

## A GIFT

It was a night in November and Eli was on his way from his previous place to the next one. He was travelling on foot, of his choice as much as of necessity. The few pennies he had rattling in his pocket would not have been enough for either train or bus tickets, but he didn't complain. He liked to walk, was used to it. After all, he had already lived more than a century the first time he even saw a train, and then another couple of decades passed before he had the opportunity to travel with one. Buses and cars were a novelty in the context. He had never tried airplanes.

So Eli traveled on foot. He kept to the smallest roads, preferred them to the noise and the blinding headlights from the cars along the larger roads. But there was a big highway some kilometers away, the noise from the traffic there could still be heard all the way here. Eli followed the big road from a distance, it would lead him right.

The road Eli was walking along, however, was just a small dirt road through the forest. The trees stood high on both sides and left only a narrow opening towards the sky. It was overcast this night, clouds were hunting past the just about half moon that only was visible for short moments. Actually, it couldn't be seen at all down here, the trees were in the way. The light was still enough for Eli, he could see well and the darkness did not hide any secrets. Wild animals didn't frighten him, nor did the creatures of the night and forest that he once had feared. He had long since come to the conclusion that such things were only fairy tales and superstition. If anything, the only exception would be himself.

Eli's thoughts were interrupted by the sound of a car approaching. He stopped and listened for a few seconds, decided that the car was coming from ahead and continued to walk. When he a while later saw headlights shine between the trees, he stepped off the road and into the forest. There he crouched down and waited for the car to pass, so that he could continue walking unnoticed. But the car did not pass,

instead it stopped a little further ahead. The engine was switched off, as were the headlights. A car door opened and closed. Then silence.

Eli got up, pondered a few seconds before making a decision. He put down his two plastic bags with belongings to the ground and stepped out onto the road again. Paused for a brief moment to memorise the place where he had left his stuff, then proceeded forward.

After a little while he arrived at an opening in the forest, a large gravel plane that served as a timber storage and a loading space for timber transports. A man stood smoking beside a large station wagon. He was alone, just as Eli had thought he would be. That was good.



Eli had taken what he needed from the man. He was bracing himself to do what had to be done to stop the infection when a sudden bright light caused him to rush up and rush over the gravel, away from the light source. He continued a bit into the forest but then stopped to cover behind a tree. Prepared to continue fleeing he listened for persecutors, but it was silent. No voices were heard, nothing.

He decided to wait a while and tidy himself up a little. He always got his face soiled by the blood, it couldn't be avoided, but he didn't want to look like that. Once long ago he had spotted his blooded face in a mirror and that had scared him. The thing on the other side of the glass been something very different from what he imagined himself to be.

In lack of water he grabbed some moss and scrubbed his face and neck, repeated the treatment several times until he was reasonably sure that he had removed everything. Then he sneaked out of his hiding place again to see if the coast was clear. Perhaps those who had surprised him had left to get help – that had happened before. But the gravel plot wasn't empty. A lonely woman was standing there. She had nice clothes: a knee-length winter coat, a fur-lined hat on her head, leather gloves and high leather boots. Over her shoulder she carried a shoulder bag of the same type that children used to have nowadays

when going to school. She was standing next to the lifeless body aiming a powerful flashlight onto it, apparently immersed in thoughts.



The man she had appointed to meet was laying lifeless in front of her. He had bled to death from a wound in his neck and she had let it happen. She hadn't even tried to do anything, just watched it run its course. At first she had felt a wonderful relief, at last it was over. But then a horrible thought had struck her. He had been delirious, said something before he died. *A vampire, he had been attacked by a vampire.* And she actually had seen something strange just when she arrived. It had been crouching over the man but rushed up and disappeared in the dark before she could see it clearly. She had tried to tell herself that it had been an animal. But it had ran on two legs. Like a human.

What if it really had been a vampire. What should she do then?



