

## HEARTSTAKER

Every other Saturday night, I run a support group meeting in the upstairs room of an old tavern. Wooden support posts, stained barrels, old-country German food: it's like out of a fairy tale (Grimm, not Disney). We're surrounded by beer and ale, but that's not a problem; these attendees aren't addicted to alcohol.

Tonight's meeting has drawn only a light crowd, perhaps because it's also Valentine's Day. Creatures like me have love lives too, you know. "Yes, but they're hardly *healthy* relationships, are they?" you ask. Please. I'm a psychiatrist. Do me a favor and count how many romantic relationships you know of personally that could be considered "healthy." Entire professions - family lawyers, marriage counselors, train-wreck talk show hosts - rely on the fact that romance seldom lasts for long, and it's often replaced by dysfunction that would be unbelievable if written down as fiction.

Mortimer Bleak (his pen name), who struggles with his own version of bloodlust at his particular time of the month (you just thought of a menstruation joke, and that's distasteful - he has a real problem, and he's trying his best to cope), speaks first. The only ones here are me and Bleak; Tango Foxtrot, a homeless Vietnam vet, turned a decade or so ago, who prefers to go by his initials in military parlance; and two new faces: a youngish, hard-faced man with greasy hair down to his ears and a couple days' worth of scruff, and a woman near the same age, dirty blonde hair done in a loose ponytail. They had walked in as the meeting was in session, neither removing their coats, but February is cold, and the tavern is admittedly drafty. Something nags at me, but Bleak is talking and I'm his sponsor, so I listen.

Bleak is an aspiring poet and author, but he's severely depressed. He reconciles these with bad humor, and since the rule here is complete freedom to say anything without fear of condemnation or correction, I can't stop him from reciting his new verses.

"In honor of the holiday," he says.

"Like all her friends, the plain girl dreams of dances, dates, and balls.  
But no boy ever asks her out, and no boy ever calls."

Tango claps. The two newcomers are silent, and I catch them sharing a furtive, but meaningful, look.

Ah, I've just pinpointed the problem. I can't hear their hearts beating, so that checks out as far as their identity, but why are they wearing coats? Bleak is warm-blooded, and his pulse is audible to my enhanced senses, but I know what he is. Tango is wearing his old stained military jacket, sergeant's patch still visible on the shoulders, but he's not cold; that's just his wardrobe. These two, though...

"Let's greet our guests," I stand up and say after Bleak is finished. I go to shake the man's hand. If he's like me, his grip will be cold and still; if not, I'll feel the warmth of his hand, the pound of his pulse in his palm.

The man stands up, hands in deep pockets. All at once he jumps away, holding out a revolver in one hand and a small black canister in the other. "Stay back, blahdsuckers, or I vill shoot!"

"Excuse me?" says Bleak, who's never sucked blood a day in his life.

The woman stands too, reaching into her own coat. Whatever is in there, she doesn't withdraw it, instead looking at the man, then me.

"I don't know what you think this is, but I'm a physician," I say calmly. "This is a meeting for addicts." I step forward, and I immediately regret it. The man sweeps the canister in an arc, spraying a fine aerosol-propelled mist toward me, then Tango, then Bleak. I hesitate, but when the mist reaches me, I wish I hadn't. I wish I had retreated full speed.

Capsaicin is a fascinating compound, found in peppers. It's what gives them their heat, which is measured in something called "Scoville units." The substance has a medical use: for treatment of certain chronic pain conditions, capsaicin can be applied topically, in conjunction with a local anesthetic, binding to nerves and depleting the body of pain-signaling neurotransmitters. In a very real sense, it burns so badly that it overwhelms the ability to sense pain. Another common use of capsaicin is as the active ingredient in self-defense inflammatory agents, hence the name "pepper spray." Its effects on attackers - bears, dogs, humans - are nonlethal, but utterly incapacitating.

Capsaicin does nothing at all to me. Garlic, however, does. This man sprays garlic.

