

A New Kind of Hunger

by

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A rat flew past Crimson's shoulder and splattered on the brick wall behind her.

"Careful, Merce."

"My guts are churning. That one's gonna make me gush from both ends." Mercy wiped her bloody mouth with the back of her hand.

"You eating or what?" Letty chased a well-fed, adult rodent through piles of cardboard.

"I had a couple earlier," Crimson lied.

"I must've missed it." Mercy and Letty shared a suspicious look.

Crimson couldn't explain to her sisters that she liked it when her stomach was as small and numb as the rest of her. That she would rather be hungry than nauseated or feverish from tainted rat blood. She'd accepted that the three of them would never understand each other. They weren't even really sisters. They didn't have the same surrogate mother or genetic donors. She would barely even call them her friends. Yet, according to the professor, they were her support network.

Letty touched Crimson's hand gently. In contrast to Mercy's sharp features, she had a round face that infused her every word and action with innocence.

"Aren't you hungry?"

Crimson shook her off. They were always hungry. City rats were the wily, aggressive cousins of the lab rats they'd grown up with.

"You need to keep up your strength, Crims."

"Fine."

Crimson pounced on a scrawny specimen with greasy-looking fur. She held it by the neck to prevent it biting her hand and pierced its back with her sharp canines.

Fleas jumped from the dying animal into her short black hair. Now they were the ones abandoning the sinking ship. Although the whole city was a sinking ship and the rats seemed to flock to it rather than the other way around.

She dropped the drained rodent onto the buckled and cracking asphalt and kicked it beneath the bin. They were supposed to collect the carcasses in yellow biohazard bags and drop them off at the city sanitation depot, but the bags had run out after six months and no one had come to replace them.

Since leaving the institute two years earlier, no one had come to them for anything at all.

#

On the morning of her last day at the institute Crimson and her sisters had joined the breakfast queue in the cafeteria. She'd opened her mouth to speak and then hesitated. Was it even worth bothering?

“So, how are you feeling about finally getting out of here?” she said in a single rush of breath.

Mercy ignored her and Letty had bent over to tie her shoe at the exact moment she'd spoken. It probably wasn't worth it, but she couldn't start this new stage of their life with Mercy winning a petty power game.

She stepped in front of Mercy and raised her voice. “I was just asking how you're feeling about finally getting out of here.”

Mercy rolled her eyes. “It's the professor's decision. What can I do about it? No point moaning about how long it took or getting worked up or whatever.”

“No, I'm not moaning...”

Yet again, Mercy had (purposefully?) twisted her words. Whenever they spoke it was as though two separate conversations were happening in different languages, and no adjustments on Crimson's part ever made any difference.

“What do you think the city will be like?” Letty asked.

She often asked questions Crimson didn't know how to answer. The city was vague and mysterious in her mind. All she'd ever known was the institute, which was like a cold, emotionless machine with many interconnected, moving parts. She expected the city would have many more moving parts, and, hopefully,

more warmth and feeling. Letty would look at her blankly if she even tried to put all that into words.

“We’ll soon find out,” Crimson eventually said, and Letty lost interest in her once more.

At the cafeteria counter Mrs Darla aimed her scanner at Crimson’s left retina. After a short rumble, a box appeared in the meal chute. For as long as she could remember, Mrs Darla, or Mr Bobby or Ms Jenna, had handed her a warm, jiggling box of food three times a day. This would be her last such meal. And perhaps the only meal she would remember distinctly. All the others blurred and melded into one composite memory.

“Wait a sec. I have a little something for you.” Mrs Darla retrieved a small brown paper parcel from beneath the counter and slid it across. “Be careful out there. There are some real assholes in the city.”

Crimson didn’t ask what she meant by that. She preferred to hold onto her expectation that the city would welcome them and shuffle its goings on, like subjects at a cafeteria table, to make a place.

“Thanks. I’ll miss seeing you every day.”

“You too, love.” Mrs Darla squeezed her hands and turned to scan Mercy.

Crimson took her breakfast to her usual table. Young greenfaces took up most of the seats. All of Crimson’s friends had come of age and moved on a couple of years earlier. Maybe they would be out there; Joan who ate her own faeces to extract all the nutrition from her sparse diet, Denny who slept for sixteen hours a

day to conserve energy, and Sybil who made her own vitamin C. They would introduce her to all their city friends and invite her into their personal dwellings.

The greenfaces picked at their earthy-smelling bowls of muesli. They were less chatty than usual. There'd been rumours of a breakthrough in their photosynthesizing project. Their skin was already a vibrant, almost pulsating hue. It wouldn't be long before they couldn't keep any food down and were whisked away for the next stage of their treatment.

Inside the parcel from Mrs Darla was a pair of knitted socks. Crimson really would miss some of the staff. She tucked the socks into her back pocket. She wouldn't have to hide them under her mattress like the other small items she'd kept for herself over the years. They would be displayed openly in her new home.

She peeled back the lid of her breakfast box and six rats raised their noses to sniff the air. One of them stretched towards her, whiskers quivering. She took that one first and shut the lid so the remaining animals wouldn't piss themselves in fear at what happened next. The rat sat tame and comfortable in her hand. It only squeaked a little when she fed from it.

After breakfast, technician Ross intercepted her in the hallway.

"You need to come with me. Professor's orders." He winked.

"Of course. Anything for the professor."

