

# *When Gretchen Was Human*

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"You're only human," said Nick Scuroforno, fanning the pages of a tattered first edition of *Image of the Beast*. The conversation had degenerated from half-hearted sales pitch, Gretchen trying to sell Nick Scuroforno an early Pang-born imprint. Now they sat cross-legged on the scarred wooden floor of Miss Trilby's Tomes, watching dust motes dance in August four o'clock sun. Gretchen was wallowing in self-disclosure and voluptuous self-pity.

"Sometimes I don't even feel human." Gretchen settled her back against the soft, dusty-smelling spines of a leather-bound 1910 imprint *Book of Knowledge*.

"I can identify."

"And given the choice, who'd really want to be?" asked Gretchen, tracing the grain of the wooden floor with chapped fingers.

"You have a choice?" asked Scuroforno.

"See, after Ashley was diagnosed, my ex got custody of her. Just as well." She rummaged her smock for a tissue. "I didn't have hospitalization after we split. And his would cover her, but only if she goes to a hospital way off in Seattle." Unbidden, a memory rose: Ashley's warm little body, wriggly as a puppy's, settling in her lap, opening *Where the Wild Things Are*, striking the page with her tiny pink index finger. *Mommy, read!*

Scuroforno nodded. "But can't they cure leukaemia now?"

"Sometimes. She's in remission at the moment. But how long will that last?" Gretchen kept sneaking looks at Scuroforno. Amazingly, she found him attractive. She thought depression had killed the sexual impulse in her. He was a big man, chunky but not actually fat, with evasive amber eyes and shaggy hair. Not bad looking, but not handsome either, in grey sweat pants, a brown T-shirt and beach sandals. He had a habit of twisting the band of his watch, revealing a strip of pale skin from which the fine hairs of his wrist had been worn.

"And yet cancer itself is immortal," he mused. "Why can't it make its host immortal too?"

"Cancer is immortal?" But of course cancer would be immortal. It was the ultimate predator. Why shouldn't it hold all the high cards?

"The cells are. There's some pancreatic cancer cells that have been growing in a lab fifty years since the man with the cancer died. And yet, cancer cells are not even as intelligent as a virus. A virus knows not to kill its host."

"But viruses do kill!"

He smiled. "That's true, lots do kill. Bacteria, too. But there are bacteria that

millennia ago decided to infect every cell in our bodies. Turned into — let me think of the word. Organelles? Like the mitochondrion."

"What's a mitochondrion?"

He shrugged, slyly basking in his superior knowledge. "It's an energy-converting organ in animal cells. Different DNA from the host. You'd think you could design a mitochondrion that would make the host live for ever."

She stared at him. "No. I certainly wouldn't think that."

"Why not?"

"It would be horrible. A zombie. A vampire."

He was silent, a smile playing around his eyes.

She shuddered. "You get these ideas from Miss Trilby's Tomes?"

"The wisdom of the ages." He gestured at the high shelves, then stood. "And of course the world wide web. Here comes Madame Trilby herself. Does she like you lounging on the floor with customers?"

Gretchen flushed. "Oh, she never minds anything. My grandpa was friends with her father, and I've worked here off and on since I was little." She took Scuroforno's proffered hand and pulled herself to her feet.

Miss Trilby, frail and spry, wafting a fragrance of face powder and mouldy paper, lugged in a milk crate of pamphlets. She frowned at Gretchen. Strange, thought Gretchen. Yesterday she said I should find a new man, but now she's glaring at me. For sitting on the floor? I sit on the floor to do paperwork all the time. There's no room for chairs. It has to be for schmoozing with a male customer.

Miss Trilby dumped the mail on the counter and swept into the back room.

"Cheerful today, hmm?" said Scuroforno.

"Really, she's so good to me. She lends me money to go to Seattle and see my daughter. She's just nervous today."

"Ah. By the way, before I leave, do you have a cold, or were you crying?"

Gretchen reddened. "I have a chronic sinus infection." She suddenly saw herself objectively: stringy hair, bad posture, skinny. How could she be flirting with this man?

