



Memento Monstrum

Careful, It Bites!

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I've always hated goodbyes. But in all my 589 years, this is the hardest yet. I've survived countless wars unscathed, lived through one natural disaster after another and walked through fire without getting burnt. I've even survived each of that dastardly Van Helsing's attempts to bump me off. Whether I will get through the next few days in one piece, however, remains to be seen. How am I supposed to do this without her? Perhaps just one more pleading look from my bloodshot eyes and she'll change her mind?

Don't go, Selena! I need you! I'll be lost without you!

'Oh, poopsie, don't look at me like that,' she says. 'Anyone would think the world was about to end. I'm only going away for two days.'

Only two days. This isn't a matter of *only* two days. Normally I wouldn't have any problem with her being away for two days. Two days could easily be spent with my feet up, playing old records as loudly as I liked or watching my favourite films while scoffing blood-orange ice cream by the bucketful until I felt sick. But none of that would be possible in the next two days. Because despite the fact that my beloved wife Selena was going away, I wouldn't be alone. Because *they* would be here. For two whole days. No break. I still can't believe it. Why is she doing this to me? Why is she just leaving me with these... these monsters?

Aima chuckles. 'I think Grandpa is scared of you, children.'

Great. Now even my own daughter is stabbing me in the back.

Not that I should be surprised. After all, she was the one who set this whole thing up. She just had to go and treat her mother to a wellness weekend in Paris with a day's stay in the catacombs as a 400th birthday present. Without asking me! And then she goes and decides that I have to look after these three hooligans while they're gone. And I'm not allowed to just lock them in the basement. Aima says that's not a good pedagogical approach.

[...]

'All right then,' I say, 'what happens if I stop watching them for a minute and they die?'

'Oh mousie, we've been through all this already.' Selena picks up her suitcase. 'What could go wrong? We're vampires. We're not that easy to kill. You just need to make sure they're in their coffins in plenty of time before sunrise. I've left everything ready in the children's crypt. There are

alarm clocks all over the house to remind you. And there's enough blood substitute in the fridge for a week, so you won't go hungry either.'

'Even so,' I sigh. 'Why can't Cassidy look after them?'

A reasonable question, I think? Fatherly duties come before Grandpa duties. Grandpas don't actually have any duties, that's the great thing about being a Grandpa. Unfortunately, it doesn't work out that way when the mother is in Paris and the father is who knows where. Trust Aima to go and fall in love with a vampire activist who's always out saving the world and fighting for the survival of our kind.

'Dad is on an island' says Globinia. 'He's doing a brimbosium.'

'It's called a *symposium*,' Vira corrects her.

'And he's not on an island, he's in Ireland, darling,' adds Aima, before turning to me. 'The Vampire Society is holding a congress in Dublin on the issue of *Effective Sun Protection*. But I told you that on the phone last week, Dad.'

Did she? I don't remember that. Happens to me a lot these days. Two nights ago, I decided to stretch my frail wings for the first time in weeks and go for a fly over the mountains. I looked down and saw I'd forgotten my trousers. At least nobody saw me!

'Your father has been a bit forgetful of late,' says Selena. 'He is approaching 600 after all.'

[...]

'Rhesus?' his mother repeats. 'Did you hear me? You'll help Grandpa look after your sisters. Do we understand one another?'

'Haha, good one, Mum!' says Vira with a laugh. 'That idiot might stand a chance of looking after us if we popped up in his game. But even then, he'd probably shoot us by accident!'

'Idiot yourself,' replies Rhesus, without looking up from his phone. 'Is there WiFi here or what? I need to download more silver bullets urgently or I'll never catch all these stupid werewolves.'

'Why are the werewolves stupid?' Globinia wants to know. 'Didn't they pay attention at school?'

'No idea,' Rhesus grumbles. 'They are our enemies and enemies are stupid. That's why I shoot them all.'

