

Unquenchable

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I

Venneman

One

Richard Venneman, former vampire, wept in frustration. His prey had eluded him.

He stood on a street corner, shivering in the cold night air while tears ran down his cheeks, overwhelmed by what he had become.

It was seeing Jill again, he thought. Watching her on the hunt, watching her bewitch her prey and draw it into the dark. It was that instant of hearing and tasting blood again that had done it, that had made him forget what he now was.

It must have been an illusion, that momentary contact with the blood of Jill's victim. But it had seemed so real!

Just a memory, he told himself. You weren't hearing the boy's blood, you were remembering how it sounded when you could still hear it. You were remembering the taste, the electric flow of your victims' life energy into you. You were remembering what you yearn to experience again.

He stood in the cold, dark street and concentrated, but he couldn't bring the experience back. It was already a fading memory.

Nor could he feel Jill or her vampire companion. He had no idea where they were. The dark was his enemy, as it always had been during his human years. It concealed his prey from him.

Venneman remembered Jill's hunting style from the one time he had stalked with her. She and Hapgood would not have taken the young man very far — only far enough from the busy sidewalks to be safe from

discovery while they drained his life. If the boy cries out, and if I'm close enough, Venneman thought, I might be able to hear him. If I walk around the neighboring streets, I might happen to be in the right place at the right time.

The odds weren't too good. It must already be half an hour since Jill and Hapgood had left the restaurant with the entranced young man. By now, the boy might be well past being able to cry out.

Venneman's wounded side began to ache in the cold.

So much for walking around at night, he thought.

He was in no condition to search the streets. And what if he did happen to find Jill and Hapgood by sheer chance? In the restaurant, Jill had reacted to him with fear and she had dragged Hapgood away. But the second time, she might overcome her fear and attack him. If she did, Venneman was in no shape to defend himself.

Not that I ever was in shape to defend myself against a vampire in my human days, he thought. My first human days.

He had been healthy and strong when he'd met Elizabeth Vallé, and she had found him easy prey. Not that he had resisted in the slightest when Elizabeth seduced and killed him. There would be that much difference now. Jill would kill him without any seduction, without any hint of sex. It would be pure vengeance on her part, pure agony on his — pure agony and real death.

No, it wasn't Jill Kennedy he needed, but Henry Hapgood. The man had been interested in something other than Venneman's blood. That had been clear enough in the way he had looked at Venneman. Hapgood might be willing to give Venneman what he needed.

But that only meant that Venneman must find Hapgood, and moreover must find him when he was alone, when he was apart from Jill. The nature of the problem had changed, but its difficulty had not been diminished.

Venneman went back to his car. It was marginally warmer inside the car than outside, and he had a sweater on the back seat. He put the sweater on and sat behind the wheel for a while trying to think of some promising plan, while the remaining heat left the car and the cold seeped in. He wrapped his arms around himself, trying to hold his body warmth in, trying to keep the wound in his side from hurting so much or from

reopening.

The ache in his side grew steadily, making him forget the cold. The unhealing wound had ceased to hurt for a few minutes in the restaurant. The pain had disappeared, he remembered, when he caught sight of Jill and Hapgood. Now it was back with a vengeance, as though it were making up for lost time.

I can't just wander around the streets looking for him, Venneman thought. I'm just as likely to find an ordinary mortal mugger as I am to find a vampire. Probably more likely! The shape I'm in now, I could get myself killed. And if I did find a vampire, it might be some other vampire — Jill instead of Henry Hapgood, or someone else entirely. Which would also mean agonizing death.

How likely was he to find another vampire, though? He had no idea. He had no way of knowing how many vampires there were in the world, let alone in this city. He watched the crowds passing by on the sidewalk beside his car, and he could not even guess how many of them were normal humans and how many were something else.

He couldn't tell vampires from human beings by simply looking at them. Outwardly, vampires looked like human beings. Venneman knew from experience that humans were simultaneously fascinated and frightened by vampires, but they didn't know what it was that both drew them to the creatures and repelled them. Other vampires were apparently able to recognize each other instantly in some way that had nothing to do with the normal five human senses. Or so Venneman had been told. Even when he was a vampire, Venneman had lacked that ability.

Jill had once told him that that was symptomatic of his detachment from all life, of his essential juicelessness.

He knew how much truth there was to her accusation. In the old horror movies Venneman had loved to watch, vampires cast no shadow and had no reflection in mirrors. They were soulless and insubstantial creatures, their only solidity lying in their terrible ability to suck blood and life from human beings. But the vampires Venneman knew — himself, Elizabeth Vallé, Jill Kennedy, Karen Belmont — had more solidity and presence than any human being. They were filled with life and energy, especially after feeding. It was Venneman, after his reduction to human form, who was insubstantial and lacking in solidity.

