



Excerpt from Kindle Version, 2018

Rabbit: Chasing Beth Rider

By Ellen C. Maze

Sixth Edition

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This Sixth Edition is released in tandem with the long-awaited Book Three in the Rabbit Trilogy – Rabbit Redemption—freshened for old and new readers.



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Nip It in the Bud

Jack Dawn shoved Kite to the ground and beat his chest like a gorilla. He'd never been bested, not in twelve hundred years, and there was no way this feeble pup was going to get the better of him tonight. Jack feigned toward him and the kid winced. It was good to be the king.

He'd begun his evening at a local brothel with a few of his brothers and now they were winding down, enjoying their nightly ritual of pounding each other until they collapsed or cried uncle. Kite endured a special beat-down for something he'd said over a month ago. There was no need to remind him of his error; it was more fun to slap the snot out of him and watch his eyes grow wide with fear. It would make the kid stronger. Jack was slapped around plenty when he was young. Not that he could remember a lot of it; he hadn't been young for a long time.

"So, what about that Rabbit you marked, Jack?" Elder Tomás spoke with a thick Spanish accent, watching the amusing and violent spectacle from a few feet away.

"What's to say?" Jack booted Kite in the shoulder just to hear him yelp. When the kid fell silent, he turned to Tomás behind him.

"There's a whisper going around that your boy, Stone, isn't playing fair."

"Don't you know better than to listen to gossip?" Jack approached his friend and swatted his shoulder hard. Not quite as tall as Jack, but nearly as muscular, Tomás braced himself, effectively nullifying the jab.

"It's not gossip, Brother. Tyson said—"

"Tyson? That miserable waste of space? Come on, Tomás. Shut up about Tyson!" Jack growled his words and threatened the Elder

with a raised fist.

Tomás stepped forward and bared his teeth, wrapping a strong hand around Jack's closed fist. Jack pushed against him and soon added his upper body strength, leaning in to press through, but Tomás matched his great physical might perfectly. As they tested each other's strength, Tomás spat his next words into Jack's sweating face.

"Stone's gone soft, Jack." Tomás grunted with effort. "Let's go down to Montgomery and check it out." Tomás brought his free hand up and clocked Jack under the chin. "If Stone's behaving, no problem. But if he's—"

Jack returned Tomás' uppercut with a powerful double blow to his kidney. Tomás crumpled to the ground, but didn't cry out or show pain. He stayed on the carpet, drew up his knees, and caught his breath.

"Behaving? That's my lieutenant, you asshole." Jack kicked the other Elder's nearest shin *hard*.

Tomás made no notice of the blow. "If he's gone soft, Jack," he said in a forced whisper, "you're gonna...you're gonna want to nip that in the bud."

Jack frowned. "Seriously? What does Tyson know?"

"It's not Tyson alone." Tomás put out his hand and Jack pulled him to his feet. "Others sense the same thing. Don't you? He's *your* disciple—your favored one—surely you've read his intentions by now," Tomás said and raised his fists, pugilist style.

Jack ignored his offer and turned away. He left the large empty room, modified especially for roughhousing, and entered the kitchen. Tomás was right behind him, followed by a very bloody Kite, and Beryl, one of a set of twins Jack was discipling.

"What about it, Jack?" Tomás pressed him as he pulled a beer from the fridge. He tossed the can to Jack who caught it without looking up.

"I got this, Tomás. I'll handle it. End of discussion." Jack popped the can open and drank the entire contents without pause. He tossed the empty to Beryl who in turn tossed it into the trash at his heel. "I should have killed that woman as Bel suggested. Why do I always listen to you?"

"Blame yourself for lovin' me so much." Tomás smiled and his eyes narrowed. "Bel had two of his pups disappear today. That makes at least twenty that we know about."

Jack cursed and hit the wall with a closed fist. Powdered plaster filtered down slowly from the ceiling onto his bald head. “This is ridiculous. Stone’s a real monster. That woman has unleashed some kind of magic on him. *On us*. But how? And why now? Thousands of years and nothing like this has ever happened before...”

