

London Nights

Book 1: The Lost Boy

Von Ulysses

Kapitel 7: The Shadow Queen

The sunlight reflected off of the surface of the water lily pond and played on Jonathan's face as he sat next to it. He drew on his cigarette. Quiet days at the manor were a rare commodity and after last night, he cherished it even more.

He had given a short report about the events of the night during breakfast, bringing Velkan, Castor and Myra up to speed. However, he had decided to paint himself as the one who had messed things up by going too far too fast. After the conversation with Richard, Jonathan didn't want to make Kearon seem like a threat to the others and deep in his heart Jonathan knew the Banshee hadn't done this to him deliberately. It didn't make the memory easier though.

The tall grass next to him rustled and a big grey rat emerged and scurried towards him. It caressed Jonathan's hand with its nose, tickling him with its whiskers until he turned his hand around. The rat climbed on his palm and from there up his arm to his shoulder where it started to play with Jonathan's hair.

Jonathan chuckled and helped the little critter by pushing the strands away to allow the rat access to his ear. Its whiskers tingled as they brushed along the sensitive skin of his earlobe.

"What's gotten you all excited, Celeste, eh?"

No one but he could understand the reply to the question.

"Oh, bloody hell. Here we go."

He barely said that as hurried footsteps approached on the gravel of the garden paths. Jonathan stood up and snipped the cigarette into the pond before tenderly running his hand over the soft fur of his familiar.

"Thanks for the heads up, Celeste. It was too good to be true anyway. Oh, stop laughing, furball, or I won't tell you where Mrs Gunderson hid the cheese this time."

Kearon came running towards him. The Banshee was sweating profoundly and his usually pale cheeks were burning. He stopped in front of Jonathan and tried to catch his breath.

"I... I've been... running all the way from... the tube station." he gasped.

"Good for you." Jonathan raised an eyebrow. "So? What did we fuck up this time?"

"Richard..." Kearon choked and hunched over, supporting himself with his hands propped against his thighs. "He... he's been taken..."

A few minutes later, Jonathan waited with strained patience while Kearon gulped down a glass of water. Celeste sat on her hind legs in the fruit bowl on the sideboard of the drawing room and ripped grapes from their stem to munch on them.

Finally, the banshee put away the glass. He sat hunched over in the armchair and played with his long fingers nervously.

"Let's make one thing perfectly clear." Jonathan said calmly. "No more lies. One more lie from you and whoever is after you, I will happily throw you to them."

Kearon looked up, his purple eyes widened. "But--"

"No, you heard what I said and I mean it. Richard is a kind and sweet guy. He's caring, loving and most of all he is trusting when he lets someone into his heart which, if you ask me, is way too big. I am none of those things at least not when you don't deserve it and if you keep lying, Kearon, then I will decide that you are not worth anything. You'll be on your own again."

"Sir--"

"Don't sir me." Jonathan groaned. "You know my name. And all I want is the truth. Velkan said you found someone who turned you into a man and you paid them for it. I was willing to let that go then because everyone was eager to help you and I was already becoming the bad guy but enough is enough. Who gave you this body?"

"I... please...I didn't want..."

Celeste squeaked in the fruit bowl and Jonathan turned his head towards her, twisting his mouth and narrowing his eyes. The rat licked her paw innocently.

"You know how it feels when a rat tells you that the best way to catch a mouse is cheese?" Jonathan asked directed at Kearon.

"No?"

"I do." Jonathan massaged his temples. "I'm not your enemy, Kearon. I know you didn't mean to do what you did last night. I just need you to be honest with me."

"I never wanted... I never wanted any of this to happen..."

"What is going on here?" Velkan stood in the door of the drawing room. He took off his headphones. His track pants and the grey muscle shirt were drenched in sweat, he had been working out.

"Oh no!" Jonathan snapped his fingers, drawing Kearon's focus back to him. "Don't look at him. This is between you and me. We don't play good cop, bad cop."

