

MIDNIGHT PROMISE

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Autumn rain christened the grass in the old chestnut park when I returned to Estvangrad. Through the midnight, the church bell tolled the hours. In my mind, I counted along, just the way I'd used to ninety-seven years ago. I even dragged my step, hoping that time would slow so I could perhaps steal a pause that belonged only to me. Even immortals wanted to cheat time, if for no other reason but to know we could, but the twelfth count wove through dripping branches like a fading memory. Once my girlhood refuge, these trees had helped me hold on to a belief that the world was big enough for my dreams.

Tonight, my soaked long hair felt oddly cool against the flush of blood I had just taken. That poor fool was encouraged by the innocence of my Aryan looks. When I was too lazy to hunt, I lured men by acting the teenager I'd been as a mortal. Many fell into the trap. None lived to tell about it. Tonight, I'd wrestled against the attacker's hold to stir him up. I let him push inside me. Meaty beer

stink had washed over me while he pumped and groaned like a swine, crushing me against the red-bricked station house.

Control was such a wonderful thing. I should know. I had cut his from under him when my teeth plunged into his neck, mere seconds before he'd found the blissful oblivion. The brute strength to keep me pinned had betrayed him to panic as he spun, shoving with both arms to cast me off. It was too late. I had wrapped my legs around him so tightly that I could break him if I'd wanted to.

His pumping grunts of pleasure had mutated into horrified whimpers for mercy, but mercy fell farther beyond his reach with every drop of blood that flowed into me. When I chucked him to the wet pavement, his stare pointed neither to Heaven above nor Hell below. His soul, rather, appeared to have simply dissolved into thin air.

I had taken him inside me to prove to myself that flesh meant nothing in eternity, and its pleasures flickered away just as quickly as the soul of that man had left him with only an empty stare. I had to remind myself of this, especially tonight.

I hadn't come home out of nostalgia. Diego was here. For ninety-seven years, since the night he'd given me immortal blood, I had sensed his whereabouts. Like being aware of a feebly throbbing pain, with no effort at all, I knew where he was. Even though I could, I never sought to probe deeper with my mind to see with whom he was and why, if there was such a thing as a reason for the nightly choices of a vampire. And why should I care? What business of mine was it how Diego spent his eternity, except that tonight, he was here in Estvangrad, for the first time since I'd left his side.

Through the misty night, I inhaled the bitter scent of olive leaves. Diego. Must have been Spain in him that made him smell like olive branches and tinged his paleness with a Mediterranean flush. Even the ageless pallor could not dilute

the taste of ocean breezes on his skin, nor the reach of a flamenco beat in his azure eyes.

The scent led east, to the older part of town with little wooden houses. I roamed like a sleepwalker, driven by power outside myself. I ignored the willies in my chest, which fought to take over. I would not submit. I would not.

While I walked, I remembered his face; how much more beautiful he turned out to be the first time I'd beheld him with vampire eyes. Dark, shoulder length hair edged his hawk-shaped face. Ice-blue eyes zeroed in on me like on doomed prey, and I'd wanted to fly into his arms. Even now, that stare affected me, and this time, I could fly. I merely picked up the pace. No need to be obvious. A woman was supposed to play hard to get. Except, I was a vampire, and Diego had let me go for ninety-seven years.

I didn't have to pretend I was hard to get. Diego said I belonged to him. I laughed him off. I belonged to no man. No man could control me, have my foolish heart in his grasp, especially now that I owned eternity. I could have anyone. I did. This was how we'd played the game in our minds all these years. Meeting Diego now wouldn't change a thing.

I followed the scent to a yard protected by a tall rusty gate and hedges. With one leap, I flew over it. A dog barked a few streets away. Across the yard stood a barn, unusually large compared to the house. The gaping hay loft door framed a silent blackness against the steady drizzle.

To fly, I only needed to see myself in the air. Actually, it felt like taking a deep breath that pulled in the sky. I stepped just inside the loft's opening, listening to the staccato of rain on the old barn roof. Olive tones hung suspended over the musty hay like a haunting afterthought. I crunched straw under my feet, eager for the smallest sound to dispel the hypnotic constancy of raindrops and that other beat that was louder than my will. I could not see Diego, but I could hear his heartbeat. My own raised its tempo.

"Hello, Leela."

I had not heard his deep timbre for a life-time, but the resonance permeated me with the sweetness of fresh-baked bread. It was a homecoming. A part of me leapt in joy I'd forgotten how to feel.

He emerged from the shadows behind bales of hay and stalked toward me like a specter, with no sound at all. Only his heartbeat, and his scent, and the mere fact that I could see him proved he was there. Just beyond my reach, he stopped – still close enough for me to see his eyes. We vampires had great night vision.

