

**Freak**

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Smashwords Edition

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There! Ahead, through the trees. The freak hung in the air somehow. Pietr crept forward quietly, eyes on the semi-transparent form ahead. He could see more of it now, all pale blue and glowing. The thing hovered by one of those stupendously huge trees, the kind the freaks claimed as sacred. Sacred! Just because the things could talk. And because they lived forever. His daddy chopped them down, those big, supposedly sacred trees, and they made fine furniture. Sacred, hah!

Then Pietr slowed and stopped, frozen in almost awe. The freak turned towards him, glowing, ethereal. . . *beautiful*.

“What are you?” he breathed, watching the delicate, semi-transparent features drift closer. “You’re beautiful.”

*Sylfen*, the creature replied, suddenly much closer. *I thank you*.

Pietr couldn't help it. Despite himself, he found the creature's beauty arousing, more so than any woman or girl he'd ever seen. Fragile and delicate, with glowing misty orbs where her eyes should be, the freak excited him in ways it shouldn't. He felt lust surging through his body.

*Ah*, sighed the sylfen, *Such emotion. Such rich, rich emotion. . .*

“Stop,” Pietr protested thickly, fighting against the arousal. “You're going to hurt me.”

*No*, replied the lovely creature, close enough now to touch. She reached out an insubstantial hand and traced it down Pietr's cheek. His skin tingled madly. *I need you. I can not survive without you. Why would I hurt you?*

The touch sent jolts of electric desire through Pietr. “I—I don't understand,” he gasped. “Need me? How? Why? I need—”

He broke off before he could say that he needed the freak and clutched frantically at his crotch.

*A human mind invented us*, the sylfen claimed, tracing the contours of his face with both hands. *We can not survive without human emotion to feed us*.

“You're *feeding* on me?” Pietr gasped, fumbling awkwardly at his drawstring. The sylfen's touch sent delicious fire racing through him, nearly drowning out the disgust. He finally broke the drawstring free on his pants and thrust them down, freeing himself. He cried out when he brushed against his own hand and clutched desperately at himself.

*It does not hurt*, the sylfen murmured, hands tracing down Pietr's body. *It will never hurt. Just give me more of that luscious energy*.

The sylfen bent closer and brushed his lips with her own. Pietr moaned and thrust forward, seeking to touch her insubstantial form, then cried out with a release so intense he trembled.

*Ah, thank you*, the sylfen breathed. *I have not fed in years. I am the last of my kind, and I have been slowly dying, but now I may live a while longer. Thank you*.

Then she faded from view, leaving the shaken Pietr to tuck himself back into his pants under the watchful eyes of the so-called sacred tree. Trees should never have eyes, much less faces. They could look entirely too disapproving.

Pietr tied his drawstring and shuddered. Truly, the freaks were powerful, to control him so easily. He turned back towards the village, simultaneously shaken and satisfied.

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The next day found him in the common house, nursing an ale. He stared into it moodily, without seeing it. He'd wanted to fuck a freak. What was wrong with him?

“There he is! Pietr! How fared the hunt?”

“Not well,” he said quickly, as his friends settled around him. They must never know. . . The crowd of young men on the verge of adulthood could never possibly understand the emotions which gripped him still when he thought of the sylfen's fragile, lovely face. He thought fast. How to get out of this? “There were too many of them.”

“What, two or three?” Ronson jeered.

“More like six,” Pietr lied.

“Six!” Ara, his closest friend, exclaimed. “Why were there so many? You never hear about that many freaks in the same place anymore.”

“They were busy,” Pietr said, casting frantically through his mind for a reason. Aha! “You know that little girl that went missing last week?”

“The one from the trader caravan?”

“That's the one. They had her.”

“They did! And you didn't come back and rouse the town? Why not?” Ronson, never much of a friend to him, was openly scornful now.

“I got lost,” he muttered, head hanging. It wasn't difficult to let himself blush, not after what really happened. “They clouded my mind somehow. I couldn't think straight.”

True enough. He *still* couldn't think straight.

“They do that,” young Flickr said, nodding sagely. He clung to the ale mug he'd somehow charmed out of one of the barmaids in a slightly defensive pose.

“Maybe you'd better tell someone,” Bettina, the lone girl amongst the group of boys, looked at him with eyes wide with concern. “That poor little girl, held captive by those unnatural monsters. . .”

“Tina, you're so. . . so. . . girly!” Ronson poked her in the shoulder. Flickr, who idolized the ground Bettina walked on, growled into his mug. “Good idea, though. Why don't you run and fetch Stalker?”

“I think I will,” Bettina said, tossing her mousy hair. She turned and moved away in an offended swirl of cotton skirt.

