The Light of the Moon

I woke to the sensation of other vampires feeding on me. They had drained me of nearly every drop. Any movement was pure agony, and the holes in my heart and back left me gasping. When they were finished with me, I was unable to move anything but my eyes.

They left me where I had been thrown, just inside the gate. I wanted to move away from it. The silver of the bars caused me pain, even though I lay a foot away. There were a half-dozen other vampires in the stone room. A faint light came from the torches beyond the gate, but not enough to see their features in my weakened state. I could not even tell which of them were female. The room had no windows. Bones and rotting flesh were piled on one side. The smell was overpowering. Danr lay crumpled beside me. They had drained him, as well.

I welcomed the dawn and its sweet release from pain and all thought. The agony I felt the next night was twice what it had been. How could anyone live with such pain? Why did I have to suffer like this?

As I lay there, I heard a noise, as of metal bars swinging open. The other vampires grew restless and swarmed the metal gate at the other side of the room. Something heavy slid against the bars. I smelled blood. The bars were raised, and the others set upon it before it even had a chance to roll out of the chute.

I crawled toward the source of blood. I was shocked at the sight of my arms and hands; I was only bones and skin. They tried to keep me away, but my hunger gave me some strength. I was able to grasp the cow's leg, and although it had already lost most of its blood, I did get a little.

Then they began to take the body apart, drinking the blood that no longer flowed, and sucking on bits of meat. I got more blood in that way, as did Danr. I was able to sit up eventually, though I still could not stand. When there was nothing left but sinew, skin, and hollow bone—we even drained the marrow—it was piled with the other carcasses at the side of the room.

Although cold cannot hurt us, it is still uncomfortable. Without enough blood to give me warmth, I was freezing. The others had bits of hide they used to cover themselves, but they were rawhide and stiff. I had learned how to tan hides from my mother, so I took the skin from the ox and found its bladder still held urine. I began working on the hide. The others watched with interest. Vampires do not make urine, so I had to wait to collect more from the next animal they gave us. The others were careful not to break its bladder that time. I made a soft blanket after a few nights and showed the others how to do the same.

The holes in my heart and back did not seem to heal. My other wounds slowly covered over and became only scabs. We could not tell time down there, but I did know when the sun was up because I would sleep. I began to make marks low on the wall out of the torchlight. There were fifteen marks on the wall when Adonas came to the room.

One of the vampires had become too weak to feed, and had lain there for two nights without moving. Adonas ordered us to sit against the wall, then went to the prostrate vampire, gave her his wrist, and let her drink until she revived.

He then walked over to me and began to beat me and toss me around the room. I crashed against the walls and ceiling and felt my bones break. Then he pinned me against the silver gate. I had remained silent until that point, but the agony of the silver touching my skin forced a scream from me. The volume of it made the others cover their ears. He tossed me into the pile of bones and flesh. I had not resisted during any of it. I kept my eyes closed.

He did the same with Danr, then came and stood over me as I lay crumpled at his feet. I opened an eye and saw that sorrow suffused his face. I understood that sorrow. Judoc and Baako had no interests other than their own pleasure. They were boring. Danr and I were curious about *everything*. We wanted to learn all there was to know.

We had debated with Adonas for hours about the crumbling of empires and the folly of kings. He valued knowledge and learning as much as I did, and mourned the loss of the library at Alexandria even more keenly than Seneca had. In the two of us, he had found companions, not only vassals. We enjoyed arguing politics and intrigue. We helped him with his plans, and he had included us in the running of the estate. I was better at figures even than Valens. Danr was a very good musician and had shown us how to play several instruments. Adonas' loneliness was like an open sore that we had healed for a short while.

I was only able to speak in a whisper, but I said, "Release me, please, Adonas. Free my soul."

His face hardened. "Never."

I began to sob but had no tears to shed. "Why?"

"Because you want it."

He turned and left.



There was a hierarchy among us. Danr and I were soon at the top after we healed from Adonas' beating. There were two below us who were as evenly matched as they could be. We were never given enough blood and were always in agony from our hunger.

I had been there a month, and the holes from the silver arrows had finally begun to close over. Then they sent us a human. As Danr and I drank, the two who ranked below us began to argue over their turn. When they found the body had been completely drained, their fury overcame them. They destroyed each other, tore each other apart. Adonas came and took the bodies away to burn them.