He thought of himself as a shadow, moving through the world but not affecting it, ignored by his fellow human beings, unable to touch them in any sense. If he remained a human, he sometimes thought, he would fade away long before his natural death.

Venneman wanted that vampire strength back. He wanted the immortality and instant healing of wounds. He wanted the enhanced senses. He wanted the vividness and sense of being alive. He wanted the delights of the blood.

Once, Richard Venneman had been a religious man. After his envamping by Elizabeth, he had ceased to pray, for he had considered himself cut off from God and Heaven. He had been a creature of night and nightmare, a tool of the Devil. Now that he was once again human, Venneman prayed only that he would become a vampire again.

Let me find a vampire to grant me that blessing once more, he prayed to a God who seemed ever vaguer and harder to picture in his mind's eye. Let me enter that state of grace again, O Lord, and I won't waste it or flee from it. Not this time.

Prayer seemed ever sillier, though. Hadn't it always been? Venneman could not point to a time in his life, an event, when it had worked for him.

Right now, Venneman had to face a very practical, worldly problem: lack of money. He had started the evening with twenty-five dollars, and he had spent most of that in the restaurant where he had seen Jill with Henry Hapgood. If he was to keep searching for Henry Hapgood, then he needed food and a place to spend the nights.

No, he corrected himself. I need a place to spend the *days*. I have to adopt a vampire lifestyle. If I'm to find them, if I'm going to go hunting vampires, then I have to be out and about when they are.

But what if I pull it off? he asked himself. Suppose I find some way of making money, enough to support myself, and then I manage to arrange things so that I can hunt the city at night looking for Henry Hapgood.

And suppose I find him.

What then?

Elizabeth Vallé had envamped Venneman by seducing him first and tearing into his neck and feeding on him at the moment of mutual orgasm. Later, he had done the same to Jill Kennedy. Too late,

Venneman had learned of the strange combined power of sex and blood. A vampire's victims become vampires themselves only if the vampire drinks their blood while having sex with them and while both achieve orgasm. Otherwise, if the vampire simply feeds, the victim dies without resurrection.

So by searching for Henry Hapgood in order to be made into a vampire by him, Venneman was really searching for Henry Hapgood in order to have sex with him.

Sex with a man? The idea revolted Venneman. He could not imagine doing it, not even for the sake of becoming a vampire again. No matter how much he wanted to be a vampire again, he could not do what was necessary. There are limits, he told himself. I can't violate my nature.

That means I have to find a female vampire and give her reason to envamp me.

Once, in his first human days, he had possessed some strange attraction for women and many men. He had never understood that quality within himself, had never known what it was, had wanted to be rid of it. But whatever it was, it had caught Elizabeth's attention. Because of it, she had decided, deliberately and consciously, to seduce and envamp him so that he would be available to her whenever she wished, for eternity.

This time, his second passage through mortality, he no longer had that quality. In burning vampirism out of himself and becoming human again, he had also burned away that strange attractiveness. Now neither women nor men paid any attention to him. Except, ironically, for Henry Hapgood.

I threw that part of myself away, too, he thought, shaking his head. What a fool I was!

Why could he see and understand things so much more clearly now than he had been able to during his vampire year, or his many human years before that?

If it came down to it, if he could find no other way, could he force himself to go to bed with a man for the reward of becoming a vampire again? He had been a vampire and a murderer, he told himself, so why not be a prostitute as well? What prostitute before had ever been paid by being granted the glory of the vampire life? Perhaps he'd be able to do it,

but only after he exhausted all other possibilities.

So, he told himself, you must search for a female vampire.

He knew of three: Jill Kennedy, Elizabeth Vallé, and Karen Belmont.

Jill was out of the question. She still hated and feared him, and if she ever stopped fearing him, she would kill him painfully and permanently, not grant him vampire life. Unless I could convince her that it might be a form of revenge, he thought. It would give her control over me, or so she would believe. And it would fill me with helpless anger against her forever. That should give her some satisfaction.

No, there was something else to consider. In spite of Jill's claim that she could recognize another vampire immediately, when she had seen Venneman in the restaurant a few hours earlier, she had not sensed that he was not a vampire. Why that should be, Venneman didn't know. There must still be something in him that was different from ordinary humans. Or maybe she couldn't even entertain the possibility of a vampire becoming human.

In any case, Jill seemed to think that he was still the strange being he had once been, the creature that fed on other vampires. That was why she still feared him — because she had suffered death twice at his hands. If she learned the truth about him, that he was once again only a human being and thus subject to pain and aging, then she would impose on him the worst revenge she was capable of. She would refuse to help him. She would condemn him to remain a human, to grow old and die.

What about Elizabeth?

Thanks to Venneman, she could be anywhere in the world.

