



# KITH

PART ONE

---

## **PROLOGUE**

Genesis 2:15-17

Torches lined the cobblestone streets, shrouding the town in scarlet dress. Banners, spun across building tops like a web, proclaimed the Festival of Awakening had begun. And the people below danced as in joy but cursed with fear with anticipation of who would be the fly caught in that mesh. Rafgard, sauntering through the busy streets, tried desperately to keep in tow with the Broadsword Fellows. All his life on the farm he'd imagined what adventure city life would entail, and here he was, not only living his fantasy, but doing so even as a fellow among the most revered group of apprentices! He was the smallest in the foursome, and it was for that reason that he always found himself engaged in foolishness to impress them. Today was not unlike any other day.

Rafgard had donned his red tunic and black hose. His soft leather boots, though worn in the soles, appeared as if they were new and the black cape thrown casually over one shoulder made him feel like a Noble. The light breeze caught his long, sandy hair, tussling it over to where his cowlick made it stand almost on end. Rafgard slipped off one glove and brushed the hair from his vision.

"Cador," Rafgard called to one of the three youths he was following, "what is this celebration about?"

They laughed at him. Drust, Tor and Cador all spun to stare at their latest recruit, each one brandishing a glimmer in their eyes. Cador smiled. "Did they not teach you anything in the country? The Awakening is in celebration of when our city was no longer besieged by a terrible dragon!"

Drust leaned in close to Rafgard, and the flame from a torch caught over his face. "But the beast never died. It lay asleep upon its hoard of treasure...."

"And has for so long that a mountain has grown over it!" Tor finished; all three waiting for Rafgard's response. But he had stopped listening as a young woman who walked through the crowd, escorted by several guards, caught his attention. Raven-black hair tied up with a red ribbon covered her round face with bangs that draped like strands of silk over her eyes. She held her tiny nose slightly above the bottom of her ear lobe, and a smile painted with the brightest red Rafgard had ever seen held back porcelain-white teeth.

"Who be this?" Rafgard whispered, taking a step nearer her.

Cador poked Drust in the side and winked at Tor. Then he said, "That is the Princess Katrina. It is said that she will marry no Noble, but awaits a man who would love her for who she is."

Drust added, "And yet, she makes every man prove his devotion with a test."

"And what test does she demand?"

Drust laughed. "To bring her an item of dragon treasure. Would you attempt such a thing?"

Rafgard smiled wide. “That I would. Not an easier test has ever been asked!” After all, so the youth thought, what harm could come of meeting a beast that only exists in the nightmares of children?

## **CHAPTER ONE**

*"'TO BE, OR NOT TO BE' ... IT IS NOT SO MUCH A QUESTION, AS IT IS A DEMAND."*

Genesis 6:2-4

“Bloody ‘ell!” was all Rafgard could think to say as the dragon’s head opened its eyes and stared at him. He wondered what trouble he had found himself in this time, the key words being “this” and “time.”

As the beast leapt from beneath an ocean of wealth it revealed such a massive body that the youthful student who had woken it felt his heart stop. The dark creature stretched its serpentine body, showering the cavern in coins and knocking down many of the stalagmites. Rafgard curled beneath his shield to ward off the golden maelstrom, wondering if it would hold against the sky that had begun to fall.

He closed his eyes and wondered why, when he had first seen the lizard-like head sitting atop the bounty, he had thought it only a head. Why hadn’t he considered that beneath the treasure might lay such a giant beast? Rafgard flinched when it roared, and opening his eyes he ran for a better vantage point to avoid the deadly snapping tail.

The dragon puffed out a chest the same hue as the golden hoard around him, breathing deeply of the dank, musty air. It bore its midnight breath down upon the entire cavern, scorching much of the valuable treasure. Rafgard let his training take over and lifted his shield to direct the flames away. The shower seemed endless, and as his shield grew hot to the touch much of the gold about him melted to make it appear that he had stepped inside a living volcano. But Rafgard knew he hadn’t. After all, he was smart enough to know better than to venture inside a volcano.

When the dragon at last exhausted its lungs, Rafgard glared at it, which still shook off centuries of sleep, and pondered how he could have been so daft as to assume this legend was false.

His smoking shield had burned through his leather gloves, but bracing himself against the pain he yanked his sword from its scabbard. It felt awkward. He had, after all, only completed two of his six years at the Academy. The first he had learnt stances, the second he had trained to use a shield and this year he’d learn swordplay. But even without that skill Rafgard figured an awkward blade would aid him more than a perfected stance.

The monster reared like a cobra, smashing the ceiling with its spine. A piece twice as large as any full-grown man broke loose and smashed the dragon over its crown, incensing it further. Obviously the mountain had formed after the creature had given in to slumber, its surprise apparent in the roar it let out as it slithered until its head loomed just before its prey. The young student met the beast man to eye and conceded how much more pleasurable being crushed by the ceiling would have been than to be this towering inferno’s dinner.

Membranes opened and closed as it studied him, and a long bone that grew on its head like the sail on a ship moved both backward and forward. Its nostrils flared with

every laboured breath and, licking two giant eye-teeth that covered its bottom lip from an overbite, it displayed, though it brought Rafgard no comfort, a tooth that had been snapped in half. The student slid his sword back inside its scabbard, it was useless in his hands anyway, and stood beneath sunlight that showered inside through a crack in the ceiling.

He stared into the demon eyes before him and recalled the pride he had seen in his father. He wondered how proud he would be when news reached home that his son was this beast's dinner. His family had waited so long to raise a child strong enough for the Academy, and, as Rafgard stared into the giant, black pool that emerald lightly rimmed, he remembered his Dad's pupils that day....

But Rafgard had no time for careless thought. As the dragon cringed its eyebrows to squint it nearly knocked its prey over with its heavy breath. Its nostrils flared, and bearing great yellow teeth it swirled around, recklessly smashing into the sides of the walls. A challenge to the ceiling for it to come crashing down, but it didn't.

Rafgard felt relieved for the first time since he had woken the "legendary" dragon that the dome had withstood the assaults. Perhaps he was going to get out of this alive; with an item of dragon treasure to boot! Provided his assumption was not the mistake of an ignorant country bumpkin....

Fire filled the cavern, and again the student shielded himself from the blast. He took comfort in his Tiger stance, concentrating on it to brace himself from the scorching pain as his metal cover's outer shell grew a bright amber, much like that from a fire ... with the same distinctive, putrid smell from a peat fire.

Then, as the beast lunged, Rafgard dropped his shield and bounded behind a rock. He barely escaped the razor sharp teeth, and just as he'd expected, or at least hoped, the overgrown lizard paid no heed to the human figure bounding away. It bit down on the red hot shield, crushing it in its maw in the same way a man would crush paper with his hands. Then it roared, and spit the foul tasting metal out.

Rafgard now knew for certain that the beast was blind.

"Cool! Blind? Really?" the question was asked loudly and suddenly, disturbing the story with which an old man, far into the twentieth century, had become engrossed in telling. Trent Powers hadn't meant to interrupt, but he was just so into this tale that he couldn't contain his excitement any longer.

He watched his storyteller lean in his creaky rocking chair, and stare into the pit of the fire he had built as if he stared into the flames of a dragon. Trent had helped build the fire, and was now glad he had. It added such a mysterious edge to the narrative. The flames flickered, basking the bungalow with an amber illumination like a cosy bedspread set over a mattress; a bare mattress. Old man Whittaker lived with only those necessities he needed; he didn't even own a television! There were no pictures, no knickknack, few items of furniture, and only two forks, two knives, and one spoon.

Trent had known him for several weeks but the strange thing was he didn't "know" him at all. He knew his dedication to the Church, Sunday was the only time old man Whittaker came out, and that the town feared him. He had moved to Minnow Creek just last fall, and hadn't had any family nor friends visit. Trent had felt sorry for him, and one morning last month before the congregation met outside for coffee and juice he walked right up and introduced himself.

As for the old guy's absence of visitors, Trent had never asked why. He assumed his friends were either dead or senile and, as for family, he figured it was rude to press a man for information he didn't volunteer on his own.

Trent sat on the floor by the fire, as he did nearly every evening, completely taken in by the imaginative tales. He was the old man's biggest fan, his only fan, and his only friend.

"So what happened next?"

The storyteller smiled and stared past the embers glowing beneath the fire....

Rafgard knew he couldn't hide behind the rock forever. He scanned the area for something to use as a shield, as the great beast failed to sniff him out. A huge, unscathed silver platter, nearly as large as the shields the longbow-men used, sat among a crest of hard, melted coins. With plan intact he tip-toed to it. He knew, if he wanted, he could sneak out and forget the whole foolish dare. But now, not only would he have the Broadsword Fellows to deal with, but also an entire town. He wondered how History would treat the man who ended the most celebrated festival by unleashing a vengeful dragon upon the people.

Rafgard again took out his sword, but this time he used it to prop up the silver dish. He didn't like the idea of losing his weapon, but he couldn't think of any other plan. Hiding beneath the platter he scanned the cavern for an item worthy of taking. There was a jewel-crested gauntlet close enough by the exit that he could scoop up as he dashed out.

Flame blanketed the cave; its heat causing the saucer to turn so red the metal screamed. When the beast ran out of breath Rafgard leapt, rolling toward the gauntlet, listening as the beast roared and closed its maw upon the silver platter. The student faltered at the exit, wishing he had a deity to thank for his fortune. But he had no god, and thus owed gratitude to no one for his triumph. And because he could share this with no Higher Power he wanted one last look. After all, he had pulled off an exchange, not a daring robbery. A jewel-crested gauntlet for a crude sword made by the Academy. He turned and took one last look at the beast.

The giant lizard had not spit out the silver platter. It shook its huge head from side to side, like a dog shaking its muzzle. It slithered, thrashing its tail against the walls, and four tiny feet that Rafgard had not noticed before clenched as if in agony. Black pupils collapsed as the surrounding emerald swelled, and tears as amber as the sun at noon fell down its cheeks. It was the strangest sight Rafgard had ever seen, and he wondered why it did not roar its discontent, but listening more closely he heard a horrible gurgle. The monster had bitten the sword as well as the silver platter, and now the blade was stuck through its jaw and nose.

The ancient beast helplessly choked on its own blood.

When it fell lifeless to the cavern floor the ground rumbled, nearly knocking Rafgard off his feet. He managed to stay balanced by using a stance taught to him by the Academy, but even when the world had stopped shaking he still had trouble standing; his limbs felt like water. Had he killed a dragon?

Rafgard crept cautiously closer to its mouth, and relaxed when he could not feel any breath. He peered in through its cracked tooth and saw his sword's hilt, pleased that he would not have to lose the weapon. Glaring once again into its eyes, he considered how

proud his father would be. Just as on that day when he had first learned the Academy had chosen his son.

The news had come while they were sitting at the dinner table. He, his four brothers and two sisters, had all finished one of his mother's famous meals; the best anyone ever experienced. And after two years of the Academy's cuisine, he had come to realise just how much he appreciated her fare.

