



*To Search in the Shadows*



*Stephan Thorn*

## To Search in the Shadows

It had cost Ruth nearly all of her inheritance and hundreds of hours of time, but at last she thought she'd found her Grail. So many ads in the underground newspapers, so many trips across the world to search the fetid dark alleys and the shadows of high society's brightly-lighted towers. She'd followed leads in fourteen countries and over fifty cities, towns, and hamlets. Every one had been a disappointment. Frauds or psychos, most of them, with the occasional goon in black lipstick and a cape thrown in to spice things up. But none had been a real, honest-to-God vampire. Her cynicism had grown with every wannabe and charlatan until she was almost ready to give up and admit defeat. But not yet. Not quite yet.

They were out there, somewhere, gliding like phantoms through the chill, velvet nights. They had to be. The legends were too worldwide, too timeless and culture-spanning to be only tales for frightening children or fodder for B-movies. Every nation's history spoke of them, usually in hushed whispers. The names changed with the languages; vampire, nosferatu, lilitu, rakshasa, eyelik, lamia, wampir, wurdulak, and so many others. Different names, different legends, but always there was the thread of truth -- pulsing a bright, hot, living scarlet -- connecting them. She could sense the reality of the folklore. They had to be real. She knew it, down deep in her gut, just like she knew she belonged with them. Her heart felt their call on every night breeze, heard it whispering to her in a siren song that lured her with an all-too-real hunger for the moon's silvery caress. Hers was not the daytime world, with its brutal and burning sun. Not the world of men. Instead Ruth longed for the muted colors of evening, the world of sleep and slumber for all but her and her kind. Her people; the citizens of Night, who passed the ignorant and blissfully unaware human herd as a falcon that flies high overhead -- undetected, unseen, silent in its search for prey. She knew she was one of them, except for some freakish accident of fate that had clothed her in warm and living flesh instead of the pale, cool skin of the Undead.

Ruth's thoughts were interrupted by a bell, and the sign at the front of the cabin lit up, admonishing the passengers to buckle their seatbelts and put their trays in the upright and locked position. Then she heard the captain's reassuring voice, saying that the weather in Houston was overcast and there was a light rain falling, and that the local time was 11:00 pm, in case anyone needed to set their watch. "We should be landing shortly," he added. "Thank you for flying with us and we hope to see you again soon." Ruth buckled her seatbelt and checked her watch absentmindedly. Just over two hours until she was to meet Russell. If he showed up at all, that is.

Ruth picked up her rental car at the terminal and dropped her suitcase at the Econo-Lodge room she'd reserved. She checked her shoulder bag, making sure she had all the gear she might need -- if things went very wrong -- for her rendezvous: bottle of pure garlic oil, flashlight, silver crucifix, make-up compact, foot-long stake of ash, vial of holy water, several wafers of the Host, and a .357 magnum revolver loaded with semi-wadcutter (just in case Russell was another all-too-human rapist, like that freak in

Madrid that she'd had to castrate with a broken bottle when he attacked her). Then she removed the steel mesh collar from her valise and slipped it around her slender throat. Not just a fashion accessory, it was last-ditch protection. It locked shut with a satisfying click, and she dropped the brass key into the right cup of her bra. She eyed the silvery chain mail choker in the mirror. "Might not stop 'im," she said to herself, "but it'll slow 'im down a bit." Then she donned a turtleneck blouse to hide the steel choker, put on her coat and walked back into the drizzling rain to keep her appointment.

Finding the bar wasn't easy. Even the cabbie she'd questioned had never heard of the place. But he knew where the street she wanted was and from there it was simple. It was an unobtrusive little hole in the wall, with only one neon beer sign in the window to mark its site and purpose. She parked down the street and eyed the place for awhile. Customers came and went, seemingly a bit low on the economic ladder but not overtly threatening or remarkable. Satisfied that she wasn't walking into a trap, Ruth slid from her car and headed for the bar.

She passed through the door that opened onto the street, and there was another door beyond. It was plated in black-painted metal, with big rivets protruding from it. As she opened it, bright purple lights stung her eyes. Loud music banged in her ears, making them ring. The interior of the bar was nothing like the outer façade. Rock music thudded against her like a wind as she passed into the crowded room. Almost immediately, she was surrounded by warm, sweating, dancing bodies. A live band was abusing their instruments in a beat-heavy parody of music at the far end of the room. The lead singer was a scrawny scarecrow with electric blue hair who seemed about to swallow his microphone as he screamed incoherently into it.

Ruth made her way to the bar. Three mixologists, two men and a woman, labored behind the wooden barrier. All three wore white dress shirts and black bow ties, and the shirts of all three were dark with sweat. They were obviously operating at top speed, but still barely keeping up with demand. It was several minutes until the woman asked Ruth for her order.

As she sipped her daiquiri, Ruth scanned the crowded room. A young bunch, mostly twenty-somethings, with a few older chickenhawks around the perimeter. No Goths or anyone dressed like Bela Lugosi, she noted. That was good. Showed some promise. But where was Russell? "If that SOB stood me up," Ruth whispered, letting the unfinished murmur die in the noise-laden air.