Beryl cleared his throat and Jack glared at him out of habit. Beryl was part of Jack’s inner circle and had been for the last few years. When he sent Michael Stone off to Montgomery to manage that area, he moved Beryl and his identical twin brother, Meryl, right under him. The boys performed as two bodies with one magnificent brain, and it was no use to separate them for long. Tonight though, Meryl was taking care of a mission for Jack across town, and Beryl stayed behind. Jack liked to have one of them around at all times. He liked to watch them work. And he liked to watch them, period. Identical in every way, the boys had soft, curly brown hair, a throwback from their mixed ethnic heritage. With their fawn-hazel eyes they often left speechless any mortal, man or woman, careless enough to be caught in either boy’s gaze. The kids had the looks they all wanted—perfect facial symmetry, skin the color of creamy coffee, a killer smile—but both with the disposition of their true father, Umbarto. Father Umbarto was also Jack’s natural father, and he was a nightmare when perturbed.

Beryl and Meryl could be great; they were natural leaders. And Jack was just the man to disciple them up.

“You got something to add, B?” Jack asked, knowing his normally terse tone inevitably lifted when he addressed the twins.

Beryl cleared his throat again and carefully chose his words. “Father Abroghia once told a story.” He paused and met the eyes of each man. “Two thousand years ago, many Rakum fell away from the Brotherhood. They got wind of a new religion that was circling the planet. Abroghia was there.”

Jack considered the tale. Abroghia was the only Father that went back that far. The other nine were old, no doubt, but Abroghia had seen at least three millennia and was widely respected as the ultimate leader of their Race. He nodded at the boy who returned a tight smile. It was the closest thing to affection that they had between them and it suited them both.

“Well, it’s coming around again,” Tomás interjected. “Twenty of the brethren gone underground. Hiding from us. Hiding from *you*.” Tomás headed out of the kitchen. “You need to go to

Montgomery tomorrow and eliminate that Rabbit. Hell, I'll go with you. It'll be fun."

Jack watched him go and then glared at Kite who stepped back, as if awaking from a trance, his marbles scrambled.

"We'll leave at sundown," Jack called to Tomás and then reached for Kite's upper arm. The boy knew better than to evade him and he stood under Jack's hard gaze suppressing a shudder. Jack eyed Beryl and he stepped behind the younger Rakum to wrap his arms around his chest, holding him tight.

Kite closed his eyes and pressed his lips together tightly. It stunk being least in the kingdom.



10

Old Cow, Good Cow

Michael avoided the elderly man's gaze as he drew his tired blood into a disposable Dixie cup. After making his good-byes with Beth Rider at the airport, he surreptitiously tailed her home and made sure she got inside safely. He had a small window of time before she was in any real danger. Jesse would deflect anything mentioned to him and none of the Brethren were nearby. Michael returned his attention to the work at hand.

This particular Cow entered Michael's life five years ago and was one of the first added to his current rotation. Of course, five years ago, the man had been virile and productive, working full-time at his family-owned hardware store. But during the last eighteen months, he developed pneumonia and was beginning to show the first signs of Alzheimer's. None of this mattered to Michael. The old gentleman was still a free and ready food source, and Michael never turned down an easy meal.

It was the acceptable method of feeding; to select a few human donors who were willing and able to give blood regularly on a schedule, and Michael had nine such Cows in the area. Many of his brethren lived off less than half that, but Montgomery had been particularly good to Michael, and he was envied for it.

As a rule, Michael maintained an amicable relationship with those inclined to let blood to him, but not all Rakum treated their donors with such respect. Some Cows faced constant terror at the whimsy of their Rakum masters; but, *hey, they volunteered for the duty. You lay down in the bed you make.* Michael had a hard time feeling sorry for any mortal who consciously submitted to such practice.

Just because his own disposition led him to apply a certain gentleness, Jack Dawn was infamous for his cruelty. Michael smiled despite the gruesome recollection of the last time he accompanied his Elder on a visitation. Jack was fond of ripping the Cow's skin with his teeth and then, when the feeding ended, he would have his healer, Kite, lay hands on the wound to sew it up. Jack was indeed harsh and bloodthirsty; what self-control he must have exercised to avoid killing Beth Rider when he had the chance.

Michael cleared his mind as the aroma of Norman's blood tickled his nose. He waited until the cup was full to press a bandage against the slight wound he had made in the man's forearm. As per his habit, Michael met the man's gaze only when he brought the cup to his lips. Each Cow had his or her own idiosyncrasies, and this one enjoyed watching him drink the blood. Michael couldn't fathom why they allowed him to drink from them at all. Unless they were all insane. But what need had he of explanations? Michael finished off the quickly cooling liquid and licked his lips.

