

Sophie Duncan



Smiling

Born

Samling Born

by

Sophie Duncan

Published by Wittegen Press

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Samling Born

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This story is young adult contemporary fantasy.

Author's Note

Samling-Born was published 4th July 2012.

This story actually started life as a fanfic and is in fact only the start of that story. I had been developing this idea beyond the unfinished fanfic for some time, adapting the characters and changing the sex of two of them, since the characters in the fanfic were all male. Sometimes fanfic requires a bit of a crowbar to make things fit, simply because the universe you're playing in is not yours, and I have to say, I'm happier with it as an original idea. That's probably why it was never finished in the first place.

I class this story as young adult, even though it's at the older end of that spectrum, because I think it is dealing with plot and concepts that will appeal to a young adult audience. I have plans for Luka and Ben and the rest of Race Memory and this story will definitely develop with the rest of the plot I have in my head.

~*~

Luka strolled into the hallway and dumped his jacket on the pile of other coats that the rest of the band always left on the ratty old table by the front door. It wasn't the tidiest of houses, but he and the other five members of Race Memory had called it home for the last year and a half and they were now making just enough money from sales and concerts to pay the rent. He heard the voices of the others coming from the living room, but his eyes drifted up the stairs as his instincts called him away from company; it was the full moon. Although his body was not as affected as his ancient ancestors' had once been, his thoughts wandered with the power of the moon and he preferred solitude when She held sway.

However, he wasn't alone in the hallway for long, because he was greeted from the top of the stairs with, "Hey, Luka, where've you been?"

"Needed some air after the recording session today," Luka more or less told the truth and smiled at Kei as their diminutive drummer jogged down the flight towards him.

It had been an intense day, since they were actually working on an album and specifically some of his songs, so he'd been in the thick of the sometimes chaotic process that changed the music from one person's concept to something the whole group was happy with. Still, it was a white lie that it had only been the claustrophobia of the studio down the road that had made him want to tear at the walls.

His reaction to the moon was particularly bad this month and he had had to leave quite abruptly when his instincts to growl at Travis, their sometimes over-exuberant lead singer, had nearly overtaken him. The others all knew he could get grouchy from time to time, even if all of them didn't know the cause, and everyone knowing everyone else's habits due to living in each other's pockets, Luka recognised understanding in Kei's almond eyes.

"Travis was pretty full on today," Kei agreed, revealing he'd seen a little more than Luka had expected. "We all wanted to deck him."

"I heard that!" came from the living room.

"Good, take note!" Kei called back and Luka knew he wasn't going to escape just yet as his friend naturally swept him along and headed into the fray.

Kei might have been only 5'4", but what he lacked in height he made up for in presence and he was always a calming influence on Luka, so he wasn't too worried about the growl that was sitting at the back of his mind. He judged he could last half an hour at least before he needed to head up to his attic room, that he had bagsied as soon as he'd seen it, for some solitude.

"Finished sulking?" Travis threw at him and grinned widely from where he was kneeling up over the back of the armchair in which he had once been sitting.

Luka just gave him the finger and was laughed at before Travis' carefully coiffured streaks disappeared from view again as he sank down into the oversized, once grand Queen Anne chair that had been the only stick of furniture in the place when they'd rented it. Mel, who was opposite the door

on the beanbag, saw and chuckled at the gesture. She could not have heard the exchange, however, because she had her earphones on and was, as usual, working away on her laptop whilst listening to a track that Luka's sensitive hearing could make out quite clearly.

All his senses heightened when his wolf was close to the surface, it was one of the reasons he liked to be alone.

"At last, now we can eat," Ben waved a hand at him from where his long limbs were sprawled across most of the sofa and much of his best friend, Sim, as well, but Ben didn't look up from the takeaway menu he was reading.

Sim, who never minded Ben's lack of interest in personal space, since she had had most of her life to get used to it, did look up and her gaze was slightly more concerned than the others. Ben and Sim had been Luka's friends since he had moved to London at 13; they had more or less adopted him when he'd appeared at their school, friendless, quiet and more interested in his guitar than a football.

It had not taken long for him to share his secret with his new allies and Ben, eccentric in his own mad-musician, mostly genius way, had accepted the news without even a missed-step. However, Sim, devoted to Ben, but just a little more conventional, had never quite settled with the idea. Luka tried to give Sim space during the full moon, since, for those who knew, the signs of his wolf were there, but his stomach had grumbled at the prospect of food and he knew well enough that hunger was an additional instinct he could do without.

Kei flopped into the last piece of furniture in the room, a much smaller armchair than the Chesterfield. It was always free, since Kei was the only one who really fitted into it and it was just his size. Knowing that he wasn't going to get a chance at the third seat on the sofa, Luka sunk down to the rug, folded his long legs under him and leant back against Kei's chair. He closed his eyes just for a moment, taking in the scents and sounds of the room rather than the sights and, lone wolf or not, the familiar life around him made him feel at home.

"So, what does everyone want?" Ben knocked him out of the moment as he took charge.

Ben was their unspoken leader, always had been, always would be as far as Luka was concerned. He didn't do it out of any sense of ego, it was just the natural drive in him, and people listened when Ben spoke. No-one actually moved to look at the menu, they all knew it backwards, but Travis did have the sense to ask, "How much money have we got?"

There was then a scrabbling in pockets and purses and the dumping of coin and a very rare note on the coffee table. Sim, the group's banker at times like this, quickly counted the money and announced, "Well, it won't buy another hour in the recording studio, but we can manage a decent meal."

The music business had been a life of peaks and troughs since they'd

formed the band and begun performing wherever they could get a gig and money was always tight. With the album coming together, a lot of their cash was tied up in that, but Luka was glad it wouldn't be beans on toast again.

"In that case, 21!" Mel whooped and revealed that she could actually hear something over the din of her music and had been paying attention, despite never stopping the typing that was probably another assignment for her uni computing course.

21 was crispy duck, a treat they all enjoyed when they could afford it (except Sim, who would be going for her usual vegetarian tofu). Luka nodded his agreement when Ben cast his gaze around for consensus; he wasn't that interested in the pancake part of the meal, but plenty of meat sat well with all his instincts.

"Okay," Ben announced, pulling out his phone and beginning to dial, "21, 40 and..." he glanced at Sim.

"Yes, we can even afford the extras!" she replied with a grin.

Luka closed his eyes again as Ben engaged one of the staff at the takeaway, who knew their phone number by sight, in conversation. He wasn't tired, but his wolf was crawling under his skin and he had found it best when it was so active to remain relaxed as much as he could. However, his apparently somnolent condition did not go unnoticed and Travis was never one to let sleeping wolves lie.