'Can't you give it a rest with that silly game for one minute?' Aima moans in irritation. 'If you carry on like this, you'll end up stupid too. Put your phone away. Now, please!'

'But, Mum, I'm almost on the next level!' Rhesus protests.

'I said now!' Aima snarls. 'You can play again later. But only if Grandpa lets you. And Grandpa is not a big fan of that sort of thing. So come on, put it away!'

'Okay, okay, I'll stop,' grumbles Rhesus, putting his phone in his trouser pocket.

'That's more like it,' says Aima. 'And now come here all of you and give me a goodbye hug, you sweet little bats.'

The girls throw themselves at their mother, kissing her cheeks. Rhesus needs a bit of encouragement, so Aima pulls him towards her.

'Be good, won't you,' she says. 'Just two sleeps and I'll be back.'

'Exactly,' says Selena with a grin, giving me a hug too. 'Just two sleeps and I'll be back, my poopsie.'

'Very funny,' I grumble.

'You'll survive,' she says, and gives me a kiss. 'And so will the children.'

Yes, we probably will. I just don't quite know how.

The children and I accompany Aima and Selena outside and wave after them in the night sky, until they are out of sight. Then I am alone with my grandchildren.

'And what shall we do now?' I ask. 'Have you had your evening breakfast yet?'

'Yes,' Vira replies. 'Mum made us black pudding sandwiches especially for the journey.'

'I'm hungry though,' says Globinia. 'Can I have a lolly?'

'A lolly won't stop you feeling hungry,' I say with a chuckle. 'Lollies are just snacks.'

'Then I want a snack.' Globinia looks up at me, her eyes like saucers. 'A lolly!'

'You can have one,' I say. 'Which blood type is your favourite?'

'B!' answers Globinia. 'Those are delicious!'

'True.' I nod. 'Those are my favourite lollies too. Would anyone else like one?'

'An A for me, please,' says Vira. 'B is too sweet for me.'

'Rhesus?' I look at the eldest child.

He is already engrossed in his phone and doesn't respond to my question.

'Rhesus?' I try again. 'Would you like a lolly too?'

'What? Err... yes please,' he murmurs absently. 'B, please.'

'Two Bs and an A it is. And another B for me,' I said. 'Now I just have to find out where Grandma hid the lollies. She doesn't want me to have too many snacks so my blood level doesn't get too high. And I need to pay attention to my flying weight too. As if lollies are all that heavy! Not to worry, I know almost all of her hiding places by now. Let's meet in the library in a minute. Do you know the way?'

'Yes,' replies Vira. 'That's my favourite place in the castle. There are lots of great books there.'

'But I can't read yet,' sighs Globinia.

'That doesn't matter,' says Vira. 'I can read something to you.'

'Oh, yes please!' shouts Globinia. 'I like it when you read to me!'

'I know.' Vira laughs.

'Rhesus, go with your sisters please,' I say. 'I would like you to stay together. The castle is large and even I still get lost here sometimes.'

'Okay,' Rhesus says and starts walking without looking up from his phone.

When he reaches the top of the stairs, he trips on the first step and just manages to grab onto the handrail in time to stop himself from falling.

‘Crap,’ he swears. ‘Now that stupid werewolf’s gone and got away!’

I set off on the long walk to the kitchen. Selena is right when she says the castle is much too big for us. And too old. And too expensive. The heating costs in winter alone are so high that Selena had to take a flying job delivering overnight packages for a courier service last year. And we only use the west wing now anyway, ever since the ceiling in the east wing fell on our heads while we were drinking tea. Fortunately, this happened just before sunrise – just five minutes later and we would both have fried.

It would certainly be sensible to sell the castle, but I haven’t had the heart to do it yet. I’m too attached to the old place.

[...]

I make my way back to the library with a heavily laden tray.

When I walk in, the shock is almost enough to send the tray and its contents flying. The lower half of my book shelves is almost entirely empty. There are books strewn all over the floor and the two girls are sitting in the middle, piling books up around themselves.