He touched her wrist. "Take care." And strode through the door into the street.

"Him you don't need," said Miss Trilby, bustling back in and firing up the shop's ancient Kaypro computer.

"Did I say I did?"

"Your face says you think you do. Did he buy anything?"

"I'm sorry. I can never predict what he'll be interested in."

"I'll die in the poorhouse. Sell him antique medical texts. Or detective novels. He

stands reading historical novels right off the shelf and laughs. Pretends to be an expert, finds all the mistakes."

"What have you got against him, besides reading and not buying?"

"Oh, he buys. But Gretchen, lambkin, a man like that you don't need. Loner. Crazy."

"But he listens. He's so understanding."

"Like the butcher with the calf. What's this immortal cancer stuff he's feeding you?"

"Nothing. We were talking about Ashley."

"Sorry, lambkin. Life hasn't been kind to you. But be a little wise. This man has delusions he's a vampire."

Gretchen smoothed the dust jacket of *Euryanthe and Oberon at Covent Garden*. "Maybe he is."

Miss Trilby rounded her lips in mock horror. "Perhaps! Doesn't look much like Frank Langella, though, does he?"

No, he didn't, thought Gretchen, as she sorted orders for reprints of Kadensho's *Book of the Flowery Tradition* and de Honnecourt's *Fervor of Buenos Aires*.

But there was something appealing about Nick Scuroforno, something besides his empathy for a homely divorcee with a terminally ill child. His spare, dark humour, maybe that was it. Miss Trilby did not understand everything.

Why not make a play for him?

Even to herself, her efforts seemed pathetic. She got Keesha, the single mother across the hall in her apartment, to help her frost her hair. She bought a cheap cardigan trimmed with angora and dug out an old padded bra.

"Lambkin," said Miss Trilby dryly one afternoon when Gretchen came in dolled up in her desperate finery, "the man is not exactly a fashion plate himself."

But Scuroforno seemed flattered, if not impressed, by Gretchen's efforts, and took her out for coffee, then a late dinner. Mostly, however, he came into the bookstore an hour before closing and let her pretend to sell him some white elephant like the Reverend Wood's *Trespassers: How Inhabitants of Earth, Air, and Water Are Enabled to Trespass on Domains Not Their Own*. She would fiddle with the silver chain on her neck, and they would slide to the floor where she would pour out her troubles to him. Other customers seldom came in so late.

"You trust him with private details of your life," said Miss Trilby, "but what do you know of his?"

He did talk. He did. Philosophy, history, details of Gretchen's daughter's illness. One day, she asked, "What do you do?"

"I steal souls. Photographer."

Oh.

"Can't make much money on that artsy stuff," Miss Trilby commented when she heard this. "Rumour says he's got a private source of income."

"Illegal, you mean?"

"What a romantic you are, Gretchen. Ask him."

Gambling luck and investments, he told her.

One day, leaving for the shop, Gretchen opened her mail and found a letter — not even a phone call — that Ashley's remission was over. Her little girl was in the hospital again.

The grief was surreal, physical. She was afraid to go back into her apartment. She had bought a copy of Jan Pienkowski's *Haunted House*, full of diabolically funny pop-ups, for Ashley's birthday. She couldn't bear to look at it now, waiting like a poisoned bait on the counter.

She went straight to the shop, began alphabetizing the new stock. Nothing made sense, she couldn't remember if O came after N. Miss Trilby had to drag her away, make her stop. "What's wrong? Is it Ashley?"

Gretchen handed her the letter.

Miss Trilby read it through her thick lorgnette. Then, "Look at yourself. Your cheeks are flushed. Eyes bright. Disaster becomes you. Or is it the nearness of death bids us breed, like romance in a concentration camp?"

Gretchen shuddered. "Maybe my body is tricking me into reproducing again."

"To replace Ashley. Not funny, lambkin. But possibly true. I ask again, why this man? Doesn't madness frighten you?"

Next day, Gretchen followed him to his car. It seemed natural to get in, uninvited, ride home with him, follow him up two flights of stairs covered with cracked treads.