When he had tried to destroy her by exposing her to the man-made sun inside Harold Dinsmuir's machine, he had instead destroyed himself and made her into what he had been. Venneman had become a mere man again, but Elizabeth had been transformed from vampire into what he now thought of as a super-vampire. She had become what Venneman had made himself into, months earlier: a creature that lived on the blood of vampires, that could not stand the taste of human blood, that was not harmed by sunlight.

So now Elizabeth could travel as easily as any human being. There was no reason for her to limit herself to this city, no reason for her to return to her mountain home in Colorado. She could be anywhere in

North America by now — anywhere in the world.

She might resume her writing career, though. That would give him a way of tracking her down. But the last time he had seen her, she had taunted him with his return to humanity. She had once seduced him and murdered him in order to make him a vampire and thus one of her partners for eternity. She had ridiculed him for throwing that away. Now, even if he did find her, he was sure that she would refuse to help him again.

She might even do something worse than help him, something that, in a way, would be worse than killing him. She might take a small sip of his blood. It was part of her new nature — also thanks to Venneman's attempt to destroy her — that her bite filled her human victims with ecstasy. Venneman had experienced that only once, for a moment, but the memory still haunted him. The worst torture Elizabeth could inflict on him now would be to grant him that rapture again, for another brief instant, and then refuse to let him experience it again. He had cursed himself with mortality. She had cursed him with the memory of her feeding kiss.

No. He would not go in search of Elizabeth Vallé.

That left Karen Belmont.

Yes, Karen. Venneman knew where to look for her, and he knew how he might persuade her to help him.

Two

*F*irst, he needed money.

He went back inside the coffee shop and called Dale Whitmer on the pay phone. As soon as she answered, he said quickly, “Don’t hang up. Just listen. I think I know how to find Elizabeth and get her to come back here, but I’ll need some money for a plane ticket.”

There was silence at the other end, but he could sense Dale listening. She too had been bitten by Elizabeth. She too yearned to feel that bite again.

“A ticket to Colorado, where I first met her,” Venneman continued. “She has a house there, in the mountains. It’s home to her. I’m sure she’s gone back there.”

“Yes,” Dale said in her dull voice that had been full of life before Elizabeth. “I should have thought of that myself. I’ll go there and find her.” She hung up.

Venneman cursed aloud. He searched his pockets and found another quarter. He punched in Dale’s number again, but this time there was no reply. Christ, he thought, she could already be on her way to the airport to try to get a flight out there!

Now where was he to get the money for an airplane ticket?

Perhaps the same way he used to get money when he was a vampire. The thought astonished him. But why not? There were differences

between now and then, of course — mainly that he couldn't take his victim the way a vampire did. He wasn't strong enough to become an ordinary mugger. However, there might be a ready-made victim waiting for him. Jill and Hapgood had eluded him, but their victim was probably past eluding anyone by now.

Suddenly it occurred to him where he should look for that victim.

He wished he had thought of the place earlier, but there was no point in reprimanding himself now. Perhaps you didn't want to think of it before, he told himself. Perhaps you were too frightened to let yourself think of it. Now the vampires are gone, and it will be safe.

In Denver, he and Jill had hunted together one night. After Jill had selected their prey, they had taken him to an area of partially demolished buildings. There was a similar place within walking distance of the coffee shop. There was no logic involved in Venneman's thinking of the place. As soon as the image of the ruined buildings occurred to him, something drew him toward them. Once again, he felt a vague hint of something, a tendril of some other reality intruding into this one, a faint trace of a vampire sense. He responded to it without hesitation.

He didn't walk, though, despite the closeness of the place. He drove. He felt weak from his wound, and the chill of the night air was making him shiver with what seemed almost to be a fever. But more than his illness caused him to take his car. He wanted the protective metal shell of the car around him just in case the two vampires hadn't yet left the area.

Venneman parked on a dark side street. The sidewalk here was narrow. Beyond it was the blank wall of a parking garage. It was solid brick for the first three stories. Above that, Venneman knew, it was mostly open. He could not see the openings, but he was familiar with this block and knew they were there. Across the street was the shattered wall of an old building in the process of being torn down. It was in the rubble-strewn lot beyond the wall that Venneman thought Jill and Hapgood might have drained the young man he had earlier seen them with.

He thought: Young man, that's what I call him now. I think of him as their victim. When I was a vampire, I used to think of them as walking sacks of blood, just the way Jill and Elizabeth do. And Hapgood, no doubt.

He thought: I'm killing time. I'm hiding in my car, because I'm afraid

to get out and look. I'm afraid of the dark. When I was a vampire, I loved the dark.

He had loved the grey, pearly light that illuminates the night to a vampire's eyes. Later, when he had moved on to become something greater even than a vampire, he had loved the warm, red glow that had replaced the grey light — until the red glow had become transformed into something that threatened him. Now, parked in the middle of the block, far from the nearest streetlight, he could see little even after his eyes had grown accustomed to the dark.