‘What... what are you doing?’ I ask, horrified.

‘Isn’t this great, Grandpa?’ says Vira. ‘I’ve always wanted to build a house out of books. And you have so many of them.’

‘Yes, a book house!’ cries Globinia with glee. ‘I’m getting my own room!’

I glance at Rhesus, who is sitting on the sofa, playing with his phone.

‘I told them they should ask you first,’ he says, without looking at me. ‘But they never listen to me.’

‘We’ll tidy everything up later, Grandpa,’ promises Vira.

‘Yes,’ adds Globinia. ‘I know exactly where each book went.’

‘Now, that I have to see.’ I place the tray on the floor between the two girls. ‘Help yourselves! But please be careful not to get any smudges on the books.’

I grab two lollies from the plate and sit down on the couch next to Rhesus.

‘Here,’ I say, and offer him a lolly. ‘It was B you wanted, wasn’t it?’

‘Yes, thank you,’ Rhesus takes it in his free hand while continuing to operate his phone with the other.

‘Mmmh, these are delicious, aren’t they?’ I say. His response is an absent nod.

‘How long does a game actually take?’ I ask him.

‘A long time.’

‘And the point is to kill werewolves?’

‘Yes.’

‘Have you ever met a werewolf in person?’

He shakes his head.

I turn towards the girls. They have almost finished their book house.

'It just needs a roof,' I declare. 'It's not a proper house without one.'

'We need a board for the roof,' says Vira. 'Or bigger books.'

'There are lots up at the top.' Globinia points to the top shelf of one of the bookcases. 'But we can't reach. Can you help us, Grandpa? We can't fly yet.'

True, vampire children don't learn to fly until they're twelve. I still remember teaching Aima, at the big window on the top floor of the west wing. It feels like yesterday but it was already over fifty years ago.

'I can't fly in here either, unfortunately,' I admit. 'I've needed a gust of wind for a few years now, otherwise I can't get off the ground. But we'll manage it somehow.'

At least, I hope we will. Hmm, the ladder is in the kitchen storeroom and I'm too lazy to get it at this precise moment. I get a chair and push it against the shelves.

'That won't reach,' remarks Vira and, unfortunately, she's right – no matter how much I crane and stretch, it's just not enough.

'You'll have to put the chair on the table, Grandpa,' says Globinia.

The girls help me push the table against the bookcase and put the chair on top of it. I climb up. It's pretty wobbly. I stand on one leg in order to get my balance and stretch my arms out above me. When I get one of the books between my thumb and forefinger, I give it a hefty tug. It moves slightly. I pull harder. With a sudden jolt, the bookcase tilts forward and the book shoots towards me, along with all the other books on the top shelf.

'Look out down there!' I cry, holding my hands above my head in an attempt to protect myself. 'Book avalanche!'

The girls dive under the table while the books rain down on the floor around them.

'Everything all right?' I ask, once the rumbling has stopped.

'Yes,' answers Vira. 'You too?'

'I think so,' I say, climbing down carefully.

I take a deep breath. The children have barely been here half an hour and I have already almost buried two of them under a mountain of books.

Vira crawls out from under the table.

'That was funny,' she says. 'Can we do that again later?'

'Err, I'd prefer not to,' I say. 'Where is Globinia?'

'A book nearly fell on my head,' comes a voice from under the table. 'There are lots of pictures in it.'

Vira and I pull away the table to see Globinia sitting cross-legged on the floor, leafing through... my old photo album! I've been looking for it for decades! No wonder I'd never found it, I never would have thought to look up there.

'Grandpa, who is that next to you?' asks Globinia, pointing to one of the photos.

'That looks like the Yeti,' Vira decides.

'Don't be stupid,' grumbles Rhesus from the sofa. 'There's no such thing as the Yeti. He's just made up.'

'Oh yes?' I say. 'In that case, how could I have this photo with both of us in it?'