Eli had begun to wonder how long the woman would be standing there when she suddenly jerked and directed her flashlight straight towards Eli. He held up his hands to protect himself from the dazzling light, but remained where he was. He didn't feel threatened by the lonely woman, and he still had to stop the infection. She would probably soon go to get help, he reasoned, and then he wanted as soon as possible to do what had to be done. He just had to wait.

After a while the light disappeared again and Eli could lower his hands. The woman had turned around and Eli thought she was going to leave, but instead she went to the car and opened the tailgate. She leaned in and rummaged around for a few seconds, Eli heard noises from things being moved. Then she straightened herself again, now with an axe in her hand. She looked around quickly, then went across the gravel plane to the edge of the woods. There she stopped at a young birch and began to chop, methodically and practiced.

The woman soon had felled the birch, cut off a half-meter-long piece and sharpened one end. The sight of it reminded Eli of an old horror of his, a thought that many times had tormented him at dawn just before the rest would extinguish all thoughts, good as bad. *Someone would find him, make such a pole, and ...* It had been worst in the early days but over time it had become better and it didn't haunt him very often nowadays. Just once in a while. When he already was feeling bad for other reasons.

Eli shook off the unpleasant thoughts. He wasn't in danger right now, the woman wouldn't be able to overpower him. He was too fast and too strong for that. Could take the axe away from her if she tried anything.

But the woman turned out to have other plans. She returned to the dead man, lowered herself with one knee to the ground and put the pole with the sharp end to the middle of the man's chest. Eli watched interestedly, thinking he might not have to stop the infection himself this time. He would rather not have to, since the only method that was available to him was with his bare hands to twist the head off the corpse. He would have to grab the it with both arms and get his legs around the torso to get a hold, then twist. Change his grip and turn again. Several times. Hear bones and tendons tearing. It was horrible.

But the woman was doing it wrong, she wouldn't succeed hammering the pole through where she was aiming. Eli made a quick decision, yelled a warning.

"Wait! You shouldn't put it in the middle! "

The woman was started by Eli's shout, looked surprised up. She lowered the axe, straightened up a little.

"What are you saying?"

"You shouldn't put it in the center, there's bone!"

The woman moved the pole a little, then looked questioningly at Eli again. But the angle was wrong, the pole wouldn't penetrate the heart properly.

"Wait! I'm coming!"

Eli stepped through the brush and out onto the gravel plane. The woman put down the ax and the pole, got up and stepped away a few paces while Eli approached. Eli fell on his knees in front of the dead body, got the axe in one hand and the pole in the other and drove the latter right through with a couple of hard blows. Then he dropped the axe on the ground, got up and turned towards the woman.

She looked at him, at first appeared nervous, but after a few seconds she visibly relaxed, smiled faintly and said:

"I don't need to be afraid of you, do I? I mean, if you had wanted to kill me, you would have done so already."

Eli said nothing, just shrugged at the obvious. The woman turned towards the dead man.

"He *would* have woken up again as a vampire, wouldn't he? If you hadn't pushed that stick through him?"

"Yes."

The woman shrugged uneasily, swallowed.

"That would have been horrible. Believe me, I knew him. "

Then she turned to Eli again, looked at him thoughtfully. A few seconds went by, then she suddenly grabbed the bag she had been carrying all the time, lifted it off her shoulder and handed it to Eli.

"I came here to leave this to him, but he no longer needs it. Perhaps you will find some use for it."

Eli took the bag. It was filled with something but not very heavy.

"What's in it?"

"Money."

Eli weighed the bag in his hand, thinking that it could not be anything but banknotes inside and in that case it had to be *a lot*. He looked up at the woman, wondering:

"Don't you want them yourself, then?"

The woman didn't answer the question, just shook her head.

"I have to go now, so ... bye. And thanks for helping me!"

Then she turned around, crossed the gravel plane and disappeared between the trees. Only when Eli could no longer see the light from her torch did he go to retrieve his stuff and continue his walk.