He locked the door of a consultation room behind them and pulled her shirt over her head.

“I love the salty taste of your skin. It’s like bacon or something.” His chapped lips left loose flakes of skin, as colourless as his slicked back hair, all over her.

Crimson helped him free his skinny arms from his lab coat. She’d never tasted bacon, but she made an educated guess. “That’s probably the excess salt from the rat blood.”

He put a hand over her mouth and manoeuvred her onto the top of the examination table. “Don’t talk.” Once he was moving inside her, he said, “Bite my neck. Drink me.”

She pressed her teeth against his throat. Blood pulsed through him the way water gushed through the pipes behind her bed. So close but out of reach. She could tear through his skin and into his blood vessels more easily than she could tear through the walls and the pipes. Her teeth were designed for that very thing.

She didn’t though. It was just a fantasy of his. Only part of him really wanted her to bite him and only part of her really didn’t want to. The part that told her it could kill him. Leave him limp like the pile of rats that built up beside her meal boxes. And of course, there would be consequences.

They both had to be content with pretending.

Afterwards he pulled up his pants and flattened down his hair. “Apparently the professor had to guarantee you’d behave yourselves out there before city council would approve your release.”

“What do the city council people think we’re going to do?”

He raised his eyebrows. “They’re worried you’ll start eating something other than small animals.”

She scoffed. They feared her and her sisters? They were three women, not particularly big or strong, who’d spent their whole lives sheltered in the institute and didn’t know a thing about living in the city. She didn’t want to hurt anyone. She didn’t even like hurting the rats.

“Well, goodbye and good luck, I guess.” Ross reached for the door.

She swung her legs over the edge of the examination table. “Maybe we can meet up. In the city. After you finish work, or on your days off. Where can I find you?” She wasn’t going to miss him or anything like that, but they’d had some fun and it wouldn’t hurt to have another source of support out there.

“Not sure that’s such a good idea. Good luck though.”

“Thanks.”

Crimson returned to the dorm to find her bed had already been stripped. Stains on the mattress chronicled the times she’d wet the bed or sweated out a fever. The indentation in the middle had deepened, year after year, to accommodate her growing shape.

Letty bounced up and down on her own bed and Mercy stared out of the window.

The technician with the unfriendly eyes came for them at midmorning. Crimson had hoped for someone kinder to deliver them into their new life. They

followed him through the familiar halls. Familiarity was the only comfort the institute had ever offered.

They boarded a van at the front of the building. Nobody came out to wave them goodbye. As the van glided through the manicured gardens of the institute, the technician handed each of them a backpack.

“In these packs you’ll find basics to get you started. Biohazard bags, clothes, shoes, a sleeping bag, some first aid supplies, and detailed instructions from the professor.” He continued. “City council has agreed to your presence as long as you perform the duties the professor negotiated with them.”

“What duties?” Crimson asked.

“You’re to hunt and exterminate the rats that infest the city. Pigeons too if you’re able to catch them.”

“Huh.” Letty looked as confused as Crimson felt. It was hard to imagine the soft, white rats they were fed every day needing to be exterminated.

“How do we hunt rats exactly? We’ve only ever gotten them out of boxes,” Mercy said.

The technician shrugged. “The professor’s theory is that if you’re hungry enough you’ll work it out.”

The metal gate loomed ahead. A trio of ruminant subjects, on their hands and knees, chewed the grass along the edge of the fence. A first glimpse beyond the grounds of the institute hijacked Crimson’s attention. She would always remember this, the way a single beam of sunlight cut through the blanket of grey

clouds overhead, the screech of the gate as it rolled open, Letty's canines pressing so hard into her lips that they drew a bead of blood, the jolt as the van lurched into motion, and the film of sweat between her hands and the plastic seat.

She swivelled her head in every direction. The scenery blurred. The institute was surrounded by unkempt fields. Her fear that she would miss something important waned, only to return when buildings, neat and segregated by wooden fences, appeared.

"Houses!" Mercy exclaimed.

"They're pretty. Which one's ours?" Letty pressed her nose against the window.

The technician didn't look up from his phone.

The van driver caught Crimson's eye in the rear-view mirror and said, "Long way to go yet."

Every time the van braked Crimson thought *this could be it*, and butterflies filled her stomach. But the van continued until the buildings became larger and taller. The colours of the houses and their gardens were steadily replaced by grimy concrete. People atop two-wheeled vehicles swarmed around them as the van crawled along with the traffic.

"Maybe we're staying in one of these tall houses." Letty twisted her neck to view the towering structures. "Right below the sky."

Soon they would be amongst the throngs of people who walked the footpaths with purpose and belonging. Some of them looked kind and smiling,

others more distracted but not necessarily mean or unfriendly. They could make friends in the city.

The traffic thinned and the high-rises gave way to stooped, hulking buildings.

Mercy banged her forehead against the window. “How much longer?”

“Not far now, girls,” the driver called over his shoulder.

This part of the city was dirty and ragged, with broken windows and haphazard looking facades. Crimson willed the van to keep driving to another stretch of pretty houses. They didn’t even need to be pretty. Clean, comfortable, and safe would do.

The driver pulled the van to a stop beside a broken chain-link fence. Tangled shrubs obscured the building behind. “This is it.” He didn’t turn off the engine.

“You sure?” The technician squinted out the window.

“This is the address I was given.”

“Okay then.” He slid open the van door and waved them out.

