

London Nights

Book 1: The Lost Boy

Von Ulysses

Kapitel 1: The Lost Boy of Curry Lane

“In family life, love is the oil that eases friction, the cement that binds closer together, and the music that brings harmony.” - Friedrich Nietzsche

The grand old house on North Hill, Whitechurch Manor, has been looking down towards the sprawling city of London for centuries. Its inhabitants have come and gone, its halls been filled with life and almost abandoned time and time again.

Now, it's the home of an eclectic family not connected by blood but by the bonds they share, the connections they forged and the feelings they hold for each other.

Whitechurch Manor, with all its darkness, its haunted past and forgotten secrets, has again become a haven for those who thrive in the world which is hidden from human eyes and yet right in front of them.

Today, the great house on the hill will welcome a lost soul. And death may follow in its wake.

“It's so good to have you back with us.” Rebecca “Becky” Stanton followed Richard around the kitchen of the “St. Rita Shelter of the Lost”.

The shelter was located in London's East End, more precisely in Whitechapel close to Brick Lane with its countless curry restaurants. Many of the owners donated to the shelter, causing it to gain the nickname “St Curry Shelter” for its common menu. Not that anyone complained because a hot meal was a hot meal and Brick Lane's curries were famous in London.

The many tourists who were following the plethora of tour guides along the gruesome steps of Jack the Ripper's murder spree barely got to see the uglier side of Whitechapel. The drug dealers, the homeless, the misery which was present whenever one looked beyond the veil of tourism. And even further beyond yet another veil, Whitechapel knew a lot of supernatural crime and poverty, too. Maybe it was the familiar air of a place where the lost were gathering which had drawn Richard, who himself had been homeless for years, to this particular shelter to volunteer.

He had fast become a beloved member of the team and also well-liked among the people who came here for a place to sleep or a hot meal, in part because of his natural charm as a member of the fae but also because he was always helpful and kind. Everything he had wished for when he had been lost.

It was his first day back here after months of absence, partly spent in the arid climate of the Rub al Khali desert. There, he, his boyfriend Tariq, his "big brother" (they weren't actually related, but who cared?) Velkan and Velkan's partner Jonathan had been drawn into a battle with an ancient demon that used an enchanting form of magical flora to build an army of slaves. One of those slaves had been Tariq's older brother Farhed.

Tariq had stayed behind in the village he grew up in to help his family care for his brother who had been injured during the fight. Richard was counting the days until his boyfriend was back in London even though he suspected that Tariq dreaded the idea of going back to the cold weather of the British capital.

However, Richard had voiced those doubts during their latest skype session (after they had released some penned up energy together in front of the webcam, though) and Tariq had simply chuckled and blown him a virtual kiss.

"I hate the cold but I love you. So guess where I want to be."

Thinking about this made Richard smile. A smile Becky obviously thought was meant for her because she blushed violently.

"It's good to see you, too." Richard said quickly and brushed some strands of hair out of his face. He knew of the effect he had on people, on some more than others, a gift - and sometimes a curse - that he shared with another member of their household, Castor McCrimmon.

And his fae charms obviously worked very well on poor Becky, who had a crush on him ever since they had started working together at the shelter.

"Did you enjoy your holiday?"

Which part? The mad dash across the shifting desert sand as the demon turned the very soil against them? Or the moment when they had entered the caves the demon dwelled in and Velkan had become possessed by the spores of the demonic plants? Or maybe when Tariq had thought that his brother had just been killed, which had prompted the Ifrit to manifest never before seen powers as he had burned everything to ashes, including the demon and the poor geologist whose body the creature used as a vessel.

"Absolutely." Richard replied instead. "We had a great time."

"We?"

"Oh, my boyfriend and I."

"Your..." Richard could almost see the moment that Becky's heart broke and he felt bad for her but what was the point of giving her false hope? She pulled herself together surprisingly fast. "Well, we got work to do."

"We do." Richard smiled warmly and instantly the blush returned to Becky's cheeks. She couldn't help herself.

He left her to carry a tray with several bowls of curry out into the dining area of the shelter. It was relatively quiet tonight. A few regulars were sitting around, one group was playing cards while they ate, one man, his name was George, was browsing the Evening Standard, the free newspaper which was available at every Tube station. The room was relatively barren but the volunteers had tried their best to make it inviting by adding flowers to the simple metal tables and hanging up pictures on the raw brick walls.

Richard greeted another volunteer, Peter, who was just cleaning up some spilt curry from a table. As he moved further into the room, he suddenly felt a change in the atmosphere. The hair on the back of his neck stood on edge and his wolf senses picked up a strange new scent even with the spicy curries almost covering it.

