

Magic After Midnight: The Original Short Story

By: StarTrekFanWriter

COMPLETE: The Evil Step mother is about to meet her match. A retelling of Cinderella with a Norse myth twist.

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Chapter 1

Long time no see. I think my Avengers and Narnia fans will love this twist on Cinderella that takes place in my I Bring the Fire Universe. For my Star Trek fans, who miss Descartes, if you want a love story that is sci-fi focused, you might want to try my novel *Archangel Down*. It's free right now on Amazon, iBooks, Kobo, Nook, and GooglePlay. The start of my Loki series, *Wolves: I Bring the Fire Part I* is free too. I write under the name C. Gockel.

For now, *Magic After Midnight* is a standalone story that was designed to be read without any previous reading of I Bring the Fire or After the Fire. However, for fans of those series, it takes place after events of Ragnarok, and the fall of Asgard.

"Are you sitting down?" the voice at the other end of the phone asks.

Feeling herself go cold, Marcia pushes a chair away from the table, and slowly eases into it. Marcia exhales. "I am now," she whispers. Why, oh, why, had she picked up the phone? Because she'd expected it to be Cindy ...

"It's inoperable, I'm sorry. If you need— "

"Mom!" Joshua calls from the bathroom. "Mom, Alicia is going to do your hair."

"I have to go," Marcia says.

She takes a deep breath and smells the reek of trash, the trash that Cindy was supposed to take out.

"Ma'am— "

"I've worked in an oncology department for the last ten years, I know what this means," Marcia says quickly. *Why did I have to answer the*

phone?

"Mom!" Joshua calls again.

Marcia hangs up, and walks the short distance through the apartment to the master bath. Alicia and Joshua beam at her as she walks in. Maybe it's the perfect vanity lighting, making their skin exceptionally golden and their dark eyes sparkle, or maybe it is the soul-crushing news casting the moment in sharp contrast—their health next to her illness—but they look especially beautiful and handsome. Alicia is wearing a green silk sheath dress with an amazing gold and pearl belt. Joshua has dyed his roots purple and the ends pink. He is wearing a gray suit with pink triangle cufflinks, a blue shirt and a lighter gray—what had he called it? A choke tie. Something that is popular in the realm of Vanaheim—or is it Svartálfaheim, land of the dwarves? Her children are so perfect, and Marcia laughs despite everything, or perhaps because of everything. She feels tears come to her eyes and spill over.

"Mom, what's wrong?" Alicia asks, a brush in her hand. Her thick dark hair is upswept and held back with pearl pins. Her dark eyes are wide and caring.

"It's the suit," Joshua says, "I shouldn't have worn dad's suit, but it's in style again, Mom, and you said ..."

She shakes her head and hugs him. "No, no, William would have wanted you to wear it." The suit Joshua had worn just a few months ago no longer fits, as his shoulders seemingly grew three inches broader overnight. When the surprise invitation had come, he'd turned to his father's—stepfather's—old clothes in desperation. After some adjustments, the suit fits surprisingly well, and hides the fact that Joshua doesn't have a lot hanging on those wide shoulders.

Turning to Alicia, Marcia says, "And you look beautiful." She feels tears hot on her cheeks again. Her daughter is slouching; she always slouches. Marcia isn't sure if that is due to the weight of the world on Alicia, her oldest, most responsible child, or if Alicia just

feels eclipsed by her siblings. Cindy is more conventionally beautiful, and Joshua is so loud. Maybe it's both. Marcia swallows. The cut of Alicia's garment is just right for her broad shoulders and arms toned by swimming. And the green is beautiful against her golden skin. Marcia says to her son, "You did such a wonderful job on the dress."

Joshua flushes from his neck to his forehead. "I told you those curtains were worth keeping."

"Mom, you're still crying," Alicia says.

"I'm just emotional," Marcia says, wiping her eyes and silently willing, *don't ask, don't ask.*

Alicia's brow pinches, but she gestures to a stool in front of the mirror and says, "Sit down."

Marcia takes a seat and Alicia starts brushing her hair back. The dress Marcia wears is something she pulled out of the closet from better times. Joshua had declared that the floor length black gown "doesn't match Alicia's green, but at least it is so old it is new again." Marcia frowns at the lines at the corners of her mouth, around her eyes, and in her forehead. She looks as old as she feels. She glances up at her children. Joshua is just fifteen, Alicia is only seventeen. They're too young to lose their mother so soon after losing William. She closes her eyes. Oh, but they'd lost more than that. Marcia's first husband had died when they were five and three. William had been like a real father to them ... to lose two fathers, and now a mother.

"That gray streak through your black hair makes you look like Cruella Deville." Joshua cackles. "Fits your evil stepmother reputation."

Marcia's eyes spring open.

"Joshua," Alicia hisses, tugging Marcia's curls tight against her head.

He flicks a wrist. "She knows I'm only joking."

Marcia's phone rings. Joshua looks over at the counter where she'd put it down. He scowls. "Speak of the devil ..."

"Cindy's not the devil," Marcia says. "She's—"

"Going through a tough time," say her children in unison.

"Pick it up," Marcia says, wiping her eyes.

Sighing, Joshua picks it up and walks out of the bathroom.

Arranging Marcia's hair into a bun at the nape of her neck, Alicia asks, "Is your stomach feeling better, Mom?"

"Yes," she lies. She smiles and more tears fall out of her eyes. What is she going to do? Can she make it just three more years, to see all her children come of age? Who will look after them if she doesn't?

Joshua tromps back into the bathroom, rolling his eyes. "Cindy's hair-styling-dress-fitting date with her fairy godmother is running late and she's going to take her godmommy's chariot to the ball."

"At least we're still invited," Alicia says.

Joshua snickers. "We still get to embarrass our stinking rich snobby relatives!" He fist bumps Alicia. "Ugly step-sister powers activate!"

Marcia's eyes go wide, and not at her son's declaration of himself as a 'sister.' "You're not the *ugly* step-sisters!"

Alicia huffs, "Of course not, Mom. Fairy tales aren't real."

"Mom," Joshua says, "you're losing weight again." He picks at the dress as they walk through the grand foyer of Marcia's in-laws, or former in-laws, or whatever you call the family of a widow when the controlling members of said family never really liked her. "I should have taken it in."

"It's fine," Marcia says. Normally she would bat his hand away, but she's too tired. She tells herself not to think of what that exhaustion means as they walk toward the main reception room and the buzz of conversation.

"I know that we're probably only here because some event planner made a mistake on an invitation that was probably only supposed to be for Cindy," Alicia whispers.

Marcia's jaw sags. She'd actually thought exactly that ... but her children had begged her to accept the invite. She'd thought they'd thought the offer had been genuine.

"But I'm still so excited!" Alicia gushes. "We'll probably be hustled off to a corner like the last time we were here, but still—"

"We'll be the only people at school who've seen Night Elves up close," says Joshua, his voice bubbling with excitement.

Marcia rubs her temples, partly at the memory of the last time, partly because she feels like crying again and wants to hide her eyes. She has to give them this. One last night of excitement, hope, and magic. Not everyone gets to meet elves, even since the opening of the realms. They tend to remain in Alfheim. But the Night Elves, a minor kingdom allied with the Light Elves, are interested in trading minerals ... for what, she's not sure. Clutching her side, she rubs her temples ... her wealthy, well-connected in-laws made their fortune in commodities futures; of course they'd have maneuvered to have the Night Elves come to call.

They step into the reception room, the swirl of voices, and the press of bodies. Her flamboyant son whispers dramatically, "Oh, my God. I think I just got pregnant."

Alicia gasps. "They're ... they're ..."