"Did we tucker you out, Old Boy?" his friend kicked his knee and teased in a very bad public school accent.

It was not a new jibe: Ben, Sim and he had all been private school brats and Travis and sometimes Mel liked to needle them with it. Their parents had plenty of money and could have bailed them out at any time, but they had refused to fall back on handouts while stretching their wings at uni and working on the band and it had, at the low points, been a contentious issue. However, with their relative success in the last year, Luka wasn't normally sensitive about his privileged roots and Travis could get away with a lot with his cheeky grin and sparkling eyes, but it was really the wrong time to be goading Luka.

He opened his eyes and glared at Travis, who actually shrank in his seat, which told Luka all he needed to know. He bit down the growl that threatened and forced himself to move slowly as he stood up.

"I have stuff to finish, I'll be in my room until the food arrives," he managed and then stalked out.

~*~

Luka sat on the roof and looked up at the milky-white glow of the full moon. He had calmed down amazingly quickly after climbing out onto the ledge outside his window. The small private space was the reason he had taken the cramped room on the top floor of the house. The others had been surprised, since it had been his father's contacts which had found the place, but the freedom in the middle of London was worth all the stairs and he relaxed in the peace. He'd heard Ben go out to fetch their takeaway a while

ago and he wasn't sure how long he'd been meditating, but his wolf was back under control.

The moon was his one big weakness, his only acknowledgement of the world he had rejected at the start of his teens, his only admission of the wolf inside. Luka was not ashamed of the wild heart he kept well buried, but when he had chosen not to join The Samling, the greater Pack, he had also chosen to keep that side of himself covered. Only on clear, warm nights like this one, when he could sneak away from the others for a few minutes, did he relax and listen to the instincts in his chest.

Content, but occasionally wistful about the power that prickled under his skin, Luka smiled up at the serene lady and indulged himself.

Refusing to join The Samling had not been condemned by anyone, it had been his choice and, under the circumstances, everyone had understood and been very kind about it. However it had naturally excluded him from local pack events and from the unity and extended family that his parents, his sister and then his brother had described. That meant Luka had very little experience and mostly second hand accounts of the rush that the presence of another wolf could create.

However, that didn't mean he didn't recognise it when it flooded his body.

Instantly, Luka stood up and instinctively sniffed the air: he smelt werewolf. The front door slammed below and Luka dived for the window as he realised the wolf had entered the house.

Not being au fait with his instincts, Luka had never thought he had a sense of territory, nor a pack, but his thoughts went immediately to his band-mates and the threat an active wolf could pose to them if it was hostile. Another wolf without a pack was rare and completely circumvented the polite, careful formalities his society had developed over the years for dealing with the wild instincts that came along with the animal power. Luka wasn't sure what he was going to do, but he growled defensively under his breath as he swung back through the window into his room and charged to the protection of his friends.

He slammed open his door and hurtled towards the living room where his senses had already picked up raised voices. It was like a switch had been flicked in his body as the world took on a silver tinge and he could even smell the scent of dog. Hackles well and truly up, Luka charged into the room.

Everyone was in the living room and, much to Luka's concern, huddled in the centre of the room, all standing up and looking worried. However, on first inspection, Luka could not locate the interloper. It was only as Travis took note of his entrance, turned and, eyes going wide, suddenly stepped sideways away from him that Luka discovered his rival and instinct and knowledge made a very large mess in his head.

Ben was standing at the centre of their friends, cradling his hand and swearing colourfully as Sim examined a wound that had Luka's nose twitching with the smell of blood. His friend was injured, that set off every

alarm in Luka, but he froze at the edge of the room as his senses told him, without a doubt, that friend and rival were one and the same.

Confused and afraid, Luka whined.

Only Travis was paying him any attention, unreasoning fear as far as Luka could judge, but, at his sound, Ben looked up. No-one else could have heard it, it had been such a small admission of disquiet, but Luka saw the spark of dominance it generated instantly in Ben, even if his friend didn't know it yet.

Ben's jaw went slack as their eyes met and, coupled with Travis' reaction, Luka knew he had to be showing signs of his heritage. Whether it was his eyes, or his teeth, or maybe even more, Luka could do nothing about it as all attention followed Ben's lead and fell on him.

"Jesus Christ!" Mel made the exclamation for everyone.

"Hallowe'en's not till next month," Sim jumped in, her tone almost humorous, even if her expression said different.

Luka appreciated the attempt to give him a way out of the situation from one of the two friends who knew his secret, but the second of those was staring at him, lost somewhere between disbelief and challenge and he could no more cover his reaction than he could stop breathing.

"Luka, Ben's been bitten by a dog," Kei tried to be the sensible one.

"Not a dog," Luka returned, his voice husky as his growl refused to go away completely.

"No way!" Sim gave up the pretence, her voice full of worry as she continued. "You said your lot don't do that anymore."

"Don't, not can't," Luka returned, the threat in the room making him blunt.

The passing of power was not something werewolves did much anymore, preferring to use normal family lineage unless they were bringing a loved-one into The Samling. Why someone had chosen to put the energy into a bite filled Luka with fear, old and new, but he did not have much time to consider the why of things as he tried to handle the what. He could feel the power filling Ben heartbeat by heartbeat, touching every cell, and he could sense his friend's instincts rising with it.

Werewolves were very careful about territory; it could get ugly very quickly if they didn't and Luka couldn't help himself, he curled his lip and snarled at the newcomer to his domain.

"What the fuck?" Travis backed off from his position closest to Luka towards the others.

However, he stepped rapidly forward again as Ben growled back.

"No, no!" Sim did a very dangerous thing then, she stepped in between the growing rivalry. "Stop it, Luka. Fix it!"

The look of near panic on Sim's face found the off switch and, instincts or not, Luka stifled the growing urge to throw one of his closest friends out of the house with the same will he had called upon at age thirteen. Sim didn't exactly relax, but she lowered arms that had been held out to both Ben and

Luka and just looked between the pair instead. Luka leant sideways and glanced around Sim at where Ben was standing stock-still, flanked by Mel and Kei. His stomach did somersaults as he recognised the wolf being born, but he hung onto the thought that his friend wasn't growling anymore.

Sim's attention finally came to rest on him, and the demand for a resolution was still behind those blue eyes.

"There's no going back," he was honest with the worry in Sim, but he tried to channel some of the aggression he was still feeling into authority.

Sim's aghast face almost broke his heart then and Luka couldn't meet that, so he looked to Ben instead and asked as evenly as he could manage, "You understand what is happening?"

Slowly, Ben nodded, clearly conflicted by what was and what was to be as he replied, "I do now."

"I don't!" Kei objected.

