

MASLOW'S MAGIC 8-BALL

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Time is a physical beast. It kills those we love, destroys everything we build, and saps the life from us. Even from those of us who are, at least nominally, immortal.

I'm so hungry.

I'm sitting on the side of a mountain, watching as red and yellow magma boils up to the surface below and writhes its way down to the sea, losing itself in a much bigger lava flow moving westward. If one were to follow that flow, one would find a place that approximated the same geographical location a city called Los Angeles once occupied many, many years ago. At least, that was one of its names before the world ended. Before the world of humanity and those that preyed upon them ended.

Now those predators sit and starve, wishing for the good old days. The days when food was plentiful and too fat to run from us. We took no thought to breed them. Like the ancient buffalo hunters, we thought they'd always be there. My kind roamed the cities, searching the night places for the homeless, the drunk, the careless, the stupid. We gorged ourselves and took no thought for tomorrow.

But then, as always, tomorrow became today.

If I could breathe the air, it would most certainly be poisonous. The plants that created the oxygen-rich atmosphere died out long ago. Animals followed soon after the air began to bloat with carbon dioxide. Humanity, and we along with them, moved into steel-lined underground warrens. But that only lasted half a thousand years, and their ability to synthesize food and oxygen, along with the machines and genetic mechanisms that kept them alive, died out as well.

They took to eating each other before the last one starved.

And now I, too, am hungry.

So hungry.



“You know, Petersen, it's not really Los Angeles.”

I didn't look back. I just sat there watching the hot liquid tributary flow into its massive river of brimstone and fire. I heard the roaring of the pain-ridden rocks below as the passing fire eroded the banks, and felt the energy released as the rock around it gave up its solid state after so many millions of years.

Surely this is the hell the humans always talked about.

“Karchov, if I want it to be Los Angeles, then it is.”

“It hasn't been the LA you knew for thousands of years.”

I couldn't disagree. “Hundreds of thousands.”

I'd argued with her many times over the millennia, but lately I'd tried to be civil when our paths crossed. “How have you been, Karchov?”

I felt a hand pat my shoulder. “Dying for a cigarette. Or some blood. Do you know where we can get some, Jeffrey?”

No one had ever called me Jeffrey before. Only her. Many years ago, when her now-raspy voice sounded like a musical waterfall in my ears. Now there existed no place on this world such a sound could be heard.

I looked up. “There's probably wild tobacco growing on Mars by now, with all the planetary movement and orbital changes.”

“And no way to get there,” she whispered.

The sun – I felt certain I could see a reddish tinge to it these days – drew lower in the sky, its light reflected through heat waves and volcanic ash to break the light into spectacular colors, creating the

only beauty to be found on this dying world where lava flowed like pus and the air – when I cared to sniff it – smelled like the infected stench of rotting sewer, that special scent only methane and sulphur could produce.

But Karchov was right. It wasn't really LA. My beloved town lay buried beneath the centuries.

“So what brings you to California, Karchov?”



I remember sitting in a small bar, just off Wilshire, where rich young beautiful people came to drink away the stresses of the day. All the sore muscles from fundraising, movie making, company dealing, day trading and staff meetings. I sat in the back, my usual spot, drinking Perrier and nibbling the pistachios the bar handed away free in those days.

And I saw her for the first time.

She came in wearing a dark blue dress, a dress cut to show off one pale shoulder above and quite a bit of leg beneath. And I felt two things.

Hunger and lust. Potential satisfaction for each in one shapely package, but not both. Which to choose?

Unsure on this particular occasion, I consulted Maslow.

Abraham Maslow was a behavioral psychologist in the twentieth century who outlined the hierarchy of all the needs we have as animals. At the top of the pyramid lie the survival basics: food, sleep, the need to reproduce. Lower down on the chain sit other requirements we don't consciously think about as often: the desire for love, for acceptance, for ego strokes.

I waited. I watched.

After a few false starts, she hooked up with a good-looking young executive, probably a movie producer – or at least he likely said he was – and they left. Interestingly enough, they chose for some reason not to leave through the front door, but passed near me to exit through the rear door, which led to an alley.

Who goes out a back alley?

One heartbeat. Two.

I considered. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs told me I could get sex anywhere.

Four heartbeats.

I needed food, and as a child of the night, the pistachios weren't going to do it for me. I had to have blood. I hadn't fed in quite some time, and if I didn't, hunger would take me over.

Eleven heartbeats.

So I'd feed.

Fifteen.

I stood and crossed to the rear door, past the bathrooms and telephones. Pushing through the back door, I stepped out into the alley.

And froze.



“Did you know, Karchov, there are only two animals in the world who prey upon their own species?”

She bobbed her head and chuckled. “Yes? And what species are those, Jeffrey?”

“What species? Humans and vampires, Karchov. Humans and vampires.” I looked back at the sunset, colors fading. “And now, only vampires.”

“You know that's not true.”

“I know. It feels true, though.”

“Do you think I'm here to prey on you, Jeffrey?”

“Karchov, you've preyed on everything you've ever interacted with.”

She went silent. But I could feel her smile.



It seems to me Maslow's Hierarchy functions less like a need pyramid and more like a Magic 8-Ball the kids used to play with. You shake it and see what comes up.