“Here?” Crimson hugged her backpack to her chest.

“Looks like there’s a building on the other side of the fence. I’m sure it’ll be better inside.”

Mercy huffed and climbed out of the van. Crimson and Letty followed.

“Good luck,” the technician shouted as the van drove away.

“That bastard,” Mercy said.

“What do we do now?” Letty peered through the chain-links.

“Come on.” Crimson stooped through a hole in the fence.

It had to be better inside. There would be someone to greet them and provide rats for their dinner, a warm bed, and a place to wash up. The professor had trusted they would work it out. They had no other choice.

#

“Oi! Bite my dick,” a young man with facial piercings that sparkled in the orange streetlights, yelled at them from the top of the alley where they were feeding.

“Shit-eating bitches,” added his companion, a young woman in athleisurewear.

Crimson tensed and waited for the pair to turn off the main road and reveal knuckledusters or batons, but they kept walking.

“Assholes. I wonder how they’d like it if I ripped open their necks?” Mercy pushed her stringy blonde hair away from her face. She often spoke of revenge on those who’d wronged them. She’d once boasted that she remembered every cruel face and one day she’d break into their homes as they slept and lap up the blood from their slit throats.

Crimson had never wanted to hurt anyone, but even she had to admit that some people deserved to be hurt more than others.

“Evening church service must have ended already.” Letty scratched an infected rat bite on her cheek.

“We should leave before they come back with friends and weapons,” Crimson said.

The area around The Church of Plenty, especially after services, was one of the most dangerous places in the city for them. But the blows could come from anywhere – even the most well-dressed and beautiful citizens.

They avoided the crowds, and the repulsive waft of frying food around the food carts that lined the streets, as they trekked to what Mercy liked to call their lair, in an abandoned warehouse on the outskirts of the city.

When they’d been dumped there, the inside had been littered with trash, rusted metal, cracked concrete, shards of glass, and pigeon shit. A small group of squatters had soon moved on when the sisters had begun chasing down rats and biting into them.

She’d been angry in those first weeks after the professor had flicked them away in the same way you’d brush a fly from your arm, without caring what they did next only that they didn’t return to bother you. Each passing week without any contact only further confirmed the professor had abandoned them. She’d probably expected them to fail. And she’d been right. The rat numbers never seemed to go down. For every rat they killed, two pups took its place.

By habit the sister’s journey home took them past the Overflowing Prosperity Charity Shop. Every so often the manager left a pile of clothes in their

approximate sizes beside the back door. They weren't allowed inside because of their stench and bad manners.

It wasn't their fault they couldn't wash properly and had no access to clean clothes. It was like hating a person with broken legs because they'd fallen in a hole in the road. The city had proven to be a much crueller place than Crimson had ever imagined.

The store was dark and shuttered. As usual someone had ignored the 'DO NOT leave donated items on the footpath' sign.

"Ooh look!" Letty held up a stuffed bunny. "This one's going straight into my nest. Rabbits are one of the few animals that aren't extinct yet."

"Yes, Lets. You've told us all about the animal extinctions."

Crimson rolled her eyes at Mercy, but Mercy wasn't paying attention. She was squealing with glee at a box stacked with clattering crockery. Crimson rummaged through the pile and found a plastic bag stretched almost to breaking with books.

The moon was high by the time they skirted around the tip. Two underfed guard dogs bared their teeth and growled through the fence. Security had promised to shoot the sisters on sight if they found them raiding the hard rubbish again. Mercy kicked at the fence and Crimson bared her own teeth, which only incited the dogs into an even greater frenzy.

Back at the warehouse their heater had been stolen, for the third time. Letty got to work lighting a barrel fire.

“I’ll shoplift another heater tomorrow,” Mercy said.

Crimson smirked. Mercy wasn’t the best thief. Her attempts at pick pocketing had been disastrous. Stealing required an ability to blend into a crowd and people were always on the alert around the three of them.

Mercy took her new crockery to what Crimson had designated ‘the smashing corner’ and pulverised it to dust with her taped-together cricket bat.

Crimson settled on the tattered couch and examined her book haul by lamplight. Mostly crime and horror. Not her favourites. Too close to reality. She preferred the escapism and giddy feelings on the pages of romances and fantasies.

At the bottom of the pile was a square hardcover titled ‘Vampire Heat- A Modern Gal’s Guide to Sexy Bloodsuckers.’ Beneath the title was an illustration of a man with a black cape obscuring half of his face. Blood beaded at the end of his long canine teeth. His muscled torso was unnaturally shiny, as were his black curls and piercing blue eyes.

“What’s that?” Letty looked over her shoulder and reached out to run her fingers over the glossy cover.

Mercy wandered over, twirling her bat.

“He’s . . . handsome,” Letty said. “Read it to us.”

She opened the book. “Introduction.”

Mercy and Letty flopped down onto the couch on either side of her.

“The history of vampires is intricately entwined with the history of humankind. Over the centuries they have metamorphosed along with societal fears and preoccupations. From repulsive and brutish creatures with their origins in myth, ignorance, and superstition, they have become charismatic, seductive, and intelligent symbols of forbidden lust and desire. Regardless of their current incarnation they are always monsters obsessed with the horror, glory, and sensuality of blood.”

“Like us,” Mercy said.

“Not really,” Letty replied.

Crimson closed the book. “If you want me to keep reading you have to stop interrupting.”

