

# A NIGHT ON THE DOCKS

by Connor Freff Cochran

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Mid-morning on the wharves of Bethale. Small, wise eyes looked out from hiding upon a conversation in Scull Alleyway.

“No, Iska. I’ll have none of them.”

“And why, pray? They are fish, my friend, freshly netted; no more.”

“But those grey flakes —”

“Loose scales. Come, Avanon, you’ve seen young anvilsides before. Why waste the day with superstition? Bad enough I must beat my crew to make them cast the nets, but this! If you do not buy I cannot fix my boat or haggle for my woman’s medicines. I will still have fish to eat, lord blessing, and I will get by. But you are in a different position. If you do not buy you cannot sell, and your stalls will be empty, and your creditors will descend on you with wooden and iron duns. Be businesslike. Be a man. Buy my fish.”

The merchant in the faded muslin looked unimpressed. “Your men say that you trolled near the wreck.”

“Why not? The fish are gathered thick there, fat anvilsides and sleek perk and salt xhovies in spawn. Just because a few people have taken ill and died, and the foolish of Bethale cry ‘devils, witches!’, I am to pass such an opportunity by? Bah. A wreck is a wreck. Storm brought it here and the tide will drag its rotten wood away like so many loose bones.”

“Ten, then. I will offer no more.”

“Ten? *Ten*? Ten is an insult. Never! I’ll go elsewhere to sell. Watch me and see if I don’t, Avanon.”

“You have already been everywhere else, Iska. By repute I am the lowest fishmonger in Bethale. You must be desperate or you would never have come to me.” The merchant smiled. “It’s my one advantage in the trade.”

“Very well, robber, ten. You know where my boat is docked. I’ll be waiting.”

“I shall send agents. It would be bad for business should people discover I had bought from you.”

“Rot and superstition.”

“Prudence, Iska — but do feel free to look me up tomorrow at this time . . . and at this place. Only at this place.”

Money crossed from the merchant’s purse to the fisherman’s. They bowed and parted, and neither saw, as they walked their separate ways, that the other made a small sign against evil.

But Sestofor, in his hiding place, heard and saw all.



*It was three days since the Death had come to Bethale port. Two had died and two had sickened, all unaccountably. The air was still as stone, and though all who lived in the village were terrified, some openly, some deep beneath the false brass of their pragmatism, none could leave, or even think of leaving. Fear made them blind animals, burrowing in the dirt of their lives, refusing to see the thousand thousand small terrors which had invested the shadows since the coming of the shipwreck.*

*None left the village, and none would come; no traveler, no matter how unthinking, would pass by the witch-signs old women had scrawled in the hard dirt of the roads. And offshore, in the grip of the rocks and sea the black hulk waited, crewless, alone, masts stabbing the sky like splintered knives.*

*It had carried its cargo to this new land. And now, at night, all living things had reason to be afraid.*

Almost all . . .



As usual, Sestofor found Snipe stealing something. This time it was tiggerfruit. The boy was quietly cutting through the runners the mother fruit had woven among the slats of its packing crate. There were easier prizes in Old Hoda’s warehouse, but Snipe was the most daring of the dockrats, the orphans of the wharf, and he took his position seriously, besides dearly loving tiggerfruit.

He was fourteen, a year older than Sestofor.

“Hey, little plant,” said Snipe. “Ever hear one about rich man’s son? Thinks himself good enough to run with rats, but stands in doorways where just anybody can see. And loud? Like rat-with nails in tail. Ever hear that one?”

“All right,” whispered Sestofor, ducking inside. “I was *trying* to be quiet.”

“No worry. Nobody could have heard but I. Not even Dhoty.”

He turned, holding out one of the sweet bladders he’d cut free. “Doing good for rich kid, Ses. Want half?”

Sestofor just looked at him.

“Ah, didn’t think so. Here about bloodsucker I bet.”

“You knew?”

