

AN URBAN FANTASY ANTHOLOGY

A woman with her hair in intricate braids, wearing a dark, form-fitting dress, stands in a city at night. She is looking towards the camera with a slight smile. In the background, a large, glowing orange and red orb, resembling a full moon or a fireball, is visible. To her right, there are blue, ethereal, wavy patterns. In the foreground, a large, glowing white wolf head with glowing eyes and lightning bolts around its face is prominent. The overall scene is filled with magical and urban elements.

STREETS OF FIRE AND SHADOW

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To my wonderful husband,
The publication of this story is just the beginning of one more
dream you've helped me to realize.
I'll let you guess the first dream.

THE VAMPIRES COLD CASE

The ride had turned awkward; my partner kept trying to make small talk while I wanted to discuss work. After a while, we compromised by pretending to listen to the radio. His dark eyes concentrated on the numerous potholes in the road while I stared idly into the inky night beyond the passenger window, reviewing case details in my mind.

I didn't have much to work with. Narcotics had gone in for a big bust and found *something up our alley*. That could mean they found anything from a dead bat to a transfusion bag.

Our unit was still fairly new; we got calls every week and half of them were debunked by the coroner or tech teams before we even arrived. Bureaucracy was still ironing everything out, which meant I was likely sitting through this ridiculous pop song for no reason.

"Seventh time's a charm..." I murmured.

"What's that, buddy?"

Harper had a habit of that; everyone was his buddy or pal. I couldn't decide what his angle was but it wasn't like I could tell him to knock it off. Technically, he was only being friendly.

“Just thinking out loud.” I closed my eyes and sat back in the seat. There wasn’t much to see out the window in this dark. Not that there was anything to appreciate in the daytime. Daylight would only expose ever-widening cracks in the sidewalk and fast food wrappers imitating tumbleweed in a bad western.

“You do that lot.” The sentence was drawn out, implying a question. His large fingers tapped noisily on the steering wheel a couple of times, coercing a response.

“And?” I was so tired of beating around the bush, it was hard to keep the bite from my tone.

The retort hung between us. The methodical tapping of each dark digit held it in place. My body shifted slightly as the car turned onto a new road. “Just wondering what you’re like in interviews.”

The car halted, giving my body a short, weightless lurch as Harper slammed it into park.

“I know how to keep things to myself.” *Otherwise, you’d already know that I’ve requested a new partner.*

“Good to know,” Harpers said with a deep chuckle. I was glad he got out of the car before seeing my scowl.

Harper was probably a decent guy but he was too laid back. I couldn’t take him seriously. He wore motorcycle leather every day, even when he drove a car. He joked about anything and everything.

And that chuckle... Was he messing with me? I shook my head, reminding myself it didn’t matter.

I straightened my tie as I opened my eyes, taking in the surrounding scene. Through the windshield, lights strobed red and blue over the street, highlighting the squad cars and vans that clogged the small parking lot. Filling my lungs with a final easy breath, I left the air-conditioned vehicle. The air was hot and thick, the moisture hanging on every breath. Maybe that was why I didn’t catch the scent of death while walking up the sidewalk.

The warehouse in front of me was little more than a dilapidated concrete block, faded red stripes painted on the top with a now-illegible logo. The dirty gray reflected the cruiser and ambulance lights with dingy brilliance.

I nodded at the various team members, getting only half as many responses. Might help if I learned a few names, but I was having a hard time getting to know this unit. At least uniforms still recognized me as one of their own; Stevens even graced me with a smile.

Just outside the massive double doors, the tech team was set up with stacks of evidence bags, several boxes of latex gloves, and other gear sprawled across cheap fold-out tables I saw at a beer pong party from a crime scene last week.

Harper looked over his shoulder, as though confirming my presence, before nodding to one of the smaller ladies on the other side of the table. "He's with me. Reynolds, meet my new partner, Gabriel Collins."

"Nice to meet you, Gabriel." The smaller woman waved.

"Collins is fine." I nodded by way of greeting. Only my mom had ever called me Gabriel.