“Fine.” Mercy leaned over and flipped the book open. “Go on. Not a word, I promise.”

Crimson cleared her throat and continued. She read late into the night. Their eyes drooped and they took turns infecting each other with yawns until they reached the final page, where the vampire from the cover, his overly contoured abdomen in full view, had a thumb hooked into the waistband of his jeans.

“Can you resist your desires, or will you too invite a sexy bloodsucker into your boudoir?”

“Is boudoir another word for vagina?” Letty asked.

“No, it’s like a fancy bedroom.”

Crimson ran her fingers over the closed book. She'd heard the word vampire before but hadn't known what it meant, only that it was the name of a fictional monster.

"Are we vampires?" She said, more to hear the words out loud than to get a sensible response from her sisters.

Letty was horrified. "No way. We're not like them. Their hearts don't beat, and they live forever and never get old."

Mercy was more excited by the idea. "They're so sexy. People actually want them to drink their blood. They get off on it."

Letty kept listing differences. "We can go out in the sun, and we have reflections, and we don't need to be invited in anywhere. Just because we drink blood doesn't make us like them."

"Food makes us sick the same way it makes them sick," Crimson said.

"We should live like them. In fancy houses and castles. With fancy black cloaks and dresses." Mercy bounced up and down on the balls of her feet.

"Crosses don't burn us, and we can go into the church if we really want to." Letty retreated to her toy nest and sucked on her thumb.

"Imagine we could hypnotise people! Maybe we can. I've never tried."

"Why would we even want to do that?" Crimson rubbed her eyes.

"So we can drink their blood. Duh. That's our destiny. That's what we're supposed to do. Maybe human blood will give us all those other powers, like

superstrength and immortality and even the power to turn other people into vampires.”

“I can see the similarities, but I don’t think we’re the exact same kind of vampires as the ones in the book. They’re fictional. We’re real, but almost as monstrous.”

“We’re not monsters,” Letty called out from her nest. “We’re girls who were genetically engineered to revolutionise human nutrition. The professor doesn’t make monsters she does alimantal research to fight climate-fuelled hunger,” she said, directly quoting from the professor’s frequent speeches. “So, we can’t be monsters. And in that book, all the vampire women have big bosoms. None of us have big bosoms.”

Mercy laughed. “Imagine we drank human blood and our tits grew.”

Letty looked down at her chest. “Do you really think that would work?”

“Of course it wouldn’t work,” Crimson said. “I’m going to sleep.” She pulled an enthusiastic bedbug from her ankle and burst it between her fingernails.

Mercy squatted before her. “Just think, Crims. We could have everything. We’d be strong. Everyone in the city would be so scared. They’d do whatever we wanted.”

“Goodnight, Mercy.” Crimson pulled a blanket over her head.

At dusk the next day they went out to hunt up some dinner. Like the vampires from the book, they avoided sunlight. Not because it burned them, but because dark meant less people, more shadows to hide in, and most importantly, more rat activity.

The next stop on their regular rotation of hunting grounds was a high school. Mercy strode through the front gates, bold and cocky. Crimson usually preferred to avoid drawing attention to their activities, but she liked to fantasize she had been a student at the school and had wandered these very grounds with books in a satchel slung over her shoulder. Over there, by the bubblers, she'd had a water fight with her friends on a hot day and they'd all ended up reprimanded by the school principal. And here by the entrance to the canteen was where she'd had her first kiss with the most popular boy in school. She called him Thomas, after the love interest from a young adult romance she'd recently read.

They passed a lit window with a solitary silhouette, head bent to a screen. Crimson could see herself as a teacher here too. Her office would be beside this one and the two of them would work late each evening marking assignments and gossiping while they made hot beverages in the tearoom.

“Come on.” Mercy ran back and pulled her away from the window.

The bins were at the back of the school oval. Mercy did cartwheels across the soft grass and Letty skipped. Crimson pretended she was a teacher supervising her boisterous students.

The shadows around the bins were unusually still.

“Where are the little bastards?” Letty got on her hands and knees and peered under the bin. “Here’s one.” She pulled a rat out by its tail. “There’s more under there, but they’re not moving.” She brought it to her mouth and Crimson slapped it out of her hand.

“You know we don’t eat them if they’re already dead.”

“I was just smelling it.”

Mercy stooped to retrieve the carcass. “Smells funny.”

“Why are they all dead?” Letty looked to Crimson.

Mercy and Letty had come to rely on the information Crimson had gleaned from books. Sometimes she liked being thought of as knowledgeable and wise, but often she found it exasperating.

“How should I know?”

She caught them sharing an eye roll, as though she were the one being unreasonable.

“Come on. Let’s keep moving.”

It wasn’t the first time one of their hunting grounds had failed to yield a feed. Diseases occasionally went through rat populations, but they always bounced back.

The next site on their rotation was an alley between two apartment blocks. The rats there were dead too. With the same funny smell.

“What the hell is going on? I’m hungry.” Mercy picked up a small box on the ground, frayed with bite marks. “This smells a bit like the dead rats.”

“What’s that?” Letty looked at the letters as though she had any chance of reading them.

Mercy handed the box to Crimson.

“It says rat poison.” She flipped the box over, and quickly flung it behind the bin.

“Rat poison? That doesn’t make any sense. If they poison the rats, then we can’t eat them. Read it again,” Mercy said.