He opened the door and got out. I'm just a sack of blood myself, now, he thought as he walked across the street. A half-full one, too weak and empty to appeal to a vampire.

He walked cautiously, holding his left arm against his side. He was terrified of falling these days.

He had fallen once. His side had split open agonizingly and audibly. Blood had spurted from the opening.

He had been at work at the time, at one of his series of menial jobs. He had staggered down the hall to the first-aid station, his arm pressed to his side to hold himself together.

He had managed to close the opening in his side with tape. He had been sure he would die from loss of blood or infection, but the wound had closed itself again, as it always did — partially, incompletely. A layer of skin had formed over the opening and he had been able to get on with his normal, diminishing life. Ever since then, he had been frightened of unseen hazards on the ground.

He reached the broken wall and stopped, leaning against it. His heart was pounding. He could feel every pulsation in the pool of blood that filled the hollow in his side. He put his hand against his side and pressed gently, as though to make the pounding quieter. The layer of skin covering his wound pulsed with the beating of his heart, with the waves coursing through the miniature sea of blood filling the hole in his side.

He remembered how acute his senses had been during his vampire days. Vampires could smell blood and hear heartbeats. If they were still there, beyond this wall, waiting silently in the darkness, they would know he was here.

He held his breath and willed his pulse to slow.

He closed his eyes, not wanting to see death swooping down on him.

Minutes passed. Nothing happened.

After a while, Venneman stepped cautiously over the tumbled bricks and into the rubble-strewn lot.

The wall cut off what little light there was on the street. Venneman stared into the darkness, straining his eyes. He could see nothing. He could hear nothing, smell nothing. In his vampire days, he had never felt threatened because his senses had given him such a complete picture of his surroundings. He had been fully aware of all humans near him, of animals, even of insects in the underbrush. Now he felt bereft of all senses, swaddled in cotton, at the mercy of invisible dangers.

Venneman slid his feet forward. The ground was rough, uneven. In the daylight, he had seen the piles of old bricks. Now he felt them with his feet.

Despair overcame him.

How could he navigate through this yard in the darkness? Even in daylight, it would be a dangerous place for him in his current condition. A fall could kill him. Suicide to try to walk around here in the dark! Even if the young man were here, lying dead in the dark, how could Venneman find him?

He gave up and returned to the sidewalk. Here he could at least see the distant streetlight. That faint light would offer no protection should the vampires be here and decide to attack him, but it gave him spiritual comfort. He was a creature of the light, these days.

He walked slowly and painfully back across the street to his car.

As the temperature dropped, the air grew clammier. Venneman leaned against the car and remembered a night in the dry, bracing winter cold of the Colorado Rockies. Newly minted as a vampire, he had walked along a country road, easily carrying his heavy suitcase on his shoulder while he waited for a ride. He had listened to tiny animals in the underbrush while he walked. He had breathed the bitterly cold air, and it was a tonic to him. He had found his ride with two vacationing policemen, two scoffers at the regulations governing hunting. Later, he had gorged himself on the two men's blood. He thought of that vigor and sensual pleasure and utter healthiness now while he leaned weakly against his

car and shivered and the blood pounded in his unhealing wound.

He felt someone die.

Venneman jerked back from the car and stared wildly about him.

He had felt it! It couldn't be an illusion. An illusion couldn't feel so strong, so real, so textured. In front of him, across the sidewalk, in the parking garage, three or four stories up, someone had just died.

My God, he thought, it's a vampire sense! Something *is* left in me!

His pain and weakness forgotten, Venneman ran along the sidewalk, looking for the entrance to the parking garage. He found it. There was a staircase leading up. It was made of concrete and had a rusted metal railing beside it. Venneman could just see it in the light from the streetlight.

Venneman started up the stairs. He slowed as he climbed. His earlier burst of energy deserted him. He held onto the railing and pulled himself up. He moved ever more carefully, afraid of reopening his side, conscious of his weakness. His heart pounded and he gasped for breath.

It took an eternity to reach the third story.

On the landing, Venneman stopped and leaned heavily against the railing. His legs were shaking. Again, he stared into the darkness, trying hopelessly to penetrate it.

Something took form in the darkness, a faint glow, fading even as he became aware of it.

Venneman pushed himself away from the railing and went toward the glow as quickly as he could. For the moment, he had forgotten about the danger of tripping.

The closer he came, the more the faint light took on a shape. By the time Venneman had reached it, the glow had become a human form, a man, stretched out on his back, motionless. He wore a windbreaker, which was open, and his shirt had been ripped away. His chest was big, heavily muscled, and covered with deep gashes. His hands clutched his throat.