He let her perch on a stool in his kitchen darkroom while he printed peculiar old architectural photographs. The room smelled of chemicals, vinegary. An old Commodore 64 propped the pantry door open. She had seen a new computer in his living-room, running a screen saver of Giger babies holding grenades, and wraiths dancing an agony dance.

"I never eat here," he said. "As a kitchen, it's useless."

He emptied trays, washed solutions down the drain, rinsed. Her heart beat hard under the sleazy angora. His body, sleek as a lion's, gave off a male scent, faintly predatory.

While his back was turned, she undid her cardigan. The buttons too easily slipped out of the cheap fuzzy fabric, conspiring with lust.

She slipped it off as he turned around. And felt the draught of the cold kitchen and the surprise of his gaze on her inadequate chest.

He turned away, dried his hands on the kitchen towel. "Don't fall in love with me."

"Not at all arrogant, are you?" She wouldn't, wouldn't fall in love. No. That wasn't quite it.

"Not arrogance. A warning. I'm territorial; predators have to be. For a while, yes, I'd keep you around. But sooner or later, you'd interfere with my hunting. I'd kill you or drive you away to prevent myself from killing you."

"I won't fall in love with you." Level. Convincing.

"All right." He threw the towel into the sink, came to her. Covered her mouth with his.

She responded clumsily, overreacting after the long dry spell, clawing his back.

The kiss ended. He stroked her hair. "Don't worry. I won't draw blood. I can control the impulse."

She half pretended to play along with him. Half of her did believe. "It doesn't matter. I want to be like you." A joke?

He sat on the kitchen chair, pulled her to him and put his cheek against her breasts. "It doesn't work that way. You have to have the right genes to be susceptible."

"It really is an infection?" Still half pretending to believe, still almost joking.

"A virus that gives you cancer. All I know is that of all the thousands I've preyed upon, only a few have got the fever and lived to become — like me."

"Vampire?"

"As good a word as any. One who I infected and who lived on was my son. He got the fever and turned. That's why I think it's genetic." He pulled her nearer, as if for warmth.

"What happens if the prey doesn't have the genes?"

"Nothing. Nothing happens. I never take enough to kill. I haven't killed a human in over a hundred years. You're safe."

She slid to her knees, wrapping her arms around his waist. He held her head to him, stroking her bare arms and shoulders. "Silk," he said finally, pulling her up, touching her breast. She had nursed Ashley, but it hadn't stopped her from getting leukaemia. Fire and ice sizzled across her breasts, as if her milk were letting down.

"Are you lonely?"

"God, yes. That's the only reason I was even tempted to let you do this. You know, I have the instincts of a predator, it does that. But I was born human."

"How did you infect your son?"

"Accident. I was infected soon after I was married. Pietra, my wife, is long dead."

"Pietra. Strange name."

"Not so strange in thirteenth-century Florence. I turned shortly after I was married. I was very ill. I knew I needed blood, but no knowledge of why or how to control my thirst. I took blood from a priest who came to give me last rites. My thirst was so voracious, I killed him. Not murder, Gretchen. I was no more guilty than a baby suckling at breast. The first thirst is overpowering. I took too much, and when I saw that he was dead, I put on my clothes and ran away."

"Leaving your wife."

"Never saw her again. But years later I encountered this young man at a gambling table. Pretended to befriend him. Overpowered him in a narrow dark street. Drank to slake my thirst. Later I encountered him, changed. As a rival for the blood of the neighbourhood. I had infected him, he had got the fever, developed into — what I am. Later I put the pieces together; I had left Pietra pregnant, this was our son, you see. He had the right genes. If he hadn't, he would have never even noticed that modest blood loss." His hand stroked her naked shoulder.

"Where is he now?"

"I often wonder. I drove him off soon after he finished the change. Vampires can't stand one another. They interfere with each other's hunting."

"Why have you chosen to tell me this?" She tried to control her voice, but heard it thicken.

"I tell people all the time what I am. Nobody ever believes it." He stood, pulling her to her feet, kissed her again, pressing his hips to her body. She ran her hands over his shoulders and loosened his shirt. "You don't believe me, either."

