

Story HS HM2

What the Vein Takes

By Leah DMello

The first time I donate blood, I am surprised by how quiet it is.

Not the building—there is the low hum of fluorescent lights, the distant murmur of voices softened by partitions, the soft squeak of shoes against linoleum—but inside myself. I expected fear, pride, or at least nerves. I expected my heart to pound, my palms to sweat, some bodily protest against the needle and the vulnerability of lying still while a stranger siphoned something vital from me. Instead, when the needle slides into my arm, there is only a brief sting and then an unexpected calm, like a room settling after everyone has finally taken their seats.

I stare at the ceiling tiles, counting the tiny cracks and discolorations, and breathe.

The nurse smiles at me as though I've done her a favor. She thanks me three times: once when I check in, once when I sit, and once when I leave. Her gratitude feels sincere, not rote, and it disarms me. She hands me a juice box and a pamphlet about hydration, and her voice has the gentle firmness of someone used to being trusted. Someone used to people putting their lives, briefly, in her hands.

The building is called *The Vein*, which strikes me as an odd name for something meant to feel reassuring. Still, the walls are white and clean, the lighting warm without being dim, the air faintly scented with citrus and antiseptic. There are framed prints of forests and oceans, places that suggest abundance, flow. Someone has taped a handwritten sign near the exit, the marker slightly smudged: *Drink water today. You've earned it.*

My best friend, Nora, waits for me in the lobby, her leg bouncing so hard the chair squeaks in protest.

"You're alive," she says, relief and sarcasm tangled together.

"Barely," I reply, though I feel better than I have in weeks.

She grins, but she doesn't look at my arm. Nora has always been like that, protective in a sideways way, pretending not to care about the things she cares about most.

We leave together, stepping back into the afternoon sunlight. The sky is pale blue, washed thin by autumn. For the rest of the day, I feel lighter, like I've misplaced something I didn't know I was carrying. That night, for the first time in months, I slept without dreaming.

Outside, Nora squints up at the sky.

"Next time," she says, "you're buying me lunch as payment for moral support."

“Next time?” I tease.

She shrugs. “You’ll do it again. I can tell.”

She’s right.

Nora has always been right about me in ways I don’t understand until later. We’ve been friends since we were sixteen, since she lent me a pen during a history exam and whispered a joke that made me laugh hard enough to get us both shushed. She knows when I’m about to fall in love, about to quit something, about to forgive someone who doesn’t deserve it. She knows because she’s seen me do it before.

That night, she stays over, sprawled across my bed while I lie awake, calm and empty and light. She falls asleep halfway through a story about her coworker’s disastrous date, her breathing evening out, familiar and grounding. I think, distantly, that if something were wrong, Nora would feel it first.

But she was right, I donated again a month later.

That is when he notices me.

I don’t see him at first. I feel him. A presence, subtle but insistent, like someone standing too close behind you in line. The instinct makes my shoulders tense before my mind catches up. When I glance up, there is a man behind the counter watching me with an expression I can’t quite name.

He looks young, though his face is too still, his posture too precise, as if he has practiced being human and mastered the shape of it without the looseness. He wears a dark coat despite the lingering warmth of early fall, and beside him rests a closed umbrella, its handle polished smooth with use.

He smiles when our eyes meet.

I look away, embarrassed by the strange flutter in my chest, by the sudden awareness of my pulse.

His name, he tells me later, is Adrian.

He works at The Vein in donor relations. That’s how he explains it, quietly, politely, like he doesn’t want to take up more space than necessary. When he speaks, his voice is careful, each word measured, as though language itself is something fragile.

“Your donation helped,” he says. “It’s appreciated.”

I laugh softly. “I didn’t know blood donations came with personal thank-yous.”

“They don’t,” he says. Then, after a pause, “Usually.”

Something in the way he says it makes my skin prickle.

Afterward, when I tell Nora about Adrian, casually, like it doesn't matter, she listens too closely.

"What's his deal?" she asks.

"I don't know. He works there."

"Uh-huh."

"He's just... nice."

Nora snorts. "That's never *just* anything."

After that, I started seeing him everywhere.

At the café near my apartment, where I sit by the window with my notebooks spread out, pretending to study while mostly watching people pass. At the bus stop in the evenings, standing just far enough away to feel polite, his gaze unfocused but somehow attentive. Once, outside the library, beneath a streetlamp, holding his umbrella even though the sky is perfectly clear.

He never startles me. He never sneaks up. He simply *is*, like a thought I didn't realize I'd already been having.