I don't know how long I writhe in agony, my senses overwhelmed, eyes watering, dry-heaving with my face on the floor. A small part of my mind expects to feel, at any second, a blade's blow to my neck, or a stake piercing my chest, but my suffering is so acute and extreme that I would have welcomed the release.

Eventually, the tortuous pain subsides, and I will my swollen eyes to crack open. Bleak is talking animatedly with the woman, who is listening, and the man, whose gun is drawn but aimed at the ground. Tango is lying where he fell and groaning, crimson dripping down his chin into a puddle below his face.

I can't make myself move yet, so I take visual inventory. Bleak is fine. He's explaining to the man and woman that this is a support meeting for teetotalers, as it were. The man points to where Tango is lying and says, "What is zat, zen?" He gestures to the pool of vomit that looks suspiciously like...

Oh, Tango.

He's recovering. I go to help him to his feet. "I've been seeing this girl," he says. He's sniffing, crying, and I can't tell if his tears are a result of remorse or garlic spray. "She hangs out on Post and Beacon Street. It's Valentine's Day, man. This was her present to me. I didn't hurt her, I swear. I'd never hurt her."

I grip his shoulder. "It's okay, Tango. I'm not perfect either." I'm not. "What matters is that you're honest. We can move forward if you're honest."

The man's gun swings toward us. "Vlinski, stop," the woman says. She reaches into her coat.

"My name is Mona White," she says, holding out a badge with an insignia I don't recognize. "This is Mikhail Vlinski. We're undercover investigators with the Godalming Society, Texas branch, based out of Fort Eisner. We received a report that a coven at this address was recruiting interested parties to join an *en masse* group feeding." She looked at me, then Bleak, then Tango. "You're not planning to attack a nunnery tonight, are you?"

"No!" I say.

She turns her head and tells the man, Vlinski, "We've been played." He replaces his firearm underneath his coat, but his angry grimace stays on his face.

By force of habit, I notice the woman's - Mona's - neck. It's well-defined, denoting a fit, athletic body underneath the bulky coat. The line of her jaw is strong, but feminine. When I look at her face more closely, I see that she's made up to blend into a "coven meeting." Her full lips are painted pale, her cheeks are powdered white, and she's darkened under her eyes - her deep, blue eyes - with eyeshadow. I'm suddenly embarrassed that she saw me in such disarray from the garlic, and I very much wish to know the relationship between her and the ill-tempered scoundrel who sprayed me.

"Vell, somevun is killing people in zis city and sucking zem dry."

"It's not this group," says Mona. "I mean, look at them." I'm suddenly self-conscious. I make a note to myself to ask Jorge, my muscle-head orderly at the asylum, about building bulk. She sighs. "I guess we're back to square one."

"Perhaps not," I say, eager to help her. "This is a scheduled meeting. It isn't a secret, but I don't advertise it widely. The circle of...people...who know about it isn't extensive."

"I don't see how that helps us," says Mona. "If what you're saying about yourselves is true - and I'm inclined to believe you - you're the last bunch we need to be investigating. Who exactly would gain from disrupting what you're doing here?"

Tango looks at me, and I know exactly what he's thinking.

"Horace Gardner," I say.

Horace Gardner is a drug dealer and skin-peddler, and one of *my kind*. He loiters about at private colleges and preparatory schools, catering to the fleshly desires of the sort of students with plenty of money and autonomy and a dearth of maturity and self-control. These days, he specializes in designer drugs and high-end "escorts," but he's been around since the late nineteenth century doing the same thing in one form or another. Back then, at the turn of the century, I understand he ran opium dens and cathouses. During prohibition, it was speakeasies and burlesque parlors, and he supplied hippies with LSD in the sixties and seventies (the going value of "love" in those days was usually "free," so he briefly left that side of the business). My interactions with him over the last few decades have revolved around his attempts to use me as a source for prescription pain medication. I've refused, several times, and he is most definitely the type to hold a grudge.