And then she smiled. "I want to believe you. I told you once, I don't want to be human."

He raised his eyebrows and smiled down at her. "I doubt you have the right genes to be anything else."

His bedroom was neat, sparsely furnished. She recognized books from Miss Trilby's Tomes, *Red Dragon*, *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* on a low shelf near the bed. Unexpectedly, he lifted her off her feet and laid her on the quilt. They kissed again, a long, complicated kiss. He took her slowly. He didn't close the door, and from the bed she could see his computer screen in the living-room. The Giger wraiths in his screen saver danced slowly to their passion. And then she closed her eyes, and the wraiths danced behind her lids.

When they were finished, she knew that she had lied; if she did not feel love, then it was something as strong and as dangerous.

She traced a vein on the back of his hand. "You were born in Italy?"

He kissed the hand with which she had been tracing his veins. "Hundreds of years ago, yes. Before my flesh became numb."

"Then why don't you speak with an accent?"

He rolled on to his back, hands behind his head, and grinned. "I've been an

American longer than you have. I made it a point to get rid of my accent. Aren't you going to ask me about the sun and garlic and silver bullets?"

"All just superstition?"

"It would seem." He smiled wryly. "But there is the gradual loss of feeling."

"You say you can't love."

He groped in the bedside table for a pen. He drove the tip into his arm. "You see?" Blood welled up slowly.

"Stop! My god, must you hurt yourself?"

"Just demonstrating. The flesh has been consumed by the — by the cancer, if that's what it is. It starts in the coldest parts of the body. No nerves. I don't *feel*. It has nothing to do with emotion."

"And because you are territorial—"

"Yes. But the emotions don't die, exactly. There's this horrible conflict. And physically, the metastasis continues, very slowly. I heard of a very old vampire whose brain had turned. He was worse than a shark, a feeding machine."

She pulled the sheets around her. The room seemed cold now that they were no longer entwined. "You seemed human enough, when you —"

"You didn't feel it when I kissed you?"

"Feel..."

He guided her index finger into his mouth, under the tongue. A bony little organ there, tiny spikes, retracted under the root of the tongue.

She jerked her hand away, suddenly afraid. He caught it and kissed it again, almost mockingly.

She shuddered, tenderness confounded with terror, and buried her face in the pillow. But wasn't this what she had secretly imagined, hoped for?

"Next time," she said, turning her face up to him, like a daisy to the sun, "draw blood, do."

The wraiths in his screen saver danced.

The idea of a bus trip to Seattle filled her with dread, and she put it off, as if somehow by staying in Warren she could stop the progress of reality. But a second letter, this from her ex-sister-in-law Miriam, forced her to face facts. The chemotherapy, Miriam wrote, was not working this time. Ashley was "fading".

"Fading"!

The same mail brought a postcard from Scuroforno. *Out of town on business, seeing to investments. Be well, human*, he wrote.

She told Miss Trilby she needed time off to see Ashley.

"Lambkin, you look awful. Don't go on the bus. I'll lend you money for the plane, and you can pay me back when you marry some rich lawyer."

"No, Miss Trilby. I have a cold, that's all." Her skin itched, her throat and mouth were sore, her head throbbed.

They dusted books that afternoon. When Gretchen came down from the stepladder, she was so exhausted she curled up on the settee in the back room with a copy of *As You Desire*. The words swam before her eyes, but they might stop her from thinking, thinking about Ashley, about cancer, immortal cells killing their mortal host. Thinking, *immortal*. It might have worked. A different cancer. And then she stopped thinking.

And awoke in All Soul's Hospital, in pain and confusion.

"Drink. You're dehydrated," the nurse said. The room smelled of bleach, and dead flowers.

Who had brought her in?

"I don't know. Your employer? An elderly woman. Doctor will be in to talk to you. Try to drink at least a glass every hour."

In lucid moments, Gretchen rejoiced. It was the change, surely it was the change. If she lived, she would be released from all the degrading baggage that being human hung upon her.

The tests showed nothing. Of course, the virus would not culture in agar, Gretchen thought. If it was a virus.