Normally after dinner the men returned to their work in the fields, regardless of how exhausted summer's dry heat had left them. But on this particular day, for some odd reason, his father had sat back and placed his hands behind his head as though to relax awhile. His mother had also taken a moment to rest, and had even stopped his sisters from doing their chores.

At first Rafgard had thought this was wonderful. A break from his chores meant time for leisure. He could go fishing, and lie back in the few remaining hours of sunlight. It had been such a long time that he wondered if he'd have any bait ... then he'd realised his parents weren't relaxing, they were staring. They were staring at him.

His father had leaned over the creaky wooden table, and started to speak. But it wasn't the words his son had found intriguing but the pride in his eyes. Eyes that retracted from a strong ray of sun spilling into their home. A memory that, when he'd seen the dragon's pupils unmoved by the sun, had saved his life.

Leaving behind his recollection, Rafgard reached into the creature's mouth, cringed at the hot blood, and placed a foot against the jagged tooth for leverage. He yanked but the sword did not move.

He hadn't even heard the Broadsword Fellows rush into the cave.

"For sooth! He killed the beast!" one boy yelled.

"You only had to steal an item of treasure. What'd you go and wake it fer?"

Rafgard craned his head to see Cador, Drust, and Tor all staring at him. He had his hand on his sword inside the dragon's mouth, and because blood covered him it appeared that he had killed the mighty beast. He started to say differently, but stopped. How better to win a Princess' heart than to slay the mightiest beast that ever lived! And who could outdo someone who'd killed a dragon? So long as no one could prove differently....

"I decided this beast was too dangerous, and rather than steal an item of treasure I have claimed it all as my own."

"You're one mad man, Rafgard," Drust said, "but I wonder how brave you really are."

Rafgard pulled out his sword and looked at each Broadsword Fellow suspiciously. Silence fell over the cavern, over each of the boys....

"Hey, Mister Whittaker. A pregnant pause is cool, but you've been silent for quite some time." Trent snapped his fingers, but the old man was lost again, caught in some weird trance as he stared at the flames of the flickering fire. He blinked and smiled.

"Youthful Trent. Perhaps this would be a good place to stop. We can continue tomorrow, should you wish."

"Yeah, okay ... I'll be by ... aw, naw, can't. I work tomorrow. How 'bout Saturday?"

"Saturday? You spend too much time on Rafgard's life and not enough on your own."

"You talkin' from experience?"

Whittaker's vision fell to the floor. His jaw opened, but only a sigh came out.

Trent said, "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that."

"It's all right. We will continue the story ... Saturday."

"Okay, what time?"

As usual, the old man's eyes grew glassy as he looked into the fire. "After dusk, Trent. Anytime after dusk."



## **CHAPTER TWO**

**SEPTEMBER 25, 1975**

The next morning Trent woke, as usual, by six. His alarm was set to go off at six-fifteen, but he never needed it. He had another, more reliable alarm. Right in the middle of a dream his German shepherd, Cosmo, leapt up onto the bed and sat on his stomach. He opened his eyes and scratched the dog's ears, laughing at the content growl the canine made. As Trent felt around the ear Cosmo cocked his head and got a glossy look in his eyes, but Trent had learned to keep this moment short. The dog had not, after all, woken him solely for attention.

"Need go outside?" Trent said in a voice most people reserved for small children.

The dog perked, and leapt from the bed. Trent groaned from the impact as one of Cosmo's hind legs landed in his bowel, bringing attention to the fact that both owner and beast had to go.

"Rowf!" Cosmo spoke, sensing his master's hesitation.

"Shh! You'll get us both in trouble!" Trent grabbed his housecoat and ran down the stairs, nearly tripping over the canine who had taken the rush as a race. Trent rounded the corner at the bottom, laughing, but never winning. Cosmo leapt up into a circle and, pushing its owner back, it darted for the rear door. Trent fell to the ground.

"Some people don't have to get up this early!"

"Sorry Mom," he answered, walking into the kitchen and grabbing the leash. After snapping it onto his dog's collar he opened the door.

Once the morning "bathroom ritual" ended Trent went up to the human toilet, where beasts desiring privacy could do their "thing". Cosmo guarded the doorway, which was something Trent always found amusing. Even though the dog was a German shepherd it was still only about six months old, and it would sooner lick a perpetrator to death before biting one. Trent remembered the time Jen, his neighbour and best-friend, had strolled into the yard, unaware of the new addition to the Powers family. Trent had gone inside, and, come to think of it, he was going to phone her. When Cosmo laid his two beady eyes on his frightened enemy he'd let out a low growl, sending Jen into a panic. After she screamed Cosmo yelped, leaping behind a tree for safety. That had made her laugh. As with everything, her voice soothed the "great beast" into coming out with its ball. When Trent returned to the backyard, he'd found the two of them playing together as the best of friends.

Trent was ready for school by seven and always left at twenty-after to pick up Jen. He figured it had taken him no more than five minutes to get from his home to hers, even with a brief good-bye to his parents and a fond farewell to his dog, so when she finally strolled into the living room after twenty-five minutes his patience was exasperated. He recalled a time when she used to be punctual, but lately the only time she was ever on time was when he'd given her a few days notice. No more spontaneity. His mother said it was because she had a crush on him, but that was absurd. At least, he hoped it was absurd ... they were more like siblings than friends.

“‘bout time. What took you so long?”

“I had to...”

Together they said, “...put on my face.” Then Trent solo, “Next time put it on earlier. We’re going to be late.”

“You could have called.”

“I always come at this time. We’ve been walking to school together since our parents walked us.”

“Relax! We can take the Jeep. We’ll be all of five minutes.”

“Really? We can take the Jeep? Cool.”

Jen was right. By ten to eight Trent was alone again, standing by his locker, sorting through what books he’d need. He was fairly sure it was Day Two on the schedule, so that meant he had History followed by Sociology. Unless it was Day Three, in which case he had Sociology first ... Trent turned to see who was around in the hall he could ask. In mid-spin he felt a hand on his chest push him against the locker next to his, and though he tried fighting back the hand was too strong.

It was Billy Bender. It was always Billy Bender and his crew. They were the school’s clean-cut ruffians, clad in football jackets, Levi’s, and that gross stuff in their hair that his dad said he was too young for. These guys were the biggest teens in the school, though rumour had it they were no longer teens. Trent knew that Billy had been held back at least two years, and that he was destined to be held back again this year.

But what did Billy care? Every year he got that much bigger than everyone else, or at least it was that way with Trent. He really wished he didn’t have one more year to go.

“Hey, punk. Did you bring my lunch money?”

“Yeah,” Trent whispered.

“What? Couldn’t hear you. C’mon punk, speak like a man.”

“Yeah,” Trent said a little louder.

“Good boy, I have trained you well.” Billy let him go, patting his victim like a dog. “Y’know, if you weren’t so stupid, I’d just make you do my homework.”

Trent took the money from his pocket and handed it to the bully. “What’ll you do if I start brown-bagging it?”

Billy slapped Trent and replied, “Don’t get lippy punk, or I’ll learn you some pain.”

Trent looked to the floor and kept his mouth shut. Billy smiled, laughed, and before leaving he again patted his head like a dog.

“What a jerk.” Trent turned back to his locker, recalling that he didn’t know what Day it was. He sighed, wishing he could be more like Rafgard and a lot less like himself. Then another hand grabbed him, and jumping he turned to face ... Jen.

“Relax!” she said. “What’s got you so jumpy?”

“Nothing.” He wished he could tell her all about Billy, but it was hard enough on his ego just being bullied. The last thing he needed was to have his sister know that he was a wimp ... or worse. Have her tell her mom, who would tell his mom, who would storm down to the school. Trent shuddered just thinking about it. “What Day is it?” he asked.

“Day Five. We have gym.”

“Really?” That was when he noticed she was wearing her gym clothes. “I thought it was either Day Two or Three.”

Jen laughed. “Honestly Trent. Sometimes you are so absent-minded!”

“What would I do without you,” he said, finally able to relax.

“You may have to find out.”

“I know. Too bad boys’ and girls’ gym weren’t together.” Trent’s voice squeaked. The last thing he needed her to see was the bigger boys making him look like an uncoordinated idiot.

“That’s not what I meant.”

“Okay, what did you mean?”

“I’m thinking of joining cheer-leading. There’s tryouts after school, in front of the whole football team! Want to come watch?”

He would, except Billy would be there. “Naw, can’t.”

“Why?” she whined, her disappointment lost in Trent’s shame.

“I-I gotta work.” Not until six, but he hoped she wouldn’t remember.

“I thought you didn’t work till six.”

“I don’t,” *damn, think fast Trent*, “I have things to do ... besides, if I stayed late after school...”

Together: “...my parents would kill me.”

Then Trent solo, “I could phone and ask permission.”

“Right. Anytime you ask permission for anything it’s a guaranteed `no.’”

Actually, Trent counted on that in times such as this. “Well, there’s the warning buzzer. We’d better get to class.”

“Good idea, but one last thing.”

“What?”

“You need your sweats, not your History book.”

They laughed, and after grabbing his sweats and closing his locker he followed her to the gym.



Gym was the one class Trent hated most. He had tried several times, unsuccessfully, to get excused from it, but the principal felt that a good exercise regimen was necessary for a healthy life. “Physical education builds confidence, stamina and self-respect.” As if he knew, sitting all day behind his oak desk wolfing donuts into his ever-expanding belly! But all Trent could do was nod and say, “Okay.”

That was why every fifth school day he found himself amidst a cluster of larger boys guarding one side of the gym against a cluster on the other side. The only rule: don’t leave your half. The first time Trent had played this psycho’s-excuse-for-a-sport he thought it might be fun, until the teacher started handing out volleyballs for everyone to hurtle at each other.

That scar over his left eye still hadn’t healed.

But Trent had learned an easy way out. He’d stand near the front, usually close to where Billy was, wait for someone to get a ball and stand still. The sooner he got hit the sooner he could go sit on the bleachers and daydream about Rafgard. It wasn’t like he cared what these guys thought of him; his only friend was Jen.

When he heard coach Randolph’s whistle, he knew his relief had come premature.

“Men! We’re going to make this game interesting today.” Like most phys-ed teachers, coach Randolph sounded like a rejected marine. “The girls are joining us for this class.”

Trent felt his lungs tighten, his breaths draw short, and his legs stiffen as the girls poured into the gym. They formed a human barrier around the boys, whose duty was to snatch the ball and give it to a boy of their choice. Trent had heard of the coach doing this once, but up until today he had thought it was just a rumour.

“Bloody ‘ell,” Trent whispered, glancing behind him to see Jen waving. She even smiled.

“Man your territory!” coach yelled.

Trent straddled his legs and moved closer to the middle. This time he had to try not to get hit, and how hard could that be? Ten guys on his side, eleven on the other. He could at least last a short while, or so he thought until he met Billy’s eyes.

“You can do it Trent,” Jen called to him.

“Great,” he whispered, “she’s drawing attention to me.”

