

London Nights

Book 1: The Lost Boy

Von Ulysses

Kapitel 9: Family

The Shard glistened in the sunlight like a gigantic crystal which rose from the heart of London. Standing directly at its base looking up far into the sky was an almost dizzying experience. However, Jonathan had no eyes for the surreal beauty of the skyscraper as he and Velkan exited London Bridge Tube Station and walked past the entrance to the "View from The Shard", a tourist trap for those who wanted to go up to the top floor of the building and gaze at London for a while.

This was not what Velkan and he were here to do. The gate to the apartments was separate from the tourist entrance, next to the hotel and the lifts to the high-class restaurant on the 36th floor. Security would be tight here - CCTV, personnel and metal detectors - but now the lobby was deserted save for two men who waited next to the lift doors.

"How ominous." Velkan said quietly.

"Positively so." Jonathan flexed his hands. "Ready?"

"Is this some kink of yours?"

"Excuse me?"

Velkan raised an eyebrow and tapped his nose. "Wolf senses? I can smell your arousal. You are very excited."

"I am. And?"

"Look, I like an adventure just as much as you do but-"

"This is about Richard, I know." Jonathan placed a hand on Velkan's broad chest.

"Relax. I got this. And I know what is at stake here. I might be enjoying this a bit, yes, but only because this is my turf, Velkan. This is my world. And I missed it."

He really had missed it. Jonathan felt exhilaration the likes of which he hadn't experienced in ages. The thrill of a metaphorical game of chess with a major figure of the criminal underworld, THE major figure in this case. Naturally, he would be much more careful in this situation. Richard was a pawn on the board and his safety came first, nevertheless, this was the kind of refreshment he had been craving for a long time.

"Follow my-"

"Really?"

"Okay, okay." Jonathan winked. "Give me this."

"Alright." Velkan sighed dramatically. "I will follow your lead, oh Prince of the Underworld."

"Oh please, that's Syd. I'm the King."

"He'd kill you now."

"He can certainly try." Jonathan turned his attention back to the two men who were waiting patiently and silently. "Hello, boys, we have a date with your boss."

A short lift ride later, Jonathan and Velkan exited into the hallway which lead to the apartment that they were being expected in. As the door opened and they came face to face with the Shadow Queen, realisation dawned on Jonathan's face. She looked at him with a sense of satisfaction, as if she already had outsmarted him. A feeling Jonathan dreaded but he had to admit that this woman was good. Really, really good. "Shadow Queen." He lowered his head for a moment while never taking his eyes off of her.

"So good to see you again, Mr Bouchard. It's been a while."

"Too long. And please, call me Jonathan."

"And this must be Jeremiah's boy. A pleasure to meet you, Mr Ionescu."

"I wish I could say the same." Velkan said. His eyes were scanning the room, looking for threats and, of course, Richard. The Shadow Queen read him correctly and pointed at another door.

"Mr Winters is in the bedroom. I instructed him to wait there when my men informed me about your arrival. Maybe you want to join him and reassure yourself that he is okay. I apologize for the bruises he received in the unfortunate confrontation with my people. They have been punished accordingly, as he will surely tell you."

Velkan exchanged a look with Jonathan who simply nodded. "I'll be fine."

The Shadow Queen waited until Velkan had left the room and closed the door before gesturing towards the couch. Jonathan sat down and she returned to the armchair she had been sitting in earlier.

"How?"

"Wouldn't you like to know? And I know you would since you keep asking me that question every time." She smiled. "You have been doing well for yourself, Jonathan, but recent choices of yours, I must admit, have taken me by surprise."

"I always like to keep them guessing." He knew what she was talking about, of course. The fact that he had joined the Whitechurch Society and lived in Whitechurch Manor. He didn't have any illusions about the damage this had done to his reputation in certain circles. A decision he hadn't made lightly and luckily, so far he hadn't come to regret it.

"So, I take it you have turned over a new leaf. Become... good."

"You know that the world isn't black and white, my Queen. You aren't "evil" just as I am not "good", whatever others might think of us."

Jonathan admired the Shadow Queen. He wouldn't tell her, of course, but he was fully aware that he was in the presence of an incredibly powerful being. Sydney's true origins were a mystery already, but the Shadow Queen was an entirely different league to the horned demi-god. Unlike him, she was not only very old, positively ancient, but also immensely powerful and dangerous. Neither his magic nor Sydney's powers were a match for this woman, not even both of them combined, of that Jonathan was sure. She could kill him just as easily as he could swat an annoying fly. And yet, he wasn't afraid of her. Quite the opposite, really.

"Well said." She leaned back. "Shall we get to business?"

Jonathan folded his hands and tilted his head, giving the Shadow Queen a small and knowing smile. This had been the opening move. The game was afoot.

"That was kind of anti-climactic." Richard said as they left the Shard and stepped out into the bright sunlight.

A tourist group brushed past them, trying to look up and walk at the same time while their guide, a young man in a blue shirt with the logo "Doctor Who Tours" on it, told them that the Shard had featured in an episode of the show.

