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BRIDGES by Alan Smale

The blood brought him, fresh on the wind like tendrils of sweet copper. She was young, under thirty, and her flawless neck and shoulders made him feel dusty and ancient and almost unbearably sad.

Strange to find her here alone, staring through the trees at the moon.

Her eyes widened when she saw him. Her pulse raced and her breathing quickened, but otherwise she stayed calm.

Anton did not attack. They became prey only when they screamed and ran. Her calmness defanged him.

"Oh, God," she said. "I'm so stupid."

Her blood still hung in the air and taunted him.

"What is your name?" he asked.

Her car was thirty feet away. "I'm going to leave now," she said, and began to walk. The doors unlocked with a soft electric click as she pressed the button on her key ring. She did not press the alarm button. He followed her out of the trees. The blood was coming from four punctures in the palm of her right hand, made by her fingernails. She had made them before she'd known he was near.

The car now separated them. He knew he would let her drive away. She was too complex.

She hesitated. "Are you all right?"

He looked away.

She got into the car and started the engine. And waited.

Anton slid into the passenger seat, not knowing why he did it, not knowing why she let him. The car was a Saturn, black and modern, more comfortable than the luxury of centuries past.

The woman put the car in drive and pulled away. He wasn't used to traveling so fast without the wind in his face.

"Where do you need to go?"

"Nowhere," he replied.

"Then what do you want?"

She glowed in the moonlight. Her skin was very pale. Her heady essence filled the car.

Anton wondered if his proximity was having a similar effect on her.

"You know what I am?"

"Yes," she said. "Should I be afraid?"

The answer was unclear, even to him.

"You're bleeding," he said, because it was the main thing on his mind.

She looked down at her hand as if seeing it for the first time. Anton recognized it as a social affectation, an acknowledgment of his words, rather than genuine surprise. "I suppose I am. You have good eyes, to see that."

"Eyes?" he said, baffled.

They'd reached a conversational impasse. As the more powerful being, the responsibility to move ahead seemed to be his.

"Tell me about yourself, and why you're not afraid."

"You're not going to attack me as soon as I stop the car?"

He frowned. Her question made no sense.

"You'd have killed me already if you were going to," she said.

Anton wondered why she believed this. Clearly she did not own a cat. He began to say "Not necessarily," but desisted. Rusty on the social graces, he was beginning to remember tact.

Instead he turned her own verbal techniques against her. "You were in the woods because something is bothering you," he said. "You wished to think and be alone."

"My husband is a pig," she said.

The statement alarmed him only temporarily.

She spoke like a child, but with a late-twenties ennui and a maturity seemingly as ancient as his own. "My name is Rachel. I am twenty-eight years old, and I have a severe marital problem that I'm trying to think through. You didn't surprise me because you're just typical of the way my life is going, right about now. Yes, I'm afraid, but somehow I don't think screaming and shouting is going to help me much."

The vampire sat amazed. Rachel turned off the country lane onto the highway, and continued. "So. Ken just told me he's going to give up his job. It sucks. He's going to look for something else, after he's taken a bit of a break. It's time I supported him for a while, after all. Know what that means? It means he's going to sit around and be bored, and we're not going to be able to make the mortgage payments. He's going to be on my case all the time, and we're going to be poor. You know what else? There's this other woman he sees. Giving up his job means he has all these extra afternoons to meet up with her in motel rooms. You know what else? I boss him around too much. I never consider his feelings. Oh dear. What a witch I am."

Anton was drowning, but she continued. "I discovered today that there's even a title for him. He's a Difficult Husband. That's a term used by professional counselors for a man who finds fault in everything I do, has antisocial habits, and changes his moods at random. Eighty percent of the time I spend with him, I'm angry, depressed or otherwise unhappy. It's a co-dependency thing." She glanced at him. "In contrast, you're a rather simple problem."

Anton frowned. "Your pig is a simple problem. Leave him."

"I love him."

"Why?"

Rachel sighed. "How old are you?"

"Older than Christ," he replied. His stock answer to a regular question. "But not as good looking."

The joke fell flat. Anton hadn't used the line in a while. Perhaps it didn't make sense any more.

"So I guess you've seen it all?"

He did not answer.

"Do people ever change?"

The conversation was becoming difficult for him. He would have left, but the Saturn was now traveling at sixty-five miles per hour towards the town. He said: "Sometimes people change. But truly bad men do not."

"Ken is not a bad man," she said.

"Perhaps he will leave you."

She shook her head. "He's getting a free ride. I'm his meal ticket. This other woman won't last. They never do. It's me he loves. It's the job thing that's the problem. He gets really mean when he's bored and doesn't have enough money to spend."

"Does he hurt you?"

Her laugh was dry and bitter.

The vampire tried again. "Does he beat you?"

"He's hit me twice. I told him I would leave if there was a third time. Since then he hasn't laid a finger on me. I don't believe he will again."

A habitual misuser of women himself, Anton said nothing.

"I mean it," she said, misinterpreting his silence. "I'm not stupid, and we've been married ten years. I *know* him."

They came up on a deserted pull-off. Rachel parked the Saturn and used both hands to massage her temples and forehead. Trees still surrounded them. The night was quiet. Apparently she had forgotten her fear that he would fall upon her as soon as she halted the vehicle.

Anton decided.

"Rachel, I can solve your problem."

"Don't," she said. "If you're going to kill him, or make me like yourself, so that I'm stronger than he is, forget it. That's not what I need."

"I cannot make you into what I am," he said. "At least, it has never happened yet. But I can certainly remove your difficulty."

"I just told you. We love each other. Anything that hurts him, hurts me, one way or another. Forget I mentioned it. I'll work it out. Just leave us alone."

The wind rippled the trees around them. Slivers of liquid moonlight glowed in her eyes. The blood was drying.