Richard looked around and noticed a young boy, maybe 14 or 15, who was sitting alone in a corner. No one paid him any attention. However, Richard could see right through the shimmer which obviously kept the other people in the room from seeing who was sitting among them. The boy's shoulder-length jet-black hair was swept back and revealed pointed ears with an unnatural black tint which seemed to shine purple in the harsh light of the room.

Richard went over to the boy and set down a bowl of curry in front of him. The boy sat up with a start and stared at him with large, purple eyes. Glowing purple eyes.

"Tha... thank you." he muttered.

"You're welcome. Enjoy." Richard shifted the weight of the tray to one hand. "I'll be back in a moment. I would like to talk to you." As he said that, he brushed his wild light ginger hair back with his free hand and revealed his pointed fae ears. The boy's eyes widened but he nodded.

"Okay."

"Great. Give me a moment. I'll be right back."

Richard hurried to hand out the other bowls and nodded at the boy encouragingly before returning the tray to the kitchen. As he came back, the boy was gone. The bowl stood where he had been sitting, untouched.

"Peter!" Richard waved his co-worker over. "There was a boy, over there in the corner. Did he go to the gents?"

"No, I think he left."

"Goddammit." Richard groaned. "Why didn't you stop him? He was clearly a minor."

"I didn't see him leave either, just when he was already gone." Peter shook his head. "I would have stopped him otherwise. But I think he forgot his coat. It's still on the rack." Richard looked in the direction his co-worker was pointing and saw a black, raggedy coat on the rack on the wall. Most of the homeless didn't take off their coats out of fear that someone could steal them. The boy's coat was the only one hanging there.

"Perfect!"

"What? Mate, it's cold out there."

"Erm... sure, I mean he'll probably come back for it."

"Oh, I see." Peter shrugged and returned to his duties. Even though he felt bad for abandoning his colleagues during his shift, Richard waited for Peter to go back to the kitchen before he hurried over to the rack, grabbed the boy's coat and slipped out of the building into the evening's fading daylight.

Richard had barely left the shelter when he ran right into a group of tourists who were following a guy in a cape and a top hat. He bumped into a young man who cursed in German because he had dropped his phone but as he picked it up and stood to look into Richard's face, the surprise and anger turned into a smile.

"Aber hallo." he said before switching to English. "I mean, hello. Didn't know the British were so direct."

Richard reciprocated the smile. "You are losing your group."

"Bitte? I mean, what?"

"Your tourist group. They are almost around the corner."

"Was? Oh Scheiße!" He seemed uncertain whether to abandon his group or follow them.

"Thomas, wo zum Teufel bleibst du. Beweg deinen Hintern hierher!" another guy from

the group called out.

Thomas the German looked positively forlorn as he sighed and, with a last hopeful smile that seemed to say "Stop me and I'm yours", turned around and hurried after his group. Richard chuckled. Two in one night. In moments like these, he was relieved that Tariq wasn't human. He had been once but now, as an Ifrit, he was immune to the charm of the fae. His feelings for Richard were genuine, not caused by magic.

Getting back to the task at hand, Richard held the inside of the coat to his nose and inhaled the scent of the boy. He had never smelled something like this before. Everyone had a distinct scent, Tariq's was embers, while Sydney, another member of their household, smelled like a lush forest beneath the expensive perfume which he wore. The closest term Richard could think of to describe the scent was petrichor, the smell of earth after the rain, but there was something else. Whatever it was, it was distinctive enough for Richard to pick it up among the thousands of scents of the city. It was fading fast so Richard focused all his wolf senses on it and followed the trail.

It led him into the alleyways which tourists barely tread. The sunlight was almost gone, the sky began to darken over London. Soon, Whitechapel would change. The change was gradual, but it could be felt, especially with senses like Richard's. Not as much on the main tourist traps like Curry Lane but here in the hidden corners of the town.

The trail made a sudden turn onto an abandoned property. The weathered sign of a building company hung at the gate. At some point someone had planned to bulldoze this entire complex and turn it into luxury apartments. However, gentrification hadn't quite reached Whitechapel yet and the project's completion date was seven years ago. A perfect hideout.

The trail continued towards a door which had been left slightly ajar and further into the abandoned building, past rusty barrels and long-dead conveyor belts, deeper and deeper into the bowels of the old factory. His eyes made it easy to see in encroaching darkness but it was the warm glow of light which guided him the rest of the way.

As Richard stepped into the small space which had been turned into a makeshift home, memories came flooding back to him. It was as if he had entered a time capsule which brought him back to Glasgow over five years ago.