"What'cha gonna do when you come by here one day..." The old man paused to take a ragged breath. "When you come by here one day and I'm gone?"

Michael didn't respond, his brain alive and his every nerve tingling from the hastily-downed ambrosia. Norman knew better than to interrupt. Michael allowed a small smile, but didn't reply until the buzz passed. Norman waited, his lungs rattling, until Michael was ready. When his tongue was no longer numb with pleasure, Michael feigned surprise, teasing the old guy.

"Where're ya going, Norman? Are you leaving me? You can't even get out of bed."

"When I'm dead, you idiot!" Norman spat the last, his flying spittle a happy accident.

"Norman, if you even die, I will be very surprised," Michael laughed, and finished wrapping the white gauze around the man's withered arm just as he had done every eight weeks for the last five years. "Hard old coots like you never die. You'll be here another hundred years, lying in bed, waiting for me to come through that door and brighten up your miserable life."

"Hmph." Norman struggled to grunt his response and fell silent.

Michael felt the man's eyes on him as he rose up from his kneeling stance to toss the used cup into the trashcan. This particular Cow had always been belligerent, but it was a farce; Norman was in

awe of him—as were all his donors. And why not? He was a living, breathing god. He strode back to the man’s side and knelt once again at his eye level.

“Okay, here it is. If you’re going to die, be sure to leave me the name of someone I can carry on with. *I’m* not dying any time soon, and I’m still going to need my supper on time with or without Norman Hassel.” Michael knew that his careless words would get a rise out of the tired Cow, and for some reason, this kind of cruel banter pleased the man more than anything.

Norman took a careful but full breath into his ravaged lungs and let out a string of profanities, cursing Michael profusely as he rose and headed toward the door. He was still cussing like a sailor when the door was shut and locked automatically behind him.

Michael reached the elevator and pressed the down button as an unwanted aroma hit the air. It was a Rakum and not one he liked.

“Hey, Brother. Where’s the Rabbit?” Tyson came out the stairwell door and walked up to Michael pressing into his personal space.

Wondering how the creep got past him, Michael ignored the elevator bell and stepped back into the hallway. Although they had shared a few adventures in the past, Tyson was nobody’s favorite. Short, greasy and repulsive, he had come to live with the Southern Packs only a few years ago. Before then he had lived alone two hundred years in the Alaskan wilderness. He had zero social skills and his only positive attribute was his generosity—he had a lot of dough and he shared it with anyone who treated him with any measure of civility.

Michael was not going to earn any money tonight.

“Tyson. I thought you moved to Tennessee...”

“Don’t change the subject. I know you nabbed that Rabbit. I smell him all over you. Where’d you leave him? Is he in there?” Tyson motioned to the door Michael had just exited.

“Look, Tyson, you’ve got a nose. There’s no Rabbit in there. Now forget you ever saw me.”

“Naw, Brother, you know the rules. The Rabbit was made for all of us. You gotta share. You can’t keep him to yourself. So where is he?”

“There’s no Rabbit!” Michael hissed his answer. He could not leave Tyson with any notions of hunting down and attacking Beth Rider. Michael took two menacing steps toward the smaller man and

he stepped back.

“You can’t threaten me, Mikey boy. You know the rules.” Tyson paused, sniffing the air, and then grinned in Michael’s face. “Ahhh... this Rabbit’s a *Bunny*, eh? Hmmm... Been a *while* since we had a Bunny marked. Don’t matter none. Same rules apply. You get first dibs, but then, she’s ours. The rules, Mikey, cannot be broken. Are you going try keeping her to yourself? That’s a bit risky, even for you.”

Michael sighed. The Rakum before him read his intentions clearly, but what could he do? He needed to protect her. She’d been wrongly accused. He couldn’t let the Brethren take turns at her, harass and attack her until their horrible lusts were satiated. He knew what they’d do—he’d done it himself so many times he couldn’t count.

“I obey the rules, Michael. None of the elders has anything on me. And as far as I know, you’re one of their golden boys. I’ll tell you what...” Tyson smiled again and nodded smugly. “I’ll give you a week to work out this infatuation you have with the Rabbit. But by next weekend, it’s my turn. And I’m telling the Brethren that I have next dibs. Next weekend, back off the Bunny. She’s mine.”