Venneman dropped to his knees beside the man and reached out hesitantly to touch him. He put his hand on the man's chest — carefully, avoiding the deep wounds. He could feel no movement at all. No blood came from the gashes. The face was distorted in pain, but Venneman recognized the handsome young man Jill and Hapgood had drawn from

the restaurant with them.

Venneman tugged at the man's hands. After a moment, as though reluctant to surrender, they loosened their grip and fell away. Now Venneman could see the gaping, bloodless hole in the side of the man's neck. Ever so faintly, he could smell blood. The smell was so faint that he thought perhaps he was imagining it, or remembering it.

Venneman leaned closer, trying to see more in the vanishing glow coming from the body.

And without thinking, he put his mouth to the wound and sucked.

Venneman jerked back in horror. His stomach heaved, and he fell to one side, landing on his outstretched hands, and tried to vomit. Nothing came out of him.

After a while, he sat back on his knees and closed his eyes. Why did I do it? he wondered. Vampirism isn't a virus. You can't catch it from the wound a vampire leaves in someone else.

He tried to remember what he had been feeling when he had leaned down and put his mouth to the dead man's neck. Nothing. He had been feeling nothing. It had been an automatic reaction, as though he were still a vampire and feeding on the blood of a helpless victim was a natural, automatic thing to do.

Venneman put his hand gently on the corpse's throat and knelt quietly beside it for a long time, unmoving, his eyes closed. He willed the wound to close, willed the man to come back to life.

He could feel the body's temperature dropping.

Not my responsibility, he thought. I didn't kill him. I couldn't have saved him. How could I have stopped two vampires?

He removed his hand and sat back and concentrated on his sense of hearing. He could hear no footsteps or other hint of other humans. Oh, for the vampire hearing that had once let him listen to the heartbeat and blood pulsations of human beings far away! That vampire sense had been so acute that he had had to learn how to ignore it in order to be able to function at all in the human world.

Finally Venneman opened his eyes. He could see better in the dark than before. The body was a pale shadow on the ground. It had become just a hint of the human life it had contained. Had it really glowed for him before, or had that been his imagination? If Venneman had been

able to see the fading glow of life in it, then he was still something more than a human being.

Maybe I'm still really a vampire, he thought. Maybe Dinsmuir's machine just suppressed my vampire nature somehow, but now it's reawakening, and if I'm patient and wait, it'll come back fully.

Then a lance of pain shot through his unhealing wound, and he knew better.

He pressed his left arm against his side and held his breath until the pain subsided. Moving carefully, trying not to disturb his aching flesh, Venneman leaned forward again. He patted the man's windbreaker until he felt the bulge of a wallet.

Venneman tried to examine the wallet's contents, but his improving night vision wasn't acute enough for that. Details were fuzzy. He resorted to touch.

He seemed to be in luck. He had been afraid that the wallet would be as empty as college students' usually are, but he could feel a thick wad of bills and three different credit cards. The bills might all be ones and the credit cards might all be out of date, but he wouldn't be able to tell that until he got back to his car and its interior light.

A hand lighted gently on his shoulder.

Venneman froze.

Close to his ear, a voice whispered, "You could have joined us earlier. Jill would have changed her mind in time."

Hapgood's breath touched the side of Venneman's face, sending a wave of terror through him.

The hand tightened on Venneman's shoulder, easily lifted him to his feet, and turned him around.

He strained to make out the features that he knew were Hapgood's. Venneman tried to step back, but the deceptively slender hand on his shoulder kept him in place.

Hapgood's voice was smooth and low. "You differ from the rest of us. I can't yet tell how. Jill told me about your strange feeding habits. Is that it? She said you were exceedingly strong, though. You strike me as weak."

Venneman knew instinctively that the truth would instantly convert him in Hapgood's eyes from a potential sex partner to a sack of blood.

“I’ve caught something from the vampires I’ve been feeding on,” he told the vampire. “It took a while. It’s been building. Maybe it’s a virus that only infects us.”

“Indeed?” Hapgood removed his hand. “Perhaps I should take to heart the teaching that one should be satisfied with one’s lot and not go in search of more. We’ll encounter each other again, I’m sure.”

Hapgood didn’t seem to move, but he disappeared. It was as though he had mastered the shape-changing talent of fictional vampires, the ability Venneman had once tried unsuccessfully to find in himself.

Venneman stayed motionless, governed by the instinct of a prey animal not to draw attention to itself. At last, convinced that Hapgood had left, Venneman made his slow, painful way back to the stairs, down them, and to his car.

He slid in behind the wheel and locked the door. He knew that vampire strength was more than sufficient to enable Hapgood or Jill to tear the door off the car to get to him, but nonetheless the car’s metal solidity and weight provided the emotional sense of being protected.

In the overhead light, he checked the wallet more carefully. Most of the bills were twenties. The total was almost two hundred dollars. The credit cards were still valid. Jackpot, Venneman thought.

