

Needed

He watches from the closet when I bring them home.

He always gives them the one night. One last night to savor everything they can get. It's sweet, actually. It's also fair. At least to them. Honorable, in a strange way.

I always bring one home, but I'm not easy. I make them work for it. They bring their best effort and I put them through the paces. They deserve what they get.

He says that's good. He says that gives them a robust flavor.

Come the morning, they're always gone, but they never make it out of the door. Just before dawn, while I'm asleep, he takes them for his own. I've never been woken by it. He moves too quickly for them to scream, I think. By the time they know he's there, their blood is his.

I didn't even know he was in the closet until a few weeks ago. I knew of him, of course. I just didn't know he was nearby.

He first came to me in a dream. He was pale and his eyes were a startling, blood red. His long fingers wrapped around mine as we danced. He moved smooth as silk, but he let me lead. I could feel his taut body beneath his cloak when he pressed against me. He was ice cold, but his strength was comforting.

I'd just lost my modeling job the week before. Armondo said I was too old and too Midwestern, and both had gone out of fashion. Of course, that never stopped his eyes from wandering when I changed, or his hands from groping when we were alone.

I got low. I slept through the days and wandered at night. I found refuge in bottles and shallow friends until staggering home in the wee hours.

That's when he found me.

He came to me in that dream and as we danced, he promised me my youth back. He promised me a career. He promised me retribution. All I had to do was bring fresh blood home with me. I laughed and happily agreed, enjoying the absurdity of the dream. It seemed so surreal at the time.

I thought the dream was a result of my binge and depression. But each night I brought a man home with me, I looked like my younger self in the mirror the next morning. The bags and wrinkles were gone from around my eyes, and the hangover never lasted past the first cup of coffee. After a few weeks of it, I began to suspect the truth.

When they found Armondo eviscerated in his upscale apartment, I knew for sure: He was real. And he would keep his promises.

In another time and another life, I might have balked. In this time and this life, I reveled in it. I found myself dancing around my apartment. I couldn't stop smiling. Out of curiosity, I took more interest in the men I brought home and checked up on them the days and weeks after our night together.

That's when I learned that they all disappeared.

Afraid someone might take notice, I began to use false names and troll less reputable clubs. It worked. No one has ever come asking questions.

A few weeks ago, I happened to glance over my lover's shoulder and I saw it. Those beautiful, blood-red eyes peeked out from between the closet slats. He was there, watching, waiting.

In another time and another life, those eyes might have disturbed me. In this time and this life, I smiled and winked at him. I like to think he smiled back. I like to think he exposed the fangs that draw the blood from his nightly meals.

I feel a hollow place in my belly every morning. It grows and grows throughout the day until the nighttime when I lead the next poor soul through the door. As they get their pleasure and I gaze over their shoulder, I feel that hollow place fill with the sight of his eyes. I've spent my entire life being gawked at, objectified, and used.

But I have never felt so wanted-- so needed-- as I do now.

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