"Nor me," Travis joined in, but Luka couldn't have given a damn about explanations right then, because he knew that Sim's intervention would not last for long.

Guilt was Luka's strongest emotion then, a sense of responsibility for the renegade among his people who had done this for some unknown reason. He'd faced this type of uncivilised behaviour before, he knew what it was like to be forced towards something you did not understand or want, and he did not want Ben suffering as he had.

"We can make this work," he told Ben, whom he knew would understand where he was coming from.

Ben nodded again, eyes flicking to Sim for a moment and then back to Luka.

"My room," Luka decided.

"No, mine," Ben snapped back, hackles clearly on the rise.

Luka felt the growl of defiance rising in his throat at the claim on territory and it was only the smell of fear from the rest of the room that made him stomp on the sound before it made it out of his mouth. He used every piece of sensible thought he could to hold down a refusal to relinquish ground: this had to be horrible for Ben, to suddenly find himself with instincts that had never been part of his life; it was more important to get out of the way of the others than it was to argue over where they found the privacy they would need to settle things. They had to make it to somewhere private sooner rather than later.

Still, Luka had to fight with himself to nod his head and acquiesce to Ben's demand, but as soon as he did, they were both heading towards Ben's room.

"Hey!" Kei objected as Ben, then Luka, followed by Sim all headed out of the room, but Luka was just glad when none of the other three followed.

~*~

Everything was happening so quickly that Luka's head was spinning and his thoughts were scattered as no little panic mixed with his rising emotions. He was moving from moment to moment and through it all, he clung

desperately to the only thought that was important, to limit the fallout from Ben's werewolf encounter.

For now, how things had happened didn't matter, just dealing with the consequences was what was needed. Luka's head was full of half-remembered discussions he had had with his Dad when he'd been approaching the time when he would have joined the Samling and been accepted by their local pack. Those talks had been frank: wolves didn't mess around when it came to informing their offspring of the facts of pack life, all of them. Luka held back from focusing on the ideas those memories generated, especially since they brought back tougher recollections that knotted an old fear in the pit of his stomach.

Ben barrelled through the doorway to his bedroom, still cradling his hand and Luka followed swiftly behind. He would have slammed the door shut there and then, but Sim was bringing up the rear of their retreat and he did not have enough presence of mind to stop the worried young woman from entering. Instead, Luka came to a halt and let Sim charge past him to where Ben was still holding his bleeding hand with a very ratty handkerchief over it. Luka's stomach did a flip-flop when Ben actually backed away from his best friend.

Sim came to a flustered halt as Ben eyed her warily and Luka's heart tore to pieces. He understood Ben's motives, he could feel the danger in them both, but Sim wasn't party to that and the rejection was clear in her face. Scattered wits or not, Luka did not want this accident to damage any relationships and he was not going to let Ben be the bad guy in Sim's eyes. That more than anything else kicked him into action. Stepping between Sim and Ben very deliberately, he turned to Sim and told her, "Get out."

Sim's mouth opened to protest, but Luka beat her to any argument with, "I can't fix this with you here."

Throwing Sim's plea back at her more or less worked, because Sim's mouth closed, but it closed into a thin line. Luka maintained a hard stare, admiring Sim's bravery at facing him down, but he really did not want a face-off with Sim's stubbornness right then, so he let out a small growl. Sim blanched and backed off. As soon as he received a response, Luka eased off on the intimidation, knowing his message had hit home, and he glanced towards the door and then back at Sim. Sim looked over his shoulder at Ben, but the look was not all that certain and it became pained as Ben gave some sort of silent reply.

"Please, explain this to the others and whatever you do, don't let anyone back in here, no matter what you think you hear," Luka kept the aggression in his chest out of his voice as he gave Sim the final instruction.

Telling Sim to take charge outside was as much as he could offer his friend, and he thought it helped the stricken stare that Sim turned from Ben back to him, but not much. Still, it was imperative that only wolves were left to finish wolf business and so he maintained his serious attention on Sim until his friend turned reluctantly and headed for the door.

Luka watched Sim go, even to the point of watching the handle turn back to closed once the door had been shut, and then went quickly for the lock, turning the key and then throwing it across the room.

"Not very sensible if either of us needs to make a hasty exit," Ben observed, his tone sour and broken.

Guilt welled up in Luka as he heard all the emotions in his friend's voice that Ben wasn't expressing in words: fear, anger, maybe even hate. He didn't want to turn around then; this wasn't fair, he shouldn't have had to deal with renegades again. Yet, the fear in his friend's tone was what touched Luka the most, and he was the only one who understood this properly, so he turned slowly and met Ben's fixed gaze.

"We won't," he replied as evenly as he could.

Ben looked away then, down to the wound he was cradling and he began to wrap the handkerchief more securely round it as he asked, "So, what happens now?"

That question was one Luka's mind had been skirting around since he'd realised what was going down and a scared thirteen year old was in charge as he replied almost instantly, "Don't know."

Ben looked sharply back up at him and snapped, "You're lying."

Luka opened his mouth to object, but nothing came out. The adult caught up with the boy and he knew Ben was right. He had to face what was in his past and in his near future if they were both to come out of this with the band and some kind of relationship between them intact. He started from the beginning, "You're absorbing the power of the wolf from the bite."

Ben's look then was withering, but Luka had to be sure they both fully understood what was happening, so he set his shoulders and pressed on, "That means there will be two of us in one territory and neither of us belongs to a pack."

He dragged in a deep breath as thoughts of The Samling brought back nasty memories. Luka wanted to wrap his arms around himself and sink into a corner as those thoughts surfaced more clearly, but there was still part of him, the wolf, that recognised arrival and it gave him a steely veneer as he continued, "We have to come to terms."

Another breath and he dropped his gaze for a moment as he tried to find the right words to say what his belly was feeling. There was a good reason pups were taken into The Samling at the onset of puberty, when they were still children, it avoided the stirrings that he could feel in his body where dominance and sexuality mixed in overwhelming measure.

"Not a simple conversation then," Ben interrupted the storm that was brewing in him and Luka looked back up to see a glint in his friend's eye that hitched breath in his throat.

He shook his head and straightened his shoulders again, denying a heart-flutter as that look challenged him and he forced his voice to be strong as he replied, "We fight."

His stomach did a dozen flip-flops as he laid out what was going to happen

for himself as well as Ben. Ben's eyes widened, but no more. Luka'd been here before, fighting for his identity without any choice in the matter, and he shuddered. Ben saw his reaction and the in-between time allowed a little concern, since he asked, "I'm the one who got bitten, but you're white as a sheet, what's wrong?"