“I know how to read, Merce. It said poison. A new, extra-effective formulation, evidently. Let’s try The Harvest.” She had an idea about what was going on, but she didn’t want to say until she was sure.

By the time they got to The Harvest Hotel it was full of patrons onto their third, fourth, or even fifth drinks for the evening. Loud, raucous, and sloppy voices spilled out of the open door.

Letty liked feeding behind pubs because sometimes she found half full glasses of spirits, or bottles of beer forgotten while patrons groped or fought each other in the alley. Alcohol was one of the only substances, other than blood, that their stomachs could tolerate. Crimson was more wary and preferred to get to the pubs early, before drunks infested the streets near closing time. Drinking establishments were almost as dangerous as churches. Almost. Drunks were easier to evade than religious zealots high on nothing but their own God-given prosperity.

The rats behind The Harvest had also been poisoned. Three out of three sites. All in different parts of the city.

“I think we can assume all the rats in the city have been poisoned.”

Crimson leaned against the grimy wall. The city council logo had been stamped on the back of the box they’d found.

“What are we going to do now?” Letty squished a rat skull beneath the heel of her oversized boot.

Crimson had no answers. They’d already wasted energy trekking kilometres for nothing. They barely survived on the rats they could find when they weren’t all poisoned. She couldn’t imagine their life getting any harder. She only ever imagined better lives.

“Hey, hey, hey, yeah. Baby all right.” A man sang his way into the alley.

The sisters squatted behind a stack of empty kegs.

He fumbled with the zipper on his pants, unsteady on his feet and soft in the knees.

“This is a sign,” Mercy hissed.

“What?”

“We’re not supposed to feed on animals anymore.”

“Shh. Lower your voice.”

“He can’t hear me over the sound of his own piss and shithouse singing.”

Mercy peered around the edge of a keg. “Like the book said, only the weak feed

from animals. And we're no longer weak. It's time for us to feed from humans. We're ready."

"You mean one of these drunk people?" Letty asked.

"They'll be easy. The really drunk ones are so slow. They don't even know what's going on."

"We'd probably get drunk on their blood too!" That possibility was enough to convince Letty.

The man shook, zipped up his pants, and yodelled his way back into the pub.

Crimson wasn't completely against the idea of drinking human blood, even though it would go against everything she'd been brought up to believe was right. The thought of burying her canines into the pulsing veins at a person's neck made her mouth water. If technician Ross's throat was in her mouth now, she didn't know if she would be able to resist.

She was tempted to break the tenuous and unspoken contract they'd made with the people of the city. The contract that labelled them as the weak ones to be attacked, and not the other way around. The city had broken the contract first by killing off the rats they subsisted on. What did they expect them to do when their food source was cut off?

They probably hadn't thought about them at all.

Still, Crimson had her role to play as the mature voice of reason. "I don't think that's a good idea. They'll catch and punish us."

“Not if human blood gives us all the powers of vampires. Then they’ll fear us.”

Letty looked between them, unsure which side to take.

“You know that’s not going to happen.”

Mercy tutted. “Shit.” Even she didn’t fully believe in vampire superpowers.

“Come on. There are some pigeons at the warehouse.”

“Gross.” Letty hooked her arm through Mercy’s, and they trudged back to their lair.

#

A little over a week after the council had begun their rat poisoning campaign, the sisters lay in wait behind a pallet of empty boxes in alley beside The Rising Oceans Hotel.

Crimson had been the last to give in to the idea. She’d waited until the hunger pangs kept her from the refuge of sleep. Until she was sure the professor wasn’t coming to take them back to the institute. Until it could no longer be considered a choice. Until it was an inevitable extreme weather event, like a bushfire or a storm.

The city had cut off their food supply and the professor had closed the institute gates to them. They were being murdered through neglect. A little human blood was small compensation.

It didn't take long for a victim to emerge. A dark shape obscured by shadow and distance. They would only drink a little. It would be like taking blood for a medical test. Everyone could spare a little blood. Some people donated litres of it to be kept in banks.

The man's face resolved as he came closer. A large, hooked nose, thin lips, a lock of hair on the crown of his head that bounced with every step. He was as real as them. And he wasn't alone. A young woman in tight jeans and fluffy jacket emerged from his shadow.

They were too weak to overcome two people. It was for the best. Crimson wasn't ready. By the time the next person came out she would be. She wouldn't look at their face. They'd be someone who deserved it. Someone who'd beat them up if they had their friends with them.

"The car's waiting over there," the woman slurred.

"It's okay. We're just going to stop here for a minute." He put his arm around her and hustled her deeper into the alley.

Mercy's muscles were bunched as though ready to strike. Crimson held her back and shook her head.

"What for? You said you'd see me to my lift."

The man's hand tightened on the woman's waist. "Just relax and let yourself have some fun."

If he was alone, he would have been perfect after all.

The woman batted his arms away and slipped out of reach. “Fucking pervert.” She yelled over her shoulder as she ran.

“Cock-teasing bitch,” he muttered and reached into his pants.

He was alone. It was going to happen. Crimson had already thought through all the alternatives and options and no matter how the wrongness of it nagged at her, the decision had been made. She’d promised her sisters.

“Let’s get him while he’s pissing,” Mercy whispered.

Crimson froze as Mercy burst out from behind the pallet and, in seconds, had her teeth in the man’s neck. He fumbled to stow his penis. The smell of blood activated Crimson and Letty and before he could zip up his pants, they were upon him too. He wore the same cologne as Ross.