Pietr watched her go. A few days ago, he'd enjoyed watching Bettina move, especially from behind. She was pretty enough, and growing breasts, and making all the boys sigh these days. But now. . . all he could see was the delicate loveliness of the sylfen, with her ethereal beauty and strange eyes.

“So what happened? Tell us! What kinds of freaks were there?” Ara leaned forward avidly.

“I don't know names for them,” Pietr said, yanking his mind away from the sylfen. For about two seconds. “There was one of those trees, and some things I could see right through, and they looked like girls but weren't. They had the little one tied to that tree and it was watching.”

Of course, it was watching him pull at himself as if his life depended on it, but that was not worth saying.

“Girls, huh? And you couldn't get the better of them?”

“Ronson, grow up,” Tieg spoke from the back of the group. “You know what freaks are like. They mess with your head. If, that is, you have enough brain in there to mess with.”

General laughter greeted this remark. Even the people that really liked Ronson were willing to have a laugh at his expense.

Bettina returned then, Stalker in tow. Pietr cringed inside. He really admired Stalker. The man was the epitome of what he himself wanted to become when he grew up, smart, successful, tough enough to chew nails. He hunted freaks for a living. He had more kills and captures to his name than anyone in the region, and walked with the easy confidence born of success.

“What's this I hear about freaks?”

Pietr swallowed. “I saw some yesterday. They had that missing girl. There were too many of them for me to do anything about it.”

“What kind? Where? Were they hurting the girl?”

Pietr felt like prey pinned under the gaze of a hunting eagle. “I don't know what kind they were. They looked like transparent girls. And where. . . I could probably find it again. They were in the forest, by one of those talking trees. The girl. . . the girl was tied to the tree. They were doing things to her. I couldn't help. I wanted to, I really did, but I couldn't do anything about six of them, and the tree. . .”

“Nah, boy, of course you couldn't. Six! That many freaks haven't been gathered in these parts in a long time. We have to do something about this.”

Stalker moved away decisively, towards the barkeep. After a moment's conversation, the barkeep beckoned to one of the little serving boys and told him something in a low voice. The boy darted off, and a moment later, the bell rang out from the belltower of the common house.

Pietr cringed. The bell! Oh, why couldn't he have just killed the freak like he was supposed to? Then none of this would be happening. He would be like Stalker, successful after a good hunt, with

some kind of trophy to impress Bettina with and the desire to do something about those admiring glances she kept sending his way. But no, here he was in the center of the entire town's attention, or about to be, and having to present a lie as truth because the truth itself was hideously embarrassing.

People came quickly in response to the bell. Stalker gathered the men up around the group of boys, most of whom melted shyly into the background. Pietr wished miserably he could do the same. But he'd started this, so he would finish it, riding out the lie to its ultimate conclusion, whatever that may be. Whatever happened, it was bound to be better than admitting he had wanted to have sex with a freak. Then Stalker addressed the gathered men.

"This boy here, Pietr," and despite his misery, Pietr felt a thrill of pride. He hadn't realized Stalker knew his name. "He went on a freak hunt yesterday and ran into something too much for one hunter to handle alone. Pietr, why don't you tell them what you saw?"

"There were six of them," he said, not allowing a hint of the lie to color his voice, "and a tree. They were some kind of transparent girls, I don't know what they're called," *sylfen*, whispered a memory, "and they had that missing little girl tied to a tree. They were hurting her."

"Why didn't you come tell us yesterday?" the Mayor grumped. "Now they're probably gone, and the little girl dead."

"I couldn't," Pietr replied, honestly enough. "I tried to get back, but the way was all confused. I think just seeing them was enough to cloud my mind."

"Sylfen can do that to a man," Stalker nodded agreement. "They are difficult to deal with. I had thought them cleared from this entire region."

*I am the last of my kind. . .*

"Sylfen, eh? Haven't had one of those around in years. Well, men, who's up for a hunt? Let's go save that little girl!"

A hungry growl answered the Mayor's words. Despite his internal torment, Pietr felt a surge of excitement. A hunt! And he was going to be part of it, or else how would they know where to go?

"All right, men, let's arm for the hunt, and meet back here in front of the common house within the hour. Boy, you can guide us to where you saw the freaks?"

"I think so," Pietr replied. Of course he could. The location where he'd seen the sylfen was burned into his memory forever. "It was only after I saw them my mind got all confused."

"Stalker? Any suggestions on what we can fight these things with?"

"There's not much that works against a sylfen. Torches and razorwebs, that's about all that will affect them. They don't really have bodies."

"You heard the man. Everybody off, don't come back until you have a torch. And while you're at it, we need some axes to deal with that tree! The boy said it watched, it can die too."

Pietr actually felt a little bit better at that last. The tree, the witness to his shame, would pay the price of watching what it shouldn't!

