

“Nightmare Within the Dream”

Ben and Tomara left Cornelia City’s finest five-star restaurant hand-in-hand. Ben had just recently graduated from ISIS with a Master’s in Magical Arts. Tomara had been planning a surprise party, but Ben surprised her first with a night out at her favorite restaurant. He was wearing the same blue tuxedo he had worn for their wedding so long ago. She was wearing a stunning red cocktail dress that was Ben’s favorite.

“Oh Ben,” Tomara said and giggled, “I never knew you knew how to dance like that!”

Ben gave her a somewhat seductive version of his trademark sly grin. “My dear, I have yet to show you *everything* I learned at ISIS.” Tomara giggled and her ears blushed a little.

They walked like this for a few blocks back to their house, talking and giggling and nuzzling the whole way. As they approached, Ben caught some movement behind the rose bushes that Tomara always planted along the sidewalk. Suddenly, a rat Being jumped around from behind them, pointing a .38 Special at Ben with a wild look in his eyes.

“**DIE**, monster!!!” The rat fired a few shots, but Ben hadn’t completely forgotten his adventurer training. He pushed Tomara to one side and swung to the other, utilizing the speed that came with his incubus powers. He growled as a bullet grazed his arm and at the same time he fired off a stun spell with the other arm. The rat crumpled to the ground.

“Suck it, bastard!!” he shouted as he held his bleeding arm. Then he heard a faint voice in his mind. Tomara’s voice. “*Ben...*” He spun toward the direction he had pushed her. She lay on the ground, eyes wide open in shock. Blood flowed from a hole in her abdomen, staining her dress a deeper shade of crimson. The soul-crystal in the pendant she usually wore around her neck glowed faintly.

Ben stared in shock. Shook himself, then looked again. He wasn’t dreaming. He just stood there staring for several moments, not even breathing. Then, with a blank look in his eyes and a drawn mouth, he slowly turned to the unconscious rat. His breaths slowly became harder and louder.

Suddenly, a bestial roar split the night, followed by a series of explosions that rattled windows and set off several car alarms. Ben screamed as loud as he could as he flung fireball after fireball at the rat, each one bursting in a blazing conflagration long after the rat had been reduced to ashes. Even all the times he had been angry in his forty years as a Being combined could not compare to the rage he was feeling now.

He continued for a few minutes, stopping only to take a breath, until a hand clad in an arm-length latex glove grabbed his shoulder. He continued to scream and flail his arms, though no fire would come from them. Then he felt another rubbery hand grab the back of his head, and the haze of rage evaporated. Only misery was left. Even as emergency crews swarmed on the scene and his lawn and bushes burned, he buried his face in Daryil's shoulder and wept.

Ben fell to his hands and knees and began to sob. On the stainless steel table before him lay what appeared to be a coeurl succubus—his wife, Tomara. Her arms were folded over her waist and she appeared to be sleeping, her face absolutely peaceful. A fiber-optic cable ran from behind her ear to a nearby VAX 11/780 computer.

After the night Tomara had been murdered, Ben had managed to hold back his grief. But now, next to the android body that would soon be his wife's, he finally lost it.

To his right stood Lord Daryil, holding the crystal that contained Tomara's soul. He looked down at Ben. "Ben, what's the matter? Your wife's soul is right here—in just a few moments she will return to us! Why are you still so sad?"

Ben spoke through a stutter of sniffles and sobs. "I know, but... Her *powers*... All her wonderful powers are *gone!!* She truly *loved* being a succubus. She *loved* to feel the emotions of her family and friends. She *loved* her Warp-Aci. She *loved* driving me crazy with her shapeshifting. But now it's all gone!" Ben's hands curled into fists. "*And it's all my fault!!*"

Daryil put a hand on his shoulder. "Oh, Ben, there's no way you could have known what would happen. And besides, we've developed emotion sensors by now, Caisi will still be around—albeit bound to you instead of her—and our android shapeshifting technology has come a long way!"

"It's not the same!!" Ben shouted. "If only I... If only I hadn't been so *stupid*... Always parading around, showing off my headwings for all the world to see..... That... That *bastard*... He was targeting *me*! It should have been *me* that died, not her!! If... If it weren't for my *stupid* dreams... If I had never gotten involved with your clan, never met her, she..."

"If you had never met her, then where would I be?"

Ben turned his head to his left to look at his son. Tears streamed down Michael's face, but he remained in control of his emotions as always.

"Ben," Daryil said, squatting down and putting his arm around Ben. "Your son is right. Your wife *loves* you. *Still* loves you, even now. True, it won't quite be the same. But Tomara is still Tomara. She doesn't blame you, and neither should you. Now, are you going to keep kicking yourself until you run out of tears, or are you going to stand by your wife and help her adjust?"

Ben looked back at the floor in silence for a moment. Then, he stood up and took a deep breath. His son hugged him and a weak smile crept up his muzzle.

"That's more like it," Daryil beamed. "Now come on, I want you two to be the first thing Tomara sees when she opens her eyes." Daryil popped open a port in the back of Tomara's head and inserted the soul-crystal. Then he looked at the massive computer nearby and his fingers glowed as he moved them as if he were actually at the keyboard typing.

Tomara's eyes slowly opened. Her husband and son embraced her, their tears wetting her artificial fur. Ben said with a slight sob, "I'm sorry."

Tomara looked into his eyes. "Oh *Ben*, Daryil allowed me to hear everything you all just said. Do you *still* blame yourself?"

Ben smiled and wiped his tears away. "No, that's not it." He rubbed the back of his neck with one hand. "See, I... kiiind of vaporized your roses."

END