stared fearfully back at him, then breathed, "Yes, if it still exists...the serum."

"And...you?" He threw back his head and laughed, dislodging her with a sweep of his hand. She fell to the floor. "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 engulfed her, she had no shadow. Before, when she had become a vampire voluntarily, she had been different from the others and still cast a shadow. She had been Dracula's subject, but not his servant, he couldn't control her like the others. Now, she had lost that small bit of comfort, that remnant of free will. She sobbed, although she knew there would be no tears. Now, she was fully undead.

Dracula tossed Gambit across the room. The man was



unconscious, he thudded against the wall without any resistance or sound. Then, the vampire leaned down and offered Karenina his hand. Looking up into his eyes, she took it, and he lifted her to her feet.

He smiled victoriously. "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 the undead, did you know that? Your name was whispered among the night winds, you were feared as I am feared, the one

who did *not* bow to the Master. Now, you grovel for the life of a mortal?"

His tone seemed to soften as he looked into her eyes. He walked her out to the edge of 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, looking out across the dark water. "My anger is spent, child. Tell me, now.... Does this serum exist?"

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Karenina stared down, seeing her death in the lake. "No," she murmured.

"Yes," called Steed. He was standing in the doorway to the room. "It does exist."

"Another mortal?" Dracula looked at her, but her eyes were dead, revealing nothing. He looked up at Steed and nodded. "Ah, yes. Come." He took Karenina's arm, drawing her into the room with him.

Gambit moaned and shifted on the floor. She looked up at Dracula instantly. He didn't deign to look back at her, but waved his hand in a gesture of dismissal, as if she mattered no longer to him. She left him and knelt by 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! He'll have control over life and death...."

Steed waved her quiet, then stood, waiting for Dracula's response.

"There is honor in your terms," said the vampire lord, nodding. "I will accept. I only wish it for my Mina...."

"Did you call, my love?" Dracula turned and found Mina standing on the balcony. She stepped forward and kissed him on the cheek. Surveying the room, she asked, "All this for me, my love?" She walked toward Karenina, facing away from him. "Or for *your* anger and *your* pride?"

"Mina?" Dracula's voice was soft, almost wounded.

She turned toward Steed and walked toward him. "May I?" she asked.

He handed her the vial with a slight bow, as if acknowledging a higher authority.

"It is for me?" she asked again, peering into the clear liquid.

"Yes," answered Dracula. He moved toward her and his face was a mixture of curiosity and adoration. "For you, beloved."

"So, you *do* love me," she mused. Mina passed him and walked 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, where she leaned back against the balcony railing. "There is."

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

Dracula strode to the edge of the balcony, but Mina stopped him with a touch of her hand. He stopped and studied her, then brushed her hair back from her shoulders and smiled. "Let us begin again, then. I thought that we would need that." He waved his hand at the rocks below.

"We don't," assured Mina. She slipped her arm through his and they walked back into the room together.

Dracula looked over his shoulder, toward the glowing horizon, then back at the others. "You might take her downstairs," he said to Steed, nodding toward Karenina. "I have earth prepared for her there."

Karenina was looking at him. He walked over to where she knelt, by Gambit, and patted her head gently. "The mortal

will be well, little one. You brought this upon yourself. Although, I admit that 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, call. I will answer."

He smiled and then 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 sky was beginning to glow pink. He turned back to the room and saw Karenina flinch at the small ray of light that filtered in through the balcony. His heart ached as he watched her drag herself into the far shadows.

Purdey bounded into the room, breathless, "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 over Gambit quickly. "His arm's broken, but it's a clean break."

"Dracula was here." He stared intently at Purdey, a worried frown on his face. "Are *you* all right?"

Purdey smiled and pushed her hair back from her face. "Miss Murray got me out of a tight spot. Relieved?"

"I knew you could handle yourself."

She moved Gambit, trying to ease the pressure on his arm. "He took on Dracula, didn't he?"

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

She shook her head in despair. "When will you ever learn?" She looked up when she heard a small sigh, then followed Steed's glance into the shadows. "Karenina?"

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

Purdey bowed her head, knowing what that meant. "There's a room next door with a west window...."

"Karenina?" she was leaning against a table leg, her eyes closed.

"So tired...." she mumbled. Her head fell back. "So hungry...." She blinked her eyes, fighting the daylight trance. "John?"