“Sure. Know everything on dock — or can find out. But what is worry? Live behind father’s wall. Lore says bloodsucker only comes when invited. Safe at your place. And dockrats take care of themselves.”

“It’s not that simple for me. Can’t you feel it — *smell* it?” Sestofor’s eyes were wide and wild, but he was looking more inward than out, trying to understand what he saw in his own soul. “There’s a stink in the village, and it’s everywhere. I smell it in my father’s compound, and here, and in the fields above the cliff, and it’s driving me crazy. It’s like a fire in my brain, Snipe — cold and black and moldy, but still a fire, and I just can’t take it. Bethale’s going to die!”

Snipe shrugged. “Not all.”

“But most! How can you ignore a vampire and survive? That’s what people are doing . . . but not me. I smelled it when that trader, Karster, came in on the *Talon*. He’s staying in the apartments below my father’s offices, you know. I saw him first day and I knew, I knew . . . but I didn’t know *what* I was afraid of, not until the shipwreck and the deaths.”

He spun on his friend. Anywhere else he would have shouted, but here, in Old Hoda’s, afraid of discovery, the words rushed out in a strangled whisper. “*How can you be so calm?*”

“What’s one more scary thing to prince of dockrats, hey? I live all life with scary things.” The older boy smiled. “Just like always, Ses. Rich kid sings with feelings, follows anger and dreams. Snipe just get by, wary-like. We’re odd pair. But rich kid also sing right most times, and sing right now. Call council, Ses. Dockrats go to war.”

Sestofor allowed himself a smile in return.



*On that day in Bethale port everyone was a gossip, if they spoke at all. There were strange cries and rumors of cries. Three ravens were seen flying southward over the gloomy wreck. Shopkeepers spoke of locked shutters found open, of turned-out bins and broken boxes, and all who listened heard disturbing sounds behind walls and under foundations.*

*Three more went to the reaper in the afternoon.*

*Two had been morbidly expected. There was Chenot, a blind weaver of nets, much beloved on the docks, and also Tarkis, the priestess's man. Both had been ill with the pale sickness since the night after the wreck. In this atmosphere it seemed inevitable that they should die, and thus it was not the deaths themselves that brought shudders to the village, but the discovery, later, of the mutilation of their bodies. Even more disturbing was the strange end of the merchant Karster, who was struck without warning, as if from the sky. In full view of the guests of Lord Borum he had suddenly retched up his meal and started to palsy; soon after he was a grotesquely twisted corpse.*

*And as the afternoon passed on towards evening, parent after parent made the discovery that their children were nowhere to be found.*



It was not a room: more a minor eddy in the tide of crates that moved through Armagh Warehouse; a hidden nook five fishbarrels by three. It was dirty, dark, a swallower of light and sound, and it stank of xhovies.

The sides of the space rose in staggered tiers, like canyon walls. Children perched there. Watching.

Sestofor placed his tallow on a barreletop and examined Shamaa's leg. There was a rip in the little girl's left calf. Neither large nor deep, but still bloody, it required cleaning. He probed the cut, hand wrapped in a boiled rag. Nothing was embedded. Good.

"This will sting, brave one," he said as he wrapped salt-wet rags and herb packets around the wound. "You should be more careful. Where was your brother when you were trying to climb over Clinch Alleyway wall by yourself?"

"Takin' care of the box we found under Moley's. I didn' mean to fall, Ses, really. I'm sorry."

She was about to cry, but from fear that he was angry with her, not from pain.

There was something here that superseded pain.

It was the same with all of them, Sestofor realized. Only the degree varied. Each breath was a draught of potion, dulling some senses and heightening others. Pain and poultices weren't even in the same world as this calling-scent which had wound through the village. It was a

fanfare, a drumroll, a hunting horn, and to those who smelled it response was unquestioning and immediate. So many more than the dockrats had come to council; and now they scuttled through the darkest crannies of Bethale, the rich and poor and middle-class alike, differences forgotten, wolfpacks of children united to run down a single prize.