Coach Randolph threw in eight volleyballs, and immediately they began flying about the gym like a pinball machine gone mad. Trent imagined he was Ralfgard. The first of many balls hurtled toward him, and diving to the floor Trent dodged it. *He actually dodged it!*

Trent jumped to his feet, spun, and avoided yet another attack. The boy behind him was not so lucky. It was now nine-eleven, and Trent was not the first out! Each time a boy was struck his bravado increased, but when he found himself alone on his side, with two boys on the other, one of which was Billy, his fear returned.

Trent considered giving up. He thought about letting either Billy or the other guy, Bob, tag him. But when he heard Jen call him instinct took over. He turned to see the ball she had thrown to him, and catching it he hurtled it toward Bob, just like Ralfgard would have done! No one was more surprised than Trent when Bob shouted, “Tag!”

So it was now Billy versus Trent; Ralfgard versus the dragon.

Again he heard Jen shout as she threw him his sword..., er, a ball, and catching it he hurtled it toward Billy. Trent was the only one surprised when Billy nimbly caught the ball and threw it back. Smashing Trent in the nose. Sending him flat on his ass.

The gym echoed with laughter as Trent shook his aching head in a vain attempt to regain his senses. Licking his lips he tasted blood, and pinching his nostrils he stopped his nosebleed. Not quite the success in which Ralfgard would have rejoiced, but still less embarrassing than being first out.

“You okay?” Jen asked. She knelt beside him and rubbed his chin, her smile chasing away the embarrassment.

“Yeah, I’m okay.”

“Don’t look like it to me!” coach Randolph barked, throwing him an ice pack and towel. “Get off the floor and clean yourself up. You bleed like a girl.” Then to Jen: “No offence.”

“None taken.” She gave him a mock-smile and helped Trent off the floor. As they walked to the bleachers the coach set things up for a co-ed volleyball game. Jen held the ice-pack to Trent’s nose and, strangely, he didn’t mind the pain.

“Thanks,” Trent said, sitting.

“I’m no Florence Nightingale, but you’re welcome.”

“Not for the ice-pack.”

“Then what for?”

“For believing in me. I’ve never lasted that long.”

She smiled again and their eyes met. Trent felt oddly drawn toward her, but caught himself before doing anything crazy. Yet for the first time he was speechless with her.

Billy watched from where he and his crew set up a volleyball net.

“I can’t believe that nerd nailed me,” Bob said, having noticed his leader’s attention on them.

“I can’t believe that babe is with him,” Billy said from atop a chair where he secured one side of the net.

“Jen?” Sandra asked, throwing a ball at Billy’s head and narrowly missing.

“You’d be wasting your time with her,” Karen Berard added.

Billy jumped from the chair and walked to her. No one but him noticed her tremble when he brushed back her long, scarlet hair.

“If I can get you, I can get her.”

“She won’t be as inviting,” Karen whispered, though her tight face showed she had tried to say it louder.

“Are we playing or what?” Bob asked, not noticing the hard glare Billy shot Karen.

“Course we’re playing,” Billy said, grabbing Karen’s arm. Then, so only she could hear he said, “Chicks don’t dress like you do if they don’t want to get laid. You know you wanted it, so you better not go saying nothing different.”

“I won’t,” Karen mouthed, the words dying in strength even before they could leave her mouth.

“Good girl.” Billy patted her head and turned to his crew. “Let’s get it on!”



After school ended, Jen stood out back in the field, dressed in a purple miniskirt, gold stockings and a yellow T-shirt with a large purple “MC” printed on its front. The fiery sun beat down on her as she examined the crowd that had gathered on the old, rickety wooden bleachers. The football team was there, a few “gawkers” from the chess club, but no Trent. Jen sighed, and disappointedly turned to the other girls who had also come to try out.

“Okay girls! Get ready to strut your stuff!” Karen Berard, the head cheerleader, called.

Jen jumped into the line that was forming quickly, finding herself in the middle. That was good. She didn’t want to be first and find out everyone else’s routines totally differed from hers, but neither did she want to be last and be compared to everyone else.

The first girl did three back-flips, a cartwheel, and then landed in the Chinese splits. The second did much the same, except for an added cartwheel. Jen watched the third, the fourth, and then her turn came. She breathed for courage.

Taking a few steps, she braced her palms on the ground, kicked her feet high into the air, and when her body was balanced perpendicular to the ground she removed one hand. Jen held herself up with her body tipped slightly for balance, but before that got stale she tucked in her head, rolled onto her back and bounded to her feet with several back-flips

and a cartwheel she landed in the Chinese splits. Not exactly the elaborate routine she had planned, but she figured it best not be too different. Karen needed to see that she was a team player.

“Oh yeah!” rose a cheer from the crowd.

Jen looked up hoping to see Trent, but instead she saw that quarterback named Billy. She’d heard some bad things about him, things like all he wanted from girls was sex and that he stole lunch money from boys. She wondered what it was about him that attracted girls, but rising she turned and blushed at his continued cheer.

“He likes you,” Karen growled as Jen walked by her. The head-cheerleader was allegedly his third.

Jen smiled, and thinking the comment a friendly one she sang, “Not my type.”

Sandra, who had been Jen’s best friend in fifth grade, laughed and said to the other girls, “She thinks Karen’s serious!” Then to her: “Honey, he only goes after cheerleaders, and one you’re not!”

Jen’s chest grew heavy, and her eyes moistened. She turned, and marched stoically away. She wished Trent had come to support her. The girls were always so mean, and the guys never paid her any attention. But even if they did, Trent’s was the only one for whose she yearned.

“Hey babe! Where ya goin’?” a voice called from behind.

She had almost walked to the end of the field where the crab grass took over and a dirt path led to where she had parked the Jeep. She turned, hoping whoever it was wouldn’t notice that she was about to cry. It was Billy, standing tall and straight with his letterman’s jacket slung easily over one shoulder and his hair blowing about in the gentle breeze. His smile looked innocent, but his stubbled cheeks spoke danger. She looked into his deep emerald eyes, and smiled.

“I’m going home. This whole cheer-leading thing was pretty lame. I’m not a cheerleader.” She chuckled, but her disappointment still rang clear.

“Lame?” Billy walked to her, reached out with his throwing arm, and tenderly stroked her cheek. He made her blush, and in turn so did he. “You’re the best they got. If you don’t cheer, they better start looking for a new quarterback.”

“You don’t have to do that.” Jen couldn’t help but smile.

“There’s only one way to stop me.” Billy playfully stepped back.

“And what would that be?”

He cocked his head and narrowed his eyes; his innocent smile masking the danger that lurked from within it. “Be a cheerleader and cheer for me.”

“What’s in it for me?” She couldn’t believe she had actually said that!

“A woman who knows her own value. I like that. How ‘bout if we start with a movie this weekend, and see what develops.”

“I don’t know about that. I don’t think I’m your type.”

“What type is that?” he said, sounding both shocked and hurt. Jen suddenly felt sheepish.

“Easy,” she whispered, unable to sound louder than a hush.

Billy smiled again, that same innocent grin as before. “Y’know, that’s what I like about you. You’re not like the other girls. How ‘bout you think it over, say for Saturday night, but for now you come back and embarrass those other chicks with those moves of

yours. If you want to go out, I'll be at the coffee shop in town at eight. Lots of cops, so no funny stuff."

Jen couldn't help but smile. She'd never say yes, but maybe this little episode would stir Trent into asking her out.

"Okay, I'll come back," she said, following a step behind him.



### **CHAPTER THREE**

When the sun finished its descent from its throne in the sky, the moon took its place as ruler of Heaven. Stars joined the dark globe in the rebellion against Day, holding in their light all of eternity. The night's minions revelled in the clear, black world in which they ruled. But they rejoiced in their dominance too soon. The air was still yet thick, and far in the horizon a more powerful darkness crept closer. Storm clouds marched nearer, threatening to take over as monarch of night. Possibly even of day.

A warm, humid breeze swept over the prairie, then returned to its Master with knowledge. The storm clouds, never satisfied with the scout's information, periodically sent it back for another sweep. But the only sign of life it had to report of was a gas station sitting on the edge of a seldom used stretch of road.

Trent, working beneath the forest-green canopy of the two-pump establishment, paused to reflect on the sky. Time wandered slowly through this barren part of the prairie, and to most employees of this almost needless gas-station the night-shift was far too insipid for their sanity to handle. During daylight people seldom used the road, but after dusk not a soul ventured out. The sheer vastness of the moon's kingdom intrigued him, and though the humid air promised rain he thought nothing of it.

A mop he used to wash down the pavement took away his gaze from the evening sky, and after rinsing it in a nearby bucket he set to work on the oil stains. It seemed silly to mop a driveway, but his eccentric employer was pretty strict about no marks on his concrete. As if he'd know, anyway. Mister Farcus, a rich Winnipeg lawyer, inherited the estate from his father. Rumour was that he maintained it only out of guilt for having visited his elder parent as often as he now did the station. Trent didn't even know what the guy looked like.

But rather than think about that Trent settled into "imaginary-mode," released the mop, and thought about the story Old Man Whittaker had told him. He pressed play on his ghetto-blaster and cranked the volume up full; another benefit of working in a desolate place. Closing his eyes he let the shrill sounds of Ozzy become his world; one where the growing chill of the storm's scout was no longer a foreboding omen of the coming prairie winter. He escaped into a time of myth and legend as the harsh guitar chords beat in his ears. Tonight he was no longer an underachieving high school student, but was now Rafgard, warrior brave.

These were the moments he enjoyed most. His solitary time when he could mentally change Old Man Whittaker's tales to suit his own fantasy; and forget his boring life.

"Behold, a dragon!" Trent yelled, thrusting the mop like a sword. "I am Rafgard, Dragon Slayer!" He shouted loudly to hear himself over the deafening chimes of his rock music. He pointed the weapon as if to ward off the storm clouds.

*BEEP!* blasted a horn, winning dominance over the music. His heart jumped into his throat and he dropped the mop, frantically pushing "stop" on his blaster. His cheeks flushed as he faced the sound; hoping the dim lights hid his pink cheeks.

The horn had come from a sleek black motorbike with a shadowy woman mounted on its leather seat. She was clad in black leather: tight pants, biker boots, and a heavy jacket



adorned with scores of zippers and chains. Auburn hair, tied into a ponytail, hung loosely to the middle of her back, and after pulling her gloves tight she crossed her arms. When she leaned back in her seat Trent realised he was staring.

She asked, "You're mopping pavement?"

"Uhh, yeah ... should I fill 'er up?"

"Nah. Only two bucks."

"You sure? We're the last stop until you hit Brandon."

She glared at him with eyes as icy as the wyvern from old man Whittaker's story. "Never said I was going to Brandon. Two bucks. And I need a phone."

Trent returned the mop to its bucket and grabbed the pump's handle. He couldn't release himself from her icy stare, and suddenly he wished he'd just started pumping. She brushed her fingers through her long hair.

"A phone?"

"Uh, sorry. There's a pay-one by the Coke machine." He pointed to it and accidentally hit the pump's button. They both jumped to avoid the gas released by the nozzle.

"Guess I'd better not light-up." She got off the bike and smiled, easing Trent's nervousness.