You may be thinking that business differences are mundane reasons to engage in such murderous skulkery, especially for creatures such as Horace and me. Really though, the world wouldn't even know about Dracula if it weren't for his engaging a British law firm to put his business affairs in order in preparation for a move to England. I myself spend a great deal of time and effort managing trusts, shell corporations, asylum staff, not to mention all of the effort my thrall lawyer Benjamin and I take to forge the documents and identification necessary for all of it to remain under the control of a person who's officially deceased and hasn't aged in decades (that's me).

We're also philosophical opponents, though. Horace relishes everything about his undead existence - the thralls, the predation, the physical strengths, the ageless existence - and strongly objects to my having organized a standing meeting to encourage abstinence from an activity that ought to be a central experience for us, or so he feels. He thinks I'm ruining the culture.

I explain all of this to the investigators, Mona and Mikhail. Tango added a few details of his own: stories he'd heard on the streets, a few that he witnessed in person.

“Sounds like this Horace is playing both sides against one another,” says Mona, after we’re finished. “We hit your meeting, and things are likely to go south, as they nearly did. You destroy us, we destroy you, or both - he wins any way it plays out.”

“Except this way,” I say.

“How can we find him?” asks Mona.

I look at Tango. “Yeah, I can find him,” he says.

Mikhail pulls his revolver back out. “You lead us to him, blahdsucker, and ve vill make zis monster pay.”

The full moon is ten days away, and even if it were out tonight, a lycanthrope in the full throes of his change is hardly a trustworthy ally, so Bleak stays at the tavern. I ask him to call my thrall lawyer, Benjamin ben Benjamin, to apprise him of the situation. Benjamin is the type to find a way to be useful.

Tango comes with us. He carries a service pistol. I don’t know firearms, so I’m not exactly sure what kind, but it’s a common type. “A pistol? Really? But you’re a…” Yes, I know that’s what you’re thinking, but we’re not going up against a human. Horace has the same strength and speed that we do, so we lose that advantage, and I wouldn’t be surprised if he were armed as well. I imaging that I’m more apprehensive about this whole thing than the humans. I don’t have a weapon, and I’m not proficient with any. I’m still hoping that we can talk this out. It’s what I do.

We pile into a black sedan. Mona drives, and Tango sits up front to direct her. I’m left to make small talk with Mikhail.

“It’s funny,” I say to him, after an uncomfortable length of icy silence, “With that accent, you sound like a film Dracula. Meanwhile, I’m a psychiatrist who runs an asylum.” He doesn’t respond. “A psychiatrist,” I repeat. “Like John Seward, one of Dracula’s hunters.”

“Vhy is zis funny?” Mikhail says, staring ahead. I give up on small talk.

After several more blocks, Tango says, “Stop here.” We’re in a neighborhood with old trees overlooking the streets and expensive-looking townhomes and apartment buildings stretching down them on either side. Small alleys break up the brown brick facades, with short staircases going up to front doors and down to basements. Plenty of darkened hiding places for a dealer, or something worse.

“How does he know vhere to find him?” asks Mikhail.

Tango, who has preternatural hearing, per usual, says, “Because he’s the one who turned me.”

Various ways exist for us to establish telepathic connections with others. The easiest is to enthrall a human. If someone is in the process of turning, but not yet deceased, he’ll have a link with whoever did the turning - see the case of Mina Harker. That link also persists once death occurs and un-death begins. At this point, the connection is ignorable and weaker with distance, but with concentration, it can be followed to its source, like a mental “warmer or colder” finding game.

As an aside, I know these things intellectually, but in the interest of full disclosure, I myself don’t know who turned me, and I’ve never felt any telepathic link with anyone other than my thralls. I’ve always assumed that whoever is responsible for my current state has already met his end. Good riddance.

“Consider yourselves both deputized,” says Mona.