The man who had been friends with Ben for so long, who had told Ben and Sim what he was almost from the beginning, wanted to instantly confess all, but his wolf stopped him. This was not a time when he could expect support: any weakness would be used against him, whether Ben knew it right then or not, and so Luka brushed it out with a direct stare and, "It's been a while, that's all."

Luka had to let the wolf take control then, it was that or fall at the first hurdle and he rumbled under his breath, not an all-out sign of aggression, just a warning to his rival that he was not as fragile as it may have seemed. Ben's eyes narrowed on him and Luka knew he was being sized up and so he did the same, running his gaze over the way Ben was standing, on the surface still fixing the makeshift bandage over the wound, but underneath, poised, lean muscle tensed and ready to fly.

Luka sniffed the air, his senses already full of Ben's scent since they were in Ben's room, but he picked out the new musk in the air, something that told him he was not the only one for whom events were heating up.

"So do we just stand here and wait?" Ben did not sound impressed with the impasse, but then the glint in those grey-blue eyes told Luka the enquiry was more of a test than a taunt.

There wasn't going to be much more waiting: his wolf was taking control in Luka, he could feel the instincts mastering his human foibles. Friendship was taking second place to establishing pack hierarchy. He rumbled again and this time it turned into a proper growl. Bandage tied, Ben dropped his hands to his sides and, still poised, bared his teeth. Whether he liked it or not, Luka was impressed.

Ben had always had a way with him, something that had attracted Luka as a friend and kept him loyal. With all the niceties of human civilisation stripping away second by second, that quality was all too obvious and it was growing dimensions by the heartbeat. Ben was also a little mad, something that when they all had more money than they had ever dreamed of people would call eccentricity, but for now, Luka settled on mad, and that was showing strongly in Ben's overly intelligent eyes. Luka knew he was being assessed.

This wasn't about pity, or mercy or any give to human consideration, this was going to be ruthless and Luka tried to prepare himself. Inside he was quaking as memories of wolves he hadn't known trying to force him down to the bottom of their pack sent ice up and down his spine. However, on the surface he had to be strong, strong enough to establish himself against Ben.

Luka was not a natural sub, he was too independent. Not being part of The Samling meant he had not learnt how to handle his instincts for dominance

and so they flared when, suddenly, Ben moved. Luka slammed backwards into the door as Ben's body shoved him against it and his head smashed against the wood, making him see stars. It was a good move on Ben's part, because Luka went weak with the bright spots, only for a second, but it was enough for Ben to grab his hands and pin him to the door.

Ben had no hope of holding the position, Luka was bigger and stronger than him, but that wasn't the point. When he blinked away the stars, Luka didn't immediately scrabble for supremacy, because he was nose to nose with power that he could see and feel and he was like a moth to a flame. Ben's eyes were changing right in front of him: the grey-blue grew paler, almost glowing in the low light of the lamp next to the bed, and Luka knew Ben was now seeing him with the silver edges that the combination of dog and human eyesight gave the world.

Ben had never been an ordinary human being and, for Luka, as he recognised the rise of Ben's wolf, his friend was never going to be an average member of The Samling either. Ben filled his senses: a hard, tense body rubbed against his own, daring him to defy it. Luka could smell stress and arousal on his rival in equal measure and his mouth watered with the latent scent of blood as well. Finally, he watched his friend shifting in front of him to the wolf-man hybrid form he should have known well, but which was firing a whole new set of reactions to those he experienced with his family. Ben grimaced, half crazy smile, half snarl and gave Luka a good view of lengthened canines.

Part of Luka wanted to bow to the power close to him there and then, the same part that as a child had felt the strangers' pack and wanted to give in to them. However, there was also much more to Luka Sandulf than a childhood nightmare and the threat in Ben's expression woke up his defiance. He did not move, did not even try to counter Ben's hold on him, instead, he growled, his sound low, deliberate and intimidating. As he heard Luka's response, Ben's eyes opened a little wider, clearly surprised, but aggression took over quickly and he growled back.

Luka curled his lip and increased his volume, resisting the press on his wrists now, even as he kept the rest of his body still. Ben retaliated by leaning harder against him and also raising the growl. Almost nose to nose, Luka could see individual beads of sweat on Ben's brow and he could feel the tension in Ben's body: the absorption of wolf was not complete yet, Ben was running before he could walk, he would not be as strong as a full werewolf, and so Luka took advantage. Snapping from a growl to a snarl, he flexed his whole body and shoved his opponent off.

Ben practically flew backwards, landing heavily and sprawling out on the bed where Luka had deliberately aimed him. It was not a dignified landing, it would bruise Ben's ego, and that is what the wolf in Luka wanted. Still, without Ben's change, he wasn't all the way to wolf yet either and so Luka resisted the urge to dive in for a vicious show of force. Instead, he stalked forward and postured a few feet in front of where Ben was trying to right

himself. Glowering, Luka sought out the power in himself, reaching for the wildness that had frightened him as a kid.

Ben, if he was at all impressed, did not show it, he just stood up and glared at Luka through long, unkempt bangs.

Luka was acutely aware that it wouldn't be long before wolf and man were fully integrated and Ben seemed to be embracing the new dimension to his character with an ease that Luka hadn't known for a long time. Jealousy provided the tipping point for the more experienced werewolf, and he attacked this time. Ben was already reaching for him as he charged at his rival and they fell onto the bed in a snarling pile, scrabbling for supremacy.

A height and weight advantage he may have had on Ben, plus the fact that Ben's hand was injured, but Luka found his opponent lean and slippery when it came to trying to get a purchase to tip Ben over onto his back. Ben was all angles, knees and elbows, digging hard into him and, even though he had been an only child, Ben proved himself pretty good at the close-contact tussle; Luka could only assume Sim had been a bad influence.

Ordinary human fingers couldn't cut the mustard when it came to pinning down Ben, so Luka let the power inside out even further than his instincts had already taken it. He didn't often indulge in the shift in his physical body, teeth and eyes were as far as he took it, and his fingers tingled as his nails hardened and gained points.

Ben felt him shift, the extra petulant snarl told Luka that, but Luka moved to use his new talons before Ben could do anything about it, digging them into clothing and wrapping it between his fingers to try and get a good grip. The sound of ripping material told him that he'd over-egged his attack and bits of t-shirt were his only reward for his efforts. There was nothing else for it, if he wanted to win, he had to go for flesh, and, doing his own portion of elbowing to stop Ben grabbing him, he went for the ribs the ripped shirt exposed.