"Unbelievable," he whispered when she'd walked to the phone. "First hot woman ever to come here, and I make an ass of myself."

Trent stuck the nozzle into the gas tank and watched the numbers rise. He tried forgetting what a fool he must look like, and concentrating on his task he listened to the "whirr." That was when he'd noticed how silent the prairie was, and of how that silence amplified any noise as if by magic. The crickets, the wind's whistle, the woman's voice. He could hear her conversation! He didn't mean to listen, but...

"Yeah, I'm here ... Got lost, okay? Not like they got info booths every ten miles in this backwards province ... Don't know where I'll stay, maybe I'll pitch a tent tonight ... Yeah, Whittaker's here...."

*Whittaker*, Trent thought. Someone was actually here to visit the old man? But she'd sounded angry, as if she sought him out for revenge. He wondered what kind of trouble his friend was in, and if he could help. But what could he do?

*What would Rafgard do?*

He looked down at her bike, curious if any clues lay in it. A rolled up sleeping bag and tent tied to the back, two leather saddle bags on each side ... he flicked one open and saw a small book inside. Looked like a diary. He thought for a moment, then heard her yell, "HEY KID! I SAID TWO!"

The pump clicked from sensing the tank was full, the numbers read seven and some change. Trent clasped the diary with trembling fingers. Around the canopy rain fell, not drop by drop but all at once. The air turned cold and nothing could be seen beyond the wall of water. He was enclosed in his own world, a prison of his making, one he entered of his own volition. She had to have seen what he had done. Should he give up this venture, return the diary and hope she forgave his action? Trent snapped from his trance and flicked the bag closed. She hung up and walked toward him, her glare sharp enough to slay any beast.

"Sorry. I'll only charge what you asked."

“Damn rights you won’t charge me full. Not a very good sign for the future when youths today can’t even pump gas. Guess that’s why they got you mopping pavement.”

“Said I was sorry....”

Her voice turned soft and she said, “Sorry doesn’t always cut it kid. Don’t forget that.” But as she handed him a two dollar bill she again sounded cold: “I’ll just have to remember not to come back here.”

As Trent watched her speed off he wondered what she wanted with old man Whittaker. More so he wondered how he’d find out. Was the old guy in some kind of trouble? Clouds suddenly overthrew the moon, casting a shower as its edict.

Trent grasped her diary tightly in his hand, wondering what secrets to what adventure it would reveal.



A bluish-grey mist swirled around Trent as he mopped the gas station’s concrete floor. His ghetto was on full volume as usual, and he was so far into one of his daydreams that he hadn’t noticed the mist. But when a moment of silence between songs betrayed a voice gently calling his name, he realised that he was not alone. Trent lowered the volume and listened. In the background he heard the beginning of *Highway to Hell*, and in the foreground he heard his name quietly being reiterated. When he turned the volume off he heard a sound like a giant suction from behind, but instead of turning to see what it was he froze.

“Trent ... Trent...” the voice whispered.

Then a hand grasped his arm and he spun to face silvery eyes embedded within the bluish-grey mist.

Trent screamed and struggled to get away....

Suddenly sitting upright in his bed. In his pyjamas. Safe, at home.

Trent looked at his Mother who was sitting on the edge of his bed holding his arm. “You okay?” she asked.

“Yeah, just had a nightmare. That’s all. Where’s Cosmo?”

“I had to put him in the backyard. I’ve been calling you for ten minutes. Must have been some dream.” Her eyes narrowed into two tiny slits and she pursed her lips. “You’ve been sneaking over to that weird old man’s house again, haven’t you?”

“Aww, mom. He’s not weird. He’s just....”

“Anyone who won’t see people until after dusk is weird, Trent.”

“All he does is tell me great stories. You and Dad would like him if you’d just give him a chance.”

“Well, don’t count on him being invited to dinner anytime soon.”

“Then talk to him at Church today!”

His mother stared at him without answering. Trent hated it when she did that. Finally she said, “We’ll talk about this later.”

“Fine. So why’d you put Cosmo in the yard?”

“Because your dog was going nuts barking at someone at the door. You have a guest, and they’ve been waiting quite awhile.”

“Who?”

“I don’t know, never seen her before. She’s pretty, and has reddish-brown hair.”

*Could it be that woman from last night?* Trent wondered. “Tell her I’ll be right down.”

A few minutes later Trent was at the top of the steps that led from his room to where the landing met the foyer. He had slipped into his cut-offs and T-shirt from the day before, and though he’d run a comb through his hair he couldn’t get the cowlick at the back of his head to stay down. He wished his dad would let him use grease, but even if he was half-asleep and definitely not looking his best, he still had to see what the woman wanted. He prayed it was not the one from last night, but when he looked from the top of the stairwell to the landing below his prayer was cut short.

There she was, the auburn-haired woman, her back facing him.

“H-hi,” Trent said as he rushed to the landing.

She turned to him and smiled. “Hey kid. It seems I lost my diary last night. I went by the station this morning, but it’s closed.”

“The owner only has it open in the evenings on weekends. It’s the same hours his father worked.”

“Weird. So you gonna stand there staring at me, or are you going to tell me if you’ve seen my diary?”

“How’d you know where I live?”

“I remembered your name from your name-tag and used this thing called the ‘phone book.’ Don’t sound so suspicious kid. Now about that diary?”

“It must’ve fell from your saddle-bag. It’s at the gas station.”

“Fell. Sure. How’d you know it was in my saddle-bag?”

Trent thought fast. “Where else would you keep it?” He didn’t, however, think cleverly.

“Whatever. We’ll hop on my bike and get it.”

Trent recalled her phone conversation from last night and knew going with her was a bad idea. Luckily, he knew a sure-fire way out: “Dad?” He’d ask permission.

“Yes, son?” His father walked from the sunken living room just off the foyer wearing a bath robe and reading a newspaper. But not the sports page. He never read sports.

“Uh...” Trent looked to the auburn-haired woman and shrugged.

“Keelin,” she said.

“Keelin dropped her diary at the gas station last night and needs it. Can I go with her and get it?”

His dad’s eyes narrowed. “I don’t think that’s a good idea, you’ll miss the afternoon Service at Church.” A Saturday afternoon service had, originally, upset him. Now it made Trent want to leap for joy. Then his Dad said to the woman, “Someone will be there to open at six.”

“I’m sure you wouldn’t mind your son coming with me to get it now,” Keelin said, slowly and deeply.

There was a pause before his dad said: “Of course not. Go with her Trent, and don’t worry about the time. I’m going to read the sports.”

Trent looked at Keelin whose lips mouthed every word that his father was saying.

“O-kay...” Trent didn’t know what to do. Then, as his dad walked back to the living room, Trent realised he had said he wanted to read the sports! He turned back to Keelin

who was smiling, her full red lips and dark rimmed eyes bright against her otherwise alabaster skin.

“Are we ready then?” she asked.

Trent had never ridden on a motorbike, but knew he'd be nervous even before finding himself sitting behind Keelin with the wind ripping past his ears at highway speed. He didn't own a helmet, nor was he wearing clothes thick enough to pad his tender skin should they have an accident. His shorts, T-shirt, and canvas shoes were great for keeping cool in the blazing Manitoba heat but terrible for sliding across a pot-hole ridden Canadian highway. Trent wished this year's construction crew had fixed the road right. Well, maybe next year.

Yet it wasn't his fear of death that made his heart race a few kilometres faster than the bike itself. He was pressed behind Keelin, snugly, with nothing to hold onto but her shapely waist. And because he was taller and his arms were longer than the breadth of her waist, his forearms rested just below her supple breasts. He'd never come this close to touching a woman's boobs before, unless one counted that time he and Jen had played doctor when they were twelve. But that was four years ago, and they had only looked. Not only that, but there hadn't been much to see. Now, he was practically touching!

As the bike approached the gas-station Keelin directed it into one of the parking stalls. The station always seemed different during the daylight hours, and never in a good way. When the sun was up the lush, green prairies looked endless, and from above the sun beat down heavily without any trees to obscure its power. Trent loved the prairies at night but preferred to stay in town when it wasn't dark.

“Hey, kid. You can let go any time.”

Trent released her and they climbed off together. “Sorry....”

“Don't apologise kid. People'll think you're weak. Now where's my diary?”

“It-it's in here,” Trent started toward the front doors while fishing in his pocket for his keys. He discreetly repositioned himself, hoping Keelin hadn't noticed the bulge. He mumbled, “People think I'm weak regardless if I apologise,” sliding the key into its hole, he couldn't even imagine why he had said that. He glanced back and saw her smiling again.

“I doubt they think you're weak because you apologise.”

Trent looked away from her and opened the door. “But I'm sure you have a theory.” He walked inside, with her following.

“Does your heart always beat like a hummingbird's every time you're near a woman?”

Trent rummaged beneath the counter, glaring hard at her. “I've never been on a bike before. I was nervous!” He slammed the diary on the wooden counter, oblivious that he'd chipped the paint with the book's metal trim.

“Hey, relax kid. This is no time to grow a spine. I'm just a person passing through. You didn't by chance read this, did you?”

“No, I wouldn't do that. But you don't believe me, do you?”

“I know you didn't read it, kid. I know it as surely as I know your heart didn't flutter for fear of the bike.”

“And how do you know?”

Keelin reached across the counter for the book, but grabbed his hand instead. Trent leaned toward her, it was as if someone were pushing him from behind, and she leaned in as well. When her face was mere inches from his, and her hot breath caressed his skin she said, "I know the difference between a heart that pumps for desire, and one that pumps for fear."

Trent managed to release himself and jerked up, but she still held his gaze. She had her diary in hand, smiled, winked and walked out. Trent knew his heart pumped for fear this time; fear from those icy blue eyes. She held the door open, staring at him with hunger, but not in any sexual way. Her look was identical to the one his German shepherd bore whenever he looked upon a bowl of fresh food.

"Are you coming, or would you like to walk home?" she asked.

"I'll walk thanks."

Looking at him sidelong with narrow eyes, her ears perked as though she listened to his heartbeat. "Suit yourself," she said, starting out the door.

"Well, I figure since I'm here I may as well go through the stock." Trent stopped rambling as he stepped out the door after her. The auburn-haired woman was already on her bike and speeding away, leaving without an answer as to whom she was and what she wanted with old man Whittaker.

Trent closed his eyes and repeated to himself: *C4745E*, wondering how much more about her he wanted to learn.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

Jen didn't wake until the phone had rung for the fourteenth time. She heard the ringing somewhere in a dream, and had hoped, subconsciously, that her parents would answer it. But, as it was, her mom was out shopping and her dad was out playing golf, and she knew, as the phone rang for a sixteenth time, it was not going to stop. Opening her eyes she rolled onto her side and reached for the receiver, sneaking a quick glance at the clock. It was barely noon.

"Hello?" she asked, resisting the urge to add, "who the hell is this?"

*"Hey, it's Trent. Did I wake you?"*

Jen sprang upright and started fixing her hair. "Uhh, course not ... I was just ... uhh, reading. That book you gave me." As she listened to the words roll from her tongue she wished she could start the conversation again. Now he'd ask her about the story, and she hadn't honestly read it.