"You know what helps me?" she said eventually. "It's when people tell me about their own lousy marriages. Because then at least I know I'm not the only one."

He didn't immediately understand her.

Then, he did.

"I've known countless women," he said. "But our --" What was the word to go with the plush Saturn and the quick self-awareness of modern women? " -- relationships were rather different."

"I see."

"I've known love," he said. "I..."

"What?"

"Never mind," said the vampire. "None of it would help you."

"Ah," said Rachel. "The boundless wisdom of the millennia. I feel better already."

He searched her face.

"I'm not being sarcastic. Knowing there isn't an answer really does make me feel better." She smiled weakly. "Look: this is me, Feeling Better."

"There are many answers," he said. "You are intelligent. You are rich. You are holding all the cards. You can leave him, kill him, or change him."

"I'm trying Number Three," she said.

The vampire's face was expressionless.

Rachel watched him, a woman waiting for a stone to break in two and yield up water. Anton was confused. He must be missing a step in the modern conversational dance. He had nowhere to go.

"Okay," she said. "Your turn."

It was odd, this glance inside the mind of a twenty-eight year old.

Once, he had been so young himself.

"Come on," she said. "Tell me what makes a vampire frown."

His eyes looked back over the centuries.

"Maybe I'd understand."

"Nobody has ever asked me before," he said.

Her fingers touched the back of his hand. He jumped. "I'm not just anybody," she said quietly. "I'm good at empathy."

Without knowing what he did, he pushed his sleeves up his arms. Roman tunics left the forearms bare, and he preferred it that way.

"Try," she said.

"I'm a soldier," he said abruptly. "In the Roman army in Gaul. I'm still human. Twenty-one years old and stupidly brave, the way you are. There are Gauls in the hills and we have to wipe them out. We cross the last Roman bridge before the wilderness, over a mountain gorge with a rushing stream hundreds of feet below. Up the trail, there's a cave. The cave mouth is narrow and the earth in front of it trodden flat. We

draw straws, and I lose, and I go in with a burning branch, ready to flee or shout if I encounter Gaulish tribesmen, or a bear."

"Oh my God," she said. "You did that?"

"Choice is a recent invention," said Anton. "Hatred is not. I hated them all. They were my comrades, my own tribe if you will, but I left them in hatred because they stayed outside safe in their numbers and sent me alone into the cave. A sacrificial goat."

He laughed.

"I am in the hillside. It is dark and damp and close, but no Gauls have fallen upon me. I think perhaps I will live after all. Then there is a huge rustling and a rush of air, and they are on me. They knock my torch away, and it falls on the floor and goes out before I can even see them. There are hundreds, or thousands, beating into my face and my body. They are biting me and drawing out my blood."

Rachel's hand was over her mouth. "Gauls *bit* you?"

"Not Gauls. Vampire bats. I awoke eventually, sore in a million places, but the soreness did not even last until I fumbled my way to the cave entrance. I could not find the torch, but the darkness did not seem so dark any more.

"My cohort were all dead. The Gauls massacred them while I was interred in the hillside becoming a vampire. When I returned down the path I found them hanging from the bridge. The Gauls had tied a rope around each neck and thrown each soldier into the gorge in turn. Ninety-nine bodies in Roman armor hung beneath the bridge. They swayed in the breeze, bumping into each other. Ninety-nine men who had died bathed in my hatred, while I became immortal."

Silence filled the car.

Anton discovered her fingers were entwined with his. Her skin was warm. The little scars from her earlier bloodletting felt rough against his palm. It surprised him how comforting her touch was. He squeezed, gently and instinctively, and Rachel squeezed back.

His mind was empty, and full.

"There's nothing you could have done," she said, after a long pause. "If you hadn't been in the cave, you would have died with them."

"I know," said the vampire.

"And you couldn't have escaped the bats."

"I know."

"And you must have... killed many more people than ninety-nine, over the last two thousand years."

"I have. But they died one by one, and they were not my cohort, and they were not my friends, and I did not hate them, and I was not twenty-one."

"But --"

"You cannot help," he said. "It is complicated, and besides it might not have really happened that way. It was a long time ago. It is just the memory of a memory."

"But you think about it a lot."

Anton looked out at the night.

Rachel sighed, and looked at her watch. "I have to get home. Ken gets suspicious if I'm home late and he doesn't know where I am."

He looked at her. "You are afraid to go home?"

"Sometimes," she said, with reluctance. "When I don't know... whether he's been drinking."

"I could watch from the --"

"No," she said. "He's my problem. Remember, you've only heard my side of it. His might be different."

"You do not believe that."

"It's probably about as true as your memories," said Rachel.

He looked away.

She glanced at him and softened.

"I'm sure they forgive you," she said.

"I doubt it. Anyway, they have been dead for centuries." He paused. "Your Ken will not change, you know. Do not live your whole life hoping that he will."

Rachel closed her eyes. "All right."

"If he does not change..."

"I'll still love him," she said. "There's always the other twenty percent. Sometimes, it's wonderful."

She pressed a button and the car doors unlocked.

"I will be near," he said.

"Don't be. This was enough. It's too dangerous."

He wanted to care. He *did* care.

"I liked it when you held my hand," she said. "It was nice. I don't get much of that."

Her life would go on, and it would get better or it wouldn't.

Ninety-nine men hung beneath a bridge, blackened tongues protruding.

"Fly away home," said Rachel softly, and he opened the door.

The last thing she said to him was; "Thank you."

He had no words for her in return.

The engine purred. The Saturn's red tail lights diminished.

In the road, wind against his cheeks, he could still feel the pressure of her fingers against his. He closed his hand to lock their warmth away from the night.

Anton closed his eyes, and did not watch to see which road she took.