His blood sang so loud in his head it frightened him.

“I know you didn’t, Shamaa.” He helped her to her feet. She would limp, but not badly. “Now you must go home and rest.”

“But I want to *be* there.”

“Hush. You will be, I promise.” He tried to put on his father’s aura of authority. “But first you must rest.”

“Rich kid’s right,” said a voice from the edge of the tallow’s glow.

“Snipe!” Sestofor swallowed a rising scream of shock and irritation. “Don’t do that. Please! We’re on such an edge that —”

All the children drew a sudden breath as the dockrat leader stepped into sight. His face was grim, his eyes resigned and angry. From head to toe he was thickly splattered with shining black blood.

“No worry. None is mine.” He stepped up to Shamaa and squinted at her as she ducked her head. “Do what Ses says, little one. Dhoty, Sipper — go with and see monkey stays off walls, hey?”

As the three vanished into shadow, Snipe began scrubbing himself with the salt-rags that were left. Sestofor helped. The blood came off in clumps, as though it were days old. A taste like heated copper was in his mouth.

There weren’t enough rags for the task, but it was a start.

“Are you all right?”

“Don’t ask, Ses. Prince of dockrats don’t glow like rich kid, others. Just do what must be.”

“So did I. In my own way.”

“Lord’s way, mean.”

“It worked.”

“Yah.” Snipe stripped down to his breeches. Slung under his ruined shirt was a cotton bag. Small objects clinked and rattled inside as he set it carefully on the ground. “Brought things. Old Chenot was friend. Right to use these later.”

“We’ve found fifteen coffins and three trunks, all full of earth. But that’s all.”

“No worry. All follow noses for stink rich kid raves about, you find it. Or I will for you.”

Shamaa’s brother, Gellick, was suddenly upon them, panting and crying.

“I found it! *I found it!*”

Sestofor’s fists knotted. He almost bit his tongue. By contrast Snipe casually reached into his breeches and withdrew a small sack of coins, which he held up, kissed, and then returned to its thief-proof home.

When he noticed Sestofor staring at him, he grinned. “Lost bet with self, Ses. If want blessing from Mother got to pay.”

“Come on!” shouted Sestofor. He did not look back to see who followed. He knew they all did.



*Paint the night with cold fog and three true terrors . . . there was no longer a village. It had become a poor collection of wood-and-plaster caves, dropped at random between the cliffs and the sea, each cave desperately alone, casting its own small, shuttered circle of light and no more. All sense of community was gone. Events slipped by unseen, like successful assassins.*

*Very few were bold enough to search for the missing children.*

*Lord Borum could command a large company with torches and sounding sticks and warm cloaks. Most of those searching joined in, for the relative peace of mind provided by numbers. There were others, poorer, who worked in twos and threes — never alone — and guarded themselves against the cold with improvised wrappings of old sail and net. To find their way they burned cheap tallow that nearly added more smoky darkness to the night than it dispelled. Certainly these small bands dared more than the Lord and his troop, but it was all for nothing so long as they searched only those places they knew, the adult places, the rooms and alleys and cellars at least some light reached during the day. Their conception of a hiding place would have made the youngest dockrat laugh.*

*And perhaps if you asked the most honest of those who stayed inside and never glanced from their fires, you might hear this strange answer: that they were less afraid of the pale Death than they were of finding out about the other force now at large in their world.*



It knew something was wrong before it opened its eyes.

There was light. It could feel radiance etching at the unflesh of its skin. There were many smells in the air, rank and fetid, like a flowershop. There was horrid bright laughter and a cacophony of giggling squeals. And as the last sun faded from the day and it reached full consciousness it grew aware of constriction, as if thin lines of fire were laced tight round its gaunt wrists.

It knew it had been discovered.

