

Maiden's Prayer



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STORYTELLER'S
VAULT

Maiden's Preyer

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Maiden's Preyer

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The rain was as warm as blood as it fell. It hissed and splashed in deepening puddles. The lightning no longer flashed its incandescent fangs to bite at the city skyline, but rather at the flesh of the lake beyond. The thunder continued to roar its challenge in great gouts of violent sound, but it was in retreat. Despite this, despite the calming of the night, the prey hid. It cowered in its hovels and holes, tucked away and clustered under overhangs against the hot rain. The prey things were reminded of how small they were, and they cowered together to pretend their numbers made them greater than the fury of the storm.

With a cotton t-shirt plastered to a narrow frame, and denim made clinging on her hips and legs by the deluge, Kelly Patterson was not among the prey things. Her long, blonde ringlets were matted and cloying, and she swept them away from the streams of water flowing down her face. It had been a long time since she had gone with her hair

long, but tonight she didn't want to be recognized. She was too hungry, tonight. She didn't trust herself, tonight.

Kelly stalked the alleys of the Rack, surfacing at their mouths to test the waters only rarely. Like the dorsal fin of a circling shark in the waves, she slipped in and out of view among the sheets of rain and shadows. Her hunger was a thing alive, gnawing at her nerves and thrashing at the edge of control. There were schools of prey all around, but none safe enough to approach. Like blood in the water, red neon glow spread out from many, taunting her and protecting the prey that swam in it.

Kelly circled back around the district as thunder rumbled, distant and sounding as malcontent as she felt. The mortals at her haven were there, waiting. They were ready to be the balm to her pain; in many ways, as desperate to be that balm as she was to be soothed. If she didn't feed soon, she would have to risk them. Or, she thought, she could just claim one. Gordon, perhaps. She could end the ghoul's plight as accomplice to her killings by becoming one of them. His death would bring an end to the torment clawing at the inside of her skin. In her mind's eye she saw his confused fear and need to trust as she went to him with fangs out and desire in her eyes. She shivered out of the image and the rationalization at the same time. No, she thought. If she was to kill again tonight, it would not be her choice.

The squeal of brakes on a heavy vehicle announced the arrival of a bus at the end of the next alley and Kelly quickened her pace. She could practically taste the blood already, and she licked her fangs as if they dripped with it and not the acidic rain water that instead flowed over them. She drew up to the edge of the alley and glanced into the street, watching for the one who had signaled for the stop. Her chest felt tight, like her heart should be racing, except it didn't so much as twitch. A flash of lightning out over

Lake Michigan made her flinch back deeper into the shadows as the form stepped out onto the sidewalk. The answering thunder rolled out away from the city, and Kelly waited for it to recede before she eased back to the corner.

A long coat of glistening black plastic, more fashionable than warm despite the June heat, swathed the figure of the mortal. The sagging newspaper held over teased-out blonde hair did little to protect the mortal from the rain; most of it simply blew in past the dripping barrier. The woman turned away from Kelly and started off at an awkward jog in her heels. For a moment Kelly was afraid she had been spotted and had spooked the woman. Then she saw the way the mortal kept shielding her eyes and gauging the distance to the four-story tenement barely visible through the rain a few blocks ahead. Kelly began to slip out of the darkness onto the sidewalk but was drawn up short when a car door opened.

Half a block ahead, a man stepped out of a car parked at the curb. He was broad in the shoulders, though his height and width were masked by a hunch against the rain. A dark blue windbreaker was zipped tight and soaked with the rain before he'd made it a few feet beyond the shelter of his car. In the flash of interior light, she caught a glimpse of his hard-eyed features and felt kinship. The way he looked at the woman hurrying down the street was as a hunter looked at prey. This man was her competition, she knew. He cut a line toward the woman, who missed half a step as she noticed him angling in her direction.