Michael didn’t reply. He watched the ridiculous little snot turn on his heel and head back through the door marked STAIRS. He didn’t have time to fume over the interaction; it was less than an hour before sunup and he wanted to be in Beth’s house before then. Michael pressed the elevator button and planned his route to her house. Tyson was right—he was acting fishy, and all of his Brethren would know it soon if they didn’t already.

Jack Dawn would be furious.

Michael shook his head as the elevator slid smoothly down. It was going to be an interesting week.



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Don't Open the Blinds

Beth yawned and stretched lethargically before she rolled over to check the time on her clock radio. It was already 10 a.m., but she wasn't worried. She was free until eight o'clock when she was expected at her publisher's to schmooze and politic to advance the sales of her novels. Until then, she could rest.

Beth daydreamed a full ten minutes before she finally put her feet to the floor. Her bedroom, a bath, and a second bedroom were on the top floor of her townhouse, and down below were the kitchen, dining nook and living room. She brushed her teeth, washed her face, and then clomped down the stairs, flipping on lights along the way. The stairway ended at the front door and she stepped over to the huge front window darkened by thick Venetian blinds. She was about to open them wide to let in the morning sun, but as her hand touched the cords she heard a shuffle behind her that made her turn around.

"Who's there?" she managed while clutching a fist to her chest. The image of the tattooed biker rose in her memory, but immediately a familiar voice replied.

"Don't be afraid, Beth. And please don't open the blinds. It'll sting my eyes..."

Michael sat on the couch, leaning heavily against the cushion. He'd been drowsing and was startled when Beth appeared at the picture window. Now seeing her terrified and vulnerable in her nightgown, he was sorry that he'd surprised her in such a way.

"Michael? What are you doing here?" she asked him, inevitably recalling her encounter with his Elder, Jack Dawn.

"Beth, again—please don't open those blinds." When she lowered her hand, he continued relieved. "I'll explain everything. It has to do with a man you met in Atlanta. He would have threatened you. I don't know if he gave his name, but it's Jack Dawn. I know him well. Get dressed and I'll fill you in as best I can."

Michael spoke softly, sincerely hoping she'd heard his request to keep the blinds shuttered. If she were to allow the sunlight in at full force, he would be completely blinded by the glare. He was wearing his sunglasses even now, but they would be of no use against the mid-day sun. And of course, if left to absorb the hateful sun's rays for longer than a few minutes, he would suffer burns so painful that he would lose consciousness. Further, left to the sun's mercy, he would perish completely within hours.

Beth still clutched her chest, but her breathing had slowed. "How did you know about that monster? I didn't tell you..."

"Get dressed and we'll talk. I'm not going to let anyone hurt you, Beth, but there are many right now dreaming of just that. Go on, get dressed, be a good girl..." Michael tried to keep it light, but how was he to explain it gently? The subject was grisly and she was a mere woman. Then again, she showed no signs that she had been brutalized by his Elder two short days ago. Perhaps she was up to the challenge.

Beth backed a few steps and nodded slowly. "Okay,

Michael. Okay. I'll be back in a minute.”

She returned upstairs and Michael heard her dressing hurriedly. Minutes later, she was back wearing blue jeans and a soft green sweater that perfectly complimented her eyes.

“Can you see?” Michael shifted his weight on the couch to face Beth who sat in a cushioned chair across from him. The only light was a small forty-watt side lamp. “Will this be enough light for now?”

“I guess. But why are you wearing sunglasses in the dark?”

Michael sighed. Jack Dawn wore the same brand and she must have that in mind. He offered a smile. “To put it simply, bright sunlight will blind me. I wear these sunglasses out of habit. I'll remove them if it makes you feel better.”

Michael breathed deeply, pulled the lenses off and held them in his hand. It was risky because she would only have to open the blinds a tiny bit to render him sightless.

“Well, you do have kind eyes. I certainly don't want to hurt you. I've never heard of such a thing...”

“Well, it has to do with your experience in Atlanta. Tell me what happened. Tell me about the attack.” Michael knew the basic marking procedure, but maybe if Beth spelled it out, he might be able to figure out why she was marked in the first place.