"Got it." Reynolds handed me a set of boot covers and gloves, smiling curiously. "Switching partners again, Harper?"

"You know how it is." Harper shrugged his beefy shoulders, a grin lifting the massive beard that obscured the lower half of his face. Everything but his mouth, twisted in the usual goofy grin.

"Oh, that reminds me." Reynolds snapped her fingers, though the noise lost under her gloves, before rummaging through the contents of the table and producing a net.

Harper's face sagged and I almost laughed, despite myself.

"Captain says he keeps finding your stray hairs in crime scenes." Reynolds' dangled the beard net for emphasis in her slender hands.

He sighed and took it with the weight of the world on his shoulders. "Only for you, m'lady."

The girl broke into giggles and I couldn't resist a chuckle any longer. God, his English accent was awful.

I pointed to my chin. "You need one for me?"

"Nah, your stubble will be fine." Reynolds' smile drooped as she watched us head towards the door. "See you boys around."

There is no bracing yourself for the scent of death. No matter how many times you're exposed, your entrails always coil. Your brain does everything it can to cut off any signals that move your feet forward.

It's not as simple as the stench of finding forgotten steak in the back of the fridge. There's a darker element, something even more putrid than the human waste or the metallic tang that blood leaves in the air. Something primal makes every nerve scream, telling you to tuck tail and find the nearest exit in the least calm fashion.

Harper and I both paused, sparing each other a wary glance before marching on. Our footsteps blended into the chaos of coroners and field techs rushing across the concrete floor. The boot covers couldn't muffle the pounding feet sprinting past one another.

Most were working at filthy tables that lined the sides and middle of the warehouse, bagging scales or collecting samples of product left during the initial raid. A few went around laying out tiny yellow number cards or rulers next to the evidence they photographed before moving on. Moments later, someone else would come by, bag the evidence and label the bag before stashing the yellow card to be sure it wasn't used again. They were especially careful not to disturb the neat piles of white powder, holding every breath behind their masks while scooping cocaine into evidence bags and diligently labeling it.

A uniform approached to check our credentials and directed us with a hooked thumb. "All the way in the back. It ain't pretty."

I nodded and Harper thanked him. We found the least occupied walkway between two tables and squirmed around

the team with muttered apologies. Towards the back of the two-story cavern was a row of offices. We could have followed the foul odor to our scene; the stench grew with each step.

Another tech was ready with expandable vomit bags like you'd find in an ER. He left no room to decline. "Someone already lost their cookies. Captain will have my skull if I let anyone else taint the scene."

We each took a bag and I pondered why I couldn't smell the trash bag full of vomit next to him. None of the answers that occurred to me were very comforting.

We stepped into the room. Harper halted with a strangled hiccup while I took in an involuntary gasp. The air tasted of death and decay. The riddle of the vomit was answered; a simple matter of force. The puke was being overwhelmed by a greater source.

No, not greater. Just bigger. Much bigger.

They were piled on one another, like crumpled scraps of paper in the garbage. Their limbs twisted in and out, the top ones cradling the lower ones. Protecting them from further degradation. There had to be at least fifteen but I couldn't count, they were too tangled.

What I could see of their arms displayed a constellation of puncture marks and tears. Their legs showed the same disarray, especially on the inside of their thighs, some directly on the groin. Their necks were all ravaged, exposing muscles and vocal cords under the thick ooze of coagulated blood.

Their faces were the worst. Some shocked, frozen in horror. But the most battered among them wore a petrified expression of relief.

Yeah, this wasn't just a drug case. Those weren't track marks from a massive overdose. These poor bastards had been used as human juice boxes.

I swallowed and regretted it immediately; the sour taste of decomposition, puss, and every bodily fluid flooded over my

6 STREETS OF FIRE & SHADOW SAMPLE

tongue. I barely made it out of the room before hurling my entire stomach into the bag.

Harper leaned against the wall behind me, muttering something I couldn't hear. Bitter acid built in my mouth with every heave.

One thing was certain. This was definitely a case for the Vampire Police Bureau.

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