

People call me a hedonist sometimes. I don't think that's entirely fair.

I mean, it's *true*. I'm a hedonist. I won't deny it. Hell, I'll *preach* it.

I just don't get how people think that's a bad thing. The way I look at it, there's a huge world out there, and I've only got a little bit of time to live in it. Nothing lasts forever, after all. So how is it something to be ashamed of that I want to experience as much of what the world has to offer in this tiny little slice of eternity that I get to spend in it?

And it's not just about pleasure, or sex, or physical gratification. That's maybe the thing I don't get, out of all the things that make people upset with me. Sure, that's all part of it, but only part. Not even really the most important part. It's about experiencing *everything*, good and bad and in between. It's about taking everything you can get, everything the world offers you and a little bit more.

It's about *living*.

The party was a disappointment. The guy who'd invited me said that it was going to be crazy and intense, but of course most of the people there were boring. They just wanted to pretend to be hardcore, and I was looking for the real thing.

Most. Not all.

One guy was doing some crazy things with fire. I watched him for a while, but after a few minutes it started to get repetitive. Still pretty awesome, and it looked like it'd be all kinds of fun to *do*, but there was only so long you could spend *watching* before it started to get boring. Like golf, kind of. I made a note to talk to him after he was done, though. Anybody who did that for fun was worth talking with.

Another couple was doing a fast, intense fiddle duet. That was worth watching too, though I wasn't nearly as interested in taking part in that show. I appreciated music, rather a lot, but I had no ability to actually perform it. It just wasn't one of my talents.

More than anyone else, though, my attention was caught by a guy standing alone on the periphery. He wasn't *doing* much, but there was something fascinating about him. I wasn't even sure what it was. Something about his attitude, his posture, *something* told me he was feeling the same sort of bored indulgence that I was. Like me, he was disappointed by how tame this whole thing was.

I sauntered up to him, smiling. "Hi," I said.

He grinned widely, in a way that emphasized his teeth. "Hi."

I've got a simple rule, one that's always served me rather well. I'll try anything once.

I mean, you kind of have to, right? If you don't try something, you can't know whether you'll like it. Sometimes the best things in life are the ones you never realized you wanted at all. I'd seen so many people that didn't get into something until they were past middle age, and then they *really* got into it. Ask them what took so long, and the answer is, "Oh, I didn't think I'd like it. It seemed like a bad idea. It was never the right time, and then there was the pension to think about, and the retirement fund, and the kids need to go to college."

There's always an excuse not to try new things. It's *easy* to put things off until it's too late.

I never wanted that to be me, and I acted on that.

The dance floor was crowded with gyrating bodies, nice shoes and fancy hats. The music was quick and exuberant, a brass section playing like it was all they ever wanted to do and a pianist so fast with her fingers that you had to check that there wasn't two of her.

I danced the first round with a man who lived for it. You only had to look at him to know that dance *was* his life, that everything else he did was just passing time until he could get out on the floor again. He lived in the music, his heartbeat keeping time with the rhythm, the dancer and the dance mixed together until not even he knew where one ended and the other began.

When the music switched to something too slow for his taste, I found myself partnered with a girl who looked like she'd been built by an artist. Her skin gleamed like marble, her black hair in such effortless curls that I was sure she'd spent a solid two hours getting it just right. It was like a statue come to life. It seemed unfair to the world that bodies like that could actually exist in real life. Granted she couldn't dance for shit, but still. God *damn*.

And then I was looking him. I'd seen him around a few times since that first party, spent a little while talking to him. His name was Francis. Not what most people would call a particularly manly or dangerous-sounding name, but he wore it well. He spoke it without an ounce of shame or hesitation, like he was daring you to make fun of him for it. Like he was just looking for a reason to beat your face in, and you'd make his day if you gave him one. Francis was the kind of guy who had a beef with the whole world.

I didn't know much about him beyond that. He was sly, evasive on pretty much every topic. He danced around mentions of his family or his past, didn't talk about where he got his money. He probably thought it made him seem dangerous, and interesting as a result.

The hell of it was that he was right. I knew it was an act, of course. But you had to respect someone who did it so *well*.

He smiled like a wolf and pulled me back out onto the dance floor. I was sweaty and tingling and *alive* all over, and I was loving every moment of it.

Nothing lasts forever. *Nobody* lasts forever.

People say they know that, but they don't act like it. So many people live a life they hate, thinking they'll be happy someday. In twenty years, or thirty, or fifty, they'll be happy, they'll be able to do the things they want to. Of course, they'll be too old to enjoy it by then, but it'll all be worth it!

And I suppose you could say that they'll be happier overall, that the sum of the happy in their life will be larger than if they hadn't delayed their gratification. But that's a trap. Because what if you don't last long enough to get that payoff? Suddenly you've got the worst of both worlds.

Because of course that's the best part, the twist of the knife. Not only won't any of us be around forever, we don't even get to know how long we'll be around.

When I was in school, a girl I knew died crossing the street. She didn't do a thing wrong, but it didn't matter. She got in a wreck with a drunk driver, except she didn't have a car. Poof, gone. One day she had her whole life in front of her, a bright future and great prospects. The next they're scheduling a closed-casket funeral. It's that fast, that easy.