Cold anger rose from its ancient catalog of hates. There was fury for the circumstances of shipwreck that had forced it to move more rapidly than it wished, and fury for the bungling inadequacy of its human agent; but the far greater part was reserved for its unknown assailants. Its anger writhed like tentacles. Night had come. It would rise, naked as death, from its coffin, and before it drained its enemies dry it would give them full opportunity to regret their blasphemous daring.

Thus resolved it tried to rise, and met the greatest shock of all: it could not.

Now its eyes opened, squinting against the actinic glare of candles. It snarled. A small face hovered over it, a face with large eyes and smooth features, topped by golden hair. A child's face.

A child's face . . . .

*No!*

It bucked furiously within the confined space of its coffin, but there was so little clearance, and as it twisted sharp whips of fire struck it again and again across its body, searing chest and neck, calves and groin.

It screamed.

Shamaa, peering into the coffin from her perch atop three stacked crates, smiled with excitement. "It's awake, Ses! "

"So I can hear."

Sestofor felt like he was falling overboard, but slowly, as if in a dream. The unnamable, instinctive urge that had driven him to this room far beneath Bethale was turning in on itself, becoming as dark and uncaring as the nighttime sea, as cold and hard as the locked iron door of his father's treasury. The same force burned in all the children, but it seemed to have chosen him as its lens.

The others in the room, thirty-odd in all, watched him expectantly.

Snipe stood apart in the corner. He nodded Sestofor on.

*Do it.*

*Do it.*

*Do it.*

Like heartbeats. Sestofor went to the coffin.

As he approached, the struggling ceased.

“Hello, vampire,” he nodded to it. “Welcome to the port of Bethale.” It was neither ugly nor beautiful, contrary to lore. He knew that already; the children had stripped it of its clothes and bound it with silver wires — sometimes being Lord Borum’s son had its advantages, the times when you had to buy what you could never steal — before weaving the silver wire and hayflower garland that trapped it in its coffin. But it had been comatose, then. A dead thing. Now it was . . . aware, if not truly alive, and he could feel its red eyes pushing against him like a hot wind.

“Lore says so much about you, vampire. We did not know the proper ways to honor your visit. So we thought we’d ask. Pray forgive us this little inconvenience.”

*“Child, I will see you scream for my mercy.”*

Behind him, Sestofor heard the children laugh.

“Perhaps you will. Would you like a chance?”

It bared its fangs. *“Yes!”*

Sestofor carefully bent back the nails that held the net in place. They were rusty, and sharp. It would not do to cut himself now. When the task was finished he stepped back. “You’re free, vampire. All you must do to try for my neck is sit up.”

It surged upward, and agony wrapped it like a cloak. The silver and flowers clung; where they touched its skin mottled gray scars rose, fading only slowly.

At last it freed itself and stood, trembling, in its coffin. One leap, or three quick steps, and it would be at Sestofor’s throat.

Shamaa leaned over and jabbed it in the ankle with the blessed circle on her charm necklace.

It did not scream then, but it did a moment later, when the vicious clawing swipe it made at her face struck home. Nothing happened to Shamaa. She felt a whisper touch, like dead leaves, or old fishpaper; and she and the others went *ooh!* as its long-nailed hand erupted with bright blue fire. It staggered like a drunken man. It howled like a penitent. Fire advanced down an arm held high in the air before it finally turned, screaming, and extinguished the blaze in the dark earth that lined its coffin.

“I think I should have mentioned that we took some precautions,” said Sestofor.

*“Damn you,”* whispered the vampire. *“Damn you and all your kind, before you grow up into food . . .”*

It faced the ring of children. One arm was blackened and flaking. *“I’ve lived more lives than three times all of you together! I’ve made more of my kind than could live in this port of fleas and roaches . . . and you keep killing us, driving us on, eternally escaping! Damn you — we must exist!”*

“Cats kill rats and dogs kill cats and men kill dogs. Always something, bloodsucker,” said Snipe.

The children crowded closer.

“What’s name, bloodsucker?”

