



IMPOSSIBLE TO SCARE

Walking to school over the snow-muffled cobbles, Karou had no sinister premonitions about the day. It seemed like just another Monday, innocent but for its essential Mondayness, not to mention its Januaryness. It was cold, and it was dark – in the dead of winter the sun didn't rise until eight – but it was also lovely. The falling snow and the early hour conspired to paint Prague ghostly, like a tintype photograph, all silver and haze.

On the riverfront thoroughfare, trams and buses roared past, grounding the day in the twenty-first century, but on the quieter lanes, the wintry peace might have hailed from another time. Snow and stone and ghostlight, Karou's own footsteps and the feather of steam from her coffee mug, and she was alone and adrift in mundane thoughts: school, errands. The occasional cheek-chew of bitterness when a pang of heartache intruded, as pangs of heartache will, but she pushed them aside, resolute, ready to be done with all that.

She held her coffee mug in one hand and clutched her coat closed with the other. An artist's portfolio was slung over her shoulder, and her hair – loose, long, and peacock blue – was gathering a lace of snowflakes.

Just another day.

And then.

A snarl, rushing footfall, and she was seized from behind, pulled hard against a man's broad chest as hands yanked her scarf askew and she felt teeth – *teeth* – against her neck.

Nibbling.

Her attacker was *nibbling* her.

Annoyed, she tried to shake him off without spilling her coffee, but some sloshed out of her cup anyway, into the dirty snow.

'Jesus, Kaz, get off,' she snapped, spinning to face her ex-boyfriend. The lamplight was soft on his beautiful face. *Stupid beauty*, she thought, shoving him away. *Stupid face*.

'How did you know it was me?' he asked.

'It's always you. And it never works.'

Kazimir made his living jumping out from behind things, and it frustrated him that he could never get even the slightest rise out of Karou. 'You're impossible to scare,' he complained, giving her the pout he thought was irresistible. Until recently, she wouldn't have resisted it. She would have risen on tiptoe and licked his pout-puckered lower lip, licked it languorously and then taken it between her teeth and teased it before losing herself in a kiss that made her melt against him like sun-warmed honey.

Those days were so over.

'Maybe you're just not scary,' she said, and walked on.

Kaz caught up and strolled at her side, hands in pockets. ‘I *am* scary, though. The snarl? The bite? Anyone normal would have a heart attack. Just not you, ice water for blood.’

When she ignored him, he added, ‘Josef and I are starting a new tour. Old Town *vampire* tour. The tourists will eat it up.’

They would, thought Karou. They paid good money for Kaz’s ‘ghost tours,’ which consisted of being herded through the tangled lanes of Prague in the dark, pausing at sites of supposed murders so ‘ghosts’ could leap out of doorways and make them shriek. She’d played a ghost herself on several occasions, had held aloft a bloody head and moaned while the tourists’ screams gave way to laughter. It had been fun.

Kaz had been fun. Not anymore. ‘Good luck with that,’ she said, staring ahead, her voice colorless.

‘We could use you,’ Kaz said.

‘No.’

‘You could play a sexy vampire vixen—’

‘No.’

‘Lure in the men—’

‘No.’

‘You could wear your cape . . .’

Karou stiffened.

Softly, Kaz coaxed, ‘You still have it, don’t you, baby? Most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen, you with that black silk against your white skin—’

‘Shut up,’ she hissed, coming to a halt in the middle of Maltese Square. *God*, she thought. How stupid had she been to fall for this petty, pretty street actor, dress up for him and give him memories like that? Exquisitely stupid.

Lonely stupid.

Kaz lifted his hand to brush a snowflake from her eyelashes. She said, 'Touch me and you'll get this coffee in your face.'

He lowered his hand. 'Roo, Roo, my fierce Karou. When will you stop fighting me? I said I was sorry.'

'Be sorry, then. Just be sorry somewhere else.' They spoke in Czech, and her acquired accent matched his native one perfectly.

He sighed, irritated that Karou was still resisting his apologies. This wasn't in his script. 'Come on,' he coaxed. His voice was rough and soft at the same time, like a blues singer's mix of gravel and silk. 'We're meant to be together, you and me.'

Meant. Karou sincerely hoped that if she were 'meant' for anyone, it wasn't Kaz. She looked at him, beautiful Kazimir whose smile used to work on her like a summons, compelling her to his side. And that had seemed a glorious place to be, as if colors were brighter there, sensations more profound. It had also, she'd discovered, been a *popular* place, other girls occupying it when she did not.

'Get Svetla to be your vampire vixen,' she said. 'She's got the vixen part down.'

He looked pained. 'I don't want Svetla. I want you.'

'Alas. I am not an option.'

'Don't say that,' he said, reaching for her hand.

She pulled back, a pang of heartache surging in spite of all her efforts at aloofness. *Not worth it*, she told herself. *Not even close.* 'This is the definition of stalking, you realize.'

'Puh. I'm not stalking you. I happen to be going this way.'

'Right,' said Karou. They were just a few doors from her

school now. The Art Lyceum of Bohemia was a private high school housed in a pink Baroque palace where famously, during the Nazi occupation, two young Czech nationalists had slit the throat of a Gestapo commander and scrawled *liberty* with his blood. A brief, brave rebellion before they were captured and impaled upon the finials of the courtyard gate. Now students were milling around that very gate, smoking, waiting for friends. But Kaz wasn't a student – at twenty, he was several years older than Karou – and she had never known him to be out of bed before noon. 'Why are you even awake?'

'I have a new job,' he said. 'It starts early.'

'What, you're doing *morning* vampire tours?'

'Not that. Something else. An...*unveiling* of sorts.' He was grinning now. Gloating. He wanted her to ask what his new job was.

She wouldn't ask. With perfect disinterest she said, 'Well, have fun with that,' and walked away.

Kaz called after her, 'Don't you want to know what it is?' The grin was still there. She could hear it in his voice.

'Don't care,' she called back, and went through the gate.

* * *

She really should have asked.