*It turned out survival wasn't my highest priority right then. Who'd have thought?
The girl's producer boyfriend had his teeth in her shoulder, and I heard the heavy meaty sound of tearing flesh.
Without further thought, I strode forward and used all my momentum to pound him once at the base of the skull.
It didn't knock him out, but it got his attention. He looked up and let her go, giving me a feral look, like a cat interrupted in the middle of stalking his prey. I supposed there was a reason for the similarity. I'd worn it myself.
The fight didn't last long. The guy apparently wasn't very old, and he still thought martial arts were a pretty good way to survive.
I left him lying on the pavement in a spreading puddle of crimson.
I ran to the girl, slumped against the alley wall, her once-beautiful off-white dress now stained with her life.
"What's your name?" I whispered.
"Stefanya Karchov," she gasped in a mild Eastern European accent.*



"You know, Jeffrey, a few years ago, I was traveling across the Sahara."
"Crap."
"All right, across what used to be Northern Africa. Do you know what I found?"
I didn't answer.
In the failing light, the lava began to glow. I still hadn't looked at Karchov's face. She used to be beautiful, and I felt certain her beauty had gone the way of her voice.
"I came upon an old friend, weak and exhausted from lack of blood."
She paused, and from the corner of my eye, I saw an aged hand come forward to gesture her point. "Have you ever starved, Jeffrey?"
"No, Karchov." Sarcasm dripped from my lips like blood. "I've *never* starved." I wondered if she even caught the humor. "Pray, what happens?"
"You're an asshole, Jeffrey."
"No kidding. Make your point."
"Why so quickly? The world won't become uninhabitable for several thousand years yet."
"Because I can only take you in small doses, Karchov, and I'm tired of looking at Los Angeles."
"I'm hurt, Jeffrey."
"Uh-huh."
She'd never taken anyone else seriously enough to be hurt. "Anyway?"
"Of course. This vampire was starved for blood, so weak he was positively immobile."
"Anyone I know?"
She chuckled. "Chinese gentleman by the name of Han?"
I shook my head at the horizon.
"No? I thought not. That was..." She paused. Had that been a wistful note in her voice? "Well, it doesn't really matter. I was mostly starved myself."
I rolled my eyes. One of her flings, I supposed. "Yeah, that's what you get for wandering the desert. No blood to be had there."
"Well, I was being chased. Hunted."
I frowned. "Hunted?"
"Haven't you heard?"
I'd heard. It'd started shortly after the last human died out. Vampires had to eat. For a while we could survive on the higher animals. Bears, gorillas, kangaroos, dolphins.
But they hadn't lasted long.



*Fifty years after that night in Wilshire, we stood on the deck of a cruise liner. Hand in hand, we leaned on the rail, watching the Alaskan coastline crawled by. High, glaciated mountains arched the sky, falling to the horizon into valleys of sharded crystal. I couldn't tell where the rock ended and the ice began. Just as when I kissed Stefanya – we'd become so close, almost like one entity.
In a heavily wooded section, we saw a wolverine padding along the coast. "Look," Stefanya pointed. I followed her*

hand, and saw another wolverine some forty or fifty yards ahead of the other one.

"It's stalking its own kind," she said.

I nodded.

"I thought predators didn't hunt their own kind. Do you suppose it's a territorial thing?"

I suppose it could have been, but wolverines are mean. I imagined any territorial disputes would probably be settled head on.

"Any animal will do anything if it gets hungry enough," I replied.



Vampires have become like the animals.

Karchov laughed. "You once told me –"

"I remember. The wolverine."

I sensed her silent nod.

I turned and looked at her. She still looked beautiful, not fresh-faced like that day in the bar, but still very beautiful. I felt a stirring I'd not felt since Greece, hundreds of millennia ago.

I took her into my arms and kissed her.



"I'm leaving, Petersen."

Greece. We'd toured the world for a hundred and twenty years before we stopped holding hands. After that, we opened a business. The days of the gas-powered cars had gone, and vehicles now used different means of propulsion – solar, cold nuclear, clean electric. Still, the Gernsbackian flying automobiles had never materialized, but lots of other wonders had. We sat in a green park, hundreds of stories above street level, after a night that should have been romantic, magical. But we'd argued, and I'd slept up here.

"I understand," I replied.

"I can't take the arguments anymore."

What I couldn't take anymore was her having sex with those she stalked. She'd seduce them, do them, and kill them, and this didn't sit well. I couldn't put my finger on it, but it struck me as somehow immoral.



The next day found me sitting in the same place, watching the spectacular sunset, darkening the orange ugliness from the dead evening sky.

So Maslow's hierarchy isn't always a hierarchy. I shook the 8-Ball to see what floated to the top. Years ago, when I met Stefanya for the first time, I shook it and found love, even though I was only looking for survival at the time.

But it doesn't *always* happen that way.

Sometimes you shake the ball, and it comes up just the way you expect. This time, high up in what was the Sierra Nevada, looking towards a sea of blistering rock covering forever the place we first met, I felt hungry. I shook my mental 8-Ball. Last time I went after Stefanya for food. And so I did this time. The 8-Ball told me to.

We made love all night, and when the sun began to rise, my morality went out the window.

I wanted to save her for as long as possible, but when I reached for her that last time, hunger took over, and I sucked and swallowed until she bled completely out.

I'll carry her to Greece and bury her there, as close to our aerial garden as I can find.

There's only one problem.

I'm starting to get hungry again.