“What?” says Mikhail. He clearly abhors the thought. He hates us, and I don’t doubt he has a good reason for it. We’ve given many, many people ample reason to hate us.

“We don’t know how many there are, Vlinski,” Mona says, turning the engine off.

“We can help,” I add, eager to please and feeling a little pathetic for it. Tango is already out of the car. We exit and follow.

The four of us stalk down an alley with a fence on one side. The lampposts are out up ahead, and I hear slurping sounds. I motion to Mona and Mikhail. Mona nods, and with a signal she and her partner take out two sticks that light up with a snap and a hiss. They toss them down the alley, lighting it up in a bright, sickly green. There’s no turning back now.

Horace and a woman are feeding on a couple dressed up for a date night, with another pair of women looking on. The women are dressed in skimpy clubwear - there’s no doubt of their professions - and Horace is wearing a dark shirt and slacks, covered by a high-collared black leather coat that stretches to the ground. Both of the victims are dead.

Horace sees us. I can tell he’s surprised, but he masks it well. Four on four, two humans to a side, it appears. The odds could be worse.

“Hey, Doc!” he says. “I’m afraid you’ve caught us at a bad time. Here you go, for your trouble.” He flings a flat object to me. I catch it. It’s a heart-shaped box of assorted fancy chocolates.

“You’re sick, Horace.”

“Come on. You know what they say, Doc,” Horace says. “Life is like a box of chocolates: if I want yours, I’ll take it.”

Vampires can feed without killing, and they can kill without turning the victim. Either of these simply depends on the extent of the drainage of blood. A single full feeding won’t be fatal, even on children. Dracula’s first documented European victim, Lucy Westenra, fed on children when she was newly arisen, with no permanent ill effects to any of them.

Turning is more complicated. I’ve never turned anyone, but as doing so is an instinctual function of my current physiology, I don’t need to be taught: feed the victim your blood, feed on blood from the victim, and when the victim dies - whether from anemia, as in the case of Lucy, or by some other cause - he’ll turn into one of us.

No, this wanton killing is simply sport for Horace, because he’s a psychopath, and that’s a clinical diagnosis.

“Hands up. You’re all under arrest,” says Mona.

Horace ignores her. “How did you find me?” he asks me.

Tango growls. “You don’t even know? You’re my maker!”

Horace spreads his arms and smiles, fangs out and proud. “Sorry, champ. You can’t expect me to remember everyone I’ve turned over the years. I’m like Wilt Chamberlain and Gene Simmons rolled into one, except with making vampires instead of making love.” He turns his grin to Mona. “But also with making love.” He bobs his eyebrows. The three women with him titter.

Tango is angry. He’s a man who carries abandonment issues - with his government, from his years in Vietnam, and with Horace, from setting him and his bloodlust loose in the streets with no direction. It’s all tied up with a significant guilt complex, too. Tango has done some pretty terrible things in both of those settings.

“You want a fight?” says Horace. “Fine. Take the first-”

Mikhail’s revolver fires, but Horace dodges it. All three of the women move faster than a human ought. I mentally adjust the odds to “not as even as I first imagined.” Tango’s pistol barks repeatedly. Horace comes at Mona, and I position myself so that he’s coming toward me, too.

Mona sprays garlic at him, but he sweeps his coat across his face and body and the leather catches it. I slam into him from the side, crashing him into a brick wall but smearing some of the garlic-infused dampness on myself in the process. A foolish mistake on my part. I cough, disoriented, and Horace shoves me aside and leaps for Mona.

Through half-shut, blurry eyes, I see her draw her weapon. It’s a warhammer in the shape of a cross, ornate but ancient-looking, haft no doubt made of mountain ash or a similar wood, with twin heads of what appears to be iron etched with silver (I assume for faerie-kind and lycanthropes, since neither of those elements has any effect on my sort). The haft continues above the heads and comes to a point, a built-in stake. She’s good with the hammer, but Horace is just too fast. He dodges a fierce swing once, then twice. I know he’s bothered by the shape of the cross, but ironically, it’s probably only motivating him more to dodge the blows. He spins behind her, grabs her coat, and tosses her into a pile of trash bags.