Marcia drops her hand from her face. She looks around. There are male and female elves intermingled through the crowd. They have

pointed ears and too-perfect faces. They're tall, elegant, dressed in silk brocades that are elegant and alien and ...

"They're beautiful," Alicia whispers.

"Vampires," Marcia whispers at the same time. She can see fangs peeking between their lips as they speak, plop hors d'oeuvres in their mouths, and take sips of their wine.

"Beautiful," Alicia whispers.

Joshua snorts and whispers, "We know our stepfamily are all bloodsuckers. Don't worry, Mom, we'll be careful."

Alicia sighs and squeezes Marcia's arm. "How could Dad have been so nice when his family is so evil?"

They hadn't all been evil. William's parents had been lovely ... but since her mother-in-law was put into a nursing home, and her father-in-law's passing, the fortune had fallen into the care of Cindy's godmother. Marcia doesn't remind the children of this. She's too petrified. Is she hallucinating? She turns slowly in place, dreading what she might find—that she is going mad, or that her hallucinations real. She finds herself staring at a man standing so close he could reach out and touch her. He's one of them, tall, with olive skin and dark hair curling in ringlets around his pointed ears. His eyes are light brown flecked with yellow, and his cheekbones are very sharp. His lips are slightly parted, as though in surprise, and his fangs are glinting in the light. He must have heard her. Swallowing, she takes a step back and blinks.

And the fangs are gone ...

She's hallucinating. The news of her disease has sent her into shock. She has to hold it together, just tonight. One more night.

"Yoo-hoo!" an older woman cries from behind Marcia.

Alicia grumbles, "And here comes Cinderella and her fairy godmommy."

"Stop calling her that," Marcia says, weakly stamping her foot.

Alicia and Joshua have already turned around.

"Oh, my God," Joshua whispers. "Those are Vera Wang gowns made with elven silk. My heart just broke. I feel so shabby; I think I lost my insta-baby."

"She looks beautiful," sighs Alicia resignedly. And there is no doubt that Cindy is beautiful. Along with her blonde hair, she has enormous blue eyes, a delicate nose, and a mouth shaped like a bow. And Cindy knows she is beautiful. She often complains that, if she were "just a little taller," she could be a model.

"You both look beautiful too," Marcia protests. She tries to turn, but feels a sharp pain in her side. She takes a breath.

"It's okay, Mom." Joshua says. "We're not the kind of girls who get swept up by Prince Charming. We've accepted our fate ... but we can enjoy the ride."

Putting a hand to her side, Marcia manages to turn, and there is Cindy with her aunt and godmother, Deidre. Cindy is wearing a gown of sky blue that glows with unearthly magic. It has a diaphanous white train that flutters like a cloud. Above the sweetheart neckline her pale skin and golden hair are like the sun. Deidre wears a dress of black that seems to have stars woven into the fabric. Above the black, her silver hair is like the moon. Even next to elves, the two seem celestial. Marcia bites her lip. What a world her children are coming of age in; one where magic is real. Their possibilities seem endless.

Seeing Marcia's threesome, Cindy and Deidre walk over. They're not six feet away, when, looking at Alicia's dress, Cindy exclaims, "You're wearing our *old* curtains!" Her voice is so loud it rises above the

gentle murmur of the crowd. Marcia feels all eyes on Alicia. Her daughter's shoulders slump further. Marcia closes her eyes and reminds herself that there is a fifty-fifty chance Cindy didn't mean to be hurtful.

"That suit and that dress look familiar," Deidre says. Marcia opens her eyes to see Deidre looking her up and down with a clear expression of disdain on her face.

"Real class never goes out of style," Marcia says through gritted teeth.

"Burnnnnnn ..." whispers Joshua, but Marcia notices his eyes are a little too wet after the curtain comment.

Deidre sniffs. "If you say so." Guiding Cindy away, Deidre says, "Cindy, let me introduce you to the prince."

The three of them watch them walk off, and Alicia gulps. "You were right, Mom, they really are vampires."

Marcia hears a cough. Her eyes slide to the side, and she sees the man she'd seen before. His gaze meets hers, and for an instant she has x-ray vision. She can see his fangs behind his lips. She gasps and blinks. And then he is gone.

Marcia sits just outside the main reception area, now filled with people dancing. She is in a hallway open to the back veranda, behind a potted plant, on a chair one of the very nice waitstaff have brought for her. She looks at her watch. It's only 11:50, but she wants to go home. She peers beyond the plant and sees Joshua and Alicia dancing the foxtrot. They look like they're having a grand time, and she doesn't want to make them leave. They're doing quite well on the floor—William had insisted they learn ballroom dancing—but they're getting a wide berth from all the guests. She supposes that Night Elves are as skilled as Deirdre's usual hanger-ons at sensing riff-raff. She feels bile rising in her stomach. Magic doesn't seem to

be so much a possibility for her children, so much as another world of privilege they don't belong to. She closes her eyes ... no, she'd made it without money or magic before. She'd been born poor, made it into the middle class with her first husband, Alicia's and Joshua's father, and managed to hang onto that after he died. And then she'd met her second husband, William, Cindy's father, in a bereavement group and somehow wound up very wealthy ...

... and then the realms had opened up and a deranged Norse God had destroyed several blocks of Chicago. William, their business, and their home had been literally crushed in an instant. She'd lost her husband; the children had lost their father. Money would have been a cold comfort at that time; still, it would have allowed Marcia to take time off to help her children recover from their grief.

Unfortunately, insurance policies had exemptions for 'acts of God.' She's just barely hanging on now, with a mortgage for a destroyed home to pay, her rent, and four mouths to feed. But things will get better. She scrunches her eyes shut. No, they won't, because she won't be alive ...

Marcia bites her lip. After all that 'magic' had done for her, why has she brought her children here? She'll round them up, and take them home. She looks past Joshua and Alicia for Cindy. In tow with Deidre, Cindy has been fawned over by the vampire prince the whole evening. Marcia shakes her head. He is not a *vampire* prince—he is a Night Elf. Marcia blinks out at the reception area. She sees Deidre, but where is Cindy?

From the veranda, she hears a splash of water, and a laugh that is familiar. Marcia goes cold. The pain in her side is suddenly screaming, but she bolts from her chair, and moves as quickly as she can out the door, and into the warm night.

Down a long flight of steps, she sees Cindy, sitting on the edge of a fountain, the dark hair of the prince a shadow against her neck. It might be the pain in her side, or the earlier hallucinations, but Marcia runs to the top of the stairs, and shouts, "Don't hurt her!"

The prince raises his head. Cindy turns to Marcia and her jaw drops.

Behind Marcia a masculine voice says, "You heard her, Rayne."

A sneer forming on his handsome features, the prince narrows his eyes at the masculine speaker behind Marcia.

"She's only sixteen," Marcia gasps, as though that could possibly make a difference.

The prince's eyes bolt wide, and he gets up hastily. Without a backward glance at Cindy, he hops off the wall of the fountain, runs up the stairs, and bows to Marcia. "Madam, I apologize, I had no idea." To the masculine speaker, he says some words in a strange musical language, and then puts his hand over his mouth and, turning visibly green, runs away. Marcia has a distinct impression he might vomit.

"You ruin everything!" Cindy hisses, charging up the stairs. "I hate you!"

And then she runs for the hallway. Marcia wants to go after her, but she's suddenly dizzy with pain and her own nausea.

The man the prince had addressed sighs. "Teenagers."

Clutching her side, Marcia lifts her eyes. It is the same vampire-Night-Elf-man she'd seen earlier. He looks all of twenty-eight. Maybe. She doesn't see fangs this time. She had been hallucinating, obviously.

"The years my children were teens ..." He shakes his head and crosses his arms, looking after Cindy.