"You have a stalker," Nora says the third time she notices him, her voice light but her eyes sharp.

"He's just... around," I say, and hate how weak it sounds.

"That's worse."

I want to dismiss her. I want to laugh it off, to tell her she's imagining patterns where there are none. But I can't shake the feeling that something has shifted, that the world has tilted a degree off true.

Adrian doesn't approach me often. He watches. When he does speak, it's never trivial.

He asks about my classes, about my family, about what I think happens to people after they die.

"I don't know," I tell him. "Nothing. Everything. It depends on the day."

"I think," he says once, his gaze fixed somewhere beyond me, "that most things don't end. They just change shape."

I find myself thinking about him long after he leaves. About the way he listens, like he's collecting something delicate and rare. About how his gaze lingers not on my face, but on the curve of my wrist, the soft pulse at my throat.

I don't know that he breaks the rules the night I donate the second time.

The Vein exists because rules exist.

Vampires learned long ago that secrecy was survival. No alleys. No disappearances. No panic. Blood is taken carefully, anonymously, stored and distributed with clinical precision. Hunger is managed. Desire is regulated. Attachment is forbidden.

But when Adrian tastes my blood, something in him stirs—something old, something reckless. It doesn't taste sweeter than the others. It feels *familiar*. As if it remembers him.

He closes his eyes when he feeds from it.

This is how Clara notices.

"Be careful," she tells him later, her voice low. "You're lingering."

"I'm not," he says.

"You are."

Clara has been a vampire longer than Adrian has been alive. She remembers unregulated hunger, remembers cities burned by panic and bloodshed, remembers the long crawl toward order. She watches him with concern sharp as glass.

"Humans are not yours to keep," she says.

"I know."

But knowing and believing are not the same.

Nora believes something is wrong long before I do.

"He's always there," she says one night as we walk home, the streetlights buzzing overhead. "And he never blinks."

"That's not true," I say automatically.

She stops walking. "You're not listening."

"I am."

"No," she says softly. "You like him, so you're ignoring it."

I don't respond.

A week later, Nora follows him.

She brings Leo with her—tall, cautious, skeptical in the way people are when they want proof more than comfort. They wait until evening, until Adrian leaves the café and walks toward the quieter edge of town. He moves with purpose, his umbrella tucked beneath his arm, and he doesn't look back.

He doesn't need to.

He leads them straight to The Vein.

At night, the building looks different. The windows are dark, reflective. The sign is unlit. The air feels heavy, charged, like standing too close to a storm.

"This is where we donated," Leo whispers.

The streetlights flicker.

Once.

Twice.

Then they go out.

The sound comes next—wings beating, dozens of them. Shadows surge overhead, thick and chaotic. Nora screams, clutching Leo's arm as bats swarm the street, blotting out the stars.

And then Adrian is there.

Not approaching. Just present.

His eyes gleam, reflecting what little light remains.

"Why are you following me?" he asks calmly.

Nora's fear sharpens into anger.

"You're weird," she says. "Okay? You're just really weird."

Adrian studies her. He knows he should end this now. Wipe their memories. Remove the threat.

Instead, he lets the bats scatter. The lights steady.

"Go home," he says quietly. "Forget this."

They don't argue.

They run.

When they're gone, Clara steps out of the shadows.

"That was cruel," she says.

"It was kinder than the truth," Adrian replies.

"You're already losing perspective."

He says nothing.

I find out the next day.

Nora tells me everything in fragments—flickering lights, wings, his eyes. Her voice shakes, but her certainty does not.

"He's not human," she says. "Please. You have to believe me."

I want to.

But when Adrian texts me later that night, asking to talk, I say yes.

We meet in the park just before sunset. The trees glow gold, the air cooling. The world feels suspended, balanced on the edge of something.

"There's something I need to tell you," he says.

I brace myself.

He tells me the truth.

Not all of it. But enough.

I laugh at first. Then I stop.

Because the world suddenly feels fragile.

Because his eyes don't blink.

Because some part of me has always known.

"I won't hurt you," he says. "I swear."

I believe him.

That is my mistake.

When he feeds, it is quiet. Respectful. He stops too late.

I feel myself slipping, dissolving, like breath in cold air.

When I wake, the world is sharper. Louder. Brighter.

The sun burns.

My heart is silent.

Adrian kneels beside me, horror etched across his face.

“I’m sorry,” he whispers.

I look at him, and in the space where fear should be, there is only hunger.

And understanding.

Later, I will wonder whether this was always inevitable—or whether love, like blood, is simply another thing we were never meant to give away without consequence.