Luka was not intending to do damage, but he was none too careful either and, as he clamped down on Ben's ribs, his nails broke the skin. Ben was already growling and snarling in snatches and a whine of pain added to his friend's repertoire sent a rush of adrenaline right through Luka. He smelt fresh blood again and, his nostrils flaring, he let the thrill drive him, applying pressure to the cuts he had created in order to distract Ben from the pummeling he was giving his shoulders. The pain also became a motive for Ben, though, and if Luka had thought he was dealing with a competent wrestler before, he suddenly discovered Ben had been holding back.

With one younger brother, Luka had often ended up in fights, some of them playful, some of them not, but, being older, he had always had more of a responsibility on him to make sure the outcome was relatively harm-free. For the first time in his life, this battle had no such boundaries, there was just wolf on wolf in a contest for alpha status and there were no holds barred. The energy Ben used on stage was nothing compared to the scratching, punching, kicking mass that his rival became as the contest grew

more serious and Ben screamed at Luka, a sound only half human and full of anger. That noise sliced right through Luka like a knife frozen with ice and the thrill of the fight gained frightening dimensions.

Luka had never fought like this before, never needed to challenge anyone for position in a pack, it was something his civilised brain had rejected and he had avoided the lupine instincts that rose during conflict since those horrible three days with strangers who had wanted nothing but his wolf. Those memories were more of a burden to him than they had ever been before; as he sensed he could be fighting for his life against the wild opponent who had once been Ben, the terror of the child hindered clear thinking in the fight and interrupted his instincts as well. He didn't want to fight, not really, Ben was much more a natural alpha than he was, but the only thing that had saved him before was a fear of what surrender would bring. That fear would not go away now, so he continued to struggle for supremacy.

Still, fighter or not, without his full heart being in the battle, Luka did not make the strikes that counted. Ben showed no such weakness and it was Luka's turn to scream as agony cascaded from his shoulder. The reason took him by surprise: Ben had sunk teeth into his shoulder and sharp pre-molars had latched onto his flesh, threatening to tear it off the bone. However, it was not only pain that came with the bite. The power that Ben had embraced so easily flooded into Luka and he went weak as the essence of hostile wolf drowned his own psyche. The bite linked him to Ben on a fundamental level and, faced with such a will for dominance in the raw, Luka lost himself and Ben took control.

Luka had felt this kind of domination before, he had been surrounded by it for days as, one after another, members of that strange pack had tried to take him for their own. Then he had resisted, but now he had another front on which to fight as well, the part of him that had instinctively wanted to bow to Ben, and that made his resistance weak. Weak enough that by the time his fear had forced his senses out of surrender, Luka found himself on his back under Ben, his hands held up above his head.

"No," he objected, his alarm very much on a human level, and he struggled with the clamp Ben's fingers had made round his wrists.

He flexed violently then, terror wiping away all his pack instincts, but Ben had made full use of the advantage the bite had given him, and remained straddled over him, leaning heavily on the hold on his wrists. When Ben's face came close to his, Luka couldn't help himself, he shied away and only half saw the frown on Ben's face. Those pale eyes were examining him, Luka could feel them on him, and he heard a heavy draw of breath from Ben, but he looked away, struggling somewhere between boy and man.

"Why are you resisting me?" Ben asked, his voice rasping. "I know you don't want to."

Luka struggled again, but his energies were running low as Ben's essence took him from the inside as well as out and the boy he had been was more

in force than man as he sobbed the terror that had stopped him joining The Samling.

"Why are you afraid?" Ben whispered this time and his tone was soft.

A nose nuzzled at his ear, a sign of affection, but still Luka whimpered.

"Let me see," Ben requested, cheek resting against Luka's own and the link his friend had set up stirred inside him.

Luka knew that all sorts of contacts were possible between wolves. Those who had brought him back from a catatonic state after he'd been rescued had used some kind of blood bond to reach him, but he'd never submitted to one willingly and it was asking a lot of his terror to trust that such surrender would not be used against him.

"I won't hurt you," Ben cajoled, nuzzling him again and then applying incisors in a nibbling action at the base of his hairline behind his ear.

The grooming sent skitters of pleasure through Luka in heady contrast to the rest of his vulnerable position and his instincts responded to the bonding action, even if his head was still having problems deciding what to do. He huffed and shivered, but his head was catching up with his heart as it told him he trusted Ben and slowly he relaxed and let Ben take the lead. Luka closed his eyes as Ben's presence rose in him and risked all as he let his memories come forward.

The strongest memory that skittered across Luka's thoughts was of sitting huddled in the dark in a broom-closet sized room, cold, naked and confused as drugs slowly wore off. Luka whimpered and shuddered, this time all due to the first strands of nightmare that he had buried down deep inside and he gratefully wound his fingers with Ben's as his friend released any hold on his wrists. Ben continued to nuzzle at his neck and Luka needed all the comfort he could get as he allowed his memories to bubble out of him.

There was no order to his thoughts, there had been none at the time as a dozen different influences had tried to dominate him, and so there was none now. He remembered a big man who had tried violence to knock him into submission and a woman with ample breasts who had tried to seduce his cooperation; there had also been a calm stranger who had tried to reason with him in an absurd kind of diplomacy and on failure had almost gone to the point of rape to intimidate him into line. There were more, all who had haunted his dreams since, images he had thought he had come to terms with, but in the raw openness that Ben commanded, it was like yesterday and Luka needed all the support Ben gave him not to sink back into the catatonia that had saved him from submission.

"It's alright," Ben whispered to him and the warm, confident tone drew him out of the memories. "I understand now."

Luka had never really shared those memories with anyone, not even the counsellor who had tried to help him through the aftermath of his kidnap, and he came back out of himself shivering and hissing through his teeth and, for the first time, he was glad someone was there with him. The trust it had taken to open up washed over him as Ben held close, petting his ear

and squeezing his fingers and he knew without a doubt that he had found his Alpha: the relief was incredible. Luka had talked to his parents, and then his sister about what it was like when things just slotted into order, but he had never really understood what they had told him. As a lone wolf he had thought himself content, comfortable to be on the outside of his society, safer on his own, but, as his rival became his leader, Luka relaxed at the rightness of it.

Ben clearly felt the change in him, because there was a change in Ben too. They had moved from conflict, through the fear that had sat at the bottom of his psyche the whole of his teenage years, and as Ben pushed himself up on his elbows above Luka, Luka looked up at him with adult eyes unfettered by that terror. Luka was wolf, Ben was wolf and between them they had formed a new pack and, exclusive though it was, those bonds came with all the dimensions of The Samling, the needs and desires that ran through every fully integrated wolf.

They held like that a moment, both acknowledging the changes that had happened so quickly, and then, slowly, Ben let Luka go and knelt up. Confusion flicked across his friend's face and Luka recognised the considerable distance they had to go, but, for now, the crisis had been averted.