“Well, I was hoping it was all a dream. Look—I'm fine, and I don't have any proof that I was even attacked.”

“Is your driver's license missing?”

Beth nibbled her bottom lip and nodded.

“Tell me what happened. It might help me figure this out.”

“Well, okay. It was weird. I've never done anything to hurt anyone and I can't figure out what this guy has against me. I was only signing books in the bookstore...”

Michael was about to ask her to clarify and she caught on without a word.

“I’ve written a novel series and the second one came out four months ago. Since then, I’ve been holding signings about every other weekend around the South.”

“Okay, I’m listening...”

“Well, I signed books all afternoon and into the night, but one of the guys in the line threatened me.” Beth laughed nervously and Michael arched his eyebrows.

“And?”

“Well, don’t laugh, but I thought I heard him threaten me in my mind. You know, like telepathically. Well, anyway, that’s impossible. But I freaked out. I backed up and fell over and he said, ‘Miss Rider, watch your back.’”

“And then he left for a more opportune time.” Michael knew the drill. Frighten and intimidate the intended Rabbit and mark them later in private.

“That sounds like a Bible verse, did you know that?”

“No, I didn’t.” For the second time, it came to Michael’s attention that the beguiling woman made frequent references to religious notions. He refocused his questions and continued. “So, when did you see him again? Did he come to your hotel room?”

“Yeah, the next night he was inside waiting for me. How did he get in? Did he have a key? How did you get in here?”

“He didn’t need a key. One thing at a time Beth, what happened then?”

“Okay, but you’ll explain it all after? You promise?”

Michael nodded and she retold the entire event, obviously embarrassed as if it were a hallucination. But Michael was not amused in the least. When she was finished, he leaned into the couch and looked up to the ceiling.

“Well?” she asked softly, maybe afraid of the forthcoming answers. “Michael, what do you know about all this? If it really happened, I should have a scab here.”

She put her fingers to her throat.

“Wait.” Michael trained his eye to her neck and looked away again. She still smelled delicious and he wanted to

keep blood out of the conversation as long as possible. “You never saw that man before that night? Not ever?”

“No. I’m certain of it. I’d remember that brute.”

“I’m sure you would.” Michael nodded, allowing a quiet chuckle. “Why did he target you? That’s what I’m trying to figure out.”

“He thinks he’s a vampire, that’s obvious. He’s a psychopath. Crazy people don’t need a reason. That’s why they’re crazy.”

“No, I know this man. He’s not crazy. He’s methodical. He has a reason for attacking and marking you like this. What could it be?”

“*Marking*—that’s what he called it. Why do you take it seriously? What does it mean to you?”

Michael had already decided to tell her everything, mainly because she was up to her neck in his world and not likely to escape. He took a deep breath and leveled his gaze at her.

“Beth, that man who attacked you was not a man at all. He was a...well, he’s a Rakum. A very powerful one. One of the top among our leaders. Now hold your questions and let me try to explain as best I can. As far as I know, none of my kind ever relate with a marked Rabbit, so I am on a ledge here.”

“Your *kind*?”

Michael held up his hand. “I’ll talk. You listen.”

Beth’s lips parted, but then she nodded and sat back in her chair.

Michael nodded gravely and continued. “My race lives below the radar of this world. We are one hundred thousand strong and we live across the globe. In English, we’re sometimes referred to as Wraiths, but we prefer our ancient name, the Rakum.”

“You’re saying you’re not human?” Beth interrupted and Michael grunted.

“Correct. Although I was born in 1859 to a human

woman, my Rakum father's genes prevailed. I was raised in a group-lair—like a group home—for Rakum. We age normally until puberty when our aging slows to a crawl.”

“What?” Beth asked, but Michael continued without a pause.

“At age thirteen, I was taken in, proselytized and raised up by an Elder Rakum named Jack Dawn. He is the one who attacked you.”

“You're over a hundred years old?”

“That's right.”

“Oh, God, I have a million questions,” she said and Michael surmised her mind was spinning. She closed her eyes, slowed her breathing by sheer will alone, and when she opened them again, Michael recognized the emotion there—determination. She took a deep breath.

“This Jack Dawn, he told me that I better start running. Is that why you're here? To protect me? Why are you helping me instead of chasing me? Are you going to get into trouble because of me? Are you risking your life for me?”