The men of the town, other than the farmers working dilligently at the harvest, assembled in front of the common house. Pietr felt a thrill at being part of the big hunt. Based on a lie or no, here he was living out his dream, heading a hunt for freaks, with Stalker at his side. He waited for the mayor's signal, then called out, "Let's go save that girl!"

An angry rumble answered him, and the townsfolk set into motion behind him. Pietr led the way through the forest without hesitation. He knew exactly where he was going. But somewhere along the way, there was an interruption. One of the wider ranging scouts let out a shout and the entire group stopped to investigate.

"I found her! I found the girl!"

*What?* Pietr followed the group to the sound of the man's voice, hoping his confusion didn't show.

The little girl, wearing only a rag that used to be her dress, clung to the baker's legs with big eyes. She said nothing, no matter who tried to cajole her into talking, just stared with those big eyes and fidgeted with the remains of her dress.

"The little girl is too worn out from her ordeal," the Mayor decided. "Pat, she seems to like you. Take her back. See if you can find her family. They were camped by the creek, last I knew."

"I can do that, Mayor, if you make sure those that scared the voice out of this poor little mite pay for what they did."

"I can assure you, there will be payment," Stalker said, grim and determined.

"No one hurts little children in my town and gets away with it," the Mayor said, with matching grimness. "Let's move on."

Pietr took the lead again, moving with utter confidence through the old growth forest. Amazing! Absolutely amazing. No one would question his story now, not with the little girl on her way back to her family of traders. And if she couldn't talk, she couldn't counter his version of what happened.

"There!" He called out, pointing ahead. Through the normal trees, one of the unnatural speaking trees reared overhead. No one could see the top, but the immense girth of its trunk was clearly visible through the smaller pines, cedars, and others. "That's the tree. That's where it all happened."

"Quiet! Everybody stop here!" Stalker rapped out the command and everybody stilled without complaint, even the Mayor. "I see something. Three of you, on me."

Pietr slipped in behind Stalker, secure in his position of importance for the day, and two other experienced hunters claimed the flanking positions. Quietly, the four of them approached the tree, while Stalker pulled out a tangled web of something and shook it quickly into order. He didn't even look at it. His hands knew exactly what they were doing. After he finished, it became a glowing red net, with yellow nodes wherever filaments crossed. Pietr wondered what it did, and if he would ever have one. Was it a magic weapon? It had to be, why else would it glow?

Stalker held up a hand. Instantly, the two experienced hunters froze, Pietr winced as the step he couldn't halt in time crunched disproportionately loudly in the hush. Stalker gave him an unreadable look, then glided forward silently, eyes on the ground.

Pietr strained to see what the hunter was looking at. Was that a smudge of blue? Then he felt a complex surge of shame, lust, and other emotions he couldn't begin to name, let alone understand. The sylfen was laying on the ground, her cheek pressed to the spot where his seed had spilled.

Stalker gestured for the others to come forward then. Pietr moved as quietly as he could, although he knew he was louder than the others, who made no more noise than ghosts. He held out parts of the web to each, and they positioned themselves around the semi-transparent being. Then the sylfen looked up, saw Pietr, and smiled.

"Now!" Stalker shouted. As one, the four lunged forward and trapped the sylfen in the net. She screamed, a high, terrified wail filled with pain. Pietr's heart twisted and he dropped the net as though burned.

"Boy! Go bring the others. There may be more of these around."

Pietr didn't hesitate, just bolted back to the others.

"Stalker needs you now," he said, then was swept along with the mad rush as men ran to the scene of the struggle.

Pietr saw what was happening, then wished he hadn't. The three men still holding the net were clustered together, straining to anchor themselves to the ground as the sylfen struggled frantically, clinging grimly to the ends of the net. Then Stalker freed a hand, groped at his back, and pulled a stick out of his belt. Not a stick, really, more of a thick rod, brown and polished.

"Hold her!" he called to the others, then released his grip entirely, trusting the other two hunters to hold his prey as he gathered the ends of the net up into a compact ropelike bundle and wrapped it around the rod, securing it with a knot. Then he began to twist, like wringing out a towel. "Let go now, men, and step back!"

With the others out of the way, Stalker continued to twist, shrinking the size of the net. The screams of the trapped sylfen increased in volume and desperation as the cords began to cut into her insubstantial flesh. Pietr was dimly aware that other men were moving around, yelling, attacking the tree that now swung its branches at them in an attempt to defend itself. But all that really registered was the pain of the sylfen as the cords of the razorweb cut into her, and through her, and bits of her began oozing out of the web and falling off. . . yet still those betrayed, accusing eyes watched Pietr.

He couldn't watch until the end. He just *couldn't*. He had to turn away and vomit repeatedly, with the screams echoing in his ears and the harsh smoke of torches burning his throat and lungs, and the sight of that lovely girl being sliced like an egg in a slicer into bits and pieces. Those eyes. . . she *knew*, as she died, that he'd betrayed her. How could he do such a thing? She hadn't harmed him any, just gave him an intense fantasy so she could eat his pleasure. . .