He guessed that the body would be discovered in the morning, when the first cars arrived to use the parking garage, or even earlier, when the first employees arrived to open up the place for the day’s traffic. Without the wallet, identification might take a while. He was assuming that there was no other identification on the body. Venneman knew he should go back and check the corpse for anything else, but he also knew he couldn’t force himself up there again. That was beyond him both physically and emotionally.

So let’s assume he has no other ID on him, Venneman thought. How long will it take before the police determine who he is and start looking for someone using his credit cards?

That was impossible for Venneman to estimate. The person who found the body might just happen to be someone who had known the man. In that case, the watch for someone using the victim’s credit cards would begin immediately. Or the man might have been from out of town, just passing through, and it might take weeks before he was identified.

Safest to assume the minimum time, Venneman decided.

He checked the time. It was just after ten p.m. Say eight hours at least, he thought. Might be time enough, especially if there's a late-night or early-morning flight leaving soon. Once I'm in a rental car in Denver, I'll switch to cash and it won't matter.

During the drive to the airport and the flight to Denver, such calculations kept Venneman's mind off the dead man and his attempt to suck blood from the wound in his neck. He was less successful at trying not to remember Hapgood and his own reaction to the vampire. He wasn't ashamed of feeling fear. But he couldn't rid himself of a memory of the arousal that had mingled with the terror.

II

Alpensprings

Three

Once again, Richard Venneman found himself driving from Denver into the mountains, heading toward the ski town where he had been made into a vampire. A year had passed since then, but every moment of that first trip and that strange transformation remained vivid in his memory. His drive back down from the mountains, and his further transformation, were just as vivid.

He remembered that during the second trip, the cold air had seemed mild to him. He had navigated by what Elizabeth called “nightlight,” the grey, directionless light that vampires see by at night. But for Venneman, his next transformation had changed that light to the color of blood. Dinsmuir’s machine had changed him from vampire to super-vampire, had changed the color of nightlight from grey to red, and had filled Venneman’s nights with dreams of a sea of blood, an ocean in which the flotsam was human body parts. Toward the end, that ocean had begun to erupt into the waking world. It had broken out of his dreams, pursuing him.

Venneman shivered, as much at that memory as because of the cold mountain air. This time, he would observe the rule Hapgood had praised, that one should be satisfied with his lot. This time, all Venneman wanted was to be a vampire. He would be satisfied with that. He would not try to achieve a further transformation this time.

Jill and Hapgood's victim was named Rick Norton. The coincidence of the first name being almost the same as his own made Venneman uneasy, but he managed to put that feeling aside and practiced until his signature was a reasonable facsimile of the one on the white strip on the back of the credit cards. The cards' limits were high enough for Venneman's purposes. He was able to reserve a one-way seat to Denver on a flight that left shortly after midnight and arrived in Denver, after four hours in the air, at three-thirty in the morning. Traveling west meant that the difference in time zones worked in Venneman's favor by giving him more hours of night at his destination.

Unfortunately, it also meant that he arrived too early. He had to wait at the airport in Denver for more than two hours before the rental car offices opened. He spent that time worrying about the possibility that Norton's body had already been found and identified and that the police would spring out of nowhere and arrest him as soon as he used one of the credit cards.

But his luck held. By dawn he was on his way, heading west from Denver in a rented car. When the police finally managed to track him to the rental car office, the forms he had filled out would lead them on a false trail of supposed business contacts scattered around Denver — but all within the city, none of them in the mountains. By the time they realized that the information was false, it would be too late. Venneman would have accomplished his aim.

I'll be dead, he thought. You're too late, officer. The suspect has succeeded in having all the blood sucked from his body.

When he reached the state highway he wanted, Venneman left the interstate and drove for a few miles, looking for a safe place to stop beside the road. He found one and pulled off and parked. This part of the highway wound through a canyon. A creek ran through the canyon, close to the highway. The turnout held a couple of picnic tables overlooking the creek. At this time of year and this early in the day it was too cold for picnickers and most hikers. At the same time, the ski resorts were not yet open. So Venneman was alone by the creek, and no cars passed by on the state highway.

He watched the water rushing by. It was crystal clear. The morning sun was just peeking over the hilltop behind him and shining into the

water. Venneman could see every pebble on the creek bed, every detail of the rocks the water tumbled over. Briefly, he wondered about the source of the spring water. Melting snow? A mountain spring? It must be cold, he thought. It looks alive, but it's dead and cold, like a vampire.

He thought that reality might be easier to accept if that were true. Vampires should be dead and cold, but instead they were the very opposite.

He took Rick Norton's credit cards from his pocket and ran his finger over them, looking for life in them, for some last trace of the dead man's soul.

Nothing.