She awoke nights thinking of human blood. She whimpered when they took away her room-mate, an anorexic widow, nearly dry, but an alluring source of a few delicious drops, if only she could get to her while the nurses were away.

Miss Trilby visited, and only by iron will did Gretchen avoid leaping upon her. Gretchen screamed, "Get away from me! I'll kill you!" The doctors, unable to identify her illness, must have worried about her outburst; she didn't get another room-mate. And they didn't release her, though she had no insurance.

Miss Trilby did not come back.

They never thought of cancer. Cancer does not bring a fever and thirst, and bright, bright eyes, and a numbness in the fingers.

Finally, she realized she had waited too long. The few moments of each day that delirium left her, she was too weak to overpower anybody.

Scuroforno came in when she was almost gone. She was awake, floating, relishing death's sweet breath, the smell of disinfectants.

"I'm under quarantine," she whispered. This was not true, but nobody had come to see her since she had turned on Miss Trilby.

He waved that aside and unwrapped a large syringe. "What you need is blood. They wouldn't think of that, though."



"Where did you get that?" Blood was so beautiful. She wanted to press Scuroforno's wrists against the delicate itching structure under her tongue, to faint in the heat from his veins.

"You're too weak to drink. Ideally, you should have several quarts of human blood. But mine will do."

She watched, sick with hunger, as he tourniqueted his arm, slipped the needle into the vein inside his elbow and drew blood.

She reached for the syringe. He held it away from her. She lunged with death-strength. He put the syringe on the table behind him, caught her wrists, held them together.

"You're stronger than I expected." He squeezed until the distant pain quelled her. She pretended to relax, still fixated on the sip of blood, so near. She darted at his throat, but he held her easily.

"Stop it! There isn't enough blood in the syringe to help you if you drink it! If I inject it, you'll get some relief. But my blood is forbidden."

Yes, she would have killed him, anybody, for blood. She sank back, shaking with desire. The needle entered her vein and she never felt the prick. She shuddered with pleasure as the blood trickled in. She could taste it. Old blood, sour with a hunger of its own, but the echo of satiety radiated from her arm.

"Here are some clothes. You should be just strong enough to walk to the car. I'll carry you from there."

She fumbled for his wrists. "No. Any more vampire blood would kill you. Or" — he laughed grimly — "you might be strong enough to kill me. On your feet." He lifted her like a child.

In his apartment, he carried her to the bedroom and laid her on the bed. She smelled blood. Next to her was an unconscious girl, perhaps twenty, very blonde, dressed in white suede jeans, boots, a black lace bra.

Ineptly, she went for the girl's jugular. The girl was wearing strong jasmine perfume, a cheap knock-off scent insistent and sexy.

"Wait. Don't slash her and waste it all. Be neat." He leaned over, pressed his mouth to the girl's neck.

Gretchen lunged.

She thrilled to sink her new blood-sucking organ into the girl's neck, but discovered it was at the wrong place. Hissing with anger, she broke away and tried a third time. Salty, thick comfort seeped into her body like hot whisky.

In an instant, Gretchen felt Scuroforno slip his finger into her mouth, breaking the suction. She came away giddy with frustration. Scuroforno held her arms, hurting her. The pain was in another universe. She tried to twist away.

"You're going to kill her," he warned.

"Who is she?" She shook herself into self-control, gazed longingly at the girl, who seemed comatose.

"Nobody. A girl. I take her out now and then. I never take enough blood to harm her. I don't actually enjoy hurting people."

"She's drugged?"

"No, no. I — we have immunity to bacteria and so on, but drugs are bad. I hypnotized her."

"You hypnotized — she sleeps through all this?"

"She thinks she's dead drunk. Here, help me get her sweater back on."

"She thinks you made love to her?"

Scuroforno smiled.

"You did make love to her?"

He busied himself with adjusting the girl's clothes.

Gretchen lay back against the headboard. "I need more, God, I need more."

"I know. But you'll have to find your own from now on."

"How do I get them to submit?"