"You never told us," Ben finally spoke what had started a frown on his face.

"I never told anyone really," Luka admitted, propping himself up on his elbows as the vulnerability of his past stayed with him.

Ben reached out and stroked Luka's hair, which, from anyone but Ben would have been a rather odd gesture, but Luka went with the comfort the touch offered, leaning into it. He closed his eyes for a moment, trying to banish the rest of the nasty feelings that came with his memories.

"Never going to happen again," Ben breathed and Luka closed his eyes, hearing the oath both inside and out as the blood bond lingered.

Since he wasn't looking, it was therefore a surprise when amusement skittered down their connection to Luka from Ben. He opened his eyes as external things caught up with internal and he saw Ben laugh.

His friend rolled his eyes, climbed off the bed and, looking down at himself, exclaimed, "I feel plain weird!"

Luka sat up, swinging his legs off the bed, and watched, somewhat fascinated, as Ben held out one hand in front and examined the claws that had come with the fight. Power was coming off Ben in waves and hitting Luka's open senses, something he'd never expected from the way others had explained The Samling to him. It frightened the independence in him as it underlined the fact that, even though only wolf for minutes, Ben was much more powerful than him. Yet, still the strength in his Alpha made him feel safe. He laughed when, suddenly, Ben struck a vaguesque pose in front of him, flicked his head back and asked with exuberance, "So, what kind of wolf do I make?"

"An overexcited one," Luka replied, remembering his brother returning from his Joining with a similar puppy playfulness in control; part of him was slightly confused that he was not feeling the same thing, but, as his own instincts were settling, the reality of the situation began to take over.

Ben revealed he'd taken the comment as a challenge when, suddenly Luka found a body diving back at him. He was quite impressed with his own reactions when he rolled quickly out of the way and Ben landed sprawled on the bed. Luka stood up and grinned at Ben: his friend's mood was a little infectious, but he kept his distance as Ben righted himself on the bed and grumbled wordlessly up at him.

"Don't you want to play?" sounded so absurdly childish that Luka laughed. It was tempting: his wolf was itching under his skin and he knew a full change was not far away, but that was the problem.

"We play, we change, all the way," Luka explained, taking another step back just for good measure as Ben's gaze widened and looked rather too interested in that idea. "This room couldn't take two wolves. Look at the damage already."

Ben could be a sensible human being, sometimes, and the realist in Luka was glad when his friend did glance around at where they'd broken the headboard of the bed with their tussle and then down at himself where large welts were showing through the holes of his T-shirt. However, the puppy in him was also disappointed when Ben made a face and visibly relaxed. His heart then leapt into his throat when Ben glanced at the door and the world descended into the momentary haven the room had become.

"We also have to face that lot," Ben sighed, clearly on the same page.

"And call Freya," Luka nodded and when Ben gave him a questioning look, explained, "What happened to you is against the law, werewolf equivalent of GBH, and she may be my big sister, but she's the only copper I know."

Ben nodded, but then stopped halfway through the gesture and fixed Luka with a look that, all at once reminded him that his Alpha was in the room, but also washed him in warmth.

"They won't try to prosecute you though?" Ben checked, his tone full of protectiveness that Luka knew instinctively his friend could back up.

Luka shook his head.

"I'm a crime victim too, it's the bastard that bit you they'll want to find."

Ben relaxed again and let out a long breath. Another second and he was glancing up at Luka once more and Luka knew it was time to face the others.

The pair held their look for another moment, but then, suddenly, Ben's eyebrows hit his hairline and he wrinkled his nose as he asked, "Know where you threw that key?"

~*~

After five minutes turning the room upside down looking for the key, Luka found himself standing behind Ben as his friend turned the key in the lock. They'd both put the wolf back inside, but Luka's senses were still on

overdrive and he knew without a doubt that there were four anxious people waiting outside the room for them and the thought was making his stomach tie in knots. It had taken courage to tell Sim and Ben his secret, but then it had been different, something about Ben had made him want to share and he'd trusted his friend implicitly. The other members of the band were a whole different idea. Making friends and trusting people seemed much more complex in adult life and Travis' reaction to him had been circling his memory since they'd begun to look for the key.

What was more, Luka thought Ben was worried. They hadn't really spoken, except for the practicalities of the search, but Ben's shoulders were hunched and the tension in the air was palpable. However, things had to be faced and so, when Ben glanced back at him, Luka took a deep breath and nodded. Ben did a very similar thing and then opened the door.

The first person standing there was Sim: her eyes were wide and it looked like she had been crying. Luka felt a sudden exclusion as, immediately, Ben grabbed Sim and wrapped her slender frame in him.

"I'm alright," Ben murmured into her shoulder and Sim hiccupped a sob.

The best friends buried themselves in the hug, which meant Luka was left staring over their heads at three very unsure and, at least on Travis and Mel's part, accusative stares. He was the big, bad wolf, quite literally, and his chest tightened as he recognised fear as well. It didn't help things when Kei ran his gaze up over Luka's chest and ended up wide-eyed on his shoulder. The wound was already healing, in fact, Luka had forgotten about it until that moment and, with the worried look he was being given, reached up and looked down at himself. His T-shirt, thankfully, was dark, but it still had several holes in it over the shoulder and blood showed through against his white skin.

"What were you doing in there?" Kei asked quietly, his straight, died fringe falling over his eyes as he partially bowed his head.

"Fighting," Luka replied bluntly and his stomach lurched at the horror that flickered across Kei's sharp features.

"To make a pack," Ben stepped in before Luka could dig his hole any deeper and he was glad of the authority in his friend's voice. "Come on, back to the living room and we can talk there."

Luka trailed in the rear as they all headed back down the single flight of stairs to the living room, an otherness sinking onto his shoulders as Travis, Mel and Kei all kept looking back at him. Ben, they did not appear to be giving the same treatment, but Ben was still holding very close to Sim, so didn't seem to care. Sim did glance back at Luka, and he knew where all her blame lay for what had happened.

His friendships falling apart in front of him made him feel sick, but the one that worried him the most was Kei. Some might have assigned Kei's gentle, unassuming nature to his half-Asian upbringing, but after knowing him for eighteen months, Luka was well aware it ran deeper than that and he cared a great deal for his friend. Still, when Kei stopped in the hallway when the

others went in, Luka almost didn't finish his walk down the stairs, because the thought of losing his friend sent shots of dread through him.

However, he couldn't run away, not with a rogue werewolf possibly still in the vicinity, so Luka had to keep walking. He gritted his teeth as he went to move past Kei and was so tense, he actually jumped when a smaller calloused hand slipped into his. He knew he was glaring when he looked down into his friend's worried face, but he couldn't help it.