"What? Would you have preferred an epic battle?" Jonathan grinned. "I would think you'd have taken enough punches for a day, Rocky. That's a nice black eye."

Richard pouted but Velkan wrapped his arm around his shoulder, visibly happy to have his puppy back. "Don't listen to him. I'm proud of you. Three against one and you gave them hell."

"I still don't think that she needed to kill that one guy."

"Listen to you, first you bring home a stray and then you get beaten up for him, only to start feeling sorry for a guy who for all intents and purposes would have killed you without batting an eyelash." Jonathan chuckled. "You're too good for this world, Richard. A wonder the Shadow Queen didn't burst into flame faced with someone so pure."

Richard opened his mouth to reply to Jonathan's teasing but then he closed it again and blinked. He looked back at the Shard.

"What the...?"

"You noticed, didn't you?"

Velkan looked back and forth between the two men. "What are you talking about? Noticed what?"

"The Shadow Queen." Jonathan said. "What did she look like?"

"She..." Velkan trailed off. "She..." He scratched his head. "I can't remember."

"Neither can I." Richard agreed.

"Me neither." Jonathan scoffed. "She's a clever bitch. I realized that when we came into the apartment and met her. I instantly remembered her face. We have met several times, but you forget what she looks like after the meeting is over. Sydney can learn a bit from her."

"Yeah, better not tell him that. He'd be insufferable."

"Isn't he always?" Jonathan grinned. "Let's go." He started towards the tube station.

"What did you talk about with her?" Velkan asked as he and Richard caught up to Jonathan. "I didn't know what to expect but I sure as hell didn't think we'd walk in there, you have a bit of a chat and we leave."

"She's a businesswoman." Jonathan shrugged and tapped his empty hand on the scanner at the turnpike. It reacted as if he was using an Oyster Card, instantly granting him access. Velkan and Richard followed suit, though they had to use their actual cards.

"She knew that she had something of value there." Jonathan continued as they stood on the escalator down to the platform. "So she suggested a simple transaction. Kearon is useless to her as he is so she wrote that investment off and she knows that she can't get on Elisabeth's nor Jeremiah's bad side. There is a power balance in London."

They lined up next to the tracks, waiting for the train of the Northern Line to arrive which would take them directly to Highgate Tube Station.

"And you expected that."

"I hoped for it." Jonathan said. "She only stands to gain from a good relationship to Whitechurch Manor. So all she asked in exchange for Richard was a favour which I

promised her. And my word means something. She knows my reputation.”

“What favour?” Velkan asked, alarmed.

“I will find out when the time comes.”

“You seem really unbothered by owning a criminal mastermind a favour.” Richard said.

“Why would I be bothered? I used to be one of those people, Richard. I know how it works. You share a house with a guy who is just like the Shadow Queen. Well, he wishes. I wonder if she knows that he is the Lord of the Bone Market. I doubt it, though. Must give Sydney that, he might not have the power to make people forget his face, the Gods know I sometimes would love to, but he is good at keeping his identity a secret.”

“And what if what she asks of you isn’t legal?”

Jonathan looked at Velkan instead of replying. He raised his eyebrows a little and twisted his mouth.

“Stupid question. It will be illegal.” Velkan sighed.

“Of course it will be.” Jonathan grinned. “We’ll see what she’s up to when she comes to collect.” The train arrived and commuters poured out into the station. “Let’s leave it at that and celebrate our victory, eh?” Jonathan added and stepped onto the train. Velkan and Richard exchanged a glance and the older wolf raised his shoulders in defeat before they followed him.

Night had fallen over Whitechurch Manor in the wake of the events of the day. A strange sense of peace lay over the mansion on North Hill after secrets had been revealed; a new friend had been welcomed into the fold and a deal had been struck with the devil. The mistress of Whitechurch Manor, Elisabeth Whitechurch, looked out of the window of her study down into the garden. There were two versions of Elisabeth: the one she showed to the world, the stern and driven political power player who regularly had tea with her royal namesake in Buckingham Palace and the one Jonathan sat across from now, the one who enjoyed wearing flowing dresses and literally let the long dark curls of her hair down once she was in the walls of her ancestral home.

Elisabeth Whitechurch was a fixture of the supernatural world ever since she became part of it in the late 1800s. The vampire had seen her legacy through World Wars and through the ever-changing political landscape of the planet into the new millennium. With her as its head, the Whitechurch Society had turned from a few people in the house on the hill into a world-wide network of operatives and specialists. Jonathan had always been aware of the actions of the Society, their support in times of crisis, their intervention when their help was requested and their expertise in dealing with supernatural threats and keeping up the veil between the human world and supernatural.

To him, they had always seemed like goody-two-shoes. Not worth a second thought unless they got in his way. And now he was one of them. Quite ironic.

Next to Jonathan, Elisabeth’s husband Tobias took a sip from his brandy and leaned back in the comfortable armchair. One could clearly see the family resemblance but where his older brother Velkan was a rugged goofball, Toby was a controlled presence rarely seen without a tailored suit, his hair always on point and his dark beard well-groomed. However, even he had loosened his tie here in the homeliness of the manor.