*“You’ll never earn that.”*

“We only want to be gracious,” said Sestofor. “We only want to play. Must you be so impolite? Won’t you at least let me explain the rules of the game?”

As he spoke he opened his embroidered shirt, uncovering a thick gold necklace with ornaments from the dozen dockside religions that held influence in Bethale. Largest among them was the blessed circle of the Mother.

“The game is called escape, and we get to have you until you do. It’s only fair to tell you that this room is kind of special. It isn’t the one you were resting in. This one is lots deeper and quieter. We’re all fishing folk here, one way or another, so even a Lord’s boy like me knew enough block and tackle to make moving your box simple. And then we decorated you, and it, and the room. Such stories precede you, vampire, and only the children ever listen. But it’s hard to tell what to believe because they are so contradictory — now, why is that? Some say you hate fire and some say you live in it. Some . . .”

The vampire suddenly turned and ran to the wall. For a moment it seemed as mist, seeping away through the cracks between the timbers, but something stopped it midway; it wrenched backwards, snarling, solidifying, and fell to the dirty floor.

The children squealed. As it tried to rise they pelted it with hayflowers and cheap religious trinkets they’d lifted from peddlers’ stands.

Sestofor walked to where it lay struggling. He felt not the slightest trace of fear, now.

“I told you this room was special, vampire. There are two reasons for that. You’ve just discovered the first. We’re down in the sewers. Water runs through here from the clifftops, carrying the garbage of Bethale out to the sea. We made a little logjam, that’s all. A tiny diversion in the flow. There’s water running on all sides of us. And you can’t cross running water. Lore’s right about that. We’re only dry here by grace of a few stairs, you know.”

Snipe called again from his post in the back. “What’s name, bloodsucker?”

*“Never . . . I will escape you, demons, and rest in another place, and feast on you in the nights to come!”*

“I don’t think so,” said Sestofor. “We took care of the other boxes.”

“I burnt mine!” That was Dhoty speaking, proud of himself.

Geval chimed in. “I wanted to save mine, so I just sprinkled blessed water in it.” He looked unhappy. “But when I did that it burnt too. *Darm.*”

Sestofor heard Geval’s brother Gevad threaten to tell their mamma that Geval had cursed.

As if that mattered.

As if anything mattered, except their prey.

“Blessed water’s really bad for you, hey? Little Shamaa bathed in it. That’s why your hand caught fire. We all bathed in it — broke into the priestess’s while she was burying her man. *I bathed in it.*”

He reached out and tapped the back of the vampire’s head.

“Tag — you’re it.”

Fire exploded, and the chase began.

The torment lasted hours. It knew every moment of it. The children formed rings around the vampire, rings that would close in gradually as they chanted and sang in their shrill, offkey voices. *Stakes of ven and rowan wood, to kill the vampire real good!* When the ring was tightened as far as it could go the children would stretch out their hands, groping, and wherever they touched the blue fire erupted. The fire that burned, but did not consume. It was kicked, tripped, kissed; stabbed with flowers, and beaten with small fists. They played all the tricks of childhood on it, perversely twisted, and it could do no more to defend itself than could an anvilside trapped in the fisher’s net.

The children were children only in name, now. They were wholly owned by something as old as mankind itself. Sestofor, the Lord’s son, the would-be dockrat, howled with the rest and tasted visions.

Only Snipe stood aside watchfully, somehow out of reach of the madness.

It went on, and on, and on . . .

Until the dawn.

They could feel it. All of them. The little ones who had fallen asleep, tired from the chase, awoke. Reason and purpose crept back to stand alongside hate.

Sestofor shuddered, breathing heavily. The vampire lay where it had last fallen, curled in a corner. It was ugly now, thick with welts and charred over most of its body. All of its fingers stretched at wrong, broken angles.

“Get up,” he said to it. It whimpered.

“Stand up!” He aimed a kick, but he didn’t have to deliver it. The threat was enough. It somehow pulled itself erect.

