

# **Shining in Crimson**

Empire of Blood Book One

Robert S. Wilson

## Chapter 1

### The Penitent

Hank hadn't expected the judge to decide any other way. These days they didn't hand out robes to anyone afraid of sending less than a dozen men to Necropolis almost every day. Hank found that he couldn't blame them. It keeps the peace, he thought. Even in the days before the chaos took hold, America had never been as safe as it was now.

He sat in the back of a paddywagon surrounded by twenty or so other males of all different shapes, colors, and sizes, also condemned to die. The air smelled of bad breath, thick body odor, and stale, smoked tobacco. Only a few of them had committed violent crimes. A tall, pale, black-haired man with tattoos covering his arms had murdered three people. More than a handful of the prisoners were children. One, a young blond kid, had been caught stealing in a supermarket. Most of the men had broken the morality laws, same as Hank.

Hank wasn't proud of what he'd done, though he wasn't sure the punishment fit the crime. He could see the last of the sun being swallowed by the horizon out the back window. They had traveled through the middle of nowhere for what seemed like days now. He saw more pale sand and tumbleweeds out that back window than he ever had before. He was pressed between two other men like a sardine. And his backside felt like it had been beaten by the hours of country roads.

A while later, the sun disappeared, taking the last rays of sunlight Hank figured he would ever see. He thought of Toby and swallowed hard. None of the other men noticed. They were all too busy with their own problems. After hours of nothing but darkness outside, street lights began poking out of the void and then drifted away just as fast. At first, it was only every once in a while. Then several at a time. Before long, there were too many to count. Finally, they streamed together into a long line of light that changed colors as it burned into Hank's retinas. After that, large neon signs started appearing. If the colors weren't so bright, Hank wouldn't have been able to see them through the phantom line of light still obscuring his vision.

Now there were new, more colorful shapes. He closed his eyes to make the nuisance go away, but it only grew worse. The only sounds were breathing and the engine. He opened his eyes again and looked outside. The street lights revealed sidewalks and parking lots beyond the road, all of which were empty. He wondered why they bothered turning on the lights. It wasn't like the residents of Necropolis needed them. For the first

time since he knew of the city's existence, the meaning of its name dawned on him. Necropolis, city of the dead.

He snickered. Some of the men turned and looked at him darkly. This only made him smile more. He was about to let out a burst of laughter when the wagon came to a screeching halt. All the humor left him at once. Other than the low idle of the engine, everything became dead quiet. Strange mechanical noises crept from the back of the wagon like the sound of gears waking within a clock tower. Then he heard similar noises from the front of the wagon. Twin thuds came from the front and back of the wagon, shaking it and making most of the passengers jump. Both of the mechanical doors began to open with a horrible screeching.

The open doorway in the back led to the quiet, empty city. But the front doorway contained shapes of men dressed in black, armored outfits. They had the American Imperial flag printed on their right breasts and wore gas masks on their faces. Each of them held a thick, black hose pointed at a different group of prisoners. Large clouds of gas shot out from the hoses, filling the wagon with a thick, noxious fog. It tasted strongly of sulfur. Choking on the gas, Hank nearly vomited. The convicts began flooding out the back of the wagon and away from the suffocating gas. Hank followed, still choking as he ran.

When he reached the road, he leaned over and joined the chorus of gasps. His lungs burned as he inhaled. But he kept taking deep breaths anyway, hoping it would eventually help. He looked over just in time to see the last man, a short Hispanic with long hair, come stumbling from the wagon. The back door shut with a loud thud. Then the wagon squealed its tires and sped off. By the time Hank could breathe without hurting too badly, it was gone.

The one who murdered three people lead several of the others down an alley off the main road. The area was surrounded with old rundown factories. A busted-up, red car from before the war was parked in front of one of the buildings. Several men managed to break in and were trying to hot-wire it. All around, men ran in different directions, either alone or in groups. Hank circled around, trying to decide where to go. But in his heart, he knew it didn't matter where he went. None of them would make it out alive. No one ever did. For the last twenty years, the American Empire boasted the most effective justice system in the world. It was simple, really. Use one evil to destroy another. Sure, some innocents got caught up in the mix from time to time. But as the saying went, you have to break a few eggs.

He decided to go on his own. He was pretty sure the locals could sense heat, making a group an easier target. And with going solo, there would be no one to slow him down. He found an alley a few blocks down from the other men and followed it in the opposite direction. It got darker the further he went. The rough texture of brick grazed his hands as he felt his way through the alley. When he'd gone a ways down the block, a loud engine cranking and failing almost gave him a heart attack. What good would a car do for those morons anyway?

Of course the thought of Toby reared its ugly head again. Toby would already have that thing going zero to sixty. That boy of his could fix anything you put in front of him, so long as it had moving parts. But he was only sixteen, and now that his father was about to check out, who would take care of him? The boy's mother left when he was a baby. Hank never managed to find her and felt sure she didn't want to be found. And Diana, he

didn't want to think about Diana. The thought of Toby growing up in the Empire all alone hurt him enough. It dawned on Hank if he could make it through the night and get close enough to the edge of the city, he might make it out alive. The bastards were bound to Necropolis. It was common knowledge, ruthless as they were, that they held to their end of the blood pact rather loyally.

Hank turned left down another alley, this one even more narrow than the one before. Something ahead smelled rotten. He heard the scurrying sounds of rats all along the way. Before the war, the residents of Necropolis would have kept the city clean of them. But then again, before the war, Necropolis hadn't been Necropolis. No one even knew its inhabitants were real then. The war had brought them out. They waited centuries for such a war to come along and leave the humans vulnerable. They were smarter than humans. Anyone who didn't blindly believe everything the Imperial Church brainwashed them to could see that.

The first scream echoed from somewhere far behind him as he came upon North Eastern Avenue. It stopped him dead in his tracks and he turned to make sure no one was coming. Once he was sure they weren't close enough to get him, he crossed the street. He started to look both ways as he went, out of habit, his heart running in overdrive. He hadn't truly been afraid until that point. Hearing the scream made it real.

From the look of things, North Eastern Avenue had once been very busy. Hank spotted an old army surplus store a ways down the street and started towards it. Everything looked gray. The road, the sidewalk, and even the street signs. As he crossed a side road just before the surplus store, he heard more screams. The screams were coming from way up in the air. He looked up above the tops of the buildings behind him. Figures dressed in what looked like black rags flew around in circles above the buildings. Each one of them had a man wearing a blue prisoner's jumpsuit hanging from its face. He couldn't tell for sure from that distance, but it looked like they held the men with their teeth. Hank watched in horror as, one after another, the flying figures began to drop their victims to the ground. None of them made a sound as they fell, giving Hank the impression they were already dead. He turned and ran for the army surplus store.

He went for the back of the building, for cover if nothing else. He came upon