The words seem out of place on his youthful face, but Marcia has heard rumors that elves are immortal.

She huffs, and says what she always says at these times. "They have four times the hormones of an adult. That makes them

practically insane." She shrugs and catches her breath.

"That is a very generous interpretation of their situation." He smiles wryly and says, "It was the worst century of my life."

Marcia blinks at him, thinking of all the fights she'd had this year with Joshua and Cindy, and all the times Alicia had gone to her room, her face streaming with tears, unwilling to talk about it. "I have never considered the advantages of a short life," Marcia says.

The corners of the man's lips turn up. Bowing slightly, he holds out a hand, palm up. "Madam, you seem to require assistance."

Marcia takes a step back, her hand fluttering to her throat. His eyes follow her fingers, his gaze intent, and she gasps. She sees the fangs, again. Frozen in place, she looks down at the vampire's hand, and she sees ... an ending, and peace. And suddenly, that is what she wants so much. Her struggle isn't just with her emotional teenagers. It is dealing with their school, with the teachers who aren't helping Joshua deal with bullies, and with Deirdre, who fills Cindy's mind with tales of how deprived the girl is, but only wants Cindy when it is convenient for her. And it is Marcia's responsibilities to her extended family, her continuing battle with insurance agencies, and the specter of her disease looming over like a dark shadow.

She wants to take his hand, but instead she draws back. "I have to stay with my children," she says. *For as long as I can.* She still feels sick, her side still hurts, but she bolts from the veranda.

In the car not fifteen minutes later, Cindy screeches, "I lost my shoe!"

To Be Continued ...

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Chapter 2

The next morning, Marcia wakes up from where she sleeps on the couch, to the reek of garbage. Her cell phone is ringing. Seeing her brother's number, she picks up.

"Marcia," Fernando says without preamble, "the assisted living center is saying that you requested that I be given durable power of attorney for Mother and Father."

"Yes," says Marcia. "I need you to do that, Fernando, I'm—"

"My firm is going public," Fernando says. "I'm pulling eighty hours a week right now."

"What about Sarah?" Marcia says, referring to Fernando's wife. "She is staying at home; you have a nanny, and—"

"We can't have Sarah making medical decisions for our parents!" says Fernando.

"I like Sarah," Marcia says. "She—"

"Is too busy with our twins," says Fernando.

Marcia scrunches her eyes shut. "But I have—"

There is a light ping at the other end of the line and Fernando says, "It's my investors, I have to go." And he's gone.

Marcia puts her head in her hands. It's been years since she lost William, and she had thought she was used to it. She loved William. They may not have always been perfect together, but they were always on each other's team. Now she is playing solo, and the weight of his absence is suddenly so heavy she feels like she can't breathe. She sucks in a deep breath, to prove to herself she still can ... and is overwhelmed by the reek of garbage.

Throat tight, she gets up and goes to the kitchen. Alicia's and Joshua's doors are shut. Cindy is leaning against the counter, eating yogurt from the container, last night's makeup smeared down her face. She still looks gorgeous, but ...

"How can you eat with the reek?" Marcia asks.

Throwing her yogurt container in the sink, Cindy hisses, "Deidre says you were ridiculous," storms out, and slams her door. Marcia should feel angry, but then she hears Cindy break down into sobs.

She feels her stomach churn. If she doesn't take the garbage out, Joshua might, but he'll complain about it the entire time. Cindy will call him a drama queen, he'll say "pot, you're black," and the situation will go downhill from there. If Joshua doesn't take the garbage out, Alicia will. She won't complain, won't say a word ... she'll just do it. And for some reason, Marcia finds that scenario worse.

Sighing and holding her nose, Marcia opens the garbage can. A moment later she steps out of their apartment and pads down the hall in her pajamas, her nose wrinkled, her stomach about to heave, carrying a stinking, dripping bag of fermented yuck. She's almost at the door of the garbage chute when a voice behind her says, "Madam, may I help you with that?"

She turns, sees a man with fangs, screams, and promptly drops the garbage. The man swoops in, picks up the garbage, and points to the door Marcia was just about to go into. "Is that the rubbish chute?"

She nods dumbly. It's the same man-vampire she'd spoken to last night, the one with the teenagers, not the one who'd tried to seduce her daughter.

The man-maybe-vampire disappears into the garbage room.

The door to Marcia's apartment opens. Alicia hangs off the door frame into the hallway and demands, "Mom, did you take out the

garbage again?"

Marcia darts for the door. Joshua's indignant voice rises from within the apartment. "You made Mom take out the garbage!"

She hears Cindy angrily retort, "She decided to take it herself!"

Joshua roars, "Because you were too lazy and now the house smells like putrid chicken!"

"I'm sticking this piece of bubblegum in your sewing machine!" screams Cindy.

Feeling her stomach roiling, Marcia rushes past Alicia and says, "Shut the door!" Not pausing for breath she gasps, "Cindy, don't you dare!"

"Ah, I see I have come to the right domicile," says the man.

Marcia blinks. Cindy comes running out of Joshua's room with her brother in hot pursuit so fast that Marcia's head spins. She turns and finds the maybe vampire in the doorway. Alicia's lips are parted, her eyes are wide, and she's looking quickly between Marcia and the maybe bloodsucker.

"Mom," Alicia whispers. "I recognize him from the party. We shouldn't slam the door in his face."

Before Marcia can protest, the man asks, "May I come in?" He is definitely a vampire! Marcia can see his fangs when he talks.

Throwing up her hands, Marcia implores, "Don't let him—"

"Sure," says Cindy.

He steps in with a smile, giving Marcia an odd look. Alicia shuts the door behind him. Eyes wide, Marcia backs up. She tries to think of anything in the kitchen that might do as a wooden stake and

gestures for Alicia to stand next to her. Alicia just looks at her quizzically.

"How can we help you?" says Joshua, rolling on his heels. Cindy elbows him. He elbows her back.

Marcia wonders if she can hit a wooden spoon against a counter hard enough to break it and give it a sharp point. She starts slowly edging toward the kitchen, motioning for Alicia to follow. Alicia's brow furrows, but she doesn't move. Marcia sucks in a breath. Normally, she thinks of her eldest child as the most perceptive one.

The vampire clears his throat. "I apologize for disturbing you. My name is Darerick Razvano ..." A long litany of syllables follows. He must see their slack jaws because he clears his throat and adds, "Please just call me Dare. I'll be working with the Night Elf embassy. First off, I want to return this." He opens a satchel and pulls out a package wrapped in blue tissue paper. Bowing to Cindy, he says, "Your shoe, madam."

Cindy smiles, puts a hand to her mouth, and walks forward to take it. Before she can, Marcia snatches it from his hand, and hands it to Cindy, glaring at the vamp. Cindy gives Marcia a dirty look, but then smiles at Dare and says, "And?"

The vampire opens his mouth as though to speak, and the fangs are there! Can't her children see them? Are they just blinded by how handsome he is, how other worldly?

"If you're here for Cindy's hand in marriage, take her," Joshua says.

"Joshua!" Marcia hisses, edging toward the kitchen.

"Pardon?" the vampire says, eyes widening, and skin flushing all the way to the ears. He's deviously hidden their pointy tips behind his curls, Marcia notices. When her family's bodies are found later, the neighbors won't identify the man who entered their home as an elf.

Cindy doesn't hear Joshua or doesn't care. Blinking up at the vamp, she gushes, "The prince? Did he send you?"

The vampire's jaw drops and he looks at Cindy. "Ah," he says, and Marcia can see the exact moment he catches on to what she's getting at. "He did not send me. I have business this way, and I thought I might return the shoe as well."