He waited. I searched for appropriate words. What could I tell him that was true? As a vampire, Diego felt emotion beyond the words, which was why so few of us chose to hang out with our own kind. There could be no lies.

“You came. Why now?” he said.

“I could ask you the same.”

He shrugged his shoulders. “I thought you might be tired of running.”

“From what?”

His eyes never left mine, but when he stepped closer, one, two steps, his stare entered me. It crawled under my skin and flowed through my blood like the frenzy of a kill. It invaded and took control, more and more, until I was desperate to shake it off and helpless in doing so.

Diego brushed a strand of my wet hair and shifted it to the front so it fell over my breast. “Why did you let that mortal touch you?” A sliver of disappointment edged into his non-committal tone.

Like a virgin, I felt blood rush to my face. Diego had been watching, not to mention he probably smelled that man on me. I wanted to run outside, rip off my clothes, and let the rain wash me clean. In some way, though, I knew that Diego had seen everything. He always had.

“You think you can take that filth, suck the life out of them, and come any closer to forgetting me?”

I dragged my gaze to the ground. His voice was measured with such collectedness that the last hundred years could have been a speck of his own design. I could do nothing, absolutely nothing to change what existed between us.

"I've stayed out of your life. You stay out of mine," I said.

His smug smile left me wishing for claws. "Have you really?" The amused gaze cut at my pride. This man, beast, twirled me around his finger whenever he wished. Nothing had changed. Not a damned, eternal thing. I wanted to fold on the ground and sleep for many years. At least then, he wouldn't affect me, or would he?

"When will you accept it?" he challenged. "You should have let me kill you if you wanted to get away from me. The guilt alone would have done me in."

"I don't want you, Diego. Stop wasting your time."

Of course, he knew I was lying. Even so, the rejection would have bruised most men's egos. Diego's gaze tinged with sympathy. He took my hand, pulled me close then leaned to my ear. "You don't want to want me," he whispered, brushing my breast with the back of his hand. It reacted.

I pushed him away. "Don't." It was no use. In my mind, I already allowed everything he wanted to do. Resistance only left me aching for more.

"I knew you'd come," he confessed in a tone of quiet relief. "I'd hoped you might be ready to stop playing games."

I trembled. His honesty shredded my resolve. Had I heard even a hint of arrogance or condescension, I would know exactly what to do, but every word Diego uttered carried emotion.

To regain control, I should give in and let him take me the way I let that nameless victim take me then walk away the way I had walked away from countless nameless men before. Physical possession, sex, was just that. It meant nothing. It fizzled faster than champagne. It hardly compared to eternity, which I

already possessed. So, I only had to get this over with. Whatever this physical thing was between us, proving to myself that Diego was no different than anyone else would fix it like a charm.

He dropped my hand and pulled away. "If that's the way you want it," he said.

Both of his arms rested at his sides, but the absence of touch strengthened his grip on me that much more. A force pulled me to him, all the harder the more I resisted. Around him must have been an aura that sucked people in, if he wanted it. Of course, he created this deliberately. As a vampire, he could. I grappled for tenacity to break out of his sphere, but the possession left me suspended. I let myself believe that I couldn't move, but in fact, I didn't want to. Of all the places I had explored and searched, all over the globe, nothing felt like this.

How could Diego have this kind of power over me? He was nothing to me but a vampire who made me immortal; no more a mate than a vagrant. I could go anywhere, do anything, kill anyone. I could fly. What on this Earth could ever tie me to a bloodless creature who could likewise do anything and be with anyone he chose?

All those years ago, Diego let me go search for that missing part I needed to be happy. I'd never even glimpsed it. Always, when I thought I'd discovered it at last, it slipped away like a mirage, leaving me empty and restless. I ran and flew from one corner of the world to another, convinced that I would eventually find what I was looking for, and when I did, I would have no doubt.

"Leela..."

The sound melted in the damp air like the kiss of a butterfly's wing. It fluttered through me until my blood called out. Diego offered a hand. His palm faced me, waiting, cajoling. If I took it, I would have to admit what I'd denied since the night Diego gave me his blood.

Even the outstretched hand mocked my stubbornness by reaching inside me with a certainty of a physical touch—yet it had not moved a single inch. In his pale other-worldliness, Diego could stand motionless for a long time.

I still prayed for an absolution that would set me free, but the more I wished to walk away, the deeper grew an ache inside me. With the pain, which was the result of my denial, came a kind of self-damnation.

Leela.

His voice resonated in my thoughts. In truth, we didn't need to speak at all. We could communicate from mind to mind, but Diego relished the sound of words, especially in his native Castilian, which slipped off his lips in honeyed rises and falls.

His hand still waited. In the darkness of the barn, his expression reflected the patient rattle of rain on the old roof. He knew exactly what I would do, just as I had known it from the day I'd run away.

