

excerpt from LITTLE VAMPIRE WOMEN

CHAPTER ONE PLAYING PILGRIMS

“Christmas won’t be Christmas without any corpses,” grumbled Jo, lying on the rug.

“It’s so dreadful to be poor!” sighed Meg, looking down at her old dress.

“I don’t think it’s fair for some vampires to have plenty of pretty squirming things, and other vampires nothing at all,” added little Amy, with an injured sniff.

Being so poor, the Marches customarily dined on quarts of pig’s blood, goat’s blood, and, on very special occasions, cow’s blood, but they rarely had the luxury of a living, breathing animal to feast on, and when they did, it was usually a small creature hardly more than a snack. Most of their meals had to be warmed over the fire to be brought up to the proper temperature, which was particularly humiliating for the young girls. Gone were the days when they could sink their fangs into a wiggling beaver, let alone a wriggling cow. A human had never been on the menu, even when the family was wealthy and lived in a large, well-appointed house, for the Marches were humanitarians who believed the consumption of humans unworthy of the modern vampire. Humans were an inferior species in many ways but they deserved to be pitied, not consumed.

“We’ve got Father and Mother, and each other,” said Beth contentedly from her corner. She was the shy, domestically inclined sister.

“We haven’t got Father, and shall not have him for a long time,” Jo said sadly. She didn’t say “perhaps never,” but each silently added it, thinking of Father far away, where the fighting was.

The war was the reason they were to be denied even a badger this Christmas. It was going to be a hard winter for all humans, and their mother thought they ought not spend money for pleasure, when so many were suffering in the army. That the suffering was limited to mortal men did not concern her, for her commitment to the human race was steadfast, despite the criticism of her neighbors, who found both their beliefs and behavior baffling. Typically, vampires didn’t concern themselves with the petty wars of humans. They had roamed the earth long before people and would continue to roam it long after they were gone.

“We can’t do much, but we can make our little sacrifices, and ought to do it gladly. But I am afraid I don’t,” and Meg shook her head, as she thought regretfully of all the pretty corpses she wouldn’t get to eat.

“But I don’t think the little we should spend would do any good. We’ve each got a dollar, and the army wouldn’t be much helped by our giving that. I agree not to expect any gifts from Mother or you, but I do want to buy Mr. Bloody Wobblestone’s *Scientifical Method for Tracking, Catching and Destroying Vampire Slayers*. I’ve wanted it so long,” said Jo, who longed to join the league of defenders, brave and gallant vampires who protected their fellow-creatures from those humans who would destroy them by any means possible. In the last century, the noble profession had undergone a vast change, adopting modern techniques to battle an ancient threat. Relying on one’s instincts, which had always been an imperfect process at best and a guessing game at

worst, had been supplanted by steadfast science. Now, instead of spending three months learning the antiquated art of filtering out the smothering scent of garlic, one simply could simply put on an allium mask , which accomplished the task for you.

“I planned to spend my dollar in new music,” said Beth, who loved to play music on the Marches’ very old, poorly turned piano. Mrs. March believed in a liberal education and strove to cultivate an interest in the arts in all her children.

“I shall get a nice box of Faber’s fang enhancements,” said Amy decidedly. Her fangs, though long, were blunt and did not come to an aristocratic point like her sisters’. No one minded the dullness save herself, but Amy felt deeply the want of a pair of killer-looking fangs.

“Mother didn’t say anything about our money, and she won’t wish us to give up everything. Let’s each buy what we want, and have a little fun; I’m sure we work hard enough to earn it,” cried Jo.

“I know I do; teaching those tiresome children nearly all night, when I’m longing to enjoy myself at home,” began Meg, in the complaining tone again.

“You don’t have half such a hard time as I do,” said Jo, who served as companion-protector to their four-hundred-year-old aunt. “How would you like to be shut up for hours with a nervous, fussy old lady who’s convinced every tradesman who comes to the door is there to slay her?”

“It’s naughty to fret, but I do think washing dishes and keeping things tidy is the worst work in the world. It makes me cross,” Beth said.

“I don’t believe any of you suffer as I do,” cried Amy, “for you don’t have to go to school with impertinent girls, who plague you if you don’t know your lessons, and laugh at your dresses, and label your father if he isn’t rich, and insult you when your fangs aren’t nice.”

“If you mean libel, I’d say so, and not talk about labels, as if Papa was a pickle bottle,” advised Jo, laughing.

As young readers like to know ‘how people look’, we will take this moment to give them a little sketch of the four sisters, who sat knitting away in the near dawn, while the December snow fell quietly without, and the fire crackled cheerfully within. It was a comfortable room, though the carpet was faded and the furniture very plain, for a good picture or two hung on the walls, books filled the recesses, chrysanthemums and Christmas roses bloomed in the windows, and a pleasant atmosphere of home peace pervaded it.

Margaret, the eldest of the four, looked to be about sixteen, and very pretty, being plump and fair, with large eyes, plenty of soft brown hair, a sweet mouth, and white hands, of which she was rather vain. A year younger, Jo was very tall, thin, and brown, and reminded one of a colt, for she never seemed to know what to do with her long limbs, which were very much in her way. She had a decided mouth, a comical nose, and sharp, gray eyes, which appeared to see everything, and were by turns fierce, funny, or thoughtful. Her long, thick hair was her one beauty, but it was usually bundled into a net, to be out of her way. Round shoulders had Jo, big hands and feet, a flyaway look to her clothes, and the uncomfortable appearance of a girl who was rapidly shooting up into a woman and didn’t like it. (Although her transformation brought an abrupt end to the growth spurt, the awkwardness of her appearance remained a permanent fixture.) Elizabeth, or Beth, as everyone called her, appeared to be an ashen-faced, smooth-haired, bright-eyed girl of thirteen, with a shy manner, a timid voice, and a peaceful expression which was seldom disturbed. Her father called her “Little Miss Tranquility,” and the name suited her excellently, for she seemed to live in a happy world of her own, only venturing out to meet

the few whom she trusted and loved. Amy, though the youngest, was a most important person, in her own opinion at least. A regular snow maiden, with blue eyes, and yellow hair curling on her shoulders, pale and slender, and always carrying herself like a young vampire lady mindful of her manners.

Each girl looked as if she'd been alive for scarcely more than a decade, especially Amy, whose pallid complexion could do little to mute her youthful energy, but they had all undergone the Great Change thirty-two years previous, which made them vampires of some experience. However, they were still considered adolescents, for vampires lived very long lives indeed and thirty-odd years was scarcely a fraction of it. Therefore, in all the ways that mattered, the March girls, although chronologically older than their mortal counterparts, were perched just as precariously on the edge of womanhood.