"Are you alright, Luka?" Kei spoke very quietly and the honest concern for him was such a shock, it almost brought him to tears.

Yet, a small ball of warmth began to work on the knot in his stomach and Luka relaxed a little bit. Gratefully, he closed his fingers round Kei's and, with a squeeze, nodded.

"The others are just worried too," Kei then reassured and, when Luka failed to respond, let go of his hand and hurried into the room.

All eyes were on him when Luka walked into the room to find everyone arranged much the same way they had been only half an hour earlier. Yet, this time, Mel was not wearing headphones and Travis was not grinning. Sim was sitting in Ben's lap checking the large tears in his shirt and it was her glare as she looked up that made Luka go cold. However, Ben held out his arm to Luka and waved him at the last seat on the sofa.

There was complete silence as he sat down, or rather, he perched on the edge of his seat. Taking the wolf by the tail, he looked around at the gathered company and launched, "What do you want to know?"

Five faces looked around at each other then and Luka just waited. Finally, it was Mel who braved the silence, "Werewolf, a real werewolf?"

Luka nodded slowly.

The girl sat back in her chair then, pursing her black-stained lips.

"You would scare the shit out of my vampire mates," she added as she ran her eyes over Luka and then looked at Ben. "And you as well?"

"Thanks to the bite, yes," Ben replied evenly and sounded much calmer than Luka felt.

"And that wasn't you who bithim?" Travis wagged a finger at Luka.

Luka shook his head.

"Then who the hell was it, and are they coming after us next?" Travis revealed the real reason for his question.

"No way," Ben jumped in quickly and Luka heard the growl under his Alpha's breath.

Travis' jaw went slack then and he stared at Ben.

"The other werewolf would be a fool to try and come in here now," Luka jumped in to rescue the moment. "Ben and I formed a pack, we'd be stronger than a lone wolf. We can protect you."

"I don't want bloody protecting!" Travis snapped, bouncing in his seat. "I don't want to even know you lot exist. Mel's goth crowd are scary enough, I don't want this to be real."

"It is," Kei interrupted calmly before Travis could have a meltdown and got

a glare for his trouble. However, their self-composed friend just looked back at Luka and asked, "What does it mean to form a pack?"

Luka could not have been more grateful for the push and, gathering his thoughts, replied, "Until tonight, I was what we call a lone wolf. We normally join our local pack when we reach thirteen, but I decided not to and that meant my wolf was fettered."

"Seemed pretty bloody unfettered to me," Travis muttered and grabbed a cushion in front of his chest.

"It means I couldn't become a full wolf," Luka clarified. "It also means I wasn't part of pack hierarchy, so I could come and go in any territory, no-one from any pack would bother me."

"You mean there's a pack round here?" Mel checked, her dark skin paling a little.

"Most places," Luka decided that it was all or nothing. "We have strict rules governing pack formation and how different packs can interact, it stops any territorial trouble, but when Ben began to change, there were two lone wolves in the same territory. We had to come to terms."

"So you did that by fighting?" Sim prodded, her disdain obvious.

"We don't normally do that," Luka replied quickly, rather too sharply, but he did not want his friends thinking that violence was automatic. He tried to calm himself before he continued, "That's why we have proper ways of doing things, but whoever attacked Ben broke the law and there wasn't any time."

"So you did what you had to," Kei's support made Luka feel better and he nodded.

"So why fight to create a pack?" Sim objected again and Luka knew he could never explain wolf instincts to the human pacifist.

However, Ben put his arms around Sim and came to the rescue, "Because I wouldn't have understood anything else. It was a bloody primal experience, kind of liberating actually, and Luka did the best he could to fix things like you asked him to."

That derailed Sim's righteous disdain somewhat and so Luka took control again with, "Look, I have to call my sister, the werewolf attacking Ben is a crime. I'll answer any more questions once I've called her."

Luka headed out of the room to find his mobile and noted that a lot of low whispering started as soon as he left. However, he had more important things to do than eavesdrop and so he hurried upstairs to his bedroom.

~*~

Half an hour later, Luka was sitting on the arm of the sofa and mainly listening to Ben tell the others in minute detail what it felt like to become a wolf. He added comments when facts about his kind were required, but he had taken a back seat as the others appeared to be relating to Ben better than him. However, when the front door bell rang, everything stopped and Ben sat bolt upright in his seat. Luka knew the feeling he could see running through Ben, it was one of defence, someone wanted to come into their territory and that someone was a wolf.

"It's Freya," he spoke as calmly as he could, even as his own hackles began to rise.

He'd never felt anything like it as the power of the pack barrelled through him. The way Travis went wide-eyed again, he knew something about his appearance had changed and shortly after that, the world gained silver edges as his wolf rose to defend his pack's territory. One glance from Ben and he could see the same thing happening to his friend. They both stood.

"Everyone, please stay here," Luka told the others as calmly as possible and then led Ben out of the room.

Ben was snorting down his nose and Luka put a hand onto his arm.

"You are the Alpha, you have to open the door. Freya will not come in until you say," he reassured as much as he could with his own wolf clawing at his psyche.

Ben nodded and then they both walked to the front door. The whole unit rattled as Ben yanked it open rather faster than normal and even though Luka recognised the scent of his sister before he saw her, he still growled in time with his pack leader. Freya stood very passively on the step, which was impressive for the six foot Amazon of a police officer, and waited until the growling stopped. Only then did she carefully hold out her hands, palm up and asked, "May I enter your territory?"

Ben whined and sniffed the air. He'd spent loads of time at the Sandulf house, he knew Freya well, but Luka knew the hostility he was feeling, even though he was incredibly glad to see his sister. Freya just waited, her face blank and, finally, to Luka's relief, Ben nodded and stepped back. His tension fell away as Freya stepped over the threshold and he threw his arms around her. With his tension, went his stamina, and the evening's trauma caught up with him: Luka began to shake and embarrassment shot through him as he let out a puppy-whine.

"Hey, hey," Freya wrapped him in a hug, apparently unfazed by his meltdown. "I'm here now."

She reached out to Ben too and patted his shoulder.

It took Luka a surprising amount of time to calm down enough to let his sister go as the horror of his past and the shock of his present caught up with him. He was still wobbling when he did stand back and Freya kept her hands on his shoulders, giving him an appraisal. She looked Ben over as well and decided, "You both look like you need to rest. My unit is waiting outside, I don't think either of you could take them coming in right now. We've also got officers out looking for the wolf that did this. Now, I'll be as quick as I can, but I need to ask both of you some questions and then you should both get some sleep."

Luka just nodded meekly, the weakness in his limbs only backing up Freya's opinion.