*"That's great. I knew you'd like horror if you gave it a shot!"* Trent paused, and added: *"Now do you see how stupid it is to think old man Whittaker's a vampire?"*

"Let's just keep him out of the conversation. He still gives me the spooks! Want me to pick you up for Church?"

*"Yeah, but I'm at the gas-station."*

"Why?"

*"It's a long, weird story. I'll explain when you get here."*



It normally took about thirty minutes to get from Jen's to the gas station, but Trent had waited for nearly three quarters of an hour before he saw the Jeep. As she pulled up Trent noticed that her family had finally taken the top and doors off. They always waited until the holidays ended and Indian summer began before they did, but as Jen always said, "At least it got done."

That was not all he noticed. He remembered what the boys in school had started calling her this year, and found himself shirking off a thought one should not have about someone they considered a sister.

"Hi, Trent," she said, her words falling on deaf ears. Without realising it he was staring at her bare legs, watching the muscles in her left thigh tighten as they depressed the parking brake, and the muscles in her right leg relax as she rested it against the floor stick-shift. She was wearing tight black shorts with elastic suspenders, and a scarlet halter top that cupped her breasts. She smiled, having noticed his examination of her. Trent observed for the first time that the guys at school were right. She was a babe.

"Hey, Jen. Thanks for picking me up," he said, hoisting himself onto the passenger seat. He reminded himself that they were, after all, supposed to be like siblings. But this time he noticed he had mentally put the emphasis on 'like' and not 'sibling'.

"No problem Trent. Sorry I took so long, I just wanted...."

Then they both said in unison, "to put on my face."

As Jen waited for him to strap in she asked, "So, how'd you get out here?"

“It was the weirdest thing ... this hot chick came to the gas station....”

“Who? You know Billy asked me out.”

“No one from around here...” Trent stopped, realising she had changed the topic. “You’re going out with Billy?”

“I didn’t say I was going out with him. So, if she’s not from around here, where’s she from?”

“I don’t know. She just came for some gas and *lost* her diary. Are you going out with him?”

“I don’t know. Why, you jealous?” She smiled jokingly, but there was a tone in her voice that told him she actually hoped he was.

“No, I’m not jealous,” or was he? “...I’m just looking out for my ‘sister.’” He punched her arm as if she were ‘one of the boys’.

“Not every guy thinks of me as a sister you know. Maybe I will go out with him.” Her voice sounded cold.

“So-rry. The guy’s a slime who’s only after girls for one thing.”

“You don’t think he might like me for myself?”

“I’m saying he has a reputation for moving fast. I don’t have to be jealous to not want you to get hurt.”

She was silent. Then: “We doing anything tonight?”

“I’m going to old man Whittaker’s. He’s going to tell me more about ‘Rafgard.’ It’s so cool! He’s at this part...” Trent noticed she had stopped listening. “Why?”

“Just wondering. Billy asked me to the coffee shop.”

“Then you’re seriously considering?”

“Well, it’s not like anyone else has asked me out.”

“You could come to old man Whittaker’s. If you want....”

Jen gave him that ‘look’. She curled her lips into a half-smile, and pushed her eyebrows high on her forehead. She was giving it to him a lot lately. “I am *not* going to that creepy man’s house. That weirdo is a vampire.”

“Why does everyone call him that? He’s really cool.”

“People call him that because his windows are all boarded up and he never comes out during the day.”

“So he’s a night person. Still no reason to shun him.”

“I think I’ll make other plans. Well, here we are. Home sweet home.”

Trent hadn’t even realised that they’d driven the whole way already. Jen had sounded upset, making him wish to resolve whatever their argument had been about, but he could tell by her intense glare at the world beyond her tinted windshield that if he continued the conversation he’d only make things worse.

“You’re still going to the afternoon service?” he asked, exiting the vehicle.

“I have things to do first, I’ll see you there,” Jen responded, flooring the Jeep and speeding away.

Trent watched after her, perplexed. He remembered the conversation he’d had with his father years ago, the one where his dad had told him to expect some weird changes in girls (and that if he wanted to know what those changes were, he should ask his mother). But today was the weirdest of all. Jen had been abrupt, defensive, and it seemed as if she were trying to make him jealous. But why?



*Jen, where are you going?* she wondered, speeding down the highway toward the pond where she and Trent used to fish. When Trent had woken her this morning, well afternoon really, she had planned on a much different encounter. She had hoped to get him worked up by her going out with Billy, and maybe he'd ask her out. Why was it that the one guy she wanted to date was the one guy she couldn't get to think of her as anything but a sister?

Pulling into a spot where a dirt road led into the woody area to the pond, Jen closed her eyes and tried to get a grip. Things were changing so rapidly, and she hoped they would slow down soon. But why couldn't they stay the same? Relaxing against the leather clad bucket-seat, she opened her eyes and sighed.

Elvis Presley. It was coming from the pond, and she wondered who it could be. As far as she knew, only her and Trent ever came up here, and they'd stopped doing that in Junior High. Jen shrugged and, deciding she really didn't care, she pulled the Jeep back onto the road. Maybe after a brief cruise she'd know what to do about Trent, or maybe not. But if nothing else, the drive would help pass the time.



"So, you're actually going to take out that Jen chick?" Bob asked.

"Oh yeah," Billy replied, surveying the claim he'd made over the pond. The place was ideal to party; far enough from town so no adults bothered them, yet facilitated enough to want for naught. The place was constructed for families to use as a get-a-way, but it never took off. Yet, the biffy was still emptied, the trash cleaned, and not too far away was a corner store that sold groceries and beer.

They used the pond to cool off, but today only Sandra, John and Susan swam. Everyone else, Tim, Bob, Karen and himself included, all lay in the grass listening to the local radio station. It was, all in all, a typical afternoon.

Sandra, the only one in the water swimming au natural, dove to its bottom, then swam straight up and jumped out to display her tight body. She landed with a huge splash, and tossing back her wet hair she said, "Jen is a princess. I can't believe you made us let her join cheer-leading."

"You're a slut," Billy retorted.

"I thought you liked that," Sandra answered, ignoring her peer's laughter.

"I did," Billy sat up on one elbow, "until I went out with Karen. Maybe what I need is a princess."

"All right Billy!" Tim shouted, reaching out to slap his leader's hand.

"You're so mean..." Sandra was interrupted by John who had swum over to give her a deep kiss.

Karen muttered, "Maybe I'd be more fun if you were more a gentleman."

Billy glared at her. "Maybe I'd be more a gentleman if you liked new things."

Then the males in his crew shouted, "Billy! Whoop! Whoop!" while waiving their fists in the air.

Karen turned away, her expression cold. Sandra walked from the water to Billy and spread her arms wide. "Take a good look Billy, you won't be seeing any of this. You go



out with the princess and all you'll get is a little personal action with Palm-ala," then she started putting on her clothes.

"Hey! I'll bag her." Billy sounded angry. "Trust me," and he glared at Karen.

## CHAPTER FIVE

Wooden pews, hard as if they had been carved from rock, into where people filed obediently. Gradually the rows filled, though with numbers noticeably smaller than this time last year. In front of the congregation was a raised stage with red carpet, and a podium in the middle. Behind which was what looked like a throne where Pastor Smith sat, aged stoutly and always smiling. To each side of him was six chairs, in each an elderly deacon.

More like a director of a production than the man of worship whom he claimed to be Pastor Smith brought people to their feet for song. When the music ended he commanded they sit, lead the congregation into recital of a psalm (had them start over twice until it pleased him), and finally began the sermon. A sermon that did not vary in style even when it varied in topic, like all the others he spoke about some event in his life and likened it to the event in the Bible. Very often it was not clear whether the lesson was to come from Pastor Smith's experiences or from God's Word.

Trent sat to the right of his Mom who sat to the right of her husband. Their pew was second last from the back on the far left side. This was where they had sat since Trent could remember and he never objected. Jen sat in the seat beside him, with her Mom to her right. It was noticeable, at least in Minnow Creek, that Jen's Dad had been absent these past four years. Trent knew the whole story, the truth beyond the rumours of the Women's League; a group Jen's Mom had cherished being a part of until "the incident".

Jen made that "Psst!" noise that always got him in trouble. Trent tried to be discreet as he grabbed the note she had placed beside him. Most of the time everyone was too intent on the pastor to notice them, but once she had made a comment that forced him to laugh out loud. Emphasis on "loud". Trent carefully opened the note and read:

"The vampire is doing it again."

Blood boiled in veins that had long since cooled. Why she was so intent on disliking a man she didn't give a chance, and at the same time willing to give Billy Bender a chance, was beyond his comprehension! *Billy Bender*, he shouted inside his mind. Trent pretended to stretch and stole a glance behind him. He knew of what Jen had written, but every Sunday it seemed too bizarre to be true. There he was, in the last pew, dressed in his everyday attire, staring up at the ceiling. What is he looking at? Trent wondered. He looked up too. Ceiling fans, stained glass skylight, wooden beams.

An elbow slammed against his side that brought his view back to earth. His mother whispered with strong breath, "Your focus should be on the pastor!"

Trent sat tall, looked straight ahead and waited for his Mom to focus on the sermon. Then he returned the note to a now giggling Jen but not until after he scribbled, "He's not a vampire."



It was six-thirty in the evening when Trent finally got so bored that not even *Chips* could amuse him. Cosmo lay on the couch over a blanket that stretched onto his owner's lap, and his master scratched its tummy before looking at his watch for the billionth time.

Two minutes had passed. It was still forty-five seconds before six thirty-three. He somehow had to waste five hours before dusk, and, if he wanted to go to old man Whittaker's, he'd have to think of a clever way to trick his parents. Tonight he wanted to test a theory. If it worked it would open new worlds, if not he'd wind up resorting to the old stand-by of sneaking from his bedroom window. His mother entered the room, and he breathed deep for courage.

"Hi, mom." When she didn't say anything he added, "Cosmo's on a blanket."

"We talked about this."

"And you said that if I wanted the dog on the couch I'd better start vacuuming. I'll do it tomorrow."

"You better. So what's on your agenda tonight?"

*Easy now Trent, he thought. Deliver this next line wrong and your whole night is shot.* "Jen wants to go watch the Northern Lights. Her parents took the top off the Jeep."

"I don't know if that's such a good idea."

"That's what I said." *Now, the theorem:* "I don't want to go outside and watch some dumb sky."

"Why not? I think it would be a good idea for you to get some air."

"You do?"

"Yes. In fact, I insist. I don't want you sitting around all night watching television."

"Okay Mom." Trent stared after her as she walked back into the foyer toward the kitchen. His theory was right. His parents never considered what was in his best interest, they reacted instinctively by deciding whatever he wanted must be bad. They may have loved him dearly, but when it came to parenting they had no clue what they were doing.

"Huh," Trent said as he reached for the phone to call his 'sister'.



