

London Nights

Book 1: The Lost Boy

Von Ulysses

Kapitel 2: The House on North Hill

The advanced hour meant that only the Night Tube served the extensive public transport network of the city. They had to hurry to catch the train so Kearon decided that he would only gather a few absolute necessities in his rucksack before following Richard to the station. The rest would hopefully be safe at the hideout until he could come back for it.

Over an hour later, they emerged from Highgate Tube Station and made their way through the quiet streets.

Highgate had been a distinct village outside of London until Victorian times before it became part of the city. Today, it was one of the most expensive suburbs to live in. Efforts were made to preserve the character of the town with its many old houses, churches, pubs and landmarks.

Highgate was most notorious among tourists for its cemetery, one of the Magnificent Seven of London. Among the trees, headstones and ivy-covered mausoleums rested the remains of such famous figures of history as Karl Marx, but also the late singer George Michael and writer Douglas Adams. Richard knew that Velkan went to visit Adams' grave from time to time to leave a pen for the writer, as many of his fans did. Highgate's location on top of North Hill meant that one had a rather spectacular view of the inner city of London from here. In the far distance, the Shard, the skyscrapers of the borough of the City of London (with its three most distinct ones mockingly called "Gherkin", "Cheese Grater" and "Walkie-Talkie" by Londoners) and Canary Wharf were lit up brightly against the night sky.

Whitechurch Manor's position on the outskirts of Highgate was preserved by a lot of money spent by both Elisabeth and her husband Tobias and a lot of favours called in at Whitehall. The stately mansion had remained solitary while London was spreading, protected by money and the belt of historic woods and green expanses around Highgate, untouched by the changing times. It looked down towards the pulsing heart of London as it had done for centuries.

Kearon became very quiet as they walked up the driveway towards the gate. Beyond it, past the overgrown garden, Whitechurch Manor loomed in the distance. The house had once been a monastery, Ecclesia Alba, the "White Church", before the land and property had been taken from the church in 1540 during the Dissolution of the Monasteries under Henry VIII. Almost a century later, the estate had found its way back into the hands of what was today the Whitechurch family. Whitechurch Manor had grown around the former monastery, expanding upon it time and again during

the centuries, creating an eclectic mix of architectural styles.

Today, half a millennium later, not even Elisabeth Whitechurch, the last heir in a long line of owners, knew exactly how many rooms the house really had. Large parts of it were sealed off, some had fallen into disrepair and left in darkness. Their secrets remained and the haunted house on the hill had become a bit of an urban legend among the people of Highgate.

Richard noticed the way Kearon's purple eyes were fixed on the mansion.

"You don't have to be afraid. I know it looks spooky but... well, it is spooky, but it's more of a home than you might think."

"I'm not scared. This is brilliant. I love dark and mysterious places like this."

"Are you in for a treat then." Richard chuckled and pushed open the heavy gate far enough for them to slip through before he closed it again. "We need to circle around and take the servants entrance into the kitchen. The front door is probably locked at this time and I only have keys for the back. Don't want to wake Steven."

"Steven?"

Richard smiled sheepishly. "The Butler."

"You have a butler?!"

"Just one. It's not that we have a big staff or anything. Just Steven, a cook, Mrs Gunderson, and Shelley, the maid. People aren't really keen on working here. A lot of ghost stories about the mansion."

"And are they true?"

"I love how excited you sound." Richard chuckled. "You'll fit right in."

They went around the house through the overgrown garden. Richard knew the way past the hedges, crumbling stone gazebos, ponds and wildflower patches in his sleep. Of all the inhabitants of the house, he was probably the one who knew the grounds and the mansion best, even some of the corners of it which had been forgotten and left adrift in the flow of time.

There was light in the kitchen so Richard suspected that Mrs Gunderson was still up. He was proven wrong as he unlocked the servants' entrance and stepped inside, followed by Kearon.

"Take that!"

"That's not fair! Zelda can teleport out of the way!"

"That's why I'm playing as my girl. She's wiping the floor with your furry Pokémon arse!"

"Oh, just wait and see, I'll get you!"

