

THE SUCCUBUS

The succubus stood alone in the shadows. She was supposed to be out feeding, taking the lives of mortal men, fuelling her own energy and life-source, only she wasn't, she was just standing there, watching *him*. Chris was his name. He was a tall, curly-haired, blond youth with blue eyes and a ready smile. She wasn't sure how long it was that she had been watching him. She wasn't sure how it was that she had even come to notice his existence. The world was made up of millions of blond, curly-haired young men called Chris, with the same blue eyes and dimples in his cheeks. Only, she had noticed this one. And now she couldn't stop. She found herself thinking of him as she lay alone in the darkness of her home or while she seeking out other men to feed from. It seemed that she could think of nothing else. There was only him in her mind, all the time, distracting her.

Before Chris it had been so easy. She had fed because it was in her nature to do so. She was not driven to eat and drink, to sleep and wake, as mortals were. She did what was in their nature, without any thought. Fat men, old men, young men, men of different colours and classes, all were prey, all were food. It didn't matter to her who they were or what they did, whether they had a family or were alone. She never thought about it. She did what she did and then left and did it again. No thought, no guilt, no nothing. It was her nature, it was her life, it was what she was.

But now it was different. She could remember the last time she had tried to feed, when she had been in that small, dirty room, surrounded by weird faces and images that stared down at her from the walls, with the man asleep on the bed. He had been drooling a little onto his pillow, an arm thrown out to the side, and she had approached him silently and rolled him onto his back. She had started to climb on top of him, preparing herself, but Chris' face had popped into her mind. His laughing face and his bright blue eyes and she had known that she couldn't do it, that she couldn't feed from this mortal man. She had climbed down from him and prepared to leave. The man had woken, had seen her and cried out, but she had paid him no attention and slipped away. He would put it down to a nightmare. They always did. She was no longer believed in or feared, not the way she used to be. There were no more superstitious fears, no more garlic around the bed to ward off vampires, no more crosses, no more hand gestures and muttered prayers to keep away the demons and the faeries. There was more than enough darkness in human society, war and death and abuse, they didn't need to conjure up faeries and demons to give them nightmares and warn them away from doing foolish things. They had real life horror stories of things that had happened to other people to warn them away now.

Yet none of that mattered to her. How could it? Mortals and their fears changed as fast as the seasons. Spells and potions were not based on anything factual. Religion was just another form of mythology, a passing fad, as it were, in the greater scheme of things. It didn't matter to her what the mortals thought of her, if they believed in her or not. She knew she was there, that she was real, to herself, at least, and to those she fed from. To others she was just a nightmare, a creature in the shadows, and Chris was one of those others. She was nothing to him. He did not even know that she existed.

Perhaps it was time that she did something about that . . .

Chris was drunk and happy. It was another Friday night and he was doing what he always did at the start of the weekend. He had met his friends in their local pub after college, gotten drunk and then headed off to the same club that they always went to. The bartender in their local knew them, as did the bouncer and the DJ at the club. The bartender always served them first, before anyone else waiting in line, even on a Friday when it was busy. The bouncers never searched them and the DJs always played every song that Chris, or his little gang, asked for. Granted, the songs in the club were always the same anyway and so were the people, but they were part of that sameness, part of the same crowd that went every week and knew everyone and knew all the songs. Their club was a home away from home. A meeting place, a social place, a youth club, of sorts.

There was a girl at the bar, standing in the shadows. Chris wouldn't have paid her any attention had she not moved towards him as soon as he approached the bar. Even then he would have thought nothing of it, only she drew closer and lightly touched his arm. She didn't speak, just stood there, looking at him with the largest dark eyes that Chris had ever seen. She was dressed in black, a plain skirt and a sleeveless top, and looked no different from any of the other girls in the club, only she had very long, dark wavy hair. It hung almost to her waist, fell over her shoulders and trailed down her back, hiding her body like a black cloud. She was very pretty.

He smiled at her.

"Hi. I'm Chris," he said, and held out his hand to shake hers.

She looked at his hand and then she looked up at his face, her eyes wide and puzzled. "I know who you are," she said.

Chris let his hand fall. "Can I buy you a drink?"

"I think so."

Chris turned away, back to the bar to order another drink, a drink for this girl. "Anything you want?" he asked her, over his shoulder.

"I do not mind."

So he ordered her a bottle of orange Bicaradi Breezer and she smiled as she took the bottle from him, but she didn't take a drink from it, just curled her long fingers around its neck protectively.

"What's your name then?" Chris asked. She just smiled at him and didn't say anything. "D-do you come here often?" He cursed himself the moment the words were out of his mouth. A line. A stupid chat-up line. He wasn't even trying to chat her up, just talk to her. She was standing at the bar alone. He had just meant to be friendly. What would she think of him now?

"No," she said. "First time."

"Oh." He nodded. "What do you make of it then?"

"Interesting," she said. "Very interesting."

"Yes," he said, with a smile. "It is that." The girl just smiled back and didn't say anything else. "Well," Chris said, finally, after what felt like years of silence. "I have to go, back to my friends." He held up the three bottles of beer he was holding. "They'll be waiting for me."