Jen lay sprawled on her window seat, holding a romance novel but staring at the world beyond the paned glass. Her mother had told her that women in the Middle Ages spent their time crocheting on their window seats, using them to allow for sunlight since they had no electricity to guide their hands through every stitch. Her mother had made it sound so romantic and fun that she had dove into making a blanket of her own, as if she were a maiden from those times. But she found it boring, tiresome, and entirely too much like work.

The blanket now lay tucked away in a corner, still only half done.

Now she used the seat as a place to think. The open book in her lap was a ruse, intended to fool her mother should she check on her unannounced. Jen hated it when she did that. Once she had made the mistake of holding a vampire novel, her mother knows how much she detests horror. Not even a gift from Trent could sway her into reading that trash. Before she had bought a romance her mom would invite herself in and ask, "What are you thinking about? Something wrong?"

At first Jen would answer "Nothing," but eventually her parent would drag it out. But with the romance on her lap she would not only leave immediately, but she'd even apologise for disturbing her. Parents are strange, Jen thought.

When the phone rang, she was so lost in thought that she didn't notice until its third ring. She reached over and answered, "Hello?"

"Hey, Jen. It's Trent ... you're not still mad, are you?"

She sighed, "No, I'm not mad."

"Good. I need a favour. I'm going to old man Whittaker's tonight and I told my mom that you and I are going star gazing. Can you cover?"

"You know whenever you do this I have to stay out until you come home," she said, suddenly annoyed.

"I know, but...."

"Never mind. As a matter of fact, I do have something to do tonight."

"What?"

"I'm going out with Billy."

A pause. Then: "You're going out with that jerk?"

"Yes. At least he wants to spend time with *me*, and not because he needs something!"

"Give me a break! Brothers and sisters are supposed to want to do things for each other."

"WE'RE NOT BROTHER AND SISTER!" Jen screamed, and, though she added calmly, "You better be here by quarter to eight," she still slammed down the phone.

Trent looked at his receiver, perplexed at the loud buzz he heard from its other end. *What the heck was that all about?* She was really angry, and for the life of him he couldn't figure out why. Maybe she did have a crush on him, that would certainly explain her recent outbursts. There was no point asking his Dad, he'd just rub his head, sigh, and get all sweaty. Undoubtedly, that conversation would end with Trent saying, "I don't care what birds and bees are up to, I want to know what's up with Jen." He heard his Mom in the kitchen and wished he could ask her about it. But that was out of the question. If he did, she'd know he wasn't going star gazing. Then again, maybe this was one thing he didn't want to know about.

He looked at the clock on the wall and saw it was only seven o' one. Three hours and fifty-nine minutes to go before he could go to old man Whittaker's. He wondered what he was going to do until eleven o'clock while Jen went out with the one guy in Minnow Creek he hated. He wished he could just go to his storyteller's; what was his problem with sunlight anyway? That part of him was a little weird, he admitted.

He thought about the nick-name the town had for this newcomer: The Vampire. How stupid. What would a creature of the night be doing at a Church service on Sunday morning? Trent looked at the wall clock again, and saw that four whole minutes had passed.

*That whole dusk thing is crazy,* he thought. *I'm not going to wander around town until eleven.* Again he looked at the clock and saw that another three minutes of his life had passed by.

At twenty to eight Trent got up from the couch and pushed Cosmo off. The dog followed him to the foyer where he grabbed his coat and shouted good-bye to his Mom. Then, after patting his dog, he left.



Jen was just climbing into her Jeep when she saw Trent walking down his front walk. She settled into her seat and met his eyes, both of them stopping dead. At first she said nothing and she was going to leave it at that, but deep down she wanted Trent to stop her.

“I guess you’d better climb in,” she said icily.

“I thought you were mad.”

She heard relief in his voice and felt stung by it. “I am. But if we don’t leave together, both our moms will know we didn’t go star gazing.”

Trent climbed in without saying anything more. Jen reached over and turned on the eight-track, blasting her new Blondie. Trent hated that track, he said every song sounded the same. Normally she wouldn’t play it around him, provided he kept his AC/DC to himself. Talk about music that sounded the same!

Jen slipped her Jeep into gear and, looking back to pull out, she snuck a glance at her ‘brother’. He hadn’t even noticed her tight, black miniskirt, scarlet spandex shirt and matching pumps. So much for her one last ditch effort to get him to notice her. She had even hung her hair loose and teased it the way he liked, and had on the red lipstick that he once said made her look like a model. She wanted him to think she was dressed up for Billy, that her virginal status was perhaps about to change, but if Trent was thinking anything at all he certainly didn’t let it show. She wondered if her outburst had hurt him.

“Where in town should I drop you off?” she asked softly, driving fast through Minnow Creek’s short streets.

“At old man Whittaker’s.” Now Trent sounded short.

“I thought he didn’t see anyone until after dusk.”

“He doesn’t.” He hesitated before saying, “but I’m going anyway. I’m sure he won’t be mad.”

“O-kay.”

“Hey!” He glared at her, this time the anger obvious in his tone. “Just because he doesn’t meet up to your standards does not make him weird! The fact that I like him should be enough to tell you he’s really cool. I thought my opinion mattered to you.”

“Your opinion does matter! But it’s just...” Jen slammed on the brakes in front of old man Whittaker’s, “Get out.”

“It’s just what? I don’t want us to part mad.”

She looked at him icily again, but this time only for a second. “Get used to it, Trent. You always wished we were siblings, well my brother, this is how siblings act.”

She sped off, leaving him alone on the quiet street. He watched after her, dumbfounded, and, closing his eyes, he prayed for understanding. When he opened them he turned to old man Whittaker’s.

And gasped when he saw the bike.

## CHAPTER SIX

He knew it was Keelin's from the plate number, *C4745E*. That array of numbers and letters were permanently etched in his mind, never to be forgotten. He wondered what she was doing at old man Whittaker's, but more importantly ... how he'd find out.

Whittaker's home was small, even for a bungalow. It had only three rooms: a bedroom, living room and kitchen. All the windows were boarded up from the inside with boards that were rotten, cracked or both, and the neighbourhood kids had busted what remained of the glass. Trent crept up to the kitchen window, hiding in the tall, unkempt lawn that he had been meaning to mow all summer. He listened, but heard nothing. He crept toward the living-room and heard Keelin's voice through a crack in an uneven board.

"You're a fool Whittaker!"

"Fool am I? Was it not my foolishness that spared you from a loveless marriage?"

"It was your foolishness that nearly damned me."

There was a pause and then sorrow from the old man's voice, "I do not have much longer to apologise for that. How much more can I do to make amends?"

"You can stop saying you're sorry and start showing me by example." Keelin's tone showed no sign of sympathy.

"I cannot explain why I am here, only that I am doing what I believe He wants."

"You know how painful the addiction is. Do you do this because you wish it so, or because you wish He wishes it so?"

"I do not want this," Old Man Whittaker had never sounded so sad.

"I thought we all agreed to stop the blood-line with us."

Keelin's voice trailed off as they walked to the front-street door. Trent could no longer hear them, but it no longer mattered. He was pretty sure he'd figured out old man Whittaker's secret.

He was an alcoholic.

He had moved to Minnow Creek to make a fresh start. His family and friends probably stayed away because of what he'd been like as a drunk, but who was Keelin? She was certainly young enough to be his daughter, but she called him 'Whittaker', not 'Dad'. Maybe she's a younger sister and this was a pact they'd made as children after a violent beating by their drunken father. The scene unfolded in Trent's mind...

He heard the front door open and close and Keelin speed away. Leaving his hiding place Trent walked to the front door and rang the buzzer. He waited.

"Whoever it is, return after dusk," said a voice from within.

"It-it's me, Mr. Whittaker. Trent! Sorry I'm early but...."

The door flung open and old man Whittaker stood in the entryway. He looked different, strange even. His pale skin appeared almost transparent and his usually dark eyes appeared bright, almost youthful. He stood awhile in the sunlight, as though his body were absorbing it like a greenhouse.

"Trent," he said, his aged voice sounding hungry, "you are always welcome in my home."



Jen pulled the Jeep snugly against a curb only a few stores away from the coffee shop. She still wasn't sure about going on this date, especially with the way she was dressed. But, since she had come and had nothing else to do....

She unbuckled her seat belt and jumped from the Jeep. After straightening out her skirt she walked to the café, peered in and looked for Billy. He wasn't there. Looking at her watch, she saw she was nearly five minutes early and again considered leaving. But looking up there he was, Billy Bender.

He had on his letterman's jacket and a black silk dress-shirt unbuttoned halfway down his muscular chest. He stood with his arms folded and muscles flexed, smiling as if to intentionally mask the danger he empowered. Jen smiled and blushed, slipping into the role of the shy princess waiting for her gallant knight to rescue her.

"Hi," she said in a child-like voice.

"Hey. You look real fine, Jen."

Her cheeks turned a shade hotter. "Thanks," she debated her next few words, but sheepishly said, "so do you."

He gave her an "aww shucks" kind-of grin and looked away. He turned back to her and opened the coffee shop door, saying, "Shall we?"

Jen curtsied, amazed at how easily she slipped into her role. She had once promised herself never to act like this for a boy, but considering she got nowhere with Trent by being herself she figured one night of innocent flirtation wouldn't hurt. This boy actually liked her, and he didn't seem at all like everyone said. Jen always thought that rumours spoke more about those who spread them than those they spoke about, and, so far, Billy proved her assumption correct.

Jen shuffled into a small booth and Billy slid into the seat opposite her. She stared at him unsure of what to say. His eyes darted at different things, the salt and peppershakers, the ketchup bottle, even the napkin holder. He seemed to be racing through his mind for conversation as well. A small jukebox screwed into the wall at the edge of their table caught Billy's attention, and reaching for it he flipped through a list of its contents.

"What kind'a music do you like?" he asked.

"Blondie is cool," she said as if testing him. His eyes raised.

"I got her latest. I take it you must'a taken dance lessons."

"Gymnastics in elementary. How about you? Were you in football before you moved here?"

"Yeah. Listen, this is pretty lame," he paused when he saw her surprise, "I mean the coffee shop, not the company."

"Oh," she perked up.

"There's a party goin' down, what d'ya say we check it out. We can take my van."

Jen wasn't sure about that, but it was either that or waste time until Trent was finished at old man Whittaker's.

"Okay."

Billy smiled.





Before Trent began setting up the logs inside the fireplace, he first opened the flu. Normally, old man Whittaker would have helped, but this time he busied himself by ripping boards off a window. With each one he removed the beam of sun that entered the room grew, and only when it engulfed the rocking chair did he stop.

“Weird,” Trent whispered.

He watched as Whittaker relaxed into his seat, grasped the handles and got a look about him as though the sunlight were an intoxicant. Trent recalled Cosmo’s look when it was scratched behind the ears. The elder never looked away from the light.

“Youthful Trent, we do not need a fire for this tale.”

“O-kay,” Trent sprawled along the hard floor, thinking up random excuses to leave.

“Now, where were we?” Old man Whittaker’s voice sounded cold and distant.

“How brave is the Dragon Slayer?” Cador smiled, his eyes as hazy as the fog that rose after dusk. “Is he brave enough to win the hand of Princess Katrina?”