There was so much more blood in him than a rat. Delicious and nourishing. It was like being thirsty your whole life and finally drinking clean water. He pleaded and whimpered, but in their bloodlust they had no self-control or empathy.

As the overwhelming pounding of his heart slowed and faded and the red cleared from her vision, Crimson pulled away. Letty wiped her mouth while Mercy pushed the man’s limp body into the shadows. One of his shoes had fallen off. His socks were black with white tigers all over them.

“Tigers are extinct,” Letty murmured.

Cheers came from inside the pub.

They ran. There had been more than just alcohol in his bloodstream. Or maybe it was the power of human blood itself. Soon they were skipping. Colours throbbed and shifted outside of the boundaries of objects and into some fourth dimension just out of Crimson's reach. Her aches and pains disappeared. Her body was no longer just the vehicle for her mind. No longer an endless source of turmoil with its relentless needs and ailments. It was hers and she would take better care of it. No more rat blood for her beautiful body. She emerged from the emotional suit of armour that had weighed her down all her life.

They roared like lions, the once kings of the jungle, through the nearly empty streets and danced from the orange glow of one streetlight to the next. An approaching man crossed the road to avoid them.

"Yes, be afraid. Be very afraid." Mercy bared her bloody canines at him.

The city was theirs. They would no longer hide.

"We're super vampires," Letty screamed.

A light sprinkling of rain glistened on every surface, like fairy dust. They smeared blood onto each other's foreheads and pinched each other's cheeks.

"Your skin is so soft."

"I love your face!"

Crimson had never felt so close to her sisters.

In the early hours of the morning the high of the drugs and blood faded. Crimson's muscles stiffened and her temples throbbed.

On the surface the streets looked deserted but from inside sleeping bags in darkened doorways, warm blood and beating hearts called to the sisters. They were now attuned to humans the way they'd once been to rats. They had changed.

Back at the warehouse they curled up on Letty's toy nest. Mercy stroked Crimson's hair, and Letty rested her head against Mercy's belly. Crimson had always thought she was better than her sisters. She could read and write and had been more respected by the institute staff. Now hunger had brought her down to their level. She hadn't lived up to her own expectations and instead of being disappointing, it was freeing.

Letty held a koala plushie above them and moved it as though it were talking. "I'm extinct, you know. Do you think that man's extinct now too?"

Mercy sat up. "We killed him, didn't we?"

"No . . . His heart was beating when we left." Crimson closed her eyes against a memory of his face in a pale, rictus of pain. "We're not killers."

There had been so much blood. All over them. Gushing down their chins. How much blood did a human hold? How much did they need to live? He couldn't have died. People didn't die as easily as rats. Someone would have found him and filled him up again with those plastic bags of blood.

"We need to leave the city," Mercy said.

She was right. They would come for them. Even if they hadn't killed him. They had attacked a citizen.

“I’m tired,” Letty whined. “Let’s go later.”

Mercy slumped back down. “Just a little rest and then we’ll go. We can travel from city to city and feed like proper vampires. We’ll move on before they figure out what’s going on. They’ll never catch us.” She gave a big yawn and curled into Crimson’s side. “What do you think, Crims?”

“A nap can’t hurt,” Crimson lied.

By the time they napped, packed up, and decided where to go it might be too late. Part of her wanted to be caught. A homeless, roaming life, with no bed to return to sounded horrible and exhausting. It had taken months to work out how to live in the city and make the warehouse comfortable. Life on the road would mean never knowing what was going to happen next. Never feeling safe.

Back at the institute could be the best place for them. There wouldn’t be the highs and ecstasy of drinking human blood. But they would never again be hungry, or cold, or sleep in a bed infested by insects. Never again be beaten by cruel strangers. She had thought of herself as a prisoner of the professor, but she was closer to a pampered pet. The freedoms of the city had proven overrated.

#

“Shit, we overslept.” Mercy woke them in the early evening.

Crimson stretched out her stiff limbs. The blood all over Mercy's face confirmed her memories of the previous night. She rubbed the edges of her own mouth and dark, dried flakes floated down like red dandruff.

"Nobody came." Mercy peered out one of the shattered windows. "I knew it. They're afraid."

"More likely they haven't worked out it was us." Crimson peeled off her bloody t-shirt and pulled a clean one out of a pile from the charity shop.

Letty uncurled and raised her head. "Maybe they couldn't find us."

"We haven't moved in two years. They know where we are," Mercy said. "They're too scared to enter our lair."

"Maybe the guy wasn't so badly hurt. Or . . . or . . . maybe he was so drunk and drugged up he can't remember what happened," Letty said.

Crimson didn't bother trying to argue with their faulty logic. She suspected the relief they felt was like that experienced after a painless injection. The side-effects were yet to hit. If the institute didn't come for them, the city police, or a lynch mob, would.

Letty opened her mouth to say something else and Mercy yelled over the top of her. "Whatever, Lets. We got away with it and now I'm starving."

Crimson felt it too. Hunger wasn't anything new, but this hunger was different. She'd assumed the man's blood would keep them satisfied for days. Instead, her stomach was stretched, hollow, and ravenous. It demanded backpay for all the years of substandard meals.

Mercy pulled on her runners. “Let’s go and find someone to drink.”

Letty looked at Crimson with her eyebrows raised.