Kelly's eyes half-lidded as she stepped into the street. Here was an interloper, and challenge. The woman hurried her step and he jogged two to close the distance on his longer legs. Kelly pushed her own pace, but not so that her shoes would splash in the puddles or find the glittering traps of broken glass and crumpled Coca-Cola cans. The man

leaned in as Kelly glided silently towards them. His voice was raised over the volume of the rain, but it wouldn't have mattered. She had the senses of a predator, where he had only the urges of one. Even without that edge, she could have predicted his words all too easily. She had heard them or their like more than once.

"Hey, bad night to be out. Why don't you let me give you a ride? Car's right over there," he invited, and gestured back towards the hulk disappearing in the rain.

"W-what? No, thanks," the woman demurred and tried to put a step of distance between them. He matched it and then some. Kelly crept closer.

"C'mon, it'll be fine. It's just right there."

"I'm fine," the reply came, but Kelly could hear her lying. It wasn't the weather that shook her, though. The prey fear in her voice was audible to both of the predators that were closing in. "I'm not far."

"Anywhere is too far in this weather. Come on. AC's been on. It's nice and cool in there."

The woman had nowhere else to retreat except into the alley they were approaching. The barred-windows and graffitied brick of a convenience store, inconveniently closed, blocked her on one side, and the leaning man on the other. Kelly heard the hunger in his voice like an echo of her own given sound. The prey sounds in the woman's voice and the prey sign in the woman's posture were alluring, but the man was a challenge to her domain. Lions fought over prey, too. A carcass would wait, but a challenge had to be answered. She slid closer still.

"No, thanks," the woman protested. Kelly watched her struggle against the instinct to take the alley. The prey in her wanted to be safe and hidden and away from the threat looming nearby. The human in her knew the sanctuary the

narrow space offered was an illusion. "Really, it's fine. Thank you. I'm sorry."

"What's the matter with you?" the man charged. A bit of fang and claw in his voice, now, even as Kelly's more literal version slipped back under her control and out of sight. "C'mon, bitch, I'm trying to help you out."

"Something wrong?" Kelly oozed as she came to a stop. Predator and prey both leaped at her intrusion. Heartbeats hammered at Kelly, syncopated and as wild as any racing herd of horses. Predator scowled, and prey breathed a sigh of relief.

"None of your business," the man answered, but the woman's eyes were pleading.

"Sorry I was late," Kelly said to the woman. He didn't like being dismissed from her attention or ignored. "I was hoping your bus would be, too, given the rain."

"What?" the prey said, confused. Then Kelly watched realization dawn in her eyes. "Oh, no, it's okay. Thanks for coming."

The man flicked his gaze between the two of them. The prey gave off prey signs: jerky glances, a shiver despite the heat and blood-hot rain, fidgeting movements that pulled at Kelly with an urge to attack. Kelly showed him only confident coolness, almost daring, as water sluiced off her all unheeded. His own confusion began to rise, and Kelly slipped up to put her hand around the woman's elbow. The quality of Kelly's stare backed him up half a step and the two women started away before he could react.

"I'm Cathy," the woman whispered. "Thank you so much."

"Kelly," she gave as answer, just as quietly. Behind her she heard the man's first footfall in pursuit. It was heavy, like he wanted to beat the water under it to death. "Just stay calm; it isn't over," she warned.

“Hey! Don’t walk away from me!” he called and the prey flinched. Kelly’s reaction was a second too slow as she struggled to keep from lunging at the woman. The leap of the mortal’s already-adrenaline-jolted heart was a palpable thing attached as she was to Kelly’s hand.

“Ow!” the woman cried, and Kelly snapped back to awareness of something other than the urge to kill. Her attention tracked the resistance to her hold on the woman’s arm and saw the man had her other arm.

“I said, let’s go, bitch!” he spat.

The warm rain cascading over her seemed to tint as red as the blood it felt like. Kelly was moving before she felt her muscles acting. She had his wrist in her hand in a flash, and the crashing of his pulse was so different from the thread, rabbit-quick beat of the prey’s heart. “Let go of her,” she snarled up at him.