Venneman looked around to make sure he was alone. He tossed the cards into the creek and watched as the water carried them rapidly out of sight. Then he returned to the car and continued on his way.

The sign read **Alpensprings**.

He hadn't even realized before that the town had a name. The first time, it had been a place he disapproved of morally. The second, it had been important only as the home of Elizabeth Vallé. The name had been unimportant, irrelevant to his life.

"Alpensprings," he said aloud. Some real estate developer had come up with that one, he thought. It meant nothing. These were the Rockies, not the Alps, and Venneman didn't remember seeing any springs during his previous two trips here. The name had nothing to do with the area or its history. It had been chosen for its sound and its association with Switzerland and in order to elicit some idealized picture of nature. But that was appropriate, Venneman thought. The town itself was a foreign thing and utterly synthetic. It had been planted in the mountains as a lure for outsiders. They were supposed to come here and spend their money in the vain pursuit of happiness and then leave.

Some of us, he thought, are more fully outsiders than anyone else here realizes.

Some of *them*, he corrected himself. I'm not an outsider anymore. Not yet.

He drove first to the motel where he had stayed during both of his

previous visits. He parked outside the office while he considered registering. He had no reason to do so, since he hoped it wouldn't be necessary for him to stay in town for long. It just seemed appropriate that he repeat the entire pattern.

He stared at the building for a while, trying to imbue it with something, some kind of significance, a special presence, but it remained just a building.

The parking lot was empty. The town was probably empty, Venneman realized. It came alive during ski season, when vacationers covered the slopes during the day and, transformed into predators stalking each other, filled the streets and bars at night. But not yet. It was still too early in the year.

The air was already too cold for comfort, though. Venneman started the car again, turned the heat up higher, and drove away.

Once again, he drove out of town along a winding county road and turned off on a dirt road that led to Elizabeth Vallé's house.

After Dinsmuir's machine had transformed Elizabeth into a super-vampire even as it reduced Venneman to humanity, she had exulted in her new ability to move about in daylight. That and the way her human victims would now yearn to have her feed on them again were blessings, in her view. They were gifts that Venneman had rejected, but she was delighted by them. It was her reaction, along with certain things she had said earlier, that had led Venneman to assume that Elizabeth would now be traveling widely. Now she would no longer be restricted to Alpensprings and her house outside the village. By now, she could be anywhere.

But was he assuming too much? For the first time, he questioned his assumption that she would not be here.

Suddenly queasy, Venneman pulled off the road.

If he got to the house and Elizabeth was there, what would she do to him? Had she managed to regain her full size and strength yet? Not that it mattered. Small as she was when he'd last seen her, she'd nonetheless been far stronger than Venneman. She was stronger than an ordinary vampire and therefore much stronger than a human being. She had

demonstrated that in Dinsmuir's lab when she'd easily lifted Venneman to his feet and sunk her teeth into his neck.

But at her first taste of his human blood, she had spat it out in disgust and had done nothing to him. Because of what she'd become, only vampire blood was sweet to her now. So he had no reason to assume that she would harm him, even if she were waiting in her house.

If Elizabeth were indeed present, the worst she would be likely to do would be to thwart Venneman's plans by not letting Karen attack him.

Karen was the real danger.

His blood would be a feast to Karen, and she had reason to want him to suffer. That was both the risk and the promise.

But he had no choice in this. Not any longer. He might as well press on.

He drove on and eventually turned off onto a well-remembered dirt road.

It was close to noon now, but the pine forest closed around him and the road was in deep shadow. He remembered noticing before that Elizabeth had chosen a house built on the north-facing slope of a mountain, so that she would never have to fear direct sunlight. Now he was entering the shadows, freely and of his own will, planning never to emerge from them.

Venneman slowed unconsciously as the car drew near the house. His car moved slowly over the leveled dirt of the driveway. Every noise the tires made — the crunching of gravel, the cracking of a small twig — sounded amazingly loud to him.

He stopped with the front of the car a few feet away from the door.

Venneman took two deep breaths. Then he got out, walked to the door, and knocked.

There was no response. The last time, the sound had been faint because of his weakness. This time, he pounded as hard as he dared, risking reopening his side. The sound still seemed soft to him.

Little matter. It would be loud to a vampire's ears. If Elizabeth had been here, she would have been awake and would have come by now. If Karen were here, she would be lost in that irresistible deep sleep that overcomes vampires during daylight.

He went back to his car and waited for dark.

When he judged that the sky had grown dark enough for Karen to be waking, Venneman went up to the front door and pounded on it again. As best he could, he kept his mind blank, trying not to think about Elizabeth being there or about Karen not being as manipulable as his plan required. He tried to move mechanically, as though he were a robot blindly following a program.

There was no response. He tried again and again as the last trace of daylight faded from the sky and brilliant stars appeared, but still no one answered his knocking. This was the worst possibility of all: that Karen, too, had left, and he had lost his last chance.