Crimson could imagine and fantasize about a better life, but this was the reality. They’d been one step above the vermin until the city no longer needed them and they became vermin themselves. She let go of her hopes for the approval of society, or even a resumption of her life in the institute and let her sisters’ optimism, and her own bloodlust sweep her along.

“All right.” If she was to be a monster, she would experience the benefits as well as the shame. Her mouth watered at the silky, knee-weakening memory of human blood running down her throat. After everything they’d suffered that was their reward.

Letty jumped up and down and clapped.

“But—” She would also be the best, smartest monster possible.

Mercy groaned and Letty sank back down.

“We need to be more careful. We can’t kill anyone. And the people we feed from should be people nobody is going to miss.”

“Sure. Let’s go.” Mercy was already heading for the door.

“No!” Crimson yelled after her. “I’m serious. Let’s think about this. We need to work out a strategy so we can’t be identified. We don’t want to get caught or beaten up.”

Despite what Mercy imagined, they weren’t physically stronger than they’d been before they’d tasted human blood.

“Wait.” Mercy stopped by the door with her ear cocked. There was a clatter of footsteps on corrugated metal. “Someone’s outside.”

Letty turned off the lamp and Mercy scrambled back from the door. Occasionally strangers turned up at the warehouse to take drugs, vandalize, or explore. Sometimes they stole from the sisters. Most of the time they were harmless. But this could be someone come to avenge the man in the alley.

Mercy grabbed her cricket bat and Letty pulled a frying pan out from beside her toy nest. Crimson fetched the steel bar hidden down the side of the couch.

“Is this one of those food delivery services?” Mercy giggled.

“No! We can’t feed from someone in our own home. What was I just saying before, about not being identifiable?”

“Jeez. It was a joke.”

“Sh!” Letty clapped a hand over each of their mouths as the door creaked open.

The beam of a torch played over concrete, metal, graffiti, and debris before landing on the corner of the warehouse the sisters had made their own. Mercy laughed softly and leaned forward, poised to strike. There was a good chance this was a kid looking for somewhere to smoke a bong or do some graffiti. What would Crimson’s sisters do to them? What would *she* do, once the scent of blood was in her nose?

“Hello? Crimson?”

She knew that voice.

“Ross?”

She'd almost forgotten about him. He belonged to another life.

“Technician Ross from the institute?” Mercy whispered.

“Uh huh. I think so.”

Letty lit the lamp.

“Guess I don't need this.” He lowered his torch and blushed, blotchy beneath his freckles.

He was smaller. Meeker than Crimson remembered.

“What are you doing here? Did the professor send you?” In two years, he'd never come to see her once.

“No. No, nothing like that. Wow, you're different. Glowing,” he said.

She looked down at her shabby clothes and the dirt and dried blood in the creases of her hands. Maybe the man's blood had done something to them after all.

“Thanks.”

She supposed she was different in other ways too. She was no longer that subservient girl who'd do whatever he asked, whenever he wanted, wherever he wanted. She'd been wrong to ever think she could go back to that life.

“You going to tell us why you're here?” Mercy swung her cricket bat around in lazy circles.

Ross held his hands up. “Okay, okay.” He took a deep breath. “I um . . . I heard about a man. A man with his throat ripped out. They’re saying it was a pack of wild dogs. All the abandoned pets are getting more desperate for food apparently, but I wondered . . .”

So, the man was dead. Crimson wasn’t as shocked as she’d expected to be. His life should be on the consciences of the institute that had ill-prepared them, and the city that had left them starving. Not hers or her sisters’.

“What exactly do you want, Ross?”

“I’ve been thinking about you. Ever since you left the institute. I missed you, I guess.”

“You gonna let him into your boudoir, Crims?” Mercy and Letty sniggered and whispered amongst themselves.

“Shut up, you two. I’m sure Technician Ross quickly found another naive, young institute subject to act out his fantasies with.”

He moved closer and whispered in her ear. “I’m ready to let you drink from me. For real this time.”

Blood rushed through him like distant floodwaters. Crimson licked her lips. She hadn’t had sex since leaving the institute and the familiar smell of him sparked a throbbing between her legs. To combine sex and blood. That was what the vampire book had claimed the pinnacle of experience. She looked him up and down.

Mercy and Letty did an exaggerated tip-toe past them. “We’ll leave you two alone.”

“Hold on. Where are you going?” It had never been advisable to let them out without her, and even more so now they’d broken the taboo of drinking human blood.

“Don’t worry. We won’t get into any trouble.”

“Bullshit. It’s not a good idea.”

“We won’t go far. Promise.” Mercy winked.

“Yeah. We’ll stay outside until you two have finished.” Letty smirked. “We *do not* need those images seared onto our brains.”

They weren’t completely trustworthy, and they never took anything as seriously as she did, but Ross’s presence was overpowering. It wasn’t often that what Crimson wanted walked up and offered itself freely.

“Okay. Seriously though, don’t go far. I’m trusting you.”

“Of course.”

The door slammed behind them. It was a mistake, but she was tired of taking responsibility for their mistakes. She was tired of everything. She deserved some pleasure.

“Are you sure about this?” Crimson put her hand on Ross’s chest. His racing heartbeat vibrated through her body.

“I’ve always been sure. I just knew you weren’t ready yet. When I saw the reports about the man, alongside the news of the city-wide rat poisoning campaign, I knew you’d finally embraced your true nature.”