"All right," she said, and Chris turned to go but then he heard her voice, barely a whisper; "My name is Megaera."

Chris turned around again. "Megaera?" She smiled. "Well, it was good to meet you then, Megaera. Talk again, maybe?"

"Certainly," she whispered. "Certainly."

Chris turned away again, hurrying back to his friends. He handed over the beer, and took the offered cigarette with a grateful smile. He wanted to tell them about

the strange girl he had met, just standing there by the bar. The girl who seemed so at home in this club and yet spoke as if she had never talked to another living person before, only they started to play his favourite song and the girl, the beer and his friends were quickly forgotten as he pushed his way through the crowd and out onto the dance floor.

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How long had it been now since she had first spoken to Chris? A few days, a few weeks, she wasn't sure. It had been a while though, she knew that, as she had spoken to Chris many more times since that first night. Megaera, he called her, that was the name she had given. The name of a Greek Fury. The name of a "dog-faced" woman who once hounded the murderers of blood kin. The name of a woman once feared, once revered, a religious icon, who was now forgotten, now just a name in books of mythology. Now, it was her name, too. The name by which Chris knew her. The name by which Chris' friends knew her, although it was now shortened, by Chris, to Meg. And he had asked if she would mind him calling her that! Of course she had not minded. What was a name, after all?

Chris had introduced her to his friends, when . . .? The second or maybe third time they had met. It had unsettled her a little to have so many mortal faces looking at her. There had been the female faces, beautiful, gentle, covered with faints traces of powder on the eyes and colour on the lips. It had been the closest that she had ever been to a mortal woman and they had confused her. But there had also been male faces there, turned her way, and they were easier to understand. They had stronger faces and stronger scents. The smell of sweat, of sex, or that sharp, perfumed scent they used to hide those natural smells. They were friendly, those men. And their minds had been easy to read. They had wanted her. Lusted after her. And lusted after the women that stood with them. And most of the women gathered around in the club. And those women had wanted the men back. There had been so much sexual scent in the air that it had overpowered her and for a moment she had thought she was going to drown. There were too many mortals pressing around her, too many voices, too much perfume and heat and it had left her feeling dizzy and unsettled. For a brief moment she had nearly forgotten everything, who she was and where she was and what she was.

But then Chris had been there at her side, reaching for her arm to lead her away to sit at a table, and she had felt calm again, relaxed and safe.

He had talked to her but she hadn't replied, though she had listened intensely, nodding when it seemed that she should nod, laughing when it seemed that she should laugh. He seemed to like her, he brought her drinks and touched her arm and then he had kissed her. It was a mortal exchange, something they did to each other so often, in friendship, in lust, through drunken intoxication. Any reason possible was the reason that mortals found to do that act and it was something that she had never understood. What did it hope to achieve? And even as he had kissed her, his fingers pressed against her cheek, she hadn't understood it. Only he had seemed happy enough and when they had parted he had smiled at her.

"Would you like to come out with me?" he had asked. "On a date? Out for dinner and a film, maybe? Away from here and all the noise."

A date? Another mortal exchange. But it was a chance to be alone with Chris. To be with him somewhere private. To touch him and listen to him talk without all the

noise roaring around them. To be alone with Chris, with this happy blond who filled her thoughts. Yes, she wanted that. Yes, of course she did. "Yes," she had whispered.

Chris had smiled, flashing those dimples that made something inside her twinge, just a little. "Can I call you? Give me your number." She had just looked at him blankly. "You don't have a phone? Then meet me outside this club tomorrow night around seven? I'll take you out somewhere nice."

"Yes," she had said.

And Chris had smiled and kissed her again.

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She stood alone in the shadows, preparing herself. Dressing and brushing her hair, changing her form to the one she had chosen to show to Chris, the one he liked. Another date. Another chance to be alone with her mortal, to be with him. That made seven now. Seven dates. They had seen films, in that large, hot room with so many other mortals pressed in close, staring up at that massive screen where images moved and flickered and loud noises exploded either side of her without any warning. He had taken her out for dinner, in well-lit places where people brought her plate after plate of hot, strongly smelling food that she never ate. And they had been for long walks, which was her favourite. Walking through the park, his hand holding hers, his warm mortal scent filling her senses. She had listened to him talk and looked around her at the bright sky above her and the crunching grass below and at the orange and red and gold and brown leaves on trees. Other mortals had been walking around that park, and they had seen her and Chris and then had looked away. They hadn't looked twice at her. She was one of them. Dressed like they were, walking through the park like they were. Just another mortal woman out with her man, enjoying the feel of the warm sun on her face. And sometimes she could almost forget that she wasn't a mortal. Almost forget, but not quite.