Cindy's face crumples. She bows her head, turns on her heel, walks to her room, and slams the door. Marcia has one kid out of the way; now, how to get the other two behind her? She gestures to Alicia again. "Mom, are you feeling alright?" Alicia asks.

The vampire looks at Marcia's eldest daughter, and back to Marcia. "My primary order of business is to speak to you, madam. It is a matter of most urgent importance."

Marcia says, "You're—" She almost says a vampire. Catches her breath, and smells garbage, on her, and on him. It gives her pause. Had she ever seen a horror movie where a vampire helped take out the garbage?

"He's a Night Elf, Mom," Joshua says, in the same tone he uses to say, you're embarrassing me.

"—not as dangerous as you perhaps think," the vampire says, gold-flecked eyes on her.

The kids look between themselves and shrug.

The vampire takes a deep breath and adds, "The survival of my species is at stake." He winces. "If you'll pardon the expression."

Marcia raises an eyebrow. The kids' lips purse. After a long pause, Alicia says, "Mom, I think you have to help him."

"Yeah, Mom, I don't think the Sierra Club will ever let you back in if you refuse to save an endangered species," Joshua adds.

Marcia glares at the vampire. He looks ... contrite? He's in her home, and if he was going to attack them, wouldn't he have done that by now? Also, it's daylight, and he's out and about. Since the realms have opened up, humans have learned that a lot of the things they believed about magical creatures weren't true. Is it possible, vampire fearsomeness might be another myth? Or maybe he's not a vampire at all. Maybe he sucks the nectar out of flowers, or some such with those fangs. She huffs. No, she doesn't believe that.

Looking nervously to the side, he says, "We need to speak someplace private ... if you don't mind?"

Vampires in myths and movies don't talk nicely. They either bite you and drain your blood or use magic to control you and drain you later. Marcia swallows. There is only one place to talk that doesn't entail leaving her children.

"The balcony is private," she says.

He looks beyond her. "Ah, there?" he asks. The apartment is rather small.

Marcia nods. "Yes."

He raises his hands. "May I wash up first? My hands smell like putrid chicken."

More than anything, that makes Marcia think he might not be immediately dangerous.

Marcia points to the right. "Powder room right there." She watches him go in, and then glances at the balcony. It's early morning, but the balcony is western-facing, so there is no sun. Putting her hand to her side, she wonders if he gives up his right to entry as soon as he steps out. She also wonders if she can push him off the balcony.

The sun is slipping past its zenith. In another thirty minutes or so, it will clear the balcony above Marcia's and shine on her 'guest.' She feels vaguely sick, and it might be because she is, at a deep intrinsic level, very sick. And it might be because of all that Dare has told her.

"So you are a vampire," she says.

"We like to be called Night Elves," says Dare. He's sitting on the only other piece of furniture on her balcony, a fold-out chair that has a rubber lattice. He's too big for it, and his spotless Armani suit doesn't fit the cheapness of the chair any better. "Vampire conjures too many images of predators ..."

"... and you're more parasites."

"We prefer the term 'symbiote,'" Dare says, grimacing.

Marcia narrows her eyes. "You haven't exactly explained how you're symbiotic." He'd said that vampires require mammalian blood for survival, but not enough to be harmful to the host, unless the host is a very small creature, like a mouse. He'd also said, to thrive and be healthy, they need human blood. Not very much, he had assured her, and not even consistently—whatever nutrient they need from human blood they apparently can store for a long time. But without access to human blood, they eventually become infertile, ill, and often so depressed that they die. "Are gone" were the words he used to describe it. Still ... "Symbiotic implies some benefit to the host species. Not harming the host isn't the same thing."

Dare's face goes blank for a moment. "I am not at liberty to divulge the benefit." He smiles tightly, and gazes out at the parking lot across the street from her apartment. It might be Marcia's imagination, but she thinks he looks sad.

"You can't turn into mist," she says.

He shakes his head. "Though it would be convenient."

"You don't convert anyone you bite into a vampire."

He shakes his head.

Marcia huffs a soft laugh. "I always thought that wouldn't work. The predator-prey relationship would never be balanced."

"We prefer the term sym—we're parasites," he amends at Marcia's sharp glance. "But it works the same way."

Marcia looks at her knees; she's still wearing her pajamas. "And you aren't stronger than a human, faster, or able to enthrall us. And blood drawing is a consensual thing. Vampires feel a bond between themselves and their hosts and so wouldn't want to jeopardize it?"

He's quiet a moment, and then he says, "That all holds true ..." He bows his head and steeples his fingers. " ... for most of us."

Marcia raises her eyes. He meets her gaze. "All magical creatures: Night Elves, Light Elves, Dark Elves, Fire Ettins, Vanir, Jotunn, Aesir and the Dwarves ... they all possess some innate magic they can do without thinking. For Fire Ettins, it is the manipulation of fire; for all elves of all kinds, that innate ability is ... usually ... immortality."

Marcia leans her head back on her chair. The word itself has weight. And then she bites back a laugh. Forget forever; she'd take just three years.

Dare goes on, "For the Vanir, Aesir, and the rest, the innate ability is more individual. For some, it may be controlling fire or ice, great strength, or longevity, or they might be particularly good at some craft or trade. But all magical creatures, if they learn to harness magic, can learn to do all these things—be strong, control fire, be faster, be charming ..."

"No turning into bats, though?" Marcia asks impulsively. She's beginning to feel light-headed.

He smiles. "It would be fun, but no."

Marcia's brow furrows, and she picks at her pajamas. They're too big. She's lost so much weight in the last few months. "In our myths, vampires are—"

"Sadistic and evil?" Dare supplies.

Marcia's breath catches, and she turns to face him.

Meeting her gaze, he says, "There is some basis in that."

Marcia sits up very tall in her chair.

Dare sighs. "There are very few vampires strong enough to walk through the realms. Moreover, it has been illegal for us to do so for nearly a thousand years. The only ones that have come—"

It's Marcia's turn to sigh. "Lawbreakers ... powerful lawbreakers." When Alicia was an infant, she'd become obsessed with all news of kidnappings and pedophilia. The network news people love to say, "it could be anyone." That is technically true, but Marcia had discovered that it is a hell of a lot more likely to be a certain type of person: someone who breaks the law is at the top of that list. A vampire that broke the law to get to Earth was unlikely to be a vampire who respected the laws of humans.

"I think ..." Dare says, softly. "I think that certain members of my species ... who were used to being able not to care nor to love ... they sought to kill their hosts so they could loosen that bond."

Marcia's eyes blur. There is a perfectly good word to describe humans like that.

He winces. "I only mention this because I want to be completely honest with you."

Grabbing her side, Marcia's brow furrows. There is a gaping hole in his story. "Your prince was about to bond with my daughter."

Dare snorts. "No, he's rash, but even he wasn't about to crack a vein with someone he'd just met."

"Then what was he—"

Dare shoots her a look that says, really?

Marcia sags in her chair. "Ah, just some innocent hanky-panky ..."
She glares at him. "With a sixteen-year-old."

"In his defense, she ... ahhh ... misrepresented her age and he has very little experience with humans. A sixteen-year-old vampire ... "
He holds out a hand as though to indicate knee-high. "You may have noticed the prince was quite ... upset ... by what transpired."

Sadly, Marcia can believe Cindy "misrepresented" her age, and she had noticed the way the prince had turned green. She can also believe all the rest of it, and still not find his species particularly ... evil. No, she doesn't find them evil at all. She can readily believe a few bad apples could be responsible for all the heinous crimes attributed to a whole race. It hadn't taken many Conquistadors to wipe out the Aztecs. She sighs. Not that the Aztecs were angels, either. She gulps. And there is a vocal, violent minority of humans calling for a reclosing of the realms and the extermination of any magical creatures that might wind up trapped here.