Candles creating a false sense of warmth and homeliness, a pile of smelly blankets and a pillow pretending to be a proper replacement for a real bed. A small box of belongings, clothes, way overdue a wash, torn and scattered. Even a pile of books. Richard's books (and his teddy bear) had been his most valuable possession and the thing which kept him going through the nights on the street.

It all came back to him in a rush of conflicting emotions, only heightened by the figure of the boy he had been following here, huddled in the corner by the rusty radiator, staring at him with wide glowing eyes. The boy's long spider-like fingers with the sharp nails were clenched around his slim wrists. Richard couldn't tell what he was, but both his fae and his wolf senses picked up on the magic of the boy.

"Stay back!"

"Sorry, I didn't want to startle you." Richard held up his hands calmly.

"You're the guy from the shelter."

"Yes." Richard smiled and inched a bit closer, ready to stop if the boy demanded it.

"My name is Richard."

The boy was he five years ago. Lost and alone. And at this moment, Richard decided that he wouldn't let that continue.

"Kearon."

"That's a nice name." Richard squatted down a few feet away from the boy to bring himself on the same level and not appear threatening. "I'm sorry if I scared you. I recognised that you were like me and... I don't know, I just..." He shrugged a little helplessly. "I know I seem like a stalker, but I have been where you are now and so..."

"You wanted to help?" Kearon said almost matter-of-factly.

"Yes. And bring you back your coat." Richard held it up.

Kearon eyed him for a moment and again, Richard recognized himself in his behaviour. The suspicion, the paranoia, that a possible helping hand might actually mean harm. Living on the street chipped away at one's faith in people. Finally, Kearon relaxed. He sat back and reached into the box next to his makeshift bed and produced a bag of crisps.

"Want some?"

Richard smiled and nodded before he moved a little closer still and sat down next to Kearon.

During the following hour, Kearon opened up to Richard much faster than he had expected. What broke the ice was when Richard started talking about his own time on the streets of Glasgow. A shared experience like this, especially at such a young age, Richard had been 14, and as it turned out Kearon was only a year older, made it easy for both of them to relate to each other.

Richard explained what he was and how he had come to live on the street. He was a fae-wolf hybrid and his mother, a member of the Seelie Court, had given him up since she wouldn't take a bastard child with her to the court. Telling this story never stopped hurting, even more so since Castor had told Richard more about the Seelie Court and its aloof inhabitants. He simply wasn't good enough for his mother and he hated the bitch for that.

Before the anger could overwhelm him, Richard steered the conversation into a different direction by asking Kearon what he was. The boy explained that he was a member of the fae, too, and had run from home to escape his abusive father after the death of his mother. He had been on the street for half a year now.

At some point, Richard went over to Brick Lane and bought two curries and some soft drinks. He had offered Kearon to come along but the boy preferred to stay in the factory. He was still there when Richard returned.

They ate without talking much as Kearon was clearly starving for a proper meal. As the bowls were finally empty, Richard knew that it was time to make a decision. It was past 11 pm and he had to catch a night tube home at some point.

"Look, Kearon..."

"You have to go." The way the boy said those words made it abundantly clear that he had been dreading the moment. And Richard could relate to that all too well. Loneliness was the worst part of sleeping on the street. Especially during the endless nights.

"Yes, but..." Richard ran his finger through the wild mob of ginger hair on his head, something he did subconsciously when he was nervous. "Listen, I know this will sound completely insane and you have no reason to... but... would you come with me? I don't want to leave you here."

"With you?" Kearon's eyes narrowed. "Just like that?"

"I know it sounds, well, I guess suspicious." Richard smiled a little sheepishly. "I live in a mansion in Highgate."

"A mansion?!"

"Yes, the guy who found me on the street and took me in, Velkan, the mansion

belongs to his sister-in-law, Elisabeth Whitechurch. It's a huge place, a little spooky, but beautiful. It became my home. We're a family of sorts there, a weird one but a family."

Richard produced his mobile from his coat and switched through the countless photos of Tariq until he reached some he had made of the house and garden and also of Velkan making goofy faces.

"He looks nice."

"He is." Richard smiled. "He's the best, really. He saved me, gave me a new life, a new family."

"You love him."

"With all my heart, yes."

"I don't know what to do..."

"Okay, let's do it like this: You come along and have a look and I talk to Liz. Even if you don't want to stay, Liz is loaded, as is Velkan's family so they might be able to help you.. Everything would be better than this." He gestured at their surroundings.

Kearon avoided Richard's eyes for a moment, looking into the darkness beyond the candlelight as if he waited from something to emerge from the shadows. Richard could tell how torn the boy was but then Kearon nodded slowly.

"I'll come with you."