She hadn't eaten in nearly two months now, perhaps. She still didn't feel hungry, didn't feel the need, only, sometimes, she felt dizzy and Chris had to hold her, sit her down on a bench and soothe her hair until she felt strong again. Sometimes, when she saw herself, when she looked down at her hand, it appeared translucent to her, not her *real* hand, not her *real* arms and legs. And then she wondered if that was how she always looked. She was not mortal, after all. She could come and go as she pleased, through time and space, so perhaps this was how she always looked and being different, being more solid, that was the illusion, that was the unreality. She wasn't sure, she was confused and sometimes, when she looked at Chris, she was no longer she who he was. She would look at him and see his bright eyes and smiling face, but she could also see another image there, a grey face, turning to dust, and she wondered why she was not feeding from him. Why was she out just walking with him? He was food to her, just another mortal. Another creature doomed to die, why was she wasting her time like this? And then those feelings were gone and she and Chris were kissing and she was thinking about nothing at all.

Something moved and came out of the shadows. "Are you going to eat?" it was one of her sisters. Nameless, of course, and dark and shadowy and hard to focus on, as they all were, even to each other.

"Why does it matter?"

"It does not. I am just curious."

"Curious?"

"I have not seen you eat, but I have seen you out with that blond mortal. Why are you with him if you are not going to feed from him? Why are you out in the daylight with him? What is it that you are doing?"

"I like him," Megaera replied.

"You like him?"

"Yes."

"Why?" Megaera just shrugged. She did not know why. Did it matter why? "You know that he is only going to die, don't you? He will grow old and wither away before our eyes. We have seen it. It happens to mortals all the time."

"I know."

"Then why are you doing this? I don't understand."

"I like him."

"You like him?" Her sister sounded surprised.

"Yes," Megaera said. She turned and walked away then, disappearing into the shadows, leaving her sister behind her.

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Things were beginning to get very heated. They had been rolling around on Chris' bed for about an hour now, kissing at first, but as time had gone on, they had become a little more comfortable with each other and were now in their underwear. And Chris couldn't believe it, that Meg was here with him, almost naked, in his arms. She was beautiful and clever and she listened to him in a way that no one else ever had and she was her with him. And he wanted this. He wanted to make love to her so badly, so desperately, that he could barely breathe. He had never felt this way about anyone before in his life. He almost couldn't stand just how much he did love her. And as she kissed his chest with small, hard kisses, that made the blood pound inside Chris' head, and the desire run rampant through his body, the world around began to collapse into darkness and the bed beneath him started to swallow him up . . .

But then Megaera moved away and everything was cold. The room stopped seeming to collapse and Chris could feel the bed beneath him again and hear the low rumble of voices on the TV. Megaera was sitting curled up on the edge of his patchwork quilt, tracing an embroidered flower with her finger. Around and around she traced that pattern, while her pale white shoulders shook and her dark hair seemed to fan out all around her.

Chris sat up and reached out to touch her but she pulled away. "What's wrong?" he asked gently. "If I'm rushing you, we can slow it down. We can take this as slow as you want, do this however you want. I don't want to rush you, Meg."

"Why?" she asked, her voice a low whisper, barely audible over the tv.

"Why?" He was hurt that she even had to ask. "I won't take advantage of you, Meg."

"Why?" she repeated, then softly she said: "Don't all men only want sex from women?"

"Most men, yes," Chris agreed. "But not me. I love you."

Her eyes went dark then, for just a brief moment, and Chris was afraid that he had said something wrong, or stupid. But then she lunged at him, pushing him down onto the bed, kissing his mouth hungrily, and the world started to collapse again.

Megaera got from the bed. Chris was lying sprawled out, still and quiet, his eyes glazed over, locked onto the ceiling, and his blond silken hair fanning around

him on the pillow. She had no regrets about what she had done, about taking his life like this. Why would she? She was not mortal to free regret or guilt, or love. Love. It made her want to laugh. He thought he loved her? Foolish mortals, flinging their words around, thinking that words and feelings meant more than they did. She had liked him, he had interested her and now he was dead, another victim to add to the list. Another nameless mortal male, only, he wasn't nameless, was he? He was Chris, the man she had been watching for so long now.

She couldn't bring herself to look back at him. Why would she want to look back and see him lying there, dead, with his lips turning blue and that empty look in his eyes? No life there now. Those strong arms wouldn't hold her again, that soft voice wouldn't tell her his troubles any more, there would be no more walks in the park, or soft kisses.

But he wouldn't grow old either. There would be no grey hair and wrinkles for him. He wouldn't start to lose his mind as he aged, he wouldn't turn into a shell of the man that she had known. He would always be young, to her, and to his friends. They would always remember him the way that he was, full of life, young and free, not tied down by age, not destroyed by time. Perhaps it had even been a blessing, what she had done, an act of her love for him, to save him from all that, to preserve him as he was, so that he would always be like this. Always be young.

Or perhaps it hadn't been love at all, but hunger or boredom. Perhaps she had killed him simply because it was in her nature to do so and she was now reading too much into this, giving it too much thought, when really it was nothing that warranted even a second of her time. Perhaps Chris had been nothing more than a momentary obsession for her and she had simply come to her senses and done what she should have done before.

Perhaps . . .

THE END