She turns her gaze out to the parking lot across the street, which is almost empty, since it's Sunday. "So how do you keep the strong vamp—Night Elves away from Earth?" Marcia asks.

Dare stiffens in a way that seems almost defensive, but then he rubs his forehead. "We actually have been studying your technology ... We believe that we wouldn't have to send anyone through—well, except for a modest support staff, and the odd procession of dignitaries. You have machines now that would allow blood to be transported without chilling or chemical additives." Head bowing, he nods, as though to himself. "It is ... " He sighs. "It will be fine." There is something in his voice, something resigned. But her mind is

getting too fuzzy to ask, and so she asks the question at the forefront of her thoughts. "Why are you telling me all of this?"

"So you don't talk," Dare says. Too soon for her to draw away, he reaches over and takes her hand. His fingers are dry and cool. "It is a fluke that you realize the nature of Night Elves; and, if humans know, it will make things more difficult."

Marcia stares down at their entwined hands, too tired to pull away, and it isn't just her illness. It's also from lying. She works in an oncology department—only as their web designer—but she knows enough about cancer to realize that her recent symptoms had warned of something very bad. The scans she had just confirmed it. Now she has to tell her children and her family about what's really going on ... she has a meeting with a therapist ... right after her next oncology appointment. She'll ask her ... She feels tears biting at the edge of her eyes. She's frightened of holding it in that long, frightened of giving it away, too.

"Don't hide it, Dare," she says, staring down at his hands. They are large, heavy, and masculine; and by comparison her own hands look frail, small, and very old. She seldom notices how wrinkled the skin around her joints has become during her half century-and-change on the planet, or how visible her veins are, but next to Dare's magical youth she can't help but notice. She remembers Alicia asking if she feels well, and Joshua's anger at Cindy "making" her take out the trash. "Something will give you away in the end, and lying will make it worse."

He takes her hand in both of his own, and turns it over. She hears him exhale. "How would I even go about that?"

She's slouching in her chair, overwhelmed by life—and him—and this. She glances at him. For most of the conversation, he's maintained an air of self-assuredness that belied the age he looks. But now he does look all of twenty-eight or so, and Marcia feels older than his ... centuries? Millennia?

She takes a deep breath, her head clearing. She's worked at an oncology department as their web designer—which really means designer, coder, and copy editor. She knows how to soften medical terminology, make it easier to understand and accept. It occurs to her that maybe maturity is based on experience, not years.

She tells him what she would say. When she's done, she feels exceptionally light. She supposes that, if you're going to die, helping save an entire race as one of your final deeds isn't a bad way to go.

"You think, framing it as an inheritable disease, like hemophilia, and our people as in great need of ... transfusions ... that humans will find this acceptable?" Dare asks, squeezing her fingers lightly. At some point in the conversation, he'd leaned closer.

"You're in need of blood," Marcia says. "Something we give voluntarily, and offering to trade it for tellurium and lithium, things we don't have and need for our new magic power converters and batteries. It will work out." Bless human industrialism and greed, it might just save a race.

She glances over at him. He's leaning sideways in his chair, sunlight covering one side of his face. During their conversation, he'd pulled a pair of aviator glasses out of his pocket and put them on. In the hand not holding hers, he is clutching a small tube that advertises itself as Titanium Dioxide Sunscreen for Baby's Sensitive Skin.

"You don't look well," she says.

He waves vaguely beyond the balcony with the hand that holds the tube. "Perhaps a bit too much sun." He holds the vial up to his nose. "Although this ointment is amazing."

"Let's get inside," Marcia says, jumping up from her chair. She waits for the tide of nausea she expects to pass—but it doesn't even come. Not letting go of her hand, Dare slowly gets to his feet. As she leads him into the living room, he stumbles on the track for the balcony door.

"Why don't you lie down?" Marcia says. "I'll call you a cab." Perhaps seeing him so feeble and in obvious need gives her energy, because as he flops on the couch and she bustles about, she doesn't feel tired at all.

A few minutes later, she's downstairs waiting for the cab with him. He looks so awful she suggests a hospital, but he waves it off with a mumbled, "It will pass."

The cab is just arriving, when she suddenly recalls how resigned he'd seemed when they'd discussed blood banks. "You don't really want to use blood banks ... you find it a bit ..." She doesn't know what the word is. Distasteful doesn't seem right. The word she wants is sad, or maybe lonely, but she doesn't know why it fits.

For the first time since they left the balcony, he smiles. "What can I say? I'm a romantic."

Before she can ask him to explain, he's stumbling out the door, into the sunlight, to the waiting cab, clutching his side. Marcia's still pondering it when she reenters the apartment.

"Some fairy tale," Cindy says, staring at her shoe.

"See, no such thing as fairy tales," Alicia says resignedly.

Joshua says, "We're still stuck with you, too! Loser."

"Joshua," Marcia growls in warning. She gives her eldest daughter a covert little nod.

To be continued ...

If you liked, please review!

Chapter 3

Marcia stands just outside the official residence of the Night Elves. A dwarven woman stands before her. The woman's head only comes up to her chin. Her face is childlike, round with enormous eyes. But she's broader than Marcia, and the track suit she wears does nothing to disguise that every inch of her is muscle.

"I'm here to see Dare!" Marcia says, stamping her foot.

The dwarven lady blinks up at her. "You call him Dare?" she says, backing up, wide eyes going even wider.

Seizing the opportunity, Marcia storms past her.

"Diamonds, who is that?" she hears Dare say, his voice oddly ... whiney. "Make them go away!"

"Madam," the dwarf, presumably Diamonds says, grabbing Marcia's wrist with such force, she spins around. "He's not well, leave him alone."

With a move she learned in self-defense classes she took with her children, Marcia twists her wrist away and shouts, "Dare, I need to talk to you!"

"Marcia?" says Dare.

"Madam," Diamonds says. "I've been gentle with you, but—"

"Let her in," Dare says, and she can't tell if he sounds resigned or devious.

Without hesitating, Marcia strides in the direction of his voice, and finds herself in a living room with blinds closed to the afternoon light. He's wearing pajamas, a bathrobe, and fat fluffy red socks that look like Elmo might have been sacrificed in order to make them. It's

about 2 PM, she has a personal day, the kids are safely at school—she's come straight from her oncology appointment. Her doctor's words are ringing in her head. "I don't understand it, Marcia. I think it must have been a glitch with the last scans ... or ... or ... a miracle." His brow had furrowed. "There have been some odd spontaneous remissions since the realms opened—Mayor Rogers has asked to keep track of them. But those are usually blood cancers and I'm not sure this counts. How do you feel?"

She feels great, which is the problem. "Dare, why did you do it? What do you want?" she demands.

"Lovely to see you, too," he says, throwing a hand over his eyes. "Leave me alone, I'm sleepy."

"You made me better!" Marcia exclaims.

He sniffs and replies petulantly, "Made you better? Why, I never had any idea you were sick." There is a sing-song quality to his voice. He's lying. She can feel it in every inch of her body.

"Why did you do it?" Marcia demands. "Do you intend to blackmail me? Is this some sort of vampiric extortion? Do you think I might be in your debt? Because, no way, Mr. Bloodsucker." Is he after one of her children? That always happens in fairy tales, but she won't give any of them away. Not even Cindy, who'd called her a black widow this morning.

He sits up quickly. "If I wanted you to be in my debt, there would have been a contract signed in blood before I healed you." He sniffs. "Don't accuse me of incompetence."

Marcia puts her hands on her hips, and her eyes narrow. "You did make me better."

Flopping back down on the couch, he turns his back to her and curls up in a fetal position ... as much as a tall man can on a skinny

couch. "Did not." He raises a hand and waves it with a shoo-shoo motion. "Now go away."