"I didn't." The voice at her elbow surprised Ruth so badly that she nearly dropped her glass. When she looked to her right she found a man on the stool next to hers. Immediately, she sized him up. He wasn't much to look at; approximately forty and slightly chubby, with thinning hair and big, round glasses perched on his somewhat feminine nose. He smiled, his perfect teeth glittering in the neon. "Sorry, Ruth. Didn't mean to scare you. I'm Russell," and he held out his hand. His voice had a slight accent. Not Texan, nor Mexican, but something close. At least, thought Ruth, he's not using a cheesy imitation Transylvania accent like that schmuck in London.

“Hi, Russell,” Ruth returned, taking his hand. “I wasn’t sure you’d really show.” Something wasn’t right. The thought hit in a moment: his hand was warm.

“Oh, I wouldn’t have missed this. Been a very, very long time since I met anyone with your particular...desires.” His eyes locked with hers and something deep inside Ruth realized that the sounds of the room were suddenly becoming very distant and fuzzy. For several seconds she stared into his bottomless gray eyes, knowing she was being pulled into them but somehow being unable to care. It was Russell who finally looked away, turning his head and bringing his free hand up to rub his eyes as though he had developed a headache. “Damn...sorry about that. Force of habit. After a hundred and fifty years...”

Ruth shook her head and the fog cleared away. The band’s clashing chords returned, seeming louder than ever after their conspicuous absence. “How did you do that,” she demanded.

He released her hand. “Look, I’ll explain later. For now, let’s get out of here. All this young blood makes it a bit hard to concentrate. We can talk outside where it’s quiet.”

Ruth watched Russell stride away, paying attention to the way the congestion of people parted two steps ahead of him as he walked. She followed him almost without realizing she was doing it.

They stepped into the cool night air of the quiet street, and she noted that he was wearing khaki pants and a Dallas Cowboys shirt, along with Air Jordan sneakers. He leaned back against the brick wall of the building and inhaled deeply. “Smell that, Ruth?” he whispered. He closed his eyes and his head tilted back as he crooned, almost to himself, “Smell the living blood pulsing in the wind? Houston is a big, vital, delicious city. It’s full of life and strength and the mixed blood of Mexicans and Indians and Europeans...burning hot and sweet. You’ve never tasted anything like it. But you will, once you’ve crossed over.”

“Very poetic, Russell, but let’s get down to brass tacks. Before we proceed, I have to know for sure that you’re really a...well, what you say you are.” She took two steps back and slipped her hand into her bag, curling her slim fingers around the checkered, wooden butt of the pistol. She’d questioned his belief, so if things were going to go bad, it could happen right now, and very quickly. “I’ve dealt with too many phonies to just accept your word for it.”

“Of course, of course,” he smiled. He opened his eyes and turned to face her. Again, Ruth felt those gray eyes touch her mind, but this time she was prepared for it.

“Sorry, but it won’t work now. I’m aware. You won’t surprise me again. I can fight it off.”

“Smart girl,” he chuckled. “Okay, so what now? A test of some kind?”

“Exactly. Go in there,” and Ruth pointed to a shadowed alley that opened onto the street.

“Oooh, aren’t you full of good ideas,” he responded, his grin widening. Then he turned his back to her and suddenly he wasn’t there. Instead Ruth was staring at a twisting knot of silvery mist that vanished before her eyes. Fear splashed like ice water down her spine and she instinctively pressed her back into the wall. Her eyes darted from shadow to shadow, searching for Russell. Then he stepped out of the alley. It was still Russell, but different. His clothing had changed, and he was now wearing black denim jeans, a wine-red dress shirt and leather biker jacket. He was no longer chubby and balding, either, and his glasses were gone. Now he was taller and muscular, his chin dark with a well-trimmed beard. “Well, c’mon,” he urged her. “Whatcha waitin’ for?”

Ruth stepped into the thicker darkness of the alley. Sour smells of garbage reached her nose. Russell was standing in the alley, looking perfectly at ease as he floated about eight feet above the dirty, wet pavement. He spread his arms and floated down, landing soundlessly before her. “Well, Teach,” he laughed, “did I pass?”

“Neat trick. But not that impressive. Magicians do it all the time,” was Ruth’s reply.

“You’d be surprised how many magicians are really one of us,” Russell said. “After all, who else can get away with wearing a cape nowadays?” He grinned at the joke, his teeth shining ivory in the gloom.

“I thought the cape thing was just Hollywood stuff.”

“Hollywood got a lot of stuff right, Ruth. Most of it is just by accident, really. But the cape is helpful to us. Makes flying easier, for one thing. For a younger Vampire it’s also an aid to transformations. Takes a lot of concentration to shape-shift, at least until you get the hang of it, and that can take centuries. The cape helps to focus your concentrative energies, to help you envision the change you want. It’s a crutch, and some never let it go, even after they’ve mastered the technique.”