Richard and Kearon watched for a moment as Velkan and Myra were completely lost in their video game. They had set up the mobile part of Velkan's Nintendo Switch on the kitchen counter and sat in front of it with controllers in hand and surrounded by bowls of crisps and soda cans. Velkan wore one of his washed out Legend of Zelda shirts as he usually did around the house and grey sweatpants while Myra almost seemed to disappear in the green hoodie which she was wearing. It was definitely one of Velkan's.

Richard cleared his throat a little louder than necessary to get the attention of the two video gamers.

"Why in the kitchen?"

"Steven doesn't bother us here about coasters and crumps." Velkan grinned wolfishly. He noticed that Richard wasn't alone and paused the game to stand up. "Richard Winters, Tariq is only gone for two weeks and you start bringing boys home?"

Richard signed in affectionate exasperation. "Get your mind of out of the gutter. This

is Kearon. And he's 15, so behave yourself."

Velkan came around the counter. His hair was even more tousled than usual and his dark beard definitely needed to be trimmed. As he held out his hand to greet Kearon, his smile was almost as bright as his amber-coloured eyes.

"Velkan Ionescu. Nice to meet you."

"Hi... I'm Kearon. Gosh, you're tall." Kearon stared up at Velkan while they shook hands.

"Yeah, can't argue with that." Velkan winked. "And this." he turned and gestured at the Japanese girl who watched Kearon with widened eyes. "Is Myra. Don't worry. She stares like this sometimes but she's perfectly harmless. Myra? Earth to Myra!" Velkan snapped his fingers. "Sweetie, you with us?"

"This is amazing!" Myra awoke from her trance and jumped off the chair, the hood slipped from her head and revealed her jet-black shoulder-length hair tied back into a ponytail.

"I never thought I would meet one in person." She hurried over but then stopped abruptly and bowed to greet Kearon in the traditional Japanese way.

"Sweetie, I think you're scaring our guest." Velkan said.

"Gomen nasai." Myra folded her hands. "I'm just so excited. I never thought I would meet a Banshee. You are so reclusive."

All eyes converged on Kearon who seemed to shrink into the torn shirt he was wearing. He backed away and almost looked as if he was ready to run.

"You're a Banshee? But you're a boy." Richard said. He didn't know much about Banshees but one thing he knew for certain, they were a rarely seen female-only race.

"How... how did you...?" Kearon stammered.

"Oh gosh, I'm sorry. It's a gift I have." Myra blushed. "I didn't mean to... I was just..."

"Everyone calm down." Velkan smiled at Kearon. "Everything is okay, you don't have to be scared. Do you want to sit down for a moment? We can talk about it if you like."

Richard felt a rush of love for the older wolf. This was the Velkan he remembered from Glasgow. The impressive 6'5 guy with the muscular frame and the heart of gold who could make everyone feel safe and welcome.

Kearon gazed over at Richard who simply nodded. That seemed to be enough for the boy to accept Velkan's invitation. They sat down at the kitchen table and Velkan fetched crisps and cola.

Richard admired Myra's restraint. He could clearly tell that she was about to burst, countless questions ready to be asked but she clung to a can of Coca Cola and stuffed her mouth with prawn cracker crisps in an attempt to allow Kearon to speak.

And speak he did. As if he had only waited for a moment to let all of this out, he started to talk about how he had always felt out of place in Banshee society, how deep inside he had always known that he was a man, not a woman. And how he finally had found someone who was willing to change him into the right body, for a price of course. Richard wanted to ask where Kearon had gotten the money from but the subject seemed to embarrass the boy and so he kept quiet, suspecting that he might have resorted to theft.

"However... when I finally had this body..." Kearon stared at his long spider-like fingers. "Well, I found out the hard way that Banshees don't accept men around." He absentmindedly played with a broken piece of crisp on the table. "I lost my powers, it seems, at least I can't summon them anymore and... well..."

"You had nowhere to go." Richard finished. "Velkan, we have to help him. He can't live alone on the street. I could talk to Liz and..."

"She's at the townhouse." Velkan leaned back in his chair. His sister-in-law often stayed at the townhouse that Velkan's family owned in Belgrave. From there, her husband, Velkan's younger brother Tobias, had a shorter commute to Whitehall. Tobias was a career politician, everything Velkan wasn't and never wanted to be even though he loved his brother dearly.

"Tell you what, you take Kearon upstairs and show him your room. He looks like he could use a shower and a change of clothes, too, no offence."

