



Salt in the Wound of Night

Mara woke to a cold line of air slipping down her spine. It wasn't a draft from the window; this was closer, deliberate, like someone had leaned over her and exhaled. Her body went rigid before she was fully awake. She lay still, staring into the dark, listening. The cottage made its usual night sounds—timber settling, wind pressing faintly at the roof—but there was something else in the room. A presence. The sense of being watched tightened across her shoulders. She rolled onto her back.

A woman stood at the foot of the bed.

She wasn't translucent or hazy. She cast a shadow against the wardrobe. Bare feet on wooden floor. Dark hair loose around her shoulders. Too still. That was the first wrong thing—no shift of weight, no nervous movement. Just waiting.

Mara pushed herself upright, heart hammering. “How did you get in here?”

The woman didn’t answer right away. She stepped forward instead. The floorboards didn’t creak under her weight. That detail lodged under Mara’s ribs like a splinter. Moonlight caught the woman’s face—sharp mouth, high cheekbones, skin pale enough to almost hold the light. Her eyes were darker than the rest of her, depth without shine.

“You called,” she said.

Mara let out a breath that felt thin in her chest. “I didn’t.”

“You said you were tired of sleeping alone. You said you’d rather risk something than keep waking up to nothing.” The woman’s voice wasn’t loud, but it filled the room easily.

Mara’s stomach turned. She had said that. Not as a spell, not as a prayer. Just words muttered into the dark because no one else was there to hear them. “That doesn’t mean I invited a stranger into my bedroom.”

The woman came closer until she stood beside the bed. The air around her felt cooler, but not in a way that stung. It was more like standing near deep water. “It means you opened something,” she said.

“Are you going to hurt me?” Mara asked.

“If I wanted to,” the woman replied evenly, “you wouldn’t be asking.”

That should have pushed Mara into action. Instead, her eyes dropped—just for a second—to the woman’s mouth. Full. Still. Waiting. When she looked back up, the woman was studying her in a way that made heat rise under her skin.

“You shouldn’t look at me like that,” Mara said.

“Like what?”

“Like you already know I won’t tell you to leave.”

The faintest smile touched the woman’s mouth. She sat on the edge of the mattress. The bed dipped under her weight. Solid. Real. Close enough that Mara could see the slow rise of her chest. Close enough to feel the coolness of her skin when her hand reached out and brushed Mara’s knee through the sheet.

The touch was light. Testing.

Mara’s breath hitched despite herself. “You’re cold,” she said.

“You’re warm.”

The woman’s fingers slid beneath the sheet, over bare skin this time. Slow. Unhurried. When she wrapped her hand around Mara’s thigh, the chill of her palm sent a sharp shiver through her. It wasn’t unpleasant. It was intense. Every place she touched felt heightened.

“Tell me to stop,” the woman murmured.

Mara’s mouth went dry. She knew she should. She could end this with a single word.

Instead, her knees parted slightly.

The woman noticed. Her hand moved higher, pushing the hem of Mara’s sleep shirt up, fingertips grazing her stomach. Mara sucked in a breath. The cool drag of skin against skin made her arch without meaning to. The woman’s composure shifted at that—just a fraction. Her breathing deepened. Her control thinned.

“You feel it too,” Mara said quietly, because she could see it now.

“I wasn’t expecting to,” the woman admitted.

That made her more dangerous.

The woman leaned in, bracing one hand beside Mara’s shoulder. Their faces hovered inches apart. “You understand I’m not human,” she said.

“Yes.”

“And you still haven’t told me to go.”

Mara reached up and caught her by the collar of her shirt, pulling her down the rest of the way. The kiss was slow at first, deliberate, as if both of them were measuring what this meant. The woman’s mouth was cool, but it warmed quickly against hers. When her hand slid up and closed over Mara’s breast, firm and sure, Mara gasped into the kiss. The sound seemed to undo something in the woman. She pressed closer, her weight settling between Mara’s thighs.

The fear hadn’t disappeared. It had sharpened. The knowledge that this was something not entirely of this world only made the heat burn brighter. The woman’s hand moved lower, deliberate, and when she touched her properly Mara’s fingers dug into her shoulders. The cottage felt smaller suddenly, the dark in the corners thicker, like it was leaning in.

“You don’t know what you’ve invited,” the woman said against her throat, teeth grazing lightly over her pulse.

“Then don’t make me regret it,” Mara breathed back.

The woman made a low sound at that, something close to a growl, and the last of her restraint gave way. She moved with more urgency now, less careful, though she never stopped watching Mara’s face. When pleasure finally broke through her in a sharp, blinding rush, Mara clung to her as if the bed might drop away beneath them.

Afterward, the woman didn’t vanish. She lay beside her, cool fingers tracing slow lines over her hip. The room felt different—heavier, as if something had settled into the walls.

“You’re staying,” Mara said.

“I was welcomed,” the woman replied.

Mara stared into the dark beyond the doorway, listening to the house breathe around them. It no longer felt empty.

“What are you?” she asked.

The woman turned her head, those depthless eyes catching what little light there was. “I’m yours now,” she said quietly. “And you’re not sleeping alone again.”

Somewhere deep in the cottage, wood shifted with a low, settling sound, like agreement.