Crimson laughed. “Embraced my true nature? How poetic. I think you’ve been reading too many vampire books.”

“Heh. Maybe. But I really do want this.” He placed his hand over hers.

For the first time in their relationship, she was the powerful one. He was almost begging her.

“Take your clothes off,” she said.

His hands shook as he undid the buttons on his shirt. Piece by piece, his clothes formed an untidy pile on the filthy concrete floor, until he stood naked before her. The blood vessels beneath his pale skin fluoresced and pulsated.

“Aren’t you going to take yours off too?” He reached for the hem of her t-shirt.

“No.” She slapped his hands away. “And no licking either. I’m not your bacon lollipop.”

“Okay.” He lowered his hands in front of his crotch.

“Lie on the couch.”

She ran a sharp fingernail down the centre of his chest and his penis swelled.

“Don’t kill me.”

She suspected reassurances weren't really what he was after. He wanted the danger. "I'll try to control myself."

She straddled him. "Don't look at me. Turn your head to the side."

"Like this?"

"Yes." The artery in his neck loomed large in her vision.

She rode him until almost the point of her own climax, and then leaned over and gently pierced his neck. Blood rushed into her mouth, and she clutched him to her as she came. A fog of red descended.

Somewhere far away someone yelled, "Get off me!"

Slowly the red faded. She returned to find him punching her weakly in the back. She pulled away and he tumbled off the couch, pale and woozy.

"Are you okay. Was that not what you wanted?"

"Stay away from me." He crawled over to his clothes and pulled on his pants.

"You can barely walk. Let me help you."

"I said stay the fuck away." He staggered to the door.

Maybe it wasn't wise to let him go. But he'd asked her to do it. He had no reason to complain to anyone.

The blood washed through her like a wave sparkling in the sunlight. She melted onto the couch. Smug, satisfied, and content.

In the early hours of the morning the hunger that had been submerged by Ross's blood, rose to the surface. Along with all of Crimson's worries and doubts.

Mercy and Letty should have been back.

She paced the warehouse and pressed her face to each window to create a fractured picture of the grounds outside.

Where were they?

The four walls were like hands over her eyes. She needed to see into the distance and get a glimpse of her sisters returning.

She stepped over a puddle of vomit outside the door. Ross? She hoped he'd gotten home okay. He'd run from her in fear. The way she'd run from him after the first time he'd dragged her into an empty room at the institute. But was he afraid enough to tell? With any luck he'd be too ashamed.

She walked out to the fence and climbed through a gap. The world wasn't yet at full daytime colour. She stood in the middle of the empty road, the soles of her feet caked with dirt and mouldering leaves. This early the city was almost quiet. The cars on the nearby freeway were distinct packets of sound rather than a single, droning beast.

Everything would be okay. Any minute now Mercy and Letty would appear around the bend in the road. They would be full of excuses. And they would *not* have a homicidal amount of blood on them.

Her stomach grumbled. This new kind of hunger had made her stupid. What would it do to her sisters who were already too reckless? She knew the hunger would coerce her into making even more mistakes in the future. It would

wield her like a tool. Instead of elevating her to the status of the vampires in the book, it had made her an out-of-control monster.

Maybe leaving the city was their best option. They could find an abandoned building in another, similar city. It would take a while to make it comfortable, but it wasn't impossible. They'd adjusted once, they could do it again. It would be easier than the first time. No one would know them or their history. They'd be careful about where they fed and who they fed from. They wouldn't make the same mistakes in revealing their nature. They might even make friends.

She heard the police cars before she saw the first one cruise around the bend. Its lights flashed like the glowing accessories on the youths who flitted between nightclubs in the early hours of the morning. Those youths always looked so carefree and joyous, even after they'd spat at the sisters' feet. Drinking human blood was the closest Crimson had ever come to that kind of euphoria.

Mercy and Letty's blood-smearred faces stared out of the back windows of the first car. Had they led the police back to the warehouse and to her? Those two had been more like the weeds that infiltrated every crack and crevice in the warehouse and slowly pulled it down, than a support network.

She backed towards the fence.

"Halt! On the ground. Hands behind your head."

The gun was small. Just a piece of metal, like so many pieces lying around on the dirt. Still, Crimson froze.

It would be okay. They would take her back to the institute. Back to clean, climate-controlled rooms, and warm showers. She would be safe. There would be three boxes of clean, docile, disease-free rats per day. She wouldn't miss going wherever she wanted, waking and sleeping whenever she wanted. She wouldn't miss moments of privacy and the absence of painful tests and procedures. And she wouldn't miss human blood.

She swallowed the saliva that had pooled in her mouth at the thought. It wouldn't be okay. Now she had tasted something better, she could never go back. She couldn't let that indentation in her mattress deepen until it swallowed her completely. She couldn't be polite and subservient to those she wanted to feed from. They had created her, but they couldn't have her. She had evolved beyond their alimantal research program. They were food for her now. They were the rats.

Let them try to destroy her like all the species they'd forced into extinction. Let them come with their blunt teeth. Or let them set sharp-toothed dogs onto her scent. At least that would be a fairer fight.

In the back of the police car her sisters nodded and smiled. She couldn't be sure what that meant. They'd never really understood each other. She memorized their faces and mouthed goodbye. She fled into the labyrinth of abandoned warehouses and piles of refuse until the sound of bullets faded. The people of the city would no longer only fear their own hunger. They would fear hers too.

THE END