So why on earth would you put life off? You never know when that van is coming your way. Or you slip on the stairs, or catch a cough that turns out to be a little bit worse than you thought, and then a lot worse. Just like that. Poof, gone.

So I say get out there and *carpe that diem*. Live for today, not for the day after tomorrow. And when you see something you want, you don't put it off, you go for it. Because otherwise, you'll see your last chance come and go, and you might not even know it.

When Francis first told me that he wasn't human I was skeptical. Of course I was. I wasn't a total idiot. When he offered to show me privately, as proof, I figured it was a setup. Of course I did. Again, not a total idiot.

But I went anyway, after taking appropriate precautions. Because what if it *wasn't*? It was, it had to be, but...what if? I knew I'd spend the rest of my life asking that if I didn't. And I wasn't willing to do that.

When I saw him change, I knew that I wanted what he had. There was no doubt, no hesitation. The right answer was obvious to me. I mean, when you live to experience everything you can, being offered the chance at a whole new world's worth of experiences is a no-brainer.

There were risks, of course. Even before he explained them, I knew that. There were risks, there had to be risks, because nothing good came *without* some kind of risk. That was all right. I wasn't afraid of risks. There was no reason to be, from where I was standing. After all, even the guy that stands

around and frowns in disapproval at how careless I am has to cross the street. It doesn't matter how careful you are, there's a van with your name on it.

And even if there isn't, so what? You get to live to be old and sick and die in a hospital after one hell of a boring life? That's hardly a fair trade, and not in their favor.

I thought Francis was actually a bit disturbed by my response. He was used to being the outsider, the freak, dangerous and mysterious. He was expecting shock and fright. Getting curiosity and enthusiasm instead threw him a bit. But eventually I convinced him that I was serious, and then I convinced his boss, and then I got to change myself.

And it was everything that I'd hoped, and more.

There are mistakes, and there are regrets. It's inevitable. If everything works out the way you want it to, you're not actually alive. Because *nobody's* that lucky.

But you have to move on. Because otherwise your mistakes trap you. When you dwell on the bad things, you're letting them rule you. Learn your lesson and move on.

It's not always easy, but it's the only solution. Anything else just makes things worse.

Sometimes you move on with scars. That's fine. We've all got scars and broken parts. It's another of those universal things. There are wounds too deep for healing, and if you live long enough you'll pick some up. They hurt. But you have to get back on the horse.

Only the dead feel no pain, and they don't feel anything else, either. You have to be in one hell of a bad place for that to be a decent trade.

Being a wolf reinforced my habits. For better or worse was an open question, of course. I thought it was a good thing, but I didn't pretend to be a neutral source.

Either way, though, there was no question that it fit with my philosophy. It's very easy, as a wolf, to live in the moment. For some people that was a problem. It got in the way of their planning, of their ordered life. It pulled their focus from past and future into the *now*.

But that was how I wanted to live anyway. In the past I'd sometimes had problems with it, with my brain getting in the way. The fact that my new nature helped with that was a nice perk to the whole thing.

Not that I needed another perk. There wasn't much to it *but* perks, from where I was standing. Lycanthropy had opened as many doors as I'd hoped, and then some. Hunting, of course, was a thrill unlike any other. My body being so much tougher was a nice addition, as well. It meant there were a lot

more things I could *do* to it, and I got over them faster. There were so many options that I'd never had before.

There were downsides, of course. Having to answer to Edward was annoying, and there were things that were hard to explain. I ended up having to cut ties with a lot of my old friends.

But it was worth it.

In some ways, the most interesting thing was how many things *hadn't* changed. Parties, for instance, were still so often a disappointment. Poseurs were just as common as they'd ever been, and just as annoying.

A vampire smiled at me from across the room, and I considered it for a moment, but eventually shook my head. He nodded and turned away, moving on.

It was a tempting offer. Being fed on was....well, it was one hell of an experience. It felt like nothing else, that was for sure. Some people even found it addictive, though I'd never had that reaction myself.

But I was looking for something else, tonight. Something *new*.

I eventually found it in the form of an Indian man with brilliant yellow eyes. He had a sharp, mocking sort of smile, like he knew something no one else did. And his scent was...different. On the surface it was unpleasant, a nasty, sickly sweetness like something rotting. But there was something oddly compelling about it, as well, a depth and richness that most people never got close to.

"Good evening," he said, smiling at me. It reminded me of Francis, those first few nights. A smile that looked down on the world and was amused at what it saw. "You, my dear, smell delightful."

"And you don't," I retorted. I was still amused at how much of an additional dimension my sense of smell added to interacting with people. Though it should have been a dimension that this guy missed out on, since he was very definitely not a werewolf.

"Yet you choose to converse with me all the same," he said dryly. "Why, I'm flattered. To what do I owe the pleasure?"

I shrugged. "Sometimes you want something that *isn't* nice," I said.

His smile sharpened slightly. "Ah," he murmured. "Why, *that* I can offer you."