"Yes?" He knelt beside her, holding her hands in his.

"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 wasn't thinking...."

She smiled at him. "I'll die in the sunlight," she whispered. "I'll die...just like Matthew." The smile disappeared.

Steed hung his head, remembering what she had told him about Matthew. A vampire named Adela had made Matthew one of her own, then locked him out in the sunlight when he was no longer of use to her. Somehow, he couldn't picture Matthew's face at that moment, the moment he knew he would die. Matthew had been the optimist, always 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. "Karenina, I can help you. I have the serum."

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

"I switched the serum in case,...just in case something happened." He weighed the vial in his hand, then nodded when she turned to look at it. Her hand shook, as if she wanted to take it from him, but she clasped her hands together. Her lips were set in a grim line.

He couldn't force her to take it. It would have to be her choice. Life or death, it was up to her. "Do you want it?"

Karenina looked up into his eyes. "Matthew died. You will. We all will. To live, knowing it wouldn't matter in the long run...."

"It would matter. It would matter to Gambit, and to Purdey, and...to me."

"Do *you* want me to live?"

He lifted her hand and kissed it, folding her fingers around the vial. "Yes. Always."

She lifted the vial from his hands. "I could never refuse you anything."

"You never have."

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

"And none too soon for me." Gambit poked at the sling with his good hand. "It'll be weeks before I get this arm into shape again."

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

Steed chuckled, then sat down at his desk. "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 disappeared in the hall. They could hear him calling upstairs.

Purdey and Steed exchanged glances. A few minutes later, Gambit returned, puzzled. "Where is she? Her things are gone. She hasn't been kidnapped...."

"No." Steed steeped his hands and stared down at them. "No, she decided to leave."

"Leave?" Gambit was startled. "Why?"

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

Gambit stalked over to the desk. "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?" she warned.

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

Steed cleared his throat, then looked up at him. "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!" cried Purdey angrily. "John would never...."

"It's all right, Purdey," said Steed. 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, then breathed deeply. "I...I don't know."

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

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

"I know."

She looked up, surprised at the weariness in Steed's tone. "Gambit didn't mean what he said. It's just that, well, he's grown...fond of Karen."

"But, what if he's right?"

"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 for a bit. 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."

"You flatter me." Still, he smiled.

"It *was* Karenina's decision," she reminded him. "She couldn't be Karenina or Karen any more, 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."

He shook his head. "Time...it's always time. There's never enough."

"It's still early," noted Purdey. She stood up and walked to the window. "Why don't we go for a ride? It'll do you good to get out."

He smiled in surrender. "All right, you win. You always win." He escorted her through the patio doors, into the sunlight.

Karenina smiled at the stewardess. "I'm fine thanks." The woman continued walking up the aisle, looking to her other passengers.

The smile faded. It wasn't the flight that worried her, but the fact that she was leaving at all. *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 on the wharf; laughing, joking, talking.... Then, he

had turned his head, just so—the sun lit his hair as he laughed....

And she saw Matthew. Her heart caught in her throat and she started to cry.

So ended lunch.

Three days ago: she'd gone to the theatre with Steed. In the middle of the second act, she caught him looking at her. There it was, in his eyes...the same look she'd seen years before. She had loved him then, but knew he was dedicated to his work. Too dedicated to be dedicated to any one woman. She had chosen Matthew before and nearly broken both their hearts. She couldn't do that twice.

A shadow fell over her and she looked up in surprise. Dark hair, dark eyes, impish smile....

"Is this seat taken?"

Accent? Indefinable, although possibly Irish. "No, not at all." She smiled.

He returned the smile and swung down into the seat. He was tall, but not uncomfortably so. "On holiday?"

"I suppose." The agent's trained eye could pick up very little—the ratty turtleneck under the sportcoat could mean a lack of money, or a charming affectation. She bit her lip. "I'm sort of escaping my past."

He nodded nervously, then leaned over her to look out the window. After that, he looked down the aisle. She followed his gaze, but saw nothing worth noticing. He seemed satisfied, however, and leaned back in his seat, relaxed. "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," she admitted.

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

"Karen, Karenina Bosov."

"Michael O'Leary." He kissed her hand. "Well, I must say, I didn't think this flight would be at all enjoyable."

She realized that it was going to be a very short ten hours to Washington.