“I told you, this is none of your business!” he shot down at Kelly. She saw the backhand coming and had enough time to show him the glimmer of a smile before it landed. Water splashed hot and thick, and the wet smack of her matted locks twisting across her cheek was nearly as loud as the impact of his knuckles across her chin.

“Help!” the woman screamed. She drew the word out until it lost its shape and meaning. The only answer was a low peal of thunder miles away over the uncaring Great Lake.

“Shut up!” he shouted, and Kelly didn’t see the next heavy smack. It had the sound of knuckles in it, a fist against cheekbone.

Kelly recovered from the blow as he was lifting his fist again. The woman was collapsing to the sidewalk beside her, but from the tension that built in his arm she wouldn’t hit her knees before the fist came down again. What she could see of the scene from behind the screen of her hair was further

occluded by the veil of crimson that drifted in and out of view in time to the racing heartbeats. With a snarl, Kelly shoved him back. Her tongue found a trickle of blood at the corner of her lips and she shuddered.

“Oh, you want more? Fine, twice the fun,” the man insisted and his fist came at her like a piston fueled by rage. She could see the sheet of rain break like the tide on the shore against the onrushing knuckles. She saw every droplet of water pushed back towards the straining tendons in his wrist. She side-stepped the blow and he stumbled forward past her. With another shove she sent him over the curb to tumble to his hands and knees in the street.

“Walk away,” she warned. Kelly didn’t want to warn him. It was taking everything she had to hold back. She could feel the points of her fangs just starting to emerge against her will in the line of her teeth. She wanted him to get back to his feet, or else to drag him to them. Instead, she pulled the woman to hers.

“Go,” she hissed over her shoulder, but the prey sobbed. “Now,” she demanded, but the prey shrank away.

The man in the street growled and slapped his palms into the puddle of gutter water Kelly had put him in. Kelly stepped between the prey and the predator as he got to his feet and began to turn towards them. “You’re in for it now, bitch. I’ll show you what you get.” Kelly’s vision began to redden again and she forgot the prey as his hand reached for his pocket.

Chick. A gleaming edge flashed at the end of his hand as lightning illuminated the street. Kelly’s eyes flashed just as dangerously, and her lips curled back. He blinked through the darkness that descended in the wake of the bolt, and so missed the gleam of her fangs. As the thunder crashed and echoed, it drowned out his heartbeat and she stepped closer to catch it again. He thought she was closing with him and

matched her step.

“Gonna make you pay, bitch,” he spat at her, his words wet with the rain.

The woman screamed as she saw his arm thrust forward toward Kelly, low and intended to leave a lingering wound. A wound that would bleed into the belly, fill it with the fetus of Death that would grow and crush down on lungs and heart, that would steal breath in squeezing fingers of fear. The sound echoing from the heedless buildings around was as sharp in Kelly’s senses as the imagined edge of the knife. She smiled again as he committed to the strike, put his weight into it and rushed towards her. Too late, he saw her fangs in the smile.

Kelly grunted with the impact of his weight. She was carried across the sidewalk and barely felt the hard lines of steel dig into her back. Her air was driven from her lungs as shoulder crushed her chest in a bruising impact. She felt no fear at the breathlessness, only a frustration that her furious hiss would have no wings upon which to fly. When the hilt of the knife left a bruise that spread through her starved cells, she barely felt that, too. Blood fell in sheets all around her, and she wanted more.

Another scream, male and of agony rather than terror. Bone snapped, a crunch of thunder, as Kelly bent his wrist back from the knife. Kelly’s preternatural senses felt the tendons roll up under the flesh like worms writhing up the length of the pulsing veins. Blood scent filled the air at last, and she felt it pulse hot and thick against her belly. Too quickly, it faded, carried to the ground by the torrent. The predator tried to flee.