He kicked it anyway, in what would have been its crotch when it was human, centuries before. There was a flash of fire, a grunt of pain.

“I told you there was something else special about this room, vampire. It’s time you found out. See, we’re very near the openings to the sea. Very near.” Four children stood ready at the door, their hands gripping the roll of canvas drape that concealed the exit. Snipe stood beside them, his thoughts hidden behind a face as still as a temple mask.

“What’s name, bloodsucker?”

*“That much . . . I . . . take with me, human . . . ”*

Snipe shouldered the other children out of the way and grasped the canvas, ripping it free.

Sunlight entered the room. It was not bright; it entered like a stranger, travelling by reflections from the sea and the metal-threaded stone of the sewer walls; but enter it did, and struck the vampire full. Lore had it that it would turn to dust, or burst into flame, or scream like a thousand devils, but the lore was wrong on this point. Light spread over its disfigured body and it simply . . . fell. No more.

That wasn’t enough for the children. Hanging outside the door was a canvas bag full of stakes, prepared against emergency. Shamaa was allowed to hammer in the first, since she had been the only child to be hurt all day. Sestofor had to steady the stake for her while she pounded. Then he added one of his own, as did Gevad, and Dhoty, and Sipper, and most of the rest, until they ran out of stakes and the corpse was pinned to the floor in twenty places. Then they cut its head off, as per lore (and its hands and feet and, individually, its fingers, to be dried down to bone and kept or sold as black charms), stuffing the mouth full of hayflower and seedling tugging.

The cold red eyes they put out, and dropped blessed circles in the sockets.

This last was done in a dream, the children moving slower and slower. The ancient passion was fading away; and as it faded it robbed memory. Even Sestofor’s, though he shook his head, trying to hold on to the triumph.

They left, one by one, climbing to the Bethale of day and the arms of their overjoyed parents — and they went without answers.

Only Snipe stayed behind. Too old to hear the call, but not too old to believe. He put the vampire's head in the bag that had carried stakes, and threw it into the sewer waters. Let the sea take it and the shipwreck away together. Then he went back to the corpse, carrying with him a wineskin taken from the rooms of old Chenot. He poured the red fluid over the body and then, for good measure, he urinated on it.

"Prince of rats tell what name be, bloodsucker," he said. "Name be mud."



*The stories say: this happened in another time and another place. But it has happened in all times. And it will happen in all places. There are many reasons for the sweet, sly smiles of the children.*

## FILE NOTES:

This story was triggered by my intense anger at, and disappointment with, the TV miniseries version of Stephen King's *'Salems Lot*.

Instead of the fine piece of work that it should have been, it was just another ravening mindless vampire flick. Feh. And like any other approach to this story which had humans as easy prey, and virtually instant vampires themselves after being killed, with all vampires killing relentlessly, it begged the question: if this is how the whole thing works, then why isn't the entire world populated solely by vampires. Do the math, man! Obviously, some countervailing force had to be involved. Either there were smarter vampires who kept the dumber ones in line, so as to preserve the correct predator/prey ratio; or most vampires themselves kept their victims from rising as the undead, likewise; or else something preyed on vampires the same way they preyed on people.

It was the latter notion that got my story interest rolling, especially when it hooked into the idea of pre-pubescent children as instinctive pack-based vampire hunters. The title was the only one that ever occurred to me. I wanted it to be incredibly prosaic, as if this really isn't all that rare or surprising an event. The slight echo of a Marx Brothers' movie may appeal to my sense of irony.

This went out a few times and got passed on, but was finally bought for the special Stephen King issue of *Whispers* by Stuart David Schiff (when he opened the envelope he was expecting art, and was surprised to find a publishable story instead). This was an appropriate place for it to land, given its provenance. That publication had some unfortunate typos ("Skull alleyway" for "Scull Alleyway") which were corrected when the story was reprinted in *Whispers IV*.]

[4445 words.]