"That's quite a chain of events which didn't even warrant a phone call." Elisabeth said after Jonathan had finished his recount of the day's events.

"We had it under control."

"Obviously." Tobias chuckled. "If you call making a deal with the Shadow Queen 'under control'. Though I'd say there could have been worse outcomes. As deals with shady individuals go, she might be preferable to many of my esteemed colleagues at Whitehall."

"Whatever you will do for her, it will be off the books." Elisabeth turned around. "I can't have Whitechurch operatives run errands for someone like her. Sydney's presence here is only acceptable because no one knows who he really is."

"And that he helped build this place up and is a close friend, eh?" Jonathan winked, clearly aware of Elisabeth's narrowing eyes. "Don't worry. When she comes to collect, I will do my thing and nobody else has to bother with it."

"Have you told Velkan that?" Tobias smirked. "I think he might have an opinion on that."

"I'll worry about that when the time comes." Jonathan drank from his own brandy, even though he preferred whisky. "So you'll let Kearon stay?"

"After all this mess it would be cruel not to. As long as he keeps his facts straight for now." Elisabeth sat down at her desk. "I admit it's a fascinating case. A Banshee who is transgender. He's one of a kind. And with his powers in disarray, it is probably safest for him to be among people who specialize in the unknown."

"Myra will be delighted. Finally, someone new to experiment on. Though we might have seen the last of Syd, given how he went off like a shot as soon as Kearon stepped onto the scene." Jonathan agreed. "Once he heard Kearon would stay, he was out the door with more luggage than I ever owned in my entire life."

"He'll be back, just give him some time to adjust."

"What was that about? You know him longer than all of us and intimately."

"A fact I'd like to forget." Toby growled but his face brightened up as his wife gave him an affectionate smile before turning back towards Jonathan.

"He overreacted. It's death or rather things and beings which are closely associated to it, if I should make an educated guess. Reminds him of mortality. At least that's my attempt as a layman of psychology at making sense of our dear Sydney. He'll be back as soon as he tires of shopping and begins to miss Castor. To him the mansion always had a revolving door."

"You can say that again." Jonathan rose from his seat. "Well, everyone is downstairs throwing a welcome party for Kearon, will you join us?"

"We'll be down in a moment."

"Very well."

"And hands off the whisky!" Toby chuckled. "I saw that the decanter in the drawing room is empty yet again."

Jonathan held up his hands in mock defence. "Don't know what you are talking about."

He left the two alone and made his way towards the entrance hall. Light flooded out of the open door of the drawing room and he could hear happy chit-chat and laughter as he arrived at the grand staircase. His mobile vibrated in his pocket. A message from an unknown number.

It's nice to know that you haven't lost your touch.

Jonathan snorted and put the phone back. No, he hadn't lost his touch. And he wouldn't, even though he was now part of the goody-two-shoes. With that, he walked

down the stairs to join the party.

Richard pushed open the front door of the mansion and walked out into the garden. The moon was shining brightly in the sky, illuminating the great fountain at the end of the driveway, as masterful creation depicting all kinds of fantastic creatures like fauns and fairies in a wild dance around a central intricate carved stone dais.

He sat down on the side of the fountain and looked at the calm water in the pool. Even in the pale moonlight, he could clearly make out the bruises on his face. And they made him proud. He had been in his first real fight and while he had been taken down ultimately, he had been able to stand his ground against three opponents for a while.

The creaking sound of the great double door of the mansion drew him back his thoughts. Kearon stood there, looking a little lost and embarrassed. His pale cheeks were flushed, they had all been drinking and Richard, too, felt a little tipsy.

"I needed some fresh air. And you? Running away from your own party?"

"No, it's just...." Kearon stopped. He stared at the ground in front of his feet, his long fingers playing nervously with the hem of his shirt. "I'm sorry!" It exploded out of him as he looked up at Richard, his purple eyes widened. "I'm so sorry!"

Richard smiled benevolently. They hadn't really talked about what happened after his return to the manor. There hadn't been a chance.

"It's okay."

"No! No, it's not okay! You were nothing but kind to me and I lied to you and I-"

"Stop!" Richard held up his hand. "Stop it, Kearon. I said it's okay and I mean it. I was in your shoes. I lived on the streets. I know how it eats away at your faith in other people and how it makes you question whether to tell the truth or not. Anything to survive. You have a home now and I hope that it does to you what it did to me: Show you that you're loved. That there are people you can trust."

Kearon stared at him before nodding slowly, his face showing confusion and relief in equal measure.

"Just promise me that there won't be lies between us anymore." Richard finished.

"I... I promise."

"Then everything is okay. And you should get back in; the others want to get to know you better. I'll be along in a moment."

Kearon smiled faintly before nodding again. "I guess... you're right. Thank you."

"There is nothing to thank me for. It's what family does."

The Banshee walked back to the door, looking over towards Richard one last time before returning inside and closing the door.

Richard's eyes wandered over to the windows of the drawing room. They were glowing with the warm light from inside and he could see Myra chatting with Velkan, both of them turning their attention towards Kearon as he joined them.

"Family..." Richard said under his breath before standing up and going back to the house.

The End... for now.