Rafgard stared at the cave. The entrance opened like a wide yawn, with rock formations as fangs and a cobblestone walkway like a serpent’s tongue. The mountain rose high against the overcast sky and two crags jettied off like bat wings. It looked as if it were a demon that had died centuries past.

“And what will I find here?” Rafgard asked, uncertain how wise it was to know, wishing he’d never lied about killing the dragon.

Tor handed him a heavy leather satchel. “Vampyres. In there, you will find the unholy.”

Rafgard relaxed, and, as his shoulders lost their tension, he sighed; the air releasing like a dam that had burst. “Vampyres? Why not give me a test of courage that is real?”

Drust circled him, followed by Tor and Cador. Drust grabbed the satchel, continuing to circle.

“Perhaps you won’t need this?”

“How brave is the Dragon Slayer?” Cador taunted.

“I think he didn’t really slay the dragon. I think he tricked us.”

Rafgard snatched the satchel and gave Drust a hard shove. “Nay, I am no bearer of false witness! I shall go into that demon’s abode, and shall I find anyone at home may Those Who protect us help them.”

“But Rafgard, you have no deity to protect you. What will you do, should you encounter a Creature of the Night?”

Rafgard walked a few paces toward the mouth and stopped. He turned to his friends, cocked a smile and said, “I shall bring him back in this satchel, and use his dust as a warning to my enemies.”

Throwing his shoulders back he held his head high and strode up the cobblestone walkway. A groan blew from within the cavern, carrying with it a rancid stench that reminded him of the animals in the slaughterhouse. He thought he heard a voice whisper in the breeze: “this ... time....” The Dragon Slayer’s lungs stiffened, and breathing became a chore instead of a thing taken for granted. He stepped one foot inside and shuddered; it was not unlike stepping inside a cold lake. Closing his eyes and holding his breath he jumped, immersing himself inside the strange air.

As he journeyed down the narrow corridor, Rafgard searched the satchel for a torch. But he found none. He looked about and noticed that, unlike the entrance, these walls



were flawless and adorned with golden sconces with oil lamps. He walked close to one, but when they all suddenly ignited he jumped back. His heart pounded. The Dragon Slayer drew closer to the golden sconce, again feeling the wind brush his cheek with a cold whisper that said, 'this' and 'time'.

The sconce was shaped to look like a human skeletal hand that was nailed to the wall at the wrist. Upon further examination, Rafgard noticed that the rest of the skeleton was melted into the ebony walls and within deep, empty sockets where eyes had once been he sensed fear. Its jaw was wide as if it had screamed, leaving Rafgard to believe it had died in much pain.

"*That was a tasty one,*" a voice bellowed from further in the cavern. Rafgard hoped it was only the wind.

"I am Rafgard the Dragon Slayer!" he shouted, stoically facing the direction from where the voice had spoken.

He heard a low, dark laugh echo back. As it bounced from wall to wall a breeze rose again, this time like an icy finger taunting him to journey further. Rafgard reached into his satchel, produced a wooden stake and slung the leather bag over his shoulder. The weightless wooden stake shook in his grasp, making him look like an orchestra leader. But the musicians who awaited him would not harmonise with instruments, but with cries of terror from whom they feasted.

Rafgard considered turning back. He considered forgetting this foolish dare and bear whatever punishment the Broadsword Fellows might inflict, but he laughed. A loud hearty laugh that combated against that which rode the wind.

"There are no vampires," Rafgard assured himself in the same way he had assured himself that dragons were a fallacy. "This is a ruse intended to discredit me."

The Dragon Slayer leapt forward, further into the cavern, storming to its end and bounding around a corner. Every lamp he passed ignited, each displaying a skeletal corpse encased within the ebony wall. Rafgard was impressed with the effort the Broadsword Fellows had spent to unnerve him. But not as impressed as when he saw the belly of the cavern.

It opened to a Great Hall complete with marble floors and whitewashed walls. A diamond-crested chandelier, decorated with candles that danced as bright as the sun outside, hung suspended from the roof. Seven winding staircases, three on the East, three on the West, and one on the North, lead to a balcony surrounding the room. It was when Rafgard looked to these that his fear returned.

Atop each stairwell stood a dark, cloaked figure.

"I am Rafgard, Dragon Slayer!" he shouted, more to remind himself than to unnerve those at whom he yelled.

A dozen giant bats swooped at him from the ceiling, knocking the stake from his hands. Rafgard raised his arms to ward off the winged demons, and once they passed he turned to the entryway where a dozen cloaked men blocked his escape. Wooden soles clapped against marble steps. Rafgard closed his eyes, opening them only after he had turned back to the stairwells. Facing the most frightening man he had ever seen.

This man towered over Rafgard nearly as much as the dragon's eye and like that eye this man looked like a giant, black pool. A midnight cape enveloped him like a second skin, and where the garment stopped at the neck a collar rose as if it were wings coating the head in darkness. It was from within that Cimmerian pool that two icy blue eyes, each

looking like a waning crescent fallen on its side, glared hard at the student. But neither that nor the tusked ivory teeth that smiled upon him, was the most frightening thing.

The most frightening thing was that he had finally found himself in a situation from which there was no escape.

“*This ... time...*” the wind whispered one final time as it caressed his cheek. At least he hoped it was the wind.

The demon flung one side of the cape over his shoulder like an aristocrat. Then he spoke, the sounds as dark as night on a new moon. “Dragon Slayer? And have you ventured so close to your grave to slay us?”

“I have come to end your darkness!” Rafgard yelled, holding out a wooden cross he found in the satchel. *Blast, if I’m going to die may as well go out a hero*, he decided. The vampyre laughed, walking close to the wooden cross.

“This will not protect you. ‘Tis not its shape that repels our evil, but the faith one has in its meaning. Do you, Dragon Slayer, know its meaning?”

“I know better than to believe you!” Rafgard held the cross closer. “Back demon! Back!”

The vampyre lifted a finger and the two wooden stakes turned ablaze. Rafgard yelped, dropped it and turned nearly as pale as the creature he faced. The vampyre laughed.

“Perhaps you should first learn to trust me, or better yet, stop calling me ‘demon’. I am Naztar, Sage of this Kith.” He paused, kneeling to meet Rafgard eye to eye. “Relax, if I wanted to kill you I would have done so by now.”

“You mean I’m going to live?”

As the demon rose the wind caught his cloak catching him like he might take flight. Walking a few paces he said, “I never said I’d let you live. I only said you would not die.”



Jen watched as the world sped by in a blur, the horizon immured with hues of gold and scarlet as the sun bid adieu. She sat in the passenger seat, only a foot from where Billy sat as pilot. His van looked cheesy; a rusted white exterior as a mask to its plush velvet interior. Soft sheepskin covered the front bucket seats and a curtain dividing the cab from the carriage was drawn closed. Billy flicked a knob on the dash and lights glowed over the instruments in anticipation of night. A soft red light gleamed from the floor near her feet but her attention was on the dash, taken a hold of by the 8-track. The machine had been set to rewind and just clicked to play, bumping rhythms through two tiny speakers on each door and a loud one in the back. Jen smiled, focusing her attention on Billy.

“Blondie,” she said, her heart no longer in flux every time she spoke to him. “However did you know?”

As the sun dipped over the horizon he cocked that innocent half-smile again and glanced at her. “Guess we’re two peas in a pod. If it’s too loud, let me know.”

Jen laughed. “Hey, if it’s too loud, you’re too old.”

“Huh?”

“Never mind.” She sighed, her reference to Trent’s favourite song lost on a fellow Blondie lover. She wondered how her “brother” was and wished they hadn’t parted mad, but at least Billy was turning out to be a real gentleman. He wasn’t acting anything like his reputation. “So where’re we going?”

“The pond. It’s sort-of my hangout.”

“I’m familiar with it.”

“You are?” Billy’s voice squeaked. “After dusk?”

“No, not after dusk. Trent and I used to go there when we were kids.”

“Oh,” Billy’s voice betrayed his relief. “Well, now that you’re an adult, it’s time to see the pond at night.”

“I don’t know if I’m an adult, sort of in-between.” She giggled.

Billy glowered at her, his face showing no sign of the innocent smile that had charmed her. A dark shadow from the dash lights cast over his eyes, illuminating his stubbled cheeks. “After tonight, there’ll be no more ‘in-between’.”

Without doing so knowingly Jen gripped her door-handle tightly for security, feeling fear replace the good-will she had found for Billy.



“How am I going to both live and die?” Rafgard asked, no longer standing in the Great Hall but now sitting as one among many at a long dining table. Naztar sat at its head and Rafgard on his right. No one sat at the table’s foot, but there was a setting. Rafgard looked at his own setting; a silver plate rimmed with gold, a silver knife and a large silver-handled bowl. A scent of meat cooking saturated the air, though he could not discern what kind. He looked into a chalice that sat innocently above his knife. It was filled with the thickest, darkest wine he had ever seen and he wondered if it was indeed, wine. He sighed, relieved that he did not know what kind of meat danced in the air.

“So many questions, Dragon Slayer. Be patient. First, we will feast.”

“I thought vampyres didn’t eat.”

“You mortals are a strange lot.” Naztar snapped his fingers, sending three demons near the foot of the table away in a puff of smoke. “It is true that we do not need food as substance to survive, but is that all dining is to you? A refuelling of your body the same way you would refuel a lamp with oil?” He looked at Rafgard, an eyebrow perked as if he expected an answer. When the three vampyres returned as flesh they placed meat platters along the table. Naztar said, “Substance is a minor part of eating. Feasting is an act of Pleasure, and that is what being a vampyre is all about.”

“So you don’t eat humans?”

“Hell no! Tastes entirely too much like chicken.”

Rafgard sighed so loudly it echoed. “Then the whole drinking blood legend is false. All it means to be a vampyre is immortality.”

Naztar’s eyes glowed, and his voice became as hot as the flames over the torches around him. “The blood legend is true, but it is for intoxication, not substance.”

“And sunlight? Wooden stakes? An axe to the neck...”

Naztar laughed, his bellow resounding like the dragon’s roar. The others along the table joined their Sage in his gayety and when the cavern echoed with the draconian

chorus Naztar quieted. He looked upon Rafgard as if he'd expected the youth to have been scorched.

"I am not going to tell you the A B Cs of vampyrism, Rafgard. For tonight you will feast and drink with us."

"I will do no such thing!" Rafgard's chair smashed to the ground as he stood, his knees clacking so loudly they nearly drowned out the fear in his tone. "I am Rafgard the Dragon Slayer! If I am going to live then I demand to know why, and if I am to die then I shall do so as a man of honour."

Naztar rose, swooping up the student's chalice and handing it to him all in one motion. The vampyre moved like a song played on an organ; a series of complicated movements performed so beautifully they appeared a simple thing. "You will die because we desire the blood that pumps in your veins, but you will live because you own something else we hunger for."

Rafgard took the chalice and picked up his chair. He sat again, feeling his bravado abscond from his soul. "What?" he asked, jealous that his bravery had escaped while he remained imprisoned.