He stumbled back away from her and, still screaming, clutched his hand to his belly. The woman screamed again as she saw the strange angle at which his hand dangled, but Kelly was beyond hearing her. There was blood in the water

and the feeding frenzy had begun. Kelly lunged forward and latched her mouth on the jagged stump to capture the chaotic gush. She managed three, long swallows before the jagged bone spears pierced her tongue and lips and she was shoved back. The predator turned to run.

Kelly was on him in a flash. She leapt onto his back and clutched at him with arm and leg. Like a spider she enclosed him, and her fangs found his neck before the rain could fully wash the arterial spurt from her face. He cried out and went down as the drug of her kindred's bite stole his strength. Behind her, another scream that didn't matter. The blood came, rich with adrenaline and the hormones of need unleashed. Kelly gorged in swallow after swallow. When it slowed, she felt ribs crushed under her grip as she fought and squeezed and urged the last drops to her. Catharsis crashed through her in a convulsive wave that scattered her senses to the void for quivering seconds.

When the crimson curtain was lifted from her gaze, the hiss of rain was softer; a snicker instead of a nest of agitated vipers. She licked the last of the water-weakened blood from her fingers, and then Kelly heard the retching. She followed the sound of heaving stomach to find the woman leaned over the sidewalk. A thick flow of bile hung in strings from her lips and was washed across the sidewalk toward the drain in the slackening rain. Kelly felt a sharp pain in her abdomen and looked down to see the knife hilt jutting there. She reached to pull it free but before she could her attention was hauled back up to the woman by a ragged gasp.

"P-please," the mortal stammered and shrank against the wall. "Don't kill me."

"I told you to run," Kelly rasped between her fangs and behind the red-stained falls of her matted hair. It was a mask as surely as any stocking might be, and she peered out

from behind it. The lightning that flashed at her back would do nothing to show her face behind the locks. The woman flinched at the grate of Kelly's voice.

Kelly stood from her hunch on the dead man without a glance in his direction. There was no slime of guilt that clung to her skin under the rushing of water. Not for him. He had been a predator hunting, and he had picked the wrong prey. He forgot the first rule of the predator: *survive*. Some night, perhaps, she would make that same mistake, but it was not this night. She swooned in the heady rush of victory until she realized the woman was staring at the knife jutting from the bunched fabric of her t-shirt. She tugged it out of her innards and felt her flesh do its old, healing trick around the blade's withdrawal. Wide-eyed and terrified, the woman watched it tumble from Kelly's fingers to the street beside the corpse.

"Is..." she began, but Kelly saw her answer her own question as she stared at the sightless eyes of the man's dying mask of fear. Her shaking hands came up to her mouth and Kelly heard the mortal's throat clench against the slosh of a stomach in revolt, but without contents to further unburden itself.

"Go home, Cathy," Kelly grated. When the only response she got in return was a prey's headlight-stoned stare, she roared it instead. Cathy ran, and Kelly watched her go, chased by the cackle of thunder.

Kelly bent to grab the leg of the body below and drag it toward the alley and what she hoped was a dumpster due to be collected soon. The crushing injuries would, at a glance, possibly be mistaken for the work of the compactor in the truck if the body should show up in the landfill. She grunted with the effort of lifting the body into the receptacle she discovered waiting for her after she had recovered wallet and keys from his pockets. She shoved the

artifacts into her own pockets for later disposal as she went back to recover the knife.

The wild red arcs of the predator's death were already washing away, and soon the street had forgotten the murder. Kelly returned to the mortals that clustered around and depended on her, now that she had made them safe from their benefactor once again.

Afterword

Maiden's Preyer is a work of fiction, but the scenario presented is all-too real for many women around the world. According to the *Canadian Women's Foundation*, in 2014 alone there were 553,000 self-reported sexual assaults in Canada. Worse, 82% of sexual assaults target girls under the age of 18. In Canada, sexual assault is the only violent crime that isn't in decline, and victims are more often than not amongst the most vulnerable members of society.

We can all be a little bit of Kelly and bring this abhorrent situation to an end (though hopefully not with the finality of Kelly's methods).