"I still have questions for you!" Marcia says.

He sighs. "Oh, bright sunny summer days," he mutters, grabbing a pillow and pressing his face into it.

She blinks.

"Well?" he says. "Are you going to ask? Get it over with. I want to go back to sleep." The last comes out distinctly whiney.

"You have children!" she says remembering that without human blood vampires are malnourished and eventually infertile. "You've drunk human blood." And without the benefit of a blood bank, so directly from the vein.

He rolls over so he's in the fetal position, but facing her. His eyes are glinting, and she's not sure if it's magic or anger. "Yes, Marcia. Before the realms were closed, I lived here and I drank human blood." His nostrils flare, and she feels cold dread settling on her. She raises her hands, suddenly not wanting him to finish, but finds herself unable to ask him to stop.

"I was even married to the human woman in question. She was burned at the stake for being a witch," Dare continues, his eyes definitely flashing. "I went home with the closing of the realms, married a vampire in a similar situation, and we had five lovely children."

"Oh ..." says Marcia.

His jaw hardens. "But after our fifth ... and then the misca—" He takes a deep breath and rolls onto his back. "She was one of those who became ... ill. She is ... gone."

"Oh," Marcia says. She swallows and walks over to him, as though pulled by a string. "I'm sorry."

He shrugs, and throws his arm over his eyes. "It's all ... a very long time ago." For the first time she notices that there is a light sheen on his face. His hair, tucked behind his pointed ears, looks like it needs to be washed, and his eyes are bloodshot. He looks so unwell ... she feels something twist in her gut that isn't disease.

"Why did you help me?" she whispers, putting a hand to her mouth.

He sniffs. "I don't know what you're talking about."

Unconsciously, she draws her hand down her throat. His eyes, peeking beneath his arm, follow it. She sees his tongue dart out for just an instant, and then his eyes snap to hers. She knows what he was just thinking, and she knows he knows she knows. She just doesn't know what to do ... should she apologize? Or him? Pretend she didn't see?

Curling tight into a ball, Dare screams, "Guards, she has a stake!"

Marcia's eyes go wide. Before she can form a coherent thought, much less a sentence, she's being hauled up and over the heads of seven dwarves. As she's carried away on her back, she can see Dare's back, and his Elmo-sock clad feet, poking out from under his robe.

Next thing she knows, she's being thrown out onto the stoop. "How dare you think of hurting Uncle Dare!" Diamonds says.

Sitting on her butt, Marcia raises her arms so they can see inside her open hoodie. "Where in the world would I hide a stake?" Beneath the hoodie, she's wearing a form-fitting tee-shirt, and below that, she's wearing a yoga pants and sneakers.

Behind Diamonds, one of the other dwarves says, "I don't think she had a stake. Uncle's just not feeling well ... wonder what he used so

much magic on that made him so sick."

Marcia gulps. Oh, no.

"You're speaking English, you dopey 'idget," one of the other dwarves says.

"So are you!" hisses someone else, and then they all begin arguing in what is presumably Dwarvish. "Hmpf!" says Diamonds, and slams the door.

Marcia sits, staring at the door for a long time. She knows Dare is responsible for her miracle, and that it made him ill with the same certainty she knows how to breathe. She wants to do something for him, but it's obvious, he doesn't want to acknowledge the gift. She rubs her forehead. Maybe it's completely opposite of what she first assumed. Maybe he doesn't want it acknowledged because he doesn't want anything from her? Well, too bad, she's giving him something.

Climbing to her feet, she looks up at the sun. She used her last personal day for her doctor's visit, and she still has a few hours of free time.

Two hours and forty-five minutes later, she's back at the official residence carrying her gift. It's not an expensive gift, but she hopes that it's appropriately personal: a shiny helium balloon that says, "Get Well Soon," not "Thank you." The balloon is secured to a cute little plush bat that has a picture of the night sky on the underside of its wings; she thought it was more fitting than a bear. She knocks on the door, but no one answers. Without any other choice, she leaves the gift on the stoop. Just before she walks through the official residence's gate, she turns to look back. The little bat and balloon look pathetically small. So little in exchange for a life. She gulps. But maybe Dare wanted it that way? Magic has touched her family's life, but she decides, in honor of his wishes, she won't tell. She heads home. The setting sun warms her face and she smiles. The twisted

fairy tale of her family's Cinderella night had an unexpected, but happy ending.

Except the fairy tale doesn't end there ...

To Be Continued ...

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Chapter 4

Marcia stares down at the letter on the official stationery of the Night Elf Embassy. It came by the post. She couldn't have been more surprised if it had come by owl, or bat. Actually, neither of those would have been as surprising as the contents of the letter itself. And it's not just the fact that Dare might have slightly misrepresented his position at the embassy. He doesn't just work there; he is the ambassador.

Picking up the phone, she dials the number on the letter. The line rings three times, there is a click, and then Dare's voice on the other end of the line. "Well, are you taking me up on my offer?" His phone voice deep and liquid, not sickly, and not young.

"Oh, good, I can tell you're well," Marcia says, refusing to be discombobulated by the lack of preamble or his voice. She's sitting at home, even though it's the middle of the week.

"Well?" Dare says.

She takes a deep breath and licks her lips. "It's very generous." The office manager position he's offering is more than just generous; it's perfect. Fifteen minutes on foot door to door— Cindy will never have a "spontaneous" beer party before Marcia gets home from work again. The health insurance is more than decent, the personal day policy exactly what she needs with three kids and two parents in an assisted living situation. Also, it comes just when her hospital has decided to outsource her job.

"What's the catch?" she asks.

Dare snorts. "Isn't the fact that your boss is a blood-sucking parasite catch enough?"

Marcia sits in stunned silence for a moment, then chuckles. "I thought you preferred 'symbiote.'"

When he speaks again, she can hear his smile through the phone. "We do, indeed. I'm glad you agree it's the right term."

"I didn't ..."

"I didn't tell you that your plan for divulgement of our ... necessity ... has worked well."

"Oh, good," says Marcia. She'd seen the article in the paper with his picture in it; it described a genetic disorder plaguing the Night Elves, and about blood banks being set up to counter their society's slow decline. She'd noticed nowhere in the article the mention of "vampires." They are controlling the message, which is good.

"There are a few snags," he says.

"What kind of snags?" she asks.

"Nothing a woman with your sense of diplomacy won't be able to handle," Dare says confidently.

"So you figure I'm diplomatic?" she asks, raising an eyebrow. She knows she is, but she's curious how he came to that conclusion after she barged into his home a few weeks back.

"You went to a gathering with some rather inhospitable relatives while you were dying and managed to hold it together," Dare says.

She shouldn't, but she can't quite resist teasing him a little. "You know, I never told you I was dying." The teasing makes her feel young, and not like the fifty-three-year-old woman she didn't recognize in the mirror this morning.

"You'll need all your diplomacy to deal with our royal family," Dare says in a voice that is so smooth she knows he couldn't have missed the jibe. "Between you and me," he continues, "They've been out in

the sun too long. Would you like to come by the embassy tomorrow, say 10AM, for the tour?"

"Sure," says Marcia. "What are those snags, again?"

"You'll see," Dare replies, and for the first time she catches the hint of something almost wicked in his voice. "Oh, and thanks for the bat," he adds just before hanging up.

She blinks at the phone. Is she really going down the rabbit hole again?

Later that night, when she tells her children she'll be working for the Night Elf Embassy, Joshua puts a hand to his mouth and cries, "I'll make you a pendant of holy water!"

Alicia says, "Mom, you don't have to do that to protect us!"

Cindy says, "Don't worry, he won't bite her ... professional courtesy."