"Dare I ask?" Velkan came over to the couch.

"Short version: Richard has been abducted and I suspect by whoever our new friend here got his body from."

"What?!"

"Please, I... I..." Kearon looked as if he was about to burst into tears.

Velkan opened his mouth to say something but stopped as Jonathan put his hand on the wolf's arm and shook his head. He knew Velkan too well. The Banshee's plight already moved Velkan's heart and if Jonathan was honest with himself, so it did his.

"Listen." Jonathan leaned forward, giving Kearon a faint smile. "I know how it is, okay? Not what you went through, but I know about making a pact to get what you desire."

In Jonathan's case that had been power. While witches were naturally tuned into the magical ether, the power they could draw from the space between worlds was limited. If one formed a pact with one of the beings that dwelled there, however, the situation was quite different. Usually, Jonathan avoided talking about this matter.

"There is always a price to pay."

"Yes..." Kearon pulled up snot loudly.

"And in your case that price was?"

"I.. I was supposed to... work it off. Using my... talents."

"Not for something pleasant, I suspect. I don't think to confront someone with their worst fear is a trick to be performed to entertain."

"No." Kearon shook his head. "I was supposed... supposed to force people... to confess things. Or to... to... motivate them, they called it. Motivate to play along." Tears ran down Kearon's pale cheeks. "But I can't! I lost control of my powers after the change! I was so scared. Scared that they might... might take my body away again. Or worse... so I... I..."

"So you ran."

"Yes." Kearon's shoulders sank, he looked utterly defeated. "I hid but... but then Richard found me... and I thought I would be safe here."

"You would have been but for heaven's sake, you should have been honest with us." Velkan said quietly. "Kid, we'd never have turned you away."

"I'm so sorry."

"I know." Velkan went over to Kearon's armchair and squatted down next to it. "Just tell us everything. Richard means the world to me, Kearon, I need to help him."

Jonathan felt the touch of Celeste's paws on his shoulder as the rat snuggled up against his neck. He smiled. Celeste thought he needed reassuring. She was just as new to her master having a stable relationship as he was himself. However, he'd never think about Richard as a rival for Velkan's affection. The bond those two shared was special, akin to what Jonathan shared with Tariq, but even deeper.

He reached up and tickled Celeste's twitching nose affectionately.

"Who helped you, Kearon?" Jonathan said. "We need a name."

"I don't know her name." Kearon looked back and forth between Velkan and Jonathan. "She calls herself the Shadow Queen."

"Bloody hell." Jonathan groaned. He stood up and Celeste jumped from his shoulder onto the couch.

Velkan rose up, too. "Sydney's London counterpart," he said.

Both of them knew who Kearon was talking about here. The head of the supernatural criminal underworld of London, the Shadow Queen. As Syd's colourful moniker "Lord of the Bone Market" in Paris, her name was whispered in every dark corner of the city. Jonathan nodded slowly. "Everyone upstairs to Richard's room. We have work to do. I'll join you in a moment. I need to get some things from my room."

As Richard finally regained consciousness, he found himself lying on a pristine white couch. He sat up slowly, trying to ignore the pain which surged through his head. Sunlight streamed into the room through the impressive window wall which opened up to a spectacular view across the Thames.

The river glistened in the sun several hundred feet below. Richard stepped closer to the window. He could see the Tower in the distance and Tower Bridge, also the MHS Belfast, the former battleship which was now part of the Imperial War Museum and permanently anchored near Tower Bridge. The curved windows of City Hall reflected the sunlight.

Finally, it dawned on him. He was in the Shard. Not all the way to the top, he had been there with Tariq once, but about halfway up the enormous glass spire which had once been Europe's tallest building, somewhere on the floors with the completely unaffordable luxurious flats, most of which were still empty to this day. This was a

long way away from Whitechapel, basically in a different world.

His faint reflection in the glass reminded him of what had happened. The left side of his face was already turning purple and his jaw hurt as Richard tried to open his mouth. He touched his cheek and flinched as the pain intensified.