“Whoa, hang on.” Michael chuckled softly even though she brought up a few terrifying points that he had not thought through. “One at a time. Yes, I am hoping to protect you, but I don't know why and I definitely don't know how. And yes, you are definitely running.”

“Are they after me already?”

“Yes.” Michael clasped his hands in his lap and watched for her reaction.

“How do you know?”

“It's complicated and we're short on time, so here's the condensed version. In the airport, you were spotted by my friend Jesse.”

Beth interrupted. “Oh... so that's why he was acting so weird.”

“Yes, he's one of my brethren, but he's a friend first and he won't be any danger to you. Jesse has done what he can to prolong the inevitable by telling everyone that I am with

you. I have a reputation..." Michael shrugged off the rest of that topic, but Beth pressed him.

"What kind of reputation? A bad reputation?"

Michael offered a tiny shrug. "Suffice to say, if Jesse tells the Brethren I'm keeping you to myself, they'll give me a week. A week is standard."

Beth grimaced. "You've seen a lot of Rabbits, then?"

"I've had my share."

"And you don't usually help them?"

"First time," Michael answered flatly, and then expertly changed the subject. "More concerning is that last night I ran into Tyson. He's hungry and determined and has given me one week before he comes after you."

"Oh, God," she mumbled. "What does that mean?"

"He'll hunt you like a wolf hunts his prey." Not entirely in control of his sarcastic tone, Michael instantly regretted his cruel reply. He smiled apologetically and shook his head. "I'm sorry if I come across crabby or insensitive. This is new to me—being helpful." Michael offered a nervous titter. "And I usually sleep through the day. Let me get this one important issue across."

"I'm sorry." Beth pulled an imaginary zipper across her lips.

"I can keep the others away for a week. I'm respected as top dog here, a lieutenant, if you will, so they'll keep their distance for a few days."

"But in all honestly, you're just winging it, like I am." Beth interrupted him once again, but Michael continued without pause.

"I have no idea how to keep you safe after they begin chasing you with real zeal. And just for trying, I will certainly come under reproach, or punishment, or... Wait. No. Let's keep our minds on the here and now. I am going to find out why Jack marked you in the first place. I think he hit the wrong mark and I only have a few spare days to figure it out. I will need to stay by your side during the night

hours...”

“What about the day? That’s when I do most of my running around.”

“You’ll be in no danger in the daytime. We’re pretty useless when the sun is up. You see that light creeping across the floor?” Michael pointed to the long thin slice of white light snaking over the beige carpet.

“Is that bothering your eyes?”

Michael nodded his head and replaced his dark sunglasses. “Yes. I have to get to a light-tight room and soon.” Michael tried to hide his growing tension, but surely Beth heard it in his voice. “You’ll be safe until twilight.”

“You’re serious?” Not really a question, Beth watched her guest’s expression in the dim light. “Wait, one more thing. If I can buy all of this, and I’m not having much trouble with it so far, but if I do buy this wild tale, wouldn’t I have some sort of scab on my neck where this Dawn character cut me? Did I imagine that? How do you explain that?”

As the sun climbed to its eventual zenith outdoors, the fraction of sunlight that seeped in around the edges of the blinds continued to threaten Michael mercilessly and a dull pain pierced his left eye.

“I can explain it, but first I need to get away from the window.” Michael came to his feet and Beth followed suit.

“I have windows all over the house.”

“This room will work.” Michael stepped toward the dining nook and stopped at a closed door to his right. During the night, he investigated the downstairs for such a hiding place and the tiny laundry/bathroom would do fine. “If I could hole up in here until after six, I’d be a lot better off.”

Nodding, Beth reached past her guest and opened the door. She turned on the light and motioned for him to enter.

Michael entered the small room and flipped down the lid to the toilet that sat opposite the washing machine. The room was barely six feet wide and maybe eight feet deep,

but it would be dark enough with the door closed tightly against the rest of the house.

“How do you feel about all this so far?” Michael’s eyes were already relaxing and he began to calm down. “I’m a perfect stranger about to crawl into your laundry room and hide from the sunlight. This sort of thing happen to you a lot?” Half-joking, Michael meant his remarks to be rhetorical, but Beth had an answer ready.