... and Marcia realizes that the Night Elves might not be controlling the message as well as she had thought.

The door to Dare's office slams shut. Outside his office, Marcia jumps up from her desk and darts around it, shouting, "Diamonds!" while whipping out her key.

After three months, Marcia should recognize a "snag" in her plan before he or she enters Dare's office. But this morning she is reviewing applicants for blood donation. Because of the "host bond," donations are mixed and anonymous, but Dare is still very insistent that the donors "not be sociopaths or we may wind up with an Elizabeth Báthory situation ... but don't blame us for Attila, Hitler, or Stalin!"

"Marcia!" screams Dare, his voice muffled by the door, as Marcia tries the knob. It's locked ... by the reporter no doubt. Inserting the

key, she hears Diamonds and six other pairs of feet behind her. She turns the key, pushes, and the door opens.

Dare is by the window, one arm in front of his face, the other holding the stuffed bat she'd given him. He's waving it at the reporter like a priest once waved a cross at him on the street. The reporter is sitting on his desk, dress open at the front. She's leaning back, exposing her neck and breasts, saying, "Take me."

"Make her go away," Dare whines.

"Let's get her out of here, boys!" Diamonds says.

"Another one?" she hears one of the dwarves grumble. Before the "snag" can protest, she's being carried away on her back out the door, the same way the dwarves had hauled away Marcia all those months ago.

Dare peeks out from behind his arm, and then walks over, puts the bat on the desk, pats its head, and falls panting into his chair.

Without a word, Marcia goes over to the percolator—the device that keeps the fresh pig's blood from coagulating—and pours him a mug of it..

She has learned many things about Dare in the past few months. For instance, she knows that Diamonds is Dare's grandniece, by marriage, of course, not by blood. One of his daughters is married to a very nice dwarf and she has adopted four little baby dwarves. Dare has extolled the virtues of grandchildren over lunch frequently. Vampires do eat. The tiny amount of blood they drink doesn't have many calories.

She also knows that he was—and is—supposedly one of the most feared and respected vampires in all the realms. The reason he is the ambassador here is because he has a lot of experience on Earth, primarily hunting down rogue vampires who had disobeyed

the travel ban. It's a little hard to believe sometimes. This is one of those times.

She hands him the mug and he takes it with shaky hands. "This is all your fault, you know," Dare grumbles.

He always says that. Vampires have a more devoted following than Marcia had imagined. She nods, and says, "I know."

He finishes off the mug. He has access to the blood bank, but only drinks animal blood, for some reason. Marcia's not sure if it's because he thinks human blood should go to the less fortunate, or if he has some other reason for his abstinence. She's not sure why she doesn't just ask.

Dare looks around his office and then out the window. "What a beautiful foggy day. Where do you want to go to lunch, Marcia?"

Her gut does a little twist at that.

He stands up very quickly. "Oh, but wait. Before I forget ..." Walking over to a bookshelf, he says, "I know that Joshua is feeling a need of inspiration for that fashion show, and I thought, perhaps, ah ..." He picks up a parcel wrapped in paper, walks over, and hands it to Marcia. He stands too close. She ducks her head and takes the parcel a little clumsily. The paper falls away, and she's staring at a book. Elves in various sorts of glittery attire walk across the cover. It's magic, very literally.

"Elven fashion for the last two thousand years ... you'd need an encyclopedia for all the Earth fashions in the same time frame," he says, sitting down on the desk. "But perhaps it will spark Joshua's muse." Dare knows about Joshua's muse's recent absence because a few days ago, over lunch, Joshua had texted her thirty-one times. Instead of being mad, Dare had read the messages over her shoulder.

"It's beautiful," she says. And priceless. Elvish works of art and literature are still rare, especially originals. She could sell this book to Sotheby's and all her financial problems would be over ... forever.

"It's a gift," he says casually.

Marcia swallows. She won't ever sell it.

"So where should we go to lunch?" he asks. "I think I might be in the mood for garlic ... does Italian or Chinese suit you?"

How to be diplomatic? "You had Italian yesterday," she says.

His lips purse. "True. But you weren't with me."

"Cindy was with you," she says. Did that sound snippy? She didn't mean it to sound snippy.

"Hmmm ... she seemed to be wandering a little far afield," Dare says, shaking his head.

Marcia huffs. "I hate that open campus lunch policy." Cindy had, according to her, "just bumped into Dare," but Marcia's not sure she believes it.

Dare raises an eyebrow at her. "Is something bothering you, Marcia?"

Marcia looks at the book with the glittering elves drifting across the covers. Many things are wrong. But she thinks ... she thinks this might be the way to put them all to rest. Drive a stake through it, so to speak. She winces. "Cindy ... well, I think she might have thought ... well, the way she was talking to Alicia ... I think she may have thought yesterday's lunch ... was a date."

She remembers Cindy leaning against the door of Alicia's room, saying, "Dracula took me to lunch ... he paid and everything. He's so handsome, and the way he looked at me, it made me feel like I was the only person in the world."

Dare bursts out laughing.

When Marcia looks up at him in alarm, he stops.

"Oh, right, I'm sorry. That is ... disturbing, and I shouldn't have laughed," he says contritely.

"It's easy," Marcia says, her jaw getting hard, "to see how she might have gotten that impression."

Dare snorts and rolls his eyes. "Yes, we have so much in common."

"She's a seventeen-year-old girl who lost her father, who thinks she is abused because she is used as a pawn by her godmother ... and she's looking for a father figure to save her!" Marcia bursts out.

Dare's face gets very serious again, and his eyes soften. "Ah ..."

"You spend a lot of time with us," Marcia says. This is true. His home is past hers, the kids' bus stop is on the way, and almost every night he winds up walking the three of them home ... Sometimes he talks to Joshua, sometimes he talks to Alicia, and sometimes he talks to Cindy. It has been a good thing. Alicia stands a little taller when he talks to her; she says it's because she 'isn't about to show fear to him.' Cindy has started doing her homework more regularly. Marcia is still not sure what Dare said to encourage that. And Joshua no longer gets bullied, because he's met at the bus stop by 'Dracula.' A few times she has wanted to invite Dare into their house for dinner; but, considering how exciting dinners with her family can be, she has been embarrassed and afraid.

Marcia licks her lips nervously. "It might be better ... if we, you know, take it easy for a while."

She closes her eyes and exhales. There, that's done. Now she'll just come up with a reason to skip lunch.

"Is that really what's bothering you?" says Dare.

No, it isn't. Marcia wraps her arms around herself and looks at the floor. What's really bothering her is that she is attracted to her boss, who is not just her boss, but out of her league and wrong for her in so many ways. She's not sure how it happened. Usually, with younger men she finds them cute ... but a little ... well, young. She likes men with silver in their hair and creases in their foreheads, and laugh lines. Men who have loved and lost, and lived, whom she doesn't have to explain things to, about grief, and children, and life, because they understand. The problem is Dare understands, too. And two days ago, it had nearly cost her everything. He'd taken her arm in his after lunch, a gesture she's sure he learned during a short visit to New York in the 1800s. She'd looked up at him at precisely the same moment he'd looked down at her, and she almost melted. Worse, she'd stood up on her tiptoes, and then she'd almost kissed him. If that truck hadn't honked its horn ... better not to think about it.

"Because if it is, I think I have a solution ... to everyone's problems," says Dare.

"Oh," says Marcia, not knowing where he is going with this, but hoping there will be a way for her to wiggle out of lunch.

She sees him wave a hand in the periphery of her vision, and the door slams shut. She gasps and turns her head. "Did you use magic to close the door?"

He puts a hand on top of her left one. Her arms are crossed, and his hand covers her hand and part of her arm ... and she goes hot all over. Marcia feels her face go completely red. She looks down at his hand on hers, so he doesn't realize she's blushing like a schoolgirl.