"When you slain the dragon, you claimed the cave as your possession." Naztar turned his back to the frightened boy, and, pacing alongside the table, he took a strong swig from his own chalice. "We'd been trying to kill that wyvern for almost a hundred years!" Naztar spun, and walked quickly to stand behind Rafgard who cringed as the vampyre gripped the back of his chair. "One truth to the legend is that we can be killed by fire."

"And you can't enter a home uninvited," Rafgard hadn't meant to sound so hopeful. "You have to keep me alive."

"Nay, Dragon Slayer, we do not. There is one other option left open to us."

"Bring him over?" Trent's words crept off his tongue like a child daring to touch a frying pan that sat upon a heated stovetop. But he had to break the eerie reverie with which old man Whittaker had fallen under, and hopefully bring him back to the land of the conscious.

Whittaker hadn't moved from his rocking chair, not so much as a twitch. The ray of sun under which he basked had grown weaker with every passing scene, and soon that beam would altogether disappear.

"Yes, youthful Trent. They did what we call *Begetting*. There is so much more about Rafgard I wish I could tell you, but time is a fleeting thing." He looked out toward the broken window, directly into the ray that shone on him. With a movement of his head like a coyote who had just found a fresh kill the old man glared at Trent.

But he was old man Whittaker no more.

His eyes turned crimson and serpentine. His skin looked almost grey, and his teeth....

"You're a vampire," Trent could no longer breathe, and scrambling for the door he hoped to make it into the sunlight. But the elder beat him. It was then that Trent remembered his storyteller had been basking beneath the daylight for at least two hours. "How?" he asked.

"I don't have time to explain. When that sun sets I meet Eternity and I need you to carry on my legacy. You are a good boy."

Trent wanted to scream. He had even opened his mouth to do just that, but the sharp pain from old man Whittaker's bite into his arterial veins stole away his voice.



Billy pulled his van alongside a gravel parking space near the pond. The sun slipped over the edge of the world to rise in some faraway place that Jen was supposed to read about for geography, and, as the white, crooked smile rose in the speckled sky she wondered what had brought her homework to mind. She looked into Billy's reflection and knew. The homework represented safety, which was something she did not feel now. It was too late for second thoughts, but she was having them anyway.

"Guess everyone left early," Billy said, his innocent act a contender for the Drama Class award.

Jen looked around the empty pond, unable to see much in the moon's soft glow. Turning to him she faked a smile and said, "Maybe we should just catch a movie."

"Naw, don't be ridiculous. We can have a great time together, and I still haven't shown you the back of my van. Did it all myself."

"It's kind of dark."

"Watch this." Billy flipped one of many toggle switches drilled into his console. A tiny red lamp inside the switch ignited, as did a dim white one from the back. Jen met Billy's dark, sunken gaze, and noticed that his smile no longer masked the danger. Now it beckoned a warning, one that made her wish she'd gone with Trent to visit that weird old man. At least he was safe. Billy noticed her hesitation.

"Y'know, if you'd rather go to a movie we can. I honestly thought a party was going down, and I'd never think of doing nothing funny with you. I know you're not like other chicks."

She smiled, her face flush with shame for her fear of him. His sweetness was a reminder that rumours were rumours, and thus far he had proven them all a lie. "I'd love to see what you've done with your van, Billy."

Ignoring her paranoia, Jen followed him past the curtain into the maroon interior. She knew the van had a sliding door, but could see no handle for it, nor could she see one for the rear doors. She sat on a mattress that nearly covered the cramped space and watched her date open a cooler that was behind the driver's seat.

"Want anything?" he asked.

She shook her head. Billy reached behind her and turned a dial, bringing the music to a whisper. "I can control the volume from back here. Is this cool or what?"

"Cool," Jen responded, noticing Billy had a beer in his hand. One that was already half-empty! "Are you sure you should be drinking that? You still have to drive me back to town later."

"Much later," Billy said.

That was when she noticed the strong aroma of Bud on his breath, and that it was much too strong to have been from half a beer.

"How many have you had?"

"Okay, I'm caught. I had a few before I left home."

"How many is a few?"

"A few ... gimme a break! You sound like my mother."

"Sorry, I just didn't notice before."

"That's because you sit so far away. Why don't you get a little closer."

Billy cupped the back of her head with one hand and wrapped his other around her waist. As he pulled her close he pressed his lips against hers and ignored her struggle against him. But when she bit his lip he pulled away and slapped her.

“Fine. This doesn’t have to be easy,” Billy said, throwing off his coat. Jen, wide-eyed and frantic, screamed for Trent.



Trent lay curled in a ball against a narrow corner. He shivered from a cool breeze that entered the bungalow through a broken window, caressing the beads of sweat soaking his clothes. He had kept his eyes shut while the vampire bit, but rather than the sensation of blood leaving his body he swore he felt something enter. It stung like it was too thick for the tiny veins, and then it burned. Everywhere. He screamed when every muscle burned and when the fiery sensation stopped a frigid buzz overtook him. That was when old man Whittaker had stopped, collapsing himself somewhere nearby.

“What in Hell did you do to me?” Trent’s broken voice shuddered. He opened his eyes to see Whittaker laying near him; a solemn smile cast over his white face.

“I have made you immortal, or eternal. The path you choose is your own.”

Trent climbed onto his knees, holding himself in a tight embrace to ward off the cold. “I don’t understand.”

“You will. Do not be afraid, youthful Trent. Give your power to the right One and you will grow old and die. Offer it to Evil, and you will stay young forever. I know you will make the right choice.”

Trent climbed to his feet, testing each leg for strength. He walked to the elder, suddenly finding contempt where once he had respect. A tear left his eye, mixing with the cold perspiration.

“You can’t be a vampire. I’ve seen you in daylight!”

But Whittaker had turned to dust. Another shiver caressed Trent’s spine, and looking about the bungalow he found a long black trench coat. He stretched one arm into it, and then the next. It was a perfect fit. A sudden sharp pain slammed into his head, and pressing his palms against his temples he waited for it to leave. When it did, he realised how much he needed Jen.

Trent burst through the front doors, leaving the outer one open to blow in the wind. Night had come quickly, and Trent wondered where he should go to find his “sister”. Looking to the heavens where the Northern Lights exploded in a fury of colour, he wished he’d spent the evening with her.

The power grew in him, and falling to his knees he yelled, “Why me?”

The Heavens called his name. He stared up at them. He wished for the Rapture; an escape from this curse. A voice called him again. A woman beckoned. He rose and listened. She was far. He knew, not by how faint the voice was, but by how faint her scent was. And he felt her fear ... Trent shuddered. He wished he could shut this power off. He couldn’t. It was strong. He wondered why he had focused on this particular person. But he knew. Somehow he knew. He had focused on the voice because it was Jen.

Trent panicked and ran toward the scent, and suddenly the world about him grew distanced and blurry. He was flying, fast, and before he knew it he was at the pond just



outside Billy's van. Breathing deeply, he smelled alcohol on Billy's breath. He closed his eyes and felt Jen's fear. Trent banged hard on the van's sliding door.

"Get out of here!" he heard Billy yell.

"Help! Oh God, no!" Jen cried.

Trent tested the door. It was locked. He pushed the latch with one finger and it flew down. The door slid open. Jen was pressed upon a bed with Billy on top. He had his hand up her shirt. And her panties around her ankles.

Billy glared with glossy eyes. "You better shut that door before I kick your ass!"

Trent didn't know what to say. But a voice, one from within him, bellowed: *Tell him to get out of the van.* So he said, "Get out of the van."

Billy cursed and stumbled off the mattress. Jen curled into a ball and wept. Blood stained the mattress beneath her. The large football star slammed a fist into his palm. He towered over Trent and said, "This time I'm gonna hurt you so bad you'll never get up."

*Tell him he's the one who will learn pain.* "No, Billy. Tonight you will be the pupil and I will be your teacher."

A gust of wind came to them as if from Trent's will. The coat flapped like wings. Trent flew a dozen feet from the ground. He couldn't remember when he had lashed out and grabbed Billy by the neck but he had, and now they stared into each others' eyes. Billy turned pale, and Trent looked as though a fire had exploded within him. A fire that had eaten his soul.

Again he heard the voice: *Snap his neck! The bastard deserves it!* As Trent glared into Billy's eyes he could taste his fear, hear his heartbeat and understand the smell of his perspiration like a spoken tongue.

"I'm going to eat you alive," Trent said as his eye-teeth grew into long fangs.

"Is that what you want kid?"

Trent looked down at the Earth and saw Keelin. He said, "Come, sister. Join me in this feast."

"You are no brother of mine if you follow that voice. Be gone Demon! I command in the name of Jesus the Christ that you release Trent!"

*I shall return!* The voice was weak, and when it faded in Trent's mind the world became clear.

"What am I doing?" he whispered as he slowly returned to the ground. Billy's body fell lifeless, though he was only passed out from a combination of alcohol and fright. Trent fell to his knees and wept, "What kind of demon have I become?"

"Only whatever kind you wish to be, kid." Keelin walked to him and knelt on the soft grass. "You have some tough choices to make."

"And who are you, my guide?"

"No. Actually, I'm your sister." She smiled and looked into Trent's glossy eyes. "Guess it's easy to see who got the looks in the family. 'Course, you now have the same icy blue stare as mine."

"I don't understand."

"You're a Kith now, that is what we call ourselves. When Whittaker bit you he released his seed."

"Old man Whittaker is my ... father?"

"Technically, but I don't dwell on that. And we call him 'Sage'."

"How could he do this to me? How could he turn me into a demon?"

“Hey, listen kid. You can be whatever kind of Kith you choose. You want to be evil? You just go ahead and listen to that voice in your mind.”

“What if I want to be good?”

“Join the Circle.”

Trent buried his face in his palms. “I don’t understand any of this.”

Jen was still curled in a ball, weeping and shaking from fright. She had watched the whole scene in terror, and was now no longer certain whether she shook from her rape or from Trent’s strange, dark power. She took control over herself by first stepping out of the van, and next by wrapping her arms around herself. She noticed the wind for the first time; its bitter cold and gentle nips on her skin like a thousand tiny teeth. “Trent?” she whispered, uncertain if the man knelt on the ground was, indeed, him.

Keelin turned her attention on her, cocking a smile. “You better tend to your friend, kid. You’ll have plenty of time to deal with your own pain in the next few centuries.”

“Centuries?” Trent looked at Keelin, but didn’t notice her walk away. “You mean I really am immortal?”

“Or eternal kid. There’s a difference. Now, talk to your friend and say good-bye. If you’re coming with me, you two will never see one another again.”

Keelin hoisted Billy over her shoulder and said in a bitter voice, “Should’ve let the kid kill him.”

Jen knelt beside Trent who shook, and, though he tried several times, he couldn’t look at her. Jen slowly wrapped her arms around him, bringing him close to her.

“What’s going on Trent?” she asked, her voice trembling.

“Old man Whittaker. He’s a Vampire. He bit me.”

As the two childhood friends embraced they wept, each knowing they had lost the most precious piece of their soul.