There was a low growl behind him and the sound of claws on gravel.

Venneman spun around, throwing up his arm to protect himself.

Something hit him and slammed him back against the heavy wooden door. His legs buckled, and he fell to his knees. Reflexively, as he fell, Venneman clutched at his attacker. His fingers closed in fur. He could feel a thick, stiff hide and powerful muscles working under it. The animal stank of rot and blood. Venneman could barely see it in the almost-total dark.

It was a dog, a small one, but amazingly strong. By luck, Venneman had hold of the loose skin at the rear of its neck, just below the skull. The dog twisted in his grip, turning its head almost one hundred and eighty degrees around as it tried to get its teeth into his hand. It dug its hind legs into the ground and squirmed and snarled at him.

Venneman held on desperately. Small as it was, the dog terrified him. There was something extra in its viciousness and strength, something more than he had ever seen in a dog of its size before. He staggered to his feet and held the dog off the ground while it twisted and jerked madly. Venneman could feel blood leaking from his side, soaking into his shirt and windbreaker.

He felt weak and dizzy. He couldn't hold onto the animal indefinitely. He had no idea what would happen if he let it go. He could scarcely see the beast as it was, and if it got away from him, it could attack him again, and he would not be able to see it coming.

There was a click behind him. Venneman looked over his shoulder as

the door opened. A human shape stood in the doorway, ghostly white, barely visible.

“Don’t hurt him!” It was Karen Belmont’s voice.

“I thought the house was empty,” Venneman said. He thanked God that his voice sounded normal. He couldn’t let Karen know yet just how weak and vulnerable he was. He needed to say his piece first.

He stepped closer to her, and Karen backed away. She looked down, not meeting his eyes. “I hoped you’d go away if I didn’t answer,” she said. She looked up at him again. “Please don’t hurt him! Let him go. I can control him.”

For a moment, Venneman felt a hint of his old, vampire strength returning. It was as though he was drawing it from Karen’s obvious fear of him. She doesn’t realize how I’ve changed, he thought. She thinks I’m still the same as I was when she last saw me. “Karen,” he said. Even his voice sounded stronger to him. “Karen, I’m not here to hurt you. I just want to talk to you. I have an offer to make. As for this dog, you’d better make him stay away, or you know what I’ll do to him.”

She nodded. “I know.” She stepped out of the house, circling warily around Venneman, and moved away toward the woods. She disappeared quickly in the dark.

Then Venneman heard a strange call from her direction, a rising and falling cry. It was Karen’s voice, but it was different in a way that made the skin at the back of his neck tingle. It was an animal cry clothed in Karen’s voice.

The dog struggled even more desperately in his grip. “Let go of him now!” Karen shouted.

Venneman let the dog go with a sense of relief. One second more, he thought, and his fingers would have loosened whether he wanted them to or not.

The dog squirmed away from his grip, dropped to the ground, and leaped into the darkness.

Venneman backed away slowly until he felt the step at his heel. He turned and entered the house. He could see almost nothing. He slid his hand over the wall beside the door, searching for a switch.

Was there any electricity here? The only other time he’d been in the house, he had had his vampire vision to see by. There had been no lights

on, as far as he could remember. His hand hit a switch. He flipped it, and the hallway was flooded with light from an overhead fixture.

Of course, he thought. Elizabeth had made her living as a writer. Possibly she used a typewriter, but more likely a word processor. What with that and a fax machine and all the other paraphernalia of the modern world, she would have kept electricity supplied to the house for her convenience.

He left the door open behind him and walked down the hallway, seeing it anew in electric light. The last time, everything had been awash in red for him. Elizabeth had expected him to appreciate the fine art and furniture, but the light he saw by had obliterated color and detail. Now he could see it as it had been intended to be seen — by human eyes, not by vampire eyes.

So much for vampires being superior to humans, he thought. We humans can appreciate sights they don't even see. And fine food and drink, both of which are nauseating to them.

Then his temporary strength began to drain away again, oozing from him with the blood leaking from his side. The pain returned, making it difficult to breathe except in short, shallow breaths.

Bent over, left arm pressed to his side, Venneman shuffled down the hallway toward the sitting room he remembered. Fortunately, there was an overhead light in there, too.

Venneman lowered himself carefully, painfully onto the same imitation 18-Century couch he had sat on last time. He leaned his head against the wooden back and closed his eyes. He could feel himself drifting down a long, dark tunnel. It slanted ever more downward. Far ahead, a red light grew brighter as he moved toward it. His speed increased.

He sensed a presence. It was strong, angry, and yet it was afraid of him.

He opened his eyes. Karen stood in the doorway looking at him. She was squinting in the bright electric light, and her nostrils were twitching like an animal's. "You're very different," she said.