I gave him my hand. His fingers closed over mine. A smile bloomed in his blue eyes even though his lips never moved. He waited. Despite my reaching out, I still had to take a step. My insides burned. My will screamed against submission. I swallowed. God, take away this torture.

Only two feet remained between us, but even lifting my leg took the effort of bridging a chasm. Straw lined the floor boards, and although I could be as noiseless as Diego, when I finally took the step, I relished the crunch and shuffle under my soles. My gaze fell on Diego's feet. He was barefoot, and at the sight of his arches and heels, a moan rose inside me. I held it back.

With both hands, he upturned my face. His own filled with tenderness. "Don't you see?" he whispered.

I could deny him, but he would sense the lie. The spell he worked through the blood demanded my body. Worse things existed than what we could do for each other sexually. I inhaled his arousal, reached to his groin, and grasped his

hardness. The gesture alone made me wet between my legs. I knew what I wanted and how much. No sense in denying it.

I tore at his belt, his fly. He wore a white poet's shirt with strings tied in a V-shape across his chest. I shoved the shirt tails aside and pushed down his pants. No underwear. Free and full, he fell into my grasp. I went down on my knees, rubbed my cheek against the phallus and inhaled his musk. Lord, he was beautiful, and I felt like praying. Tears misted my eyes when I gave him a gentle kiss. He was mine, had always been. A gift. Mine. How could I have rejected him?

A possessive frenzy burst through my genitals. He was mine. The power that coursed through him belonged inside of me, all the way. Pulling him by the cock, I prostrated myself on the ground. He followed, but only to gather me into his arms and carry me deeper into darkness. In a corner against the rear wall, he sat me down on something soft and warm. Against my palm, I recognized velvet. Under it must have been a feather quilt into which we sank.

"Diego," I cried, grasping him and pressing myself against him, just to feel his hardness and follow its echo through my boiling blood.

He set me away just far enough to take off my wet clothes. One piece at a time, like in a research project, he unclothed me, only to cover me with his gaze and kisses. His lips on my breast, just above the nipple, forced a gasp. I had to fist my hands and press them with all my might against the floor.

"Please, hurry," I croaked.

He feathered my belly and kissed my navel. I bucked. He was so close, so close, but he still had to take off my pants. I wished I had worn a dress he could hike up. I was so ready. The cloth peeled away in slow motion. Naked at last, I pulled up my knees to lock Diego between my legs.

He bit into the vein just above my hip. My blood rushed to become his as if my soul had waited to flood through. Yes... Blood marked possession as much as submission, and mine gurgled from his ravenous sucking. He was emptying

me. I took a handful of hair at the back of his head and pulled to stop him. He drank on. I swooned from the lack, but I still saw and felt him against me in all of his hardened glory.

“Stop,” I cried. “Take me.”

How odd to demand both in the same breath. Diego was drinking away my strength. My bones lightened until they felt like sheets of paper. If he didn’t stop, Diego would consume me any second, and then, even desire would be gone.

Somewhere far away, the world opened, and rain washed down my face, each drop absorbing through the paper I had become, tearing a hole until it broke through and opened a translucent pathway inside.

Above me, the weight of my maker dissolved, but that gurgle of life passing from me to him grew louder and louder. I was so empty that even if I cried out with all my might, only air would come out. Unhooking my knees, I shoved a hand under Diego’s chest and grabbed myself. The fuzz scraped against my skin like it belonged to someone else. Diego had taken everything. Where desire once coursed, only hollowness remained, just like everywhere else.

In my chest, an aching hole gaped where strength once beat. I had never known that pain could come from a black hole and feel as real as torn flesh. To a vampire, pain was an invigorating challenge, but in this consuming emptiness, I crumbled like a wafer.

“Please, Diego.... Please, fill me.” I couldn’t be sure he actually heard me, but he pulled up on top of me, pressed his lips to my brow, and there.... Oh, God, there he was, hard against me. So full, so eager.

Never had anything touched me with such delirious joy – not even after I’d found a necklace I thought I’d lost and, jumping around, had clutched it with both hands to my throat.

“Do you feel me, Leela?” his voice drifted through like a rainbow. I smiled. With my hand, I grasped him and guided him to my opening. And it got

all the sweeter to have him perched barely outside of me but promising to make me whole when he plunged.

I took a deep breath, tightened my buttocks and elevated my hips to draw him in. He rose with me, denying my hunger and barring himself from the joining. He hovered over my emptiness like a virtuoso. He alone would decide exactly when to let the music play and how to make each tone steal itself forever into the heart.