The marks on the wall showed we had been there six months the first time I was taken out for the full moon ceremony. The moonlight hurt my eyes, and the torchlight was even more painful. Finally, I had enough human blood that my bones did not creak. Then they began their torture. Adonas held me on the altar with his mind. I could not move. The knife was not the painful part; I was so used to pain by then. It was the magic that seared me. I was taken out about every six months.

I had suffered through six moon ceremonies when one of us, a female, lost her mind. It was a few nights before Adonas noticed. As he drained her and released her soul, he kept my eyes locked on his so I could not look away, and sneered. The next time one of us lost their mind, I drained him as the others watched. I felt his joy when his soul was finally free. When he was found, they simply took the body away.

New vampires joined us at irregular intervals. There were always at least six of us. Adonas would give us a little of his blood when we weakened enough that we could not move. Sometimes, it was a fight that caused the permanent demise of one of us, but usually, it was insanity. I began to release their souls instead of waiting for Adonas. I could not stand to watch them.

Danr stopped responding when the count on the wall showed it had been ten years. He hadn't spoken for weeks. Then he was taken for the moon ceremony. When I went to him the next night, there was no one behind his eyes. His mind was gone. Adonas knew then what I had been doing. I could not bring myself to release my hold on Danr and hugged him to me after I released his soul. That's how he found us the next night.

Oh, how I hoped that would make him angry enough to destroy me. But all he did was lift me by the neck as he dragged Danr's body by an ankle. He took me further into the depths, until the darkness was almost complete, and tossed me into another stone room. There were no others there, only piles of dusty bones.

I lived as I had in the other room, but with a bit more strength than before because I did not have to share the animals I was given. I was not given humans. I was not taken out for the

ceremony, and I never had enough blood. My count on the walls had reached another ten years when Adonas found the marks and erased them. I didn't make marks anymore.

I lost myself in memories. I clung to thoughts of home and rehearsed the things that had happened. I lived in a fantasy world and sometimes my mind was lost, but I would regain it when Adonas fed me his own blood.

Then one night, I was brought two children: a boy and a girl who could not be more than ten years old. Their heartbeats mesmerized me. The smell of their blood was a balm. I ached to feed from them but did not.

They huddled in the corner and shivered from the cold. Adonas came to the gate and stared at them, then at me. He opened the gate and went to them. He made them suffer as he fed from them, let their fear take them instead of holding them with his mind. Their screams echoed off the stone walls. But even when he let the boy run toward the open gate, I did not pursue him. When they died, he took me by the hand and led me up the stairs and out into the moonlight.

I remember every moment of that night. I stood still and let the moon touch my face. I stared at the stars and knew by their pattern that it was summer. I smelled the date palms, oleander, and the orange trees Adonas had brought to the villa at great expense. I smelled the fresh dung of the corrals and the odor of horses.

Adonas simply watched as I walked to the stables and caressed the sleek neck of one of the horses. I did not try to feed from it. I breathed in the life it held and heard its heart beat a slow, steady rhythm.

I heard other hearts—human hearts—and smelled their blood. Adonas ordered one of them to come and offer his neck to me. I drank, slowly, savoring each pulse of his heart. I stopped when he began to swoon, though Adonas had given me no command. He did not speak or interrupt as I soaked in the smell of the man and the beauty that surrounded me.

I let the man go and walked out on the grass in front of the villa and lay in it, taking in the scent of the fresh earth and digging my claws into the dirt. Then I rolled over and watched the moon and stars until I felt the dawn coming.

Adonas took me to the villa to bathe. The water was so sweet, soft and warm. The women in the house washed my body, then let me take my pleasure with them as I drank just a little of their blood. I had to stop because the light was becoming too bright. Adonas clothed me in fine linens, then put me in a stone crypt lined with cushions and silk that lay at the center of the house, and closed the lid.

It had been sixty-three years since I had last seen the moon.



The next night, he took me to a battlefield. I was able to feast until my body filled out and my bones no longer ached. I did not balk at killing those who were already doomed. For the first time in all those years, I was not hungry. As Adonas led me from the field, I realized he had broken me. I would never defy him again as long as he did not make me starve.

Valens had died twenty years earlier. Alette had preceded him. Judoc and Baako had died permanently, as well. The new man, whose name was Tiberius, was not as effective at running the estate as Valens had been. It was in disrepair, and Adonas had lost interest in maintaining it. There were not nearly as many servants or fighters as there had been, nor as many cattle and horses. I recognized the two vampires who now wandered the villa. Their names were Galene and Linos. We had been in the stone room together. They were as uninteresting as Judoc and Baako had been.