“Stupid, you know,” Horace says. “Fighting in close with a vampire, even with a weapon.” She struggles to her feet, breathing hard, still holding on to her hammer, but with a grip hardly suitable for battle. “At least get a good modern firearm. An MP7, or a P90. Join the twenty-first century.”

An explosion erupts from the butt-end of the hammer. Horace clutches at his face, screaming. From my vantage point, I think most of his upper face has been shot off. “The seventeenth century works fine for me,” says Mona.

She’s old-fashioned. I like that.

He’s blinded. Mona strides over to him and runs the stake through his chest. He shrieks, and I know it’s a fatal wound.

List our weaknesses. Yes, you’re right on some. Crosses, running water, holy water, garlic: all of these cause various psychologic and physiologic problems for us, whereas they cause none for humans. You also thought “stake to the heart,” didn’t you? That’s technically incorrect. Now, would a stake to the heart be a fatal injury to me? Of course it would, but this is not a “weakness” for us, any more than it is to you. We’re simply not immune to being stabbed in the chest. The same is true with beheading. Really, you ought to put more thought into these things.

Mona doesn’t pull out the hammer until Horace’s body has crumbled into a dust-covered skeleton - exactly what he’d look like had he died and been interred after a normal human lifespan. “You can have his clothes if you’d like,” says Mona to me. I decline. From down the alley, Tango calls for help. We run to him.

Two of the women are still. One is writhing on the ground, two long wounds at her neck partially decapitating her. I count at least four bullet holes marring the skin she’s so amply displaying. Tango is kneeling over Mikhail, and I shift into doctor mode.

I immediately conclude that Mikhail is mortally injured from the wounds to his neck. His coat and shirt are ripped to rags, the flesh of his chest shredded. I see the remnants of some device, likely what kept me from hearing their heartbeats, imbedded in the

wound. I tell Tango to keep watch on the girl who's still moving. On his other side, Mona leans over the man. I consider offering him comfort care, as much as I'm able, but I decide to offer something else first.

"You're going to die," I tell him. "But I can do something for you." I bare my wrist. "I can turn you. After you pass, you'll return as one of my kind. It's not a bad existence, truly. You don't have to be a monster. It's up to you whether this is the end."

Mikhail paws at his blood-soaked chest. His fingers find what they're searching for; he pulls out a small silver cross and I shy away. Blood bubbles up over the hole in his trachea as he speaks. "Zis life...vas never...ze end."

I'm perturbed. I offered him a certain, proven continuation of his existence, and he's choosing instead to die, based on...what? An unseen hope of things to come? In my profession, we call this "delusional." Nevertheless, one of the cornerstones of a physician's practice is deference to patient autonomy. I respect his. I take one of his hands, and Mona takes another. At last he draws a final breath, and he's gone. I hear sirens in the distance.

"The police will be here in two minutes. My clean-up crew will be here in one," says Mona, adopting a mask of professionalism that I find admirable. "I suggest you two clear out. We'll take care of the bodies and the detainee."

"Listen," I say. "I know the two of you must have been close. I'm a psychiatrist, and I know first-hand the value of conversational therapy after a traumatic event like this. If you ever need to talk, maybe over coffee..."

She looks at me as if I just asked her if she wanted to see me hit a clown in the face with an ax. Without a word, she raises a phone to her ear and presses a button. "One minute," she says. I spend eight of those sixty seconds standing awkwardly beside her while she speaks a few words into the phone, ignoring my presence. I look at Tango. He gestures me away, and I glumly follow him back to the tavern.

At first sight or otherwise - and I apologize for the crude vernacular, but there's no other way to say it - love sucks.

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