I writhed and panted. Behind my closed eyelids, the vision of Diego's cock hovered in front of my face, teasing my aroused flesh to open and call out to him. I watched and felt him enter me, all in my mind, uncertain for a moment what was actually happening. My hand still held him, and I pulled and lifted to him again, but he moved to evade closer contact.

"Do you want me?" he asked hoarsely.

"God, yes. Diego. Yes!"

My throat was parched from blood loss, so it hurt to speak. Everything hurt in creaky rasps as my limbs grew wearier. Sensation dissolved so quickly that soon I would not even be able to hold him. Still, his hardness promised Heaven just as soon as he entered me. Oh, please. Please. I had never considered myself desperate, but if he didn't screw me soon, I would disintegrate.

Diego's parting words from all those winters ago whispered between the rain drops. *You will know the truth one night.* Before he'd made me a vampire, Diego promised me anything and everything I wanted. He'd promised me the world. Well, I'd taken the world, and now, I wanted only him and the joining I'd denied him a hundred years ago. Diego made me. He was like me. Of all the things I might have wanted, most of all, I'd wanted him to take me. Blood tears fell from my eyes, and he licked them off, one by one.

"I'm sorry. Forgive me. You were right," I stammered, shaking my head from side to side. Dank smell of livestock and chicken manure I'd once detested now seeped through like an aphrodisiac.

“Tell me,” he commanded, pressing himself more distinctly against my opening.

The words he asked for slipped off my lips like a penitent’s confession. “I belong to you. You were right. I am yours. Always, Diego. Always....”

I had to say the words. I would have said anything just to feel him inside me. He withdrew. I grappled in the dark for where he once was, but he pulled beyond my reach. With the power to fly, I reached again, but my body could not lift off the floor. In panic, my eyes sought him. He sat next to me on his knees. Both my arms begged for him like a child afraid to be left behind. When he stood, his phallus still protruded in all its splendor. My outstretched arm followed, supplicating to the need of holding him.

In the darkness, I smelled Diego’s blood. I couldn’t see it, but the smell ripped through me in an old surge. I’d only seen and smelled his blood when it trailed from his wrist in the first offering. This time, the surge curled in my gut with a strange foreboding.

“Diego?”

Then I saw blood trailing down his cheeks. “You’re not ready, Leela. Your blood is still empty. Don’t you see that immortality by itself is nothing?”

He withdrew into darkness. I flipped to my stomach, got on my knees, and crawled to embrace his ankles. Blood drops fell on his arches, and I pressed my lips to them.

“I need you, Diego. I love you. I always have. You know I’ve lied. You told me yourself.” Now that he threatened to walk away, I needed his body more than ever. A part of me wished to feel the emotion I professed, but my ego won, and I sobbed empty words. Like punishment, they twisted and churned in the hole in my chest, paralyzing me with pain that shouldn’t even exist. As a vampire, I registered pain only when I was injured, and right now, Diego’s bite was the only mark on my body. I focused on the unease, hoping my attention would dissolve it and give me strength to fight for Diego to stay.

Strange. A beat echoed behind the veil of pain, like a faraway drum, marking a way home. The closer I got, the louder it became, the more I wanted to get near it. With each beat, my agony dispelled. Such a burden fell away that I almost floated up into a clear blue sky. At first, I wanted to run from daylight, but it didn't burn. It passed through me, in rhythm with the heartbeat. Peace filled me, so vast that joy flooded out of me in more tears.

I grasped my chest to hold the peace in, but the heartbeat wasn't mine. It was fading. I'd never seen nor felt anything so serene and complete. I could sit in that never-ending pulse of light and need nothing else. The whole world resided there, at last, but it was slipping away.

"You promised me the world once. Teach me," I begged.

On a painful sigh, his hand lifted to his heart. "I promised all I could give. It wasn't enough."

I kissed Diego's feet over and over. "It is enough. It is!" I clasped his heel with one hand. With the other, I reached for his cock.

He crouched down and lifted my face. With his thumb, he wiped away the blood that stained my cheeks. He took my hand and placed it over his heart. The pulsing light I had felt burst through like he was made of it. The heartbeat had been his all along. It reached out to me, but it failed to fill my emptiness.

His lips touched my cheek and my mouth. He dropped my hand and rose.

"No! Diego.... No!"

He walked to the barn opening, where the mortal edifice created a threshold into the mystery of midnight rain. Over his shoulder, he gave me a tender glance before he crossed over. For a second, he hovered there like a piece of heaven. And then, he was gone, leaving not a trace, just like the soul of that man I'd drained.

I stared into the rain and felt emptiness pour back in. While drops pelted the old roof, darkness thickened with my cries. I, who owned eternity, wailed

like an outcast. For a vampire, eternity was all that existed. It was supposed to be enough. It was supposed to be fuller than Diego's heart.

A note from the author:

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Thanks a lot.

Erin