He kept heaving long after his stomach was empty and the screams stilled. Finally he stopped, trembling, wiped his mouth, and looked up.

The woods were a seething mass of men with torches and axes. The tree, witness to everything, still struggled feebly to beat its attackers off with lower branches, but pieces of it lay all around the forest floor and Pietr could see it wasn't going to last long. Six men clustered around its majestic base, biting away with their heavy axes, and the tree didn't have a chance.

Stalker stood over the pile of sylfen bits, calmly picking pieces off his web.

Pietr gagged again, but his sore belly couldn't produce anything beyond a bit of bile.

Other men searched futilely through the forest, looking for the sylfen that weren't there.

*I am the last.* . . No sylfen would ever grace the forest again, anywhere. The last of the entire race lay dead in a pathetic heap at the feet of her killer.

"Good job, boy," the Mayor said, appearing out of nowhere to clap Pietr on the shoulder. "There was only one of them, true, and that tree, but you led us right to them. We'll find the others sure enough."

Pietr gave him a look of horror, then smiled weakly. "I'm sure you will," he rasped.

"Are you okay, boy? You look a bit peaky."

"I'm fine." Pietr took a deep breath and released it. "Just a bit. . . startled by how the freak died."

"Unpleasant business, that," the Mayor said, shaking his head. "Better get yourself back to town now, check up on that little girl, and get rested for the victory feast tonight."

*Feast?* Pietr's stomach flipped, and he bolted before he could throw up again.

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Pietr drank more ale than he should have at the feast that night, trying to escape the screams of the dying sylfen. He moved around through an alcoholic haze that did nothing to dull the lingering horror. The rescued little girl watched him with big eyes any time he went near her, so he avoided her. He didn't want to think about big eyes.

Bettina followed him around as he wandered. For her sake, he tried to look like he was having fun, not horrified and still faintly nauseous. He must have pulled it off, too, because she was very friendly all evening. He hoped what he was saying to her made sense, and didn't sound stupid, and most of all didn't offend her, but he really didn't know what was coming out of his mouth. He couldn't really even hear her voice, either, for that matter. He wondered if he would ever hear anything but the screams of the betrayed and murdered sylfen for the rest of his life.

She had suffered so horribly, strained through the net like that.

Bettina took his hand and said something he didn't understand, but he read the look in her eyes just fine and followed her willingly away from the gathering, into the dark of a nearby barn. Maybe that would help.

But touching Bettina did nothing for him, just called up the memory of the intensely vital beauty of the living sylfen as she traced a finger down his cheek, the glorious beauty that had him hard even when she was still ten feet distant. . . he couldn't do it. With a wordless cry, he pushed away from Bettina and ran blindly into the night.

All, all of it, it was too much to bear. The way the people praised him for his role in the deaths of two freaks, a sylfen and a tree, the way the little girl's eyes looked at him, saying *I know you lied*, the way Bettina touched him and all he could feel was the sylfen. . . how could he bear it?

So he ran, because he couldn't. Too much pain, too much disgust, too much horror. . . even the look on Stalker's face as he calmly, methodically, tightened the net, slicing the harmless sylfen into bits. . .

Pietr didn't know how long he ran. He found himself in a grove of talking trees, their immense

size unmistakable even in the depths of moondark. He fell at the base of one of them, babbling something, begging for forgiveness, something. . . He still didn't know what he was saying. He could tell the trees were angry with him, and he welcomed it. Better honest anger than admiration based on lies and suffering. He told the trees what had happened and cast himself on their judgment.

*You are a foolish young human*, one of them said, finally penetrating his turmoil. *Why come to us with this tale of deceit and murder?*

“Because,” Pietr said, finally realizing the truth in himself, “I want to apologize. I was wrong, I think I've been wrong my entire life. I don't want to hunt freaks. I don't want to be like Stalker, and kill freaks horribly by cutting them into tiny pieces. I don't even want to live anymore.”

*A life for a life, that was the first law of the land*, the tree said, with a disinterested tone. *Myself, I care not what you do with yourself, only that you bring no more harm to others.*

Gripped in a rush of madness, the words of the tree made perfect sense, and Pietr had his belt knife in his hand in a flash. The sylfen's scream faded finally and her smile returned as the knife sank deep into his own throat. Pietr had one last thought: *no more harm to others*. Then the world went dark and nothing mattered any more.

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And so, of course, Pietr never knew what happened when concerned townsfolk came across his body, leaning up against the base of a giant waking tree. The freaks did this, they proclaimed, and set off on a rampage to eradicate all the freaks from the local environment, starting with the grove of trees that witnessed Pietr's death.

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