

The Temptress

Her skin was unusually smooth, but also very cold, like a reptile's. We had met in a little out-of-the-way place, the kind of place people go to when they want to be alone. You can always find a table there. It's never crowded. The lights are dim. The conversations never become loud or bawdy like they do in a lot of other places. For most people it's unbearably dull. But for others, like myself, who want a place where they can relax without the pressure and demands of meeting other people, particularly of the opposite sex, the place affords an ideal retreat. I've never known anyone to actually get drunk there. But the place has a way of making you numb, disoriented, even without the booze. You discover a hundred "selves" you need to get reacquainted with.

I was under a spell when I first met her. She was sipping a daiquiri at a table in the corner, looking tired and spent. She waved me away when I first approached her.

"Dreams are no substitute for reality," I said.

She looked up, suddenly smiling, and nodded for me to sit down. "I know. What more have I got to look forward to?"

She had long ago given up caring about her appearance. Strands of long black hair wrapped themselves under her chin and around her throat in woven tangles. Her lips were like fire, slightly parted. A forked tongue would occasionally shoot itself out from between her sharp, discolored teeth. Tears were welling up in her eyes but she was still smiling.

"Have you got a name?" I asked.

"Dusamé," she replied. "And you?"

I looked her straight in the eyes. Then I said, "Whose fault is it?"

"No one's, I guess. I'll be OK in the morning."

"You sure?"

She stopped smiling.

I reached for her hand and she gave it to me. Her skin was unusually smooth, but also very cold, like a reptile's.