I'm not anyone's idea of a saint. That's never really been in question. If basically any major religion has anything right, I'm bound for Hell. Or the closest thing they have. I'm no theologian, but I know that not everyone got into the whole punishing of sinners thing.

There's something oddly liberating about that. About knowing that, hey, your ultimate fate is settled. Even if it's for the worse, there's a very comforting *certainty* about it. It removes a lot of your worries. It's the equivalent of being given a death sentence. Sure, it might suck, but you can't really make it worse. You don't have to care about people's opinion of you anymore, because you've made it about as bad as it gets.

There's a very sweet freedom in knowing that you're terrible, and accepting yourself despite that. Or because of it.

For all that, though, I did have my boundaries. There are lines that I won't cross. There are things that even I think are unforgivable.

It didn't take long for me to realize that my newest associate was *far* across those lines.

The skinwalker looked almost shocked. He wasn't beaten often. I knew that. His ego was immense, but it wasn't unjustified.

That probably meant that it stung even more to lose to someone like *me*.

The people with me weren't much better. A changeling, a newborn vampire, another werewolf, a druid that wasn't good for much more than a stage magician. We were small fry, as such things went.

The nice thing about being small is that you're *negligible*. Even knowing that he'd made an enemy of me, the skinwalker hadn't done a thing to guard himself against me. Why should he? He was a terrifying powerhouse, and we...weren't.

Which probably made it particularly embarrassing that we'd not only taken away his victim, we'd also humiliated him in front of the world. Hell, this might even be the first time he'd ever been on camera.

"You know I'll punish you for this," he said quietly. His tone was quietly, utterly hateful, nearly to the point of madness. That was really what drove home just how much we'd pissed him off. He was usually very good at keeping his mask intact.

"Yep," I said casually. There wasn't much I could do about it. His ability to escape was vastly superior to our ability to capture him. He couldn't really *beat* us right now—not with how thoroughly we'd outmaneuvered him. But there would be a reckoning someday. I knew that.

That was fine. It was in the future, after all, and I'd never cared too much about the future.

And then I found what I'd been looking for.

I was lying on the floor, panting. It had been a long run back, and the baby growing in me made running harder than it had been. That was really the only downside of the whole thing. I'd never intended to have children. Now that I was, the physical burden it put on me was a constant source of annoyance. Less so as a wolf than a human, but it was still noticeable. These runs left me exhausted.

But it was worth it. To be with him, it was worth it. It was the whole reason I'd moved back here, after all.

I was reasonably confident that someone had been trying to keep me from seeing him again. It was really the only explanation that made sense. He hadn't concealed his own trail from me, after all, and that wasn't something that just *happened*. So someone else must have done it, and the only reason I could think of was to keep us apart.

If so, whoever had done it had a rather perplexingly low opinion of us. I mean, it wasn't that hard to get back to Canada. And given that he wanted to find me again as much as I wanted to find him, it wasn't that challenging to arrange.

I'd come more prepared on that second trip, enough to stay for a few days. We'd worked things out then. He was smarter than I'd given him credit for, at first. He understood what I said, at least enough to make plans.

Since then, I'd seen him close to a dozen times. It wasn't that hard to arrange. Oregon to Canada wasn't that hard of a trip for me. Even as the pregnancy got more burdensome, it wasn't too terribly difficult.

At the moment, I was lying on the floor of my sister's garage, recovering. I was tired, and hungry, and considering a nap. I knew I should change back first, though, since she still didn't know what I was. I was trying to work up the energy when someone else showed up.

He looked human, mostly. But his eyes resembled pits of fire, and his smile was twisted and scarred, and he hadn't opened the door to come inside.

"Hello there," he said, sitting on the floor beside me. "I'm sorry if this is a touch awkward. I don't normally do the dramatic monologue thing. It's tacky. And also rather stupid, but mostly tacky."

I lay still and listened. So far, this was an interesting experience. Strange, but interesting.

"I'm sorry, you know," he said. "For what I'm about to do. I don't say that often. It's not a natural reaction for me. I don't have much capacity for remorse."

At about that point, I started freaking out. I tried to stand, though I wasn't sure whether I was planning to run or attack.

It turned out not to matter much. I couldn't move. Not a muscle. I was still breathing, I was blinking, but I had no control over my muscles.

"I suppose you remind me of me, about a bazillion years ago," he continued, ignoring my attempt at struggle. "I'd prefer to spare you. And, you know, the funny thing is that I probably could. I'm guessing you wouldn't want much to do with the kid. You don't seem the type. But I can't take the chance at this point. I've got a lot riding on him, and I'm not sure I have enough time to start over again. Things are progressing faster than I was expecting. There's an external force acting to speed it up, I'm sure of it. Though I suppose it doesn't really matter."

I continued struggling, without moving a muscle. I might as well not have bothered.

"I guess that's really all I wanted to say," he said. "That I'm sorry. It isn't much, I know, but it's about all I can offer you. And it would be cruel to drag this out any more. It will be painless, at least. I can manage that much."

He fell silent, and a moment later I felt him grasp my mind.

And squeeze.

Poof, gone.