I set myself to fixing the villa and the surrounding estate for something to do. It wasn't long before things were running smoothly again, and we were prosperous. Adonas shared all with me and spent time with me whenever he could. He often became annoyed because I would not join

him in a kill unless it was for mercy, either that of a battle or those dying of disease—but he did not order me to kill.

My power rose to new levels. I did not know at the time that it was because I did not kill for pleasure. Adonas and I would run for miles and scale cliffs for the sheer fun of it. He even allowed me to wander the countryside on my own, and I often went to the ocean to meander its depths. Eventually, I realized that my speed and strength nearly exceeded that of Adonas.

But I always returned whenever he called to me.



Several years passed in that way. Then another vampire was caught for Adonas to bait and fight, as he had done with the werewolves. The new witch who performed the ceremonies had skin black as night. Her name was Chinasa. When she was near me, my powers were sapped. I feared her and did not believe her loyal. I told Adonas as much, but he scoffed at me.

I refused to join him in the arena when he fought. The first time I told him no, he had ranted and raved at my "idiotic morality" but had not required me to join the fight and did not push the issue. He had the others help him fight any preternatural creatures he found.

As the witch put her spell on the strange vampire, I noticed she was doing things differently from the other ceremonies. When I questioned her about it right before dawn, she said it was because the fighter was a vampire. But I was sure that was a lie.

I tried to talk Adonas out of fighting, but he was too eager. I glowered as I sat at the top of the wall and watched the fight progress, with dread riding my shoulder. The vampire had been weakened, but he was still faster than a werewolf, although not as strong.

I had been searching the crowd for Chinasa and finally spotted her in the shadows near the gate. Her lips were moving in a chant, her eyes riveted on the fight. The three of them seemed slower than they should be. Then the strange vampire caught Linos and twisted his head free. Adonas bled from several cuts and could not reach Linos in time. They were all moving very slowly now.

I risked leaving the scene and ran around the arena to come up behind Chinasa. Her power made my knees weak, and I could hardly stand. I picked up a pole and hook leaning on the wall. It was used for pulling the branches of the orange trees closer so the fruit could be harvested.

Through the gate, I could see it was now only Adonas who fought the stranger. Chinasa continued to chant, and Adonas fell to one knee. Her chanting increased, and he realized too late his weakness was not only from blood loss. He looked at us and locked eyes with me. The strange vampire pinned him and began to feed the moment I ran Chinasa through with the hook.

My weakness disappeared. I tore the gate open, running to Adonas. He was caught by the other vampire's mind and lay limp on the sand. I stopped and watched for several seconds, unsure if I should help. I could feel my own weakness as Adonas began to gasp. His eyes bore into mine. When his eyelids began to flutter, I made my decision. I reached down and bent the other vampire's head back, then took my belt knife and slit his throat, cutting his head almost free even with the short knife.

With Adonas so weakened, I should not have had so much strength, but I didn't think about that at the time. I tore the rest of the vampire's head off and knelt to offer Adonas my wrist. He drank until I was a husk, then took me back to my stone room and threw me in. He believed I had betrayed him. He had not seen me kill either the witch or the vampire.

My fury knew no bounds. I screamed his name, and power filled the space. I directed it at my prison, and the very walls began to vibrate. Plaster crumbled and rained down on me. Then the power pulsed into the walls and ceiling until fissures appeared. The metal gate screeched its own wail and began to twist. There was a low rumble under my feet. The floor tilted up; then the rock collapsed on me until I was pinned under tons of stone and earth.

I lay in shock, my anger replaced with wonder. Even the pain was remote as I realized I had done all of that with only my voice. Soon, the dawn put me to sleep.

When I woke the next night, the agony of my hunger, my bones knitting, and the pressure of the stone was torture. I could not shift the rock and sought escape in my mind. I had often done that during those many years alone in my prison.

There was an altar that was said to be used by the Druids in times past. It lay in a copse of trees at the north end of Adonas' property and was one of my favorite places to sit and think. I loved to listen to the night noises and smell the surrounding forest. As I lay there, the picture in my mind was so clear. I could even smell the moss on the trees. Then, suddenly, I was there—lying on the grass next to the altar, staring at the stars. Adonas would never be able to trap me again.