“Well, no, but you’ve explained the nut in Atlanta and my heart tells me that you’re trying to help me. I have peace.” Beth paused a moment. “I trust you because God is in control.” With that, she stepped away from the door and then rejoined him with cushions in her arms. “Here, put these on the floor.”

Michael received the sofa cushions and laid them on the clean tile. She then tossed him a huge pillow from the same couch to rest his head upon.

“Michael...” Beth stepped into the close space and shut the door. With barely four feet between them now, Michael saw she was uneasy, but was determined to get a few more answers before she left him alone. “Did I imagine that brute cutting my neck and drinking my blood? Clear this up and I can leave you to your solitude.”

“I suppose you’d find that disconcerting.” Michael judged the height of the dryer behind him and hopped up onto its surface. “You didn’t imagine it. Rakum *do* drink human blood, but my guess, he was trying to scare you and see what you were made of. From what you told me, he was impressed at your courage.” Michael smiled and lowered his head. “Come to think of it, I’m also amazed. You don’t act like a Rabbit. Aren’t you afraid?”

Beth shrugged and leaned against the door. “Yeah, I am, but I don’t control what happens.” She smiled mysteriously. “I’ll explain my peace later. First, you need to finish your answer to my question.”

“Yes,” Michael said and chuckled, marveling at his

host's dispassionate demeanor. He was no longer tortured by her Rabbit scent and wondered why; that had never happened before.

"You're stalling. Don't worry, you won't scare me. This is actually a lot like the main storyline from my novels. I think *that* is the main reason I'm so open to this craziness—it feels like I wrote this."

"Oh? You wrote about Rakum?"

"Answers, Mr. Stone. Go ahead and spill it," Beth pressed. "We'll talk about my books later. First things first."

Michael chuckled and leaned back on his hands. "Rakum drink human blood. Not out of necessity, but rather out of... well, habit, desire, uh...satisfaction. Human blood scratches an itch deep inside of us. That is the best way to explain that."

"What about drinking animal blood instead?"

Michael shook his head. "Bad for us—devolves us."

"Then, why not drink each other's blood and leave us alone?"

Michael shook his head. "No good. I mean, we do sometimes, but it's not good food for the long run. We might do it to a lesser brother to assert dominance, but Rakum blood is like Coke without caffeine—it doesn't satisfy."

"Geez," Beth whispered. "Poor humans. It doesn't seem fair."

"Oh, you got it all wrong." Michael shook his head. "We drink from human *Cows*, not just anyone off the street."

Beth's eyebrows went up and Michael quickly explained himself.

"Yeah, *Cows*," he chuckled good-naturedly. "Why not? She was taking the information very well for a Rabbit victim. "That's what we call a human who gives blood to a Rakum voluntarily, like a Cow gives milk. We don't have to steal blood. We don't have to kill. There are plenty of freaks who offer it up freely. It doesn't take that much and it can be relatively painless."

“Ugh, that sounds really...*wrong*.”

Michael shrugged noncommittally.

Beth tilted her head, asking carefully, “So, if this Dawn character cut my neck, where is the scar? I suppose that is what I wanted to understand.”

“Of course.” Michael’s smile faded and he slipped off the dryer. “Beth, when you swallowed Jack’s blood, your blood chemistry was altered. If you were to have tissue and blood samples drawn right now, they wouldn’t match those of the previous Beth Rider at all. By now, every single body system and every single cell is producing and reproducing cells tainted by Jack Dawn’s personal physiological identity. You’ve been literally changed into a new being. A Rakum Rabbit.”

“I don’t feel any different,” Beth said and shook her head. “Are you saying that the reason I don’t have a cut on my neck is because Jack’s blood in me caused it to heal up and disappear?”

Michael nodded affirmatively and she sighed.

“This is *exactly* what happened in one of my books,” Beth said and put her hand to the knob to leave. “This is incredible.”

“Beth, wait.” Michael replaced his sunglasses as a precaution to her opening the door. “Will you bring me your books? If this seems familiar to you, maybe it seemed *too* familiar to my Elder.”

“Sure.” Beth offered a sad smile and left him to grab a couple of copies of her novels. Michael thanked her and she backed away and closed the door, her eyes unseeing, as he imagined she was planning her new life.

It’s gotta be strange, but damn, she’s taking it well, he thought and settled onto the cushions to begin reading. He hoped the clues jumped out—he’d never been much of a detective.

(END OF EXCERPT)

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