"None taken," Kearon smirked even though his pale cheeks flushed.

"Then you get some rest and I'll tell the others that we have a guest. And everything else can wait until tomorrow."

"But we have to..."

"Richard." Velkan's voice sounded stern but warm. Sometimes he had to remind Richard that he wasn't just his best friend but also his elder. "You know that I won't just kick him out on the street again, but you have to be patient."

"Alright." Richard sighed but he knew Velkan was right. And he trusted him. So he stood up and smiled at Kearon. "Shall we go upstairs?"

Richard had picked a room for himself which had once been used as part of the servants' quarters under the roof of the mansion. This hadn't been a choice to detach himself from the others but driven by the fact that the room had a wonderful view of the city and the adjacent hallway featured a door which led directly into the library. Though, in hindsight, it also provided a nice sense of privacy for him and Tariq.

Richard's room was now almost an amalgamation of him and Tariq. The Ifrit had left his mark on the decoration and had moved a lot of his stuff into the spacious room which had once been the home to at least five to ten servants.

Now it was filled to the brim with bookshelves and knickknack which Tariq had collected on his travels with Jonathan and stored in their various safehouses across the continent. Elisabeth had arranged for it all to be brought into the mansion as it became clear that neither Tariq nor Jonathan would leave again. Several strings of fairy lights were strung among the beams of the angled roofs and created a warm glow as Richard switched them on.

Kearon stood in the middle of the room and turned on the spot, taking in the sights around him.

"This is amazing."

"I'm glad you like it."

"And I'm sorry." Kearon walked over to the window and gazed out into the night.

Richard opened a smaller door on the far side of the room which led to the closet which he shared with Tariq now, too. The faint smell of embers made him smile. Tariq's scent, left in his favourite clothes even after they had been washed.

"I get it. You were afraid of how I would react."

"You're not mad at me?"

"No. I lied a lot too when I lived on the street. It comes with the territory." Richard closed his eyes and leaned against one of Tariq's shirts, drawing in the scent. "I miss you, big guy," he whispered before taking another shirt, a pair of boxers, sweatpants and socks.

"Here, those will probably be too large but you can get out of those clothes for now after you took a shower."

Kearon stood next to the bronze-framed daybed. He had been admiring the colourful canopy but had turned his attention to the picture frame on the nightstand now.

"Is that the guy Velkan mentioned?"

"Tariq, yes."

The photo showed Tariq and him in swimwear trunks at Brighton Beach with the famous pavilion behind them. They were hugging and forming a heart with their fingers. Tariq had his dark dreadlocks tied back into a ponytail and the pierced ring in his nose sparkled in the sunlight.

Richard thought he looked impossibly pale next to Tariq's bronze skin. The Ifrit was also several inches taller than him. Richard hadn't been blessed with height, the only people in the house who were smaller than he was were Myra and now Kearon. And he had always been pale, he got a sunburn rather than a tan if he tried and there were some blemishes left on his cheeks from when he had suffered from acne.

Then again, aside from Sydney who was ridiculously perfect, everyone in the house had their little imperfections like Jonathan and his scars, with three of them always visible on his cheek, his nose and his left eyebrow, or Castor's freckles, though Richard thought those were rather adorable on the tall broad Kelpie with the thick ginger beard.

"So you're gay?"

"I'm bi. I think Tariq is gay, but we don't really talk about this." Richard smiled. "Here." He handed the clothes over to Kearon. "The bathroom is the door outside in the hall." Kearon reached out for the clothes but then hesitated.

"What is it? I know the shirt looks a little boring, but..."

"No, it's not that." Kearon finally took the pile from Richard's hands. "I'm just... I'm just worried. All of this is so amazing and what if..."

"I won't allow that you are being kicked back out onto the street, Kearon."

"Why? Why are you doing this, though? You don't even know me that well. We only just met."

Richard smiled warmly. Of course, the boy was right. It was all a bit insane and happened so fast, but in his heart, Richard knew it was the right thing to do.

"I told you that I see myself in you. I was lucky enough to be shown kindness and to be given a home. This house has more rooms than I can count. It can be your home, too. No, it will be."

Kearon looked at the clothes in his hands. "I guess... well, I guess I'll go take a shower then." He was blushing and avoided Richard's eyes.