

Vampires

Suddenly two icy patches bloomed between my shoulder blades.

I had been seen, and not by an ordinary human observer.

When one witch studies another, the touch of their eyes tingles. Witches aren't the only creatures sharing the world with humans, however. There are also daemons – creative, artistic creatures who walk a tightrope between madness and genius. 'Rock stars and serial killers' was how my aunt described these strange, perplexing beings. And there are vampires, ancient and beautiful, who feed on blood and will charm you utterly if they don't kill you first.

When a daemon takes a look, I feel the slight, unnerving pressure of a kiss.

But when a vampire stares, it feels cold, focused, and dangerous.

I mentally shuffled through the readers in Duke Humfrey's. There had been one vampire, a cherubic monk who pored over medieval missals and prayer books like a lover. But vampires aren't often found in rare-book rooms. Occasionally one succumbed to vanity and nostalgia and came in to reminisce, but it wasn't common.

Witches and daemons were far more typical in libraries. Gillian Chamberlain had been in today, studying her papyri with a magnifying glass. And there were definitely two daemons in the music reference room. They'd looked up, dazed, as I walked by on the way to Blackwell's for tea. One told me to bring him back a latte, which was some indication of how immersed he was in whatever madness gripped him at the moment.

No, it was a vampire who watched me now.

I'd happened upon a few vampires, since I worked in a field that put me in touch with scientists, and there were vampires aplenty in laboratories around the world.

Science rewards long study and patience. And thanks to their solitary work habits, scientists were unlikely to be recognized by anyone except their closest co-workers. It made a life that spanned centuries rather than decades much easier to negotiate.

These days vampires gravitated toward particle accelerators, projects to decode the genome, and molecular biology. Once they had flocked to alchemy, anatomy, and electricity. If it went bang, involved blood, or promised to unlock the secrets of the universe, there was sure to be a vampire around.

I clutched my ill-gotten copy of *Notes and Queries* and turned to face the witness. He was in the shadows on the opposite side of the room in front of the paleography reference books, lounging against one of the graceful wooden pillars that held up the gallery. An open copy of Janet Roberts's *Guide to Scripts Used in English Handwriting Up to 1500* was balanced in his hands.

I had never seen this vampire before – but I was fairly certain he didn't need pointers on how to decipher old penmanship.

Anyone who has read paperback bestsellers or even watched television knows that vampires are breathtaking, but nothing prepares you to actually see one. Their bone structures are so well honed that they seem chiseled by an expert sculptor. Then they move, or speak, and your mind can't begin to absorb what you're seeing. Every movement is graceful; every word is musical. And their eyes are arresting, which is precisely how they catch their prey. One long look, a few quiet words, a touch: once you're caught in a vampire's snare you don't stand a chance.

Staring down at this vampire, I realized with a sinking feeling that my knowledge on the subject was, alas, largely theoretical. Little of it seemed useful now that I was facing one in the Bodleian Library.