Scuroforno yawned. "That's your problem. Rescuing you was hard work. Now you'll have to find your own way. You're cleverer and stronger than humans now. Did you notice your sinus infection is gone?"

"Nick, help."

He did not look at her. "It would be better if you left town now."

"But you saved me."

"You're my competitor now. Leave before the rage for blood takes you, before we go after the same prey."

She held the hunger down inside her, remembering human emotions. "It makes no difference that I love you?" And suddenly, she did love him.

"Tomorrow you'll know what hate is, too."

On the way out, she noticed he had a new screen saver: red blood cells floating on black, swelling, bursting apart.

On the bus to Seattle, she wept. Yes, she had loved him, and she had learned what hate was, too. She played with a sewing needle, stabbed her fingers. Numb. But her feelings were not numb, not yet. Would that happen? Was Nick emotionally dead?

Would the physical numbness spread? If her body was immortal, why would she need nerves, pain, to warn of danger?

Maybe she would regret the bargain she had made.

The numbness did spread. Her fingers and hands were immune to pain. But she still felt thirst. The cancer metastasized into her tongue and nerves, wanted to be fed.

Her seat-mate was a Mormon missionary, separated from his partner because the bus was crowded. In Chicago, he asked her to change seats, so he could sit with his partner. But she refused. It didn't fit her plan.

She stroked his cheek, held the back of his neck in a vice grip, all the while smiling, cat-like. Scarcely feeling her own skin, but vividly feeling the nourishment under his. He tried to repel her, laughing uneasily, taking it for an erotic game. A forward, sluttish gentile woman. Then he was fighting, uselessly. He twisted her thumb back, childish self-defence. She felt no pain. Then he was weeping, softening, falling into a trance. She kissed his throat with her open mouth. Drank from him. Drank again and again. Had he fought, she could have broken his neck. She was completely changed.

In Seattle, the floor nurse in Paediatrics challenged her. Sniffing phenol and the sweet, sick urine that could never quite be cleaned up, Gretchen glanced at her reflection in a dead computer screen behind the nurse. She did look predatory now. Like a wax manikin, but also like a cougar. Powerful. Not like anybody's mother. Two other nurses drifted up, as if sensing trouble.

She showed the nurse her driver's licence. They almost believed her, then. Let her go down the hall, to room 409. But still the nurses' eyes followed her. She had changed.

She opened the door. The floor nurse drifted in behind her.

This balding, emaciated tyke, tangled in tubing, could not be her Ashley.

Ashley had changed, too. From a less benign cancer.

The nurse sniffed. "I'm sorry. She's gone downhill a lot in the last few weeks." The nurse clearly did not approve of noncustodial mothers. Maybe still did not believe this quiet, strong woman *was* the mother.

When Gretchen had been human, she would have been humiliated, would have tried to explain that Ashley had been taken from her by legal tricks. Now, she considered the nurse simply as a convenient beverage container from which, under suitable conditions, she might sip. She smiled, a cat smile, and the nurse could not hold her gaze.

"Ashley," said Gretchen, when they were alone. She had brought the Jan Pienkowski book, wrapped in red velvet paper with black cats on it. Ashley liked cats. She would love the scary haunted house pop-ups. They would read them together. Gretchen put the gift on the chair, because first she must tend to more important things. "Ashley, it's Mommy. Wake up, darling."

But the little girl only opened her eyes, huge and bruised in the pinched face, and sobbed feebly.

Gretchen lowered the rail on the bed and slid her arm under Ashley. The child was frighteningly light.

Gretchen felt the warmth of her feverish child, smelled the antiseptic of the room, the sweet girl-smell of her daughter's skin. But those were all at a distance. Gretchen was being subsumed by something immortal.

*We are very territorial.* Isn't that what Nick had said? *It's not an emotional numbness; it's physical.* And the memory of him jabbing the pen into his arm, the needle into his vein, her own numb fingers, how everything, even her daughter's warmth and the smell of the child and the room were all receding, distant. Immortal. Numb. Strong beyond human strength. Alone.

She touched her new, predatory mouth to her child's throat. Would Ashley thank her for this?

Now she must decide.