'Photoshop,' Rhesus responds drily.

'Oh man, is he stupid,' groans Vira, rolling her eyes. 'This photo is ancient. There was no such thing as Photoshop back then. There weren't even any computers, you idiot.'

'Idiot yourself,' replies her brother. 'It's possible to edit photos to make them look old.'

'This one smells old too though,' says Globinia. 'Like Grandpa.'

'This photo *is* old,' says Vira. 'And it's definitely not photoshopped. I can see that from here.'

'Let me see,' says Rhesus.

Globinia stands up and passes him the album. I sit down next to him and Globinia climbs onto my lap.

'Budge up, idiot,' says Vira. She gives her brother a forceful shove to one side.

'That's the Yeti? Is it really him?' Rhesus regards the photo sceptically.

'No,' I answer, 'it's really *her*.'

'The Yeti is a girl?' asks Vira in disbelief.

'She is,' I answer. 'But hardly anyone knows that.'

'She looks nice,' says Globinia.

'Yes, I thought so too back then,' I say. 'I thought she was really nice, actually.'

Rhesus chuckles. 'Grandpa had a crush on the Abominable Snowman.'

'On the Abominable Snowwoman,' Vira corrects him. 'Is that true, Grandpa?'

'No, it's not,' I answer. 'It was... complicated.'

'Tell us!' Globinia demands.

[...]

The Story of Yeti and Vlad

It was 28th June 1909. The reason I remember it so precisely is because I had moved into my flat on Baker Street in London the day before. I had to move around regularly in those days. It was a difficult time. Before that, I had been living in Paris, but that confounded Van Helsing was hot on my trail once again and I decided to hide out in London for a while. I bought a deerstalker hat and an Inverness cape at a flea market and rented a flat under the name of Sherlock Holmes in a house with the number 221b. The landlady was a nice old woman called Hudson, who was already somewhat confused, which was fortunate. I told her I was a private detective and, as such, most of my work was done at night, which she believed straight away. So she didn't raise an eyebrow when I moved in in

the middle of the night and brought a coffin with me – ostensibly a piece of evidence from an extremely tricky case.

It was shortly before the sun went up. I had put clean sheets in my coffin and was just drifting off to sleep when I was startled by a noise so loud, it caused me to bump my head on the coffin lid.

[...]

I tried to go back to sleep, but the banging didn't stop. Now, I'm not normally the sort to complain to the neighbours about noise or other petty things like that, but after it had gone on for another hour without stopping, I decided to do something about it. I got out of my coffin.

[...]

I put on my cape to protect me from the daylight, took the stairs to the next floor and knocked on the flat door. But the noise was so loud that nobody heard me. So I hammered against the door with both fists until it suddenly swung open. The noise immediately grew louder, and I could hear music now too. I walked towards a door, opened it a crack and threw a cautious glance inside. The first thing I saw was a gramophone with a record turning on it. I knew the music, it was the Nutcracker Suite by my old friend Tchaikovsky, with whom I had shared some adventures in Russia some years earlier. The banging was clearly not a part of his composition, however. And now I saw what was to blame for the noise. Or rather: who was to blame.

In the middle of the room, I saw the most enchanting creature I had ever laid eyes on, and she was dancing. She wore a pink tutu and hopped, jumped and pirouetted through the room like an overjoyed elf. The fact that she weighed at least three-hundred kilos and her entire body was covered in thick white fur was irrelevant. Each of her steps and leaps made the floor shake – it was her dancing that was causing the racket. My irritation was gone in an instant. How could I be angry with this angelic figure? It might have sounded like a wild donkey was rampaging through the room, but she appeared to be floating across it like a cloud. I stood there, dumbstruck, simply overwhelmed. When the music stopped, I started to clap, forgetting that she didn't even know I was there. With a blood-curdling scream, she leapt behind the sofa that had been shoved into the corner.

'Forgive me!' I said quickly. 'I didn't mean to scare you!'