"We're all in the living room," Ben invited, his voice none too steady either as he led the way.

An hour later, and there were in fact more people in the house, because Freya had decided that both Luka's and Ben's wounds needed medical attention. The paramedics had finished dressing Luka's shoulder and were now patching up Ben, so Luka had been sat in Travis' chair, wrapped in a blanket and given a cup of tea. Kei was sitting in his seat, watching Luka carefully, but Travis and Mel were in the kitchen part of the large room drinking their own tea and talking in low voices, only glancing over occasionally.

Freya had been taking statements from everyone, but, slipping her tablet back into her pocket, she walked over to Luka and knelt down in front of him. She ruffled his hair, which would have been embarrassing had it not felt quite so good and then she crouched back and smiled.

"I have everything I need for now. Don't worry about the other wolf, there'll be someone on your door until we catch him, or we make sure he's left the area. And, Luka, you did really well tonight," she told him, definite pride in her voice.

Luka didn't feel like he'd done well at all. One of his friends was now a wolf without consent and the rest were still looking at him oddly.

"Thank you."

Ben's tired voice surprised Luka, but when he glanced at his friend, there was a smile waiting for him. For better, or worse, it was done: Luka had found an Alpha who didn't scare him rigid, joined The Samling and formed a pack in the space of a mad few hours. There was no going back, the wolf in him and the wolf in Ben were now fully awake and the power of that curled in his belly, both excitingly inviting and terrifying.

He saw the same knowledge reflected back in Ben's pale gaze that now hid the nature that had been forced into him. There was a way to go with the others, but, he hoped their friendships could be saved. For now, though, the quiet gratitude from Ben was enough, and, wiped out, Luka closed his eyes.

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Afterword

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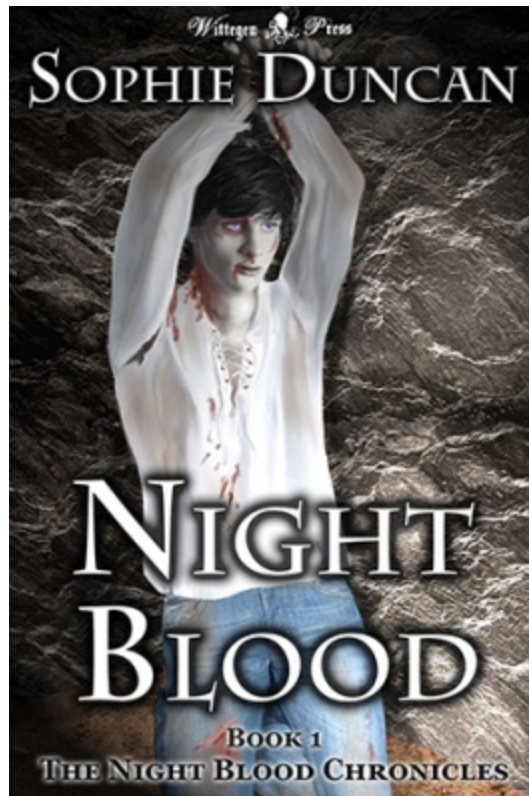


About Sophie

Sophie was born with the writing bug in her blood, boring her primary school teachers with pages of creative writing and killing her first typewriter from over use when she was thirteen. She began publishing her work on line while at university where she discovered the internet and fanfiction. It took another decade for Sophie to realise her long-time dream of releasing her own original fiction.

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Leaving a good London school with solid prospects, Tom Franklin has the world at his feet. Yet one thing has always haunted his perfect life: his dreams. When Tom discovers that the nightmarish images of dark places and even darker instincts are in fact repressed memories from his early childhood, he must face the heritage from his birth-father, a savage vampire known only as Raxos.

Realising his memories are his only hope of controlling his awakening instincts, Tom returns to, Coombedown, the sleepy, Cornish village in which he was born, unknowing that the night-breed in his veins will lead him into danger.

"Night Blood" is a young adult, paranormal novel.

This is the first story in the "Night Blood Chronicles".

~*~

Excerpt

Tom could hold on no more, he let out a gasp of breath and then his world shifted into one of silver-greys. Knife and fork went skidding off the plate as Tom grabbed the large hunk of dripping beef in both hands and lifted it to his mouth. Urgently, he sunk his teeth into the thick flesh. Blood and meat hit his tongue and Tom almost melted with relief. His senses closed around the bite, his body settled, aches and pains fading almost instantly, and there was no stopping him after that.

Sharp teeth and sharper claws were all Tom needed to rip the steak apart, devouring every decadent morsel like he hadn't eaten in weeks. Every mouthful made the power in his belly spin faster, until his senses were

almost breaking out of his body in the way they touched the world. The sensations were divine, intoxicating and Tom grinned around his meal, lost to the sheer satisfaction.

Yet, the meat did not last long and, gasping away the intensity, Tom looked down at his empty, bloodied hands, reality sinking back in. He could feel the juices running down and dripping off his chin. He was a mess. Yet, Tom could not put the genie back into the bottle, and, despite his very human disgust at what he had done, the night was still in him, seducing his senses.

Conflict was nothing new to Tom that day, and he chose to stall it with immediate considerations. Tom hated being dirty. That ingrained part of his character helped hold back the clash in his split psyche and, climbing out of bed, Tom headed to his en suite bathroom. He ignored the light as he went in and kept his head down, not wanting to see the sight he had made of himself. He knocked the mixer tap with his elbow and quickly ran his hands under it. Then he splashed his face, another sort of relief hitting him as he cleansed his skin of the evidence that he had lost control.

Yet, water could not wash everything away and Tom could not quite avoid the large mirror above the sink. His vision remained shifted, so the low light in the enclosed room could not help him and Tom looked. What he saw froze him with both the familiarity of it and the newness. His face, his messy brown hair, yet, it was his eyes that drew him in; at first, alarmed, he thought they were glowing. Trying to stay calm, Tom grappled onto any facts he could remember from his talk with Dr Cheringham. To be honest, he didn't remember many details, but enough came back that he stopped himself running away and hiding under the covers again with the knowledge that the cells in his eyes were just shining as they absorbed as much light as they could.

Shock dissipating, Tom dropped his gaze and stepped back from the sink. His hands and face were now clean again, but his shirt was covered in gore, so he hastily pulled it off. He heard the material rip as he misjudged his own strength and, throwing the clothing at the laundry basket, he could not miss the thick, sharp claw-like nails that had caused the damage. It was all too much too quickly and, keeping his mouth firmly shut, Tom retreated from his reflection.

Sinking back onto the bed, he curled up into his protective ball again, closed his eyes and tried desperately to bring the world back under control.

~*~

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