"I could be a real father figure to them, if I became their father."

After those words come out of Dare's mouth, it takes what feels like a century for Marcia to put them together. "What?" she blurts out. She must have misheard, because the words don't really make sense.

"We're perfect together," Dare says. "You're diplomatic, and you're brave ..."

She blinks at that and he says, "You thought your life was in danger when I brought back Cindy's silly shoe, but you didn't lose your head. I could see you, thinking about where to hide your children, possibly thinking of what sort of kitchen implement you might use as a stake. I was almost expecting you to push me off the balcony."

Her lips part and she feels her heart stop. He had picked up on that?

"Your advice is spot on. Your handling of my royal family's ..." He grimaces. "Eccentricities, is inspired."

"Anyone could have told them that asking about potential blood donors' virginity status would bring about a political firestorm," Marcia says.

"But no one did," Dare says. "We make a good team ... I mean, I think that I am good for your family."

And hadn't she just been thinking exactly that? She swallows. It's not a speech a young man would give, not at all. It's something an older man would say. And that is what makes it right, and more romantic, rather than less.

She hears him gulp. "We can't get married on Earth with the current state of inter-hominid marriage laws, but in the Night Elf kingdom it would be acceptable. It would make a lot of my fellow elves extremely jealous, but I don't care." He squeezes her hand. "And you don't need to worry about it being a polyamory situation where I have a vampire wife as well. I've had children, already."

"What?"

He winces. "At one time it was practiced. Not just a male vampire and a human woman and vampire woman; it went the other way as well. I've always personally felt with three you tend to triangulate."

He shudders. "I have enough of being diplomatic with my job. I don't need that at home."

She stares at him open-mouthed for far too long. "I look like your mother," she stammers at last.

His lips purse, and he pulls her hand to his stomach. He looks to the side, and then back at her. "Nooooo ... she has pointed ears, and fangs ... and is blonde ..." His voice says, I know this is a trick question. I just don't know what. He smiles sunnily. "She'll adore you!"

Sometimes he seems old and immensely wise, and sometimes he seems just ... clueless. "When we go out to eat," Marcia says in a slow, careful voice, "At least three times, people have mistaken me for your mother. And ... you ... laugh."

"Because ... it's ... funny," he says in the same careful voice. He smiles again, and this time it is wicked. "I don't think of you like my mother at all." His voice is just as wicked as his smile. A mouth that just drank pig's blood shouldn't look as sexy as it does.

Marcia still stands frozen. "I'm going to get very old ... very quickly ... in the grand scheme of things." Don't kiss him, she tells herself, think of the pig's blood, think of the pig's blood ...

Dare stands up, and he's very close, too close. He clutches her hand to his chest. "First off ... just as vampires look, I am told, 'too beautiful' to human eyes, humans look the same to us. But ... moreover, if you are my wife, my host, you won't grow old. You might even look younger ..."

She looks up and finds him gazing down at her hand.

"That's the symbiotic benefit we're not supposed to talk about." Not looking up, he adds, "And you won't get cancer again."

She can see where they might want to keep that quiet. Vampires could wind up hunted to extinction ... or something. But then Marcia takes a sharp breath. "I never told you I had cancer."

"No," he says. "But I guessed when I realized you could see our fangs." He shrugs, eyes still downcast. "We have an innate glamour that hides them. Humans who are very close to death ... they can see them ... and humans in other, emotional, non-death situations."

"You healed me ..."

His eyes meet hers, and he looks very old again. "No, I will never say that I did. Please ... don't even think of it. There is no compulsion to take up my offer, Marcia."

Marcia looks down at her hand, and laughs softly. "Usually, on Earth, an offer coming from my boss would be considered compulsion."

She feels his hand loosen, looks up, and sees a pained expression on his face, as though she's struck him. "That was the most undiplomatic observation of all time," she says, pulling his hand to her lips and closing her eyes to kiss it.

A coil of hair has fallen in front of her eyes, and he brushes it back. "Does this mean you'll ...?"

"I'm saying I'll consider it." She swallows. "But ... you should have dinner with my family. You might change your mind."

When she looks up at him, his lips are parted. For the first time since she was ill, she can see his fangs. He doesn't have to explain to her that it has nothing to do with death this time.

He's not the perfect vision of a prince in a fairy tale, but then she's not a princess either.

Marcia doesn't have Dare over for dinner that night. Instead, she broaches the subject with her family first.

"You're so old," says Cindy. "But I guess you're both evil and made for each other." She gets up from the table, goes to her room, and slams the door.

Alicia says, "Mom, you don't have to do this for us."

Joshua, looking at his book, says, "Go for it, Mom. I've been telling everyone at school you've been dating him for months."

"What?" says Marcia.

He waves a hand. "Why do you think all the bullies at school leave me alone now?"

Turning back to Alicia, Marcia says, "I am doing it for myself, too. I like him."

Alicia shrugs. "If you're happy."

Marcia looks after Cindy. "Would it help her if I tell her he likes me because I'm old?" And then realizes she's said the thought out loud.

"It might give her hope, Mom." Alicia says. "Joshua's got fashion. I've got good grades ... she just thinks she's only pretty."

Marcia notices she's not slouching at all.

Cindy hugs Marcia. Maybe grudgingly, maybe shyly, Marcia can't tell. "You look beautiful," she says. "Joshua outdid himself on the dress." The wedding dress, made by Joshua of elven silk that appears to be shimmering water, is beautiful.

Marcia pulls away. "You look beautiful, too," she whispers in her ear. "But you're more than that. You'll figure it out." Cindy nods, and the moment is uncomfortable. Marcia doesn't believe there will ever be a

magical moment when it all comes together, but bit-by-bit, maybe someday.

Cindy stands in front of Dare. "You look old."

"He does not look old, he looks older," Marcia says. He's given himself some gray hairs, laugh lines, and crow's feet.

Dare shrugs. "Magic? Is there anything it can't do?"

Marcia hadn't asked him to change his appearance. He had done it himself, saying he was worried about the kids "not respecting him as an authority figure." It's an illusion, and if Dare doesn't maintain it, it will fade. Judging by the way Cindy responds to it, it was a good idea.

Likewise, Dare hadn't asked the first time he drank Marcia's blood; she'd just bitten her lip and then kissed him. Judging by how easy it has become for him to maintain his illusion of age after she started giving him blood, it was a good idea.

Behind them, a carriage drawn by griffins comes to a stop.

"Don't worry," says Joshua, with his hand on Diamonds. "We'll have fun with our dwarf cousins while you start your happily ever after."

Diamonds snorts. "You won't have too much fun."

Dare huffs. "Happily ever after, not at all. I'm literally a pain in the neck, and your mother can be stubborn."

Marcia elbows him, and he elbows her back.

Alicia, quiet the whole time, breaks into sobs at his words. Everyone in the party goes silent.

"Alicia?" Marcia says, going to her.

Her usually stoic, unemotional daughter throws her arms around her neck. "Thank you for giving me a real fairy tale. A fairy tale I can believe in."

~Fin~

My fans loved this short so much they asked me to write a longer version. So I did ... the expanded novel of Magic After Midnight: After the Fire Book 2 is available now on all retailers-I write under my real name, C. Gockel out there in the wild. There is more nookie, trips to Vanaheim and the land of the dwarves, aggravated would-be-goddesses, and Dare's adorable fear of spiders.

Magic After Midnight is based on my I Bring the Fire universe. It's all about Loki, Norse God of Mischief. If you want to read more in this world, Wolves: I Bring the Fire Part I is free on all retailers.

If you enjoyed this short story, please leave a review!