"I apologise for that. These men had no right to treat you that way."

Richard swirled around to locate the source of the voice. A woman in a black pinstripe suit had entered the room. She was exceptionally beautiful. Tall, slender with porcelain skin and deep blue eyes, crimson lips, high cheekbones and a cascade of dark blonde hair which reached all the way down to her hips.

"How did I get here?"

"I had you brought here after that unfortunate incident in Whitechapel. As I said, this was no way to treat a member of the Whitechurch Society."

"You know who I am?"

"Of course I do, Mr Winters. I'm making a habit out of knowing all the important people in London."

"I don't think I'm important." Richard smiled, unsure of what to make of the strange woman. "Wait." He looked at his hand. "Where is my ring?!"

"You were wearing one?"

"Yes!" Richard felt his heart beat faster. He couldn't have lost it. Not that ring. "I wore it when..."

"Please sit down for a moment." The woman stepped to the counter of the freestanding kitchen isle which was almost clinically white like everything in this flat. Richard noticed that it was way too perfect. This place wasn't being lived in it was all set up to present the rentable space in the Shard to potential tenants, down to the perfectly shaped shiny red plastic apples in the bowl on the couch table.

While the woman was talking into her phone, Richard started looking for a way out. She looked like she was easy to overwhelm even for a smaller guy as he was, but Richard suspected that there was more to her than met the eye. He felt a presence which was both fascinating and deeply intimidating. She practically radiated power. Before he could dwell on that thought, Scarface, Beard and Tooth Gap entered the fake apartment, all three glared at him for a second but were quickly drawn in by the woman's aura. They snapped at attention almost like soldiers.

"I hear our guest was wearing a ring when you gentlemen attacked him."

"He attacked-"

"I'm not interested." the woman instantly interrupted Tooth Gap. "He was wearing a ring. Where is it?"

Scarface looked his feet, shifting uncomfortably for a moment before reaching into his pocket and producing a heavy ring with a big red gem set into it. The faces of wolves were engraved on both sides of the ring. It looked as if it was silver but it actually was platinum, even though Richard didn't share Velkan's intolerance towards the former. The fae blood cancelled that out.

"That's it." Richard stated the obvious.

"Very well then." The woman took the ring from Scarface's hand. "Apologize."

"M'um?"

"Apologize!"

"I'm sorry." He didn't look at Richard as he pressed that out between gritted teeth.

"Very good. This is no behaviour towards someone like our guest. First, you do that to his face and now you steal. I'm disappointed."

She turned away from him and started towards Richard but then stopped and

pondered before holding up her right hand, closing it into a fist and twisting her wrist around.

Scarface didn't make as sound as his neck followed the twisting motion of the woman's hand and snapped with a sickening sound. He slumped to the floor. Richard stared at the scene with widened eyes and didn't move even as the woman came over and held out the ring towards him. It demanded all his strength to keep his hand from trembling as he took it back and put it on.

"You can go. And take out the trash." the woman said and sat down in the white armchair opposite Richard.

Tooth Gap and Beard were both white as a sheet as they picked up their dead friend from the floor and hurried out of the apartment, leaving Richard with this terrifying woman.

"Don't be scared."

"I'm not." It was obvious that she knew he was lying. Richard twisted the ring on his finger nervously.

"So you were welcomed into the Ward family?" The woman said, interpreting the meaning of the ring correctly which at this point didn't come as a surprise to Richard anymore. He felt trapped in a corner by an enemy who was a hundred steps ahead of him.

"Jeremiah gave his blessing, yes." Richard replied truthfully as lying seemed completely futile. He was officially a member of the family of Jeremiah Ward, the Wolf Jarl of London. Even though Velkan kept his distance from his family, this meant that Richard had a certain standing among the supernatural society of the city.

"That makes you very valuable indeed." She smiled. "You took something from me, Richard, but with you here I have a bargaining chip which completely changes the game."