Ruth stepped closer to him. Her grip on the pistol had relaxed, but instead she had grasped the crucifix. “So what else did Hollywood get right?”

“Most of it, actually. There’s a lot of stuff they never tell you in the movies, though. Old legends from Europe that wouldn’t sell in the theatres. Stoker knew them, but since he didn’t use them in ‘Dracula’ they didn’t get the publicity.”

“For example?”

“Oh, that if a bird flies over -- or a cat or wolf jumps over -- an unburied corpse then the body will rise as a Vampyre, that we can see in an entirely different spectrum from humans, stuff like that. But that bit about being unable to cross running water? Bullshit. We can walk over a bridge just as well as anyone else.”

“And is that how you changed your appearance? Another thing Hollywood forgot to mention?”

“Not exactly. It’s a form of mind control – like hypnosis. We can alter our image to a certain degree so we blend into the scene or get closer to prey. It’s protective camouflage. It’s not so much an actual change in us as a change in how we permit humans to perceive us. Again, it’s a thing you learn to do over time.”

“You certainly seem to have the answers, Russell.”

“I came over in the 1800’s. Had a lot of time to practice since then.”

“Then you won’t mind if I conduct a few tests? Just to satisfy myself you’re the real McCoy, you understand.”

“Long as you don’t mind answering my questions in return.”

“Fair enough. Let’s get started.” Ruth stepped closer to him, fishing her makeup compact out of her purse. She snapped it open and held it close to Russell’s face. “Breathe on this,” she ordered. He complied, exaggerating and panting loudly so she couldn’t help but hear. The glass did not fog.

“We don’t really need air, Ruth, unless we’re talking. And when we do, it’s not moist and warm, like your breath is. We’re cold, Ruth, very cold, except in some... important ways.” He took her hand and pressed it against his cheek, almost like a lover would. The flesh was cold, as he’d said, but pliant and soft. Then he turned her hand so she could see herself in the compact’s small mirror. “See what life looks like, Ruth,” he said, “then look at me in the mirror.” She turned it slightly until it reflected the gray alley around them.

“You don’t cast a reflection,” she told him, as if he didn’t know it yet.

“Nope. Another thing the movies got right. Not in a mirror, water, on shiny metal, or anywhere else. We’re spirits, and spirits don’t have reflections.”

“What about crosses and garlic?”

“The garlic works on us like an open sewer works on you. The stink could make you sick, but you can survive it. Now if a human eats a lot of it, their blood will taste bitter and could make us puke, but that’s about it. The cross is only a piece of jewelry. It’s your belief in it that makes it a weapon. Otherwise an atheist Vampyre would be

immune to it.” He stepped closer to her, close enough that she could feel the chill from his body caress her warm skin. “Now, my turn. Tell me, Ruth-who-searches-in-the-shadows, why did you want to find us?”

“Curiosity. And money. If I can do an interview with a real, genuine vampire, and prove it, the book I’ll write will be on the best-sellers list for years.”

He stared at her for a long second, then shook his head. “Okay. You want our meeting to be full of lies, then we’re done.” He turned as though to walk away.

“What do you mean?” she asked.

Looking back over his shoulder, he frowned sadly. “Ruth, I feel every pulse of your heart. I smell the blood as it races through your veins, and I can see it inside you, like a spiderweb of red cords under your skin. You can’t lie to me without physiological changes in yourself and I can see them happen. Vampyres are excellent lie detectors.” Then, with motion too fast for her to react, he spun and grabbed her at the elbows. His hands were like frost-chilled vises, pinning Ruth’s arms to her sides. Frightened, she struggled to pull the cross from her bag, but her arms wouldn’t move. Angrily, Russell snarled at her. “Don’t lie to me, Ruth. You’re not writing any book. Tell me the truth! Why did you seek us out?”

For a moment she fought with herself. It was hard to say the words. She’d practiced the song in her mind a thousand times, but now that the music was playing she couldn’t find her voice to sing it. “I...I want to be one...one of you,” she stammered.

Immediately his demeanor softened. His angry mouth curled into a smile. He released her arms, and she felt a brief flash of disappointment that their touch was broken. “That’s better,” he purred. “Now that we have an understanding, why don’t we find a more pleasant environment for our little chat? Maybe your room? After all, if I decide to grant your wish, you don’t want your baptism to happen in this sty, do you?”

“Not so fast. I’m not convinced you’re the real article. Your hand was warm in the bar, after all.”

“Again, protective camouflage. I wasn’t sure of you yet, either. So I changed how you’d perceive me, just like I did with the hair and glasses.” He stepped back slightly. “But if you’re not sure, then take out your gun and shoot me. Right here,” and he pointed at his sternum.

Ruth was wary. “How’d you know I had a gun?” she asked.

Russell shrugged. “I’d have brought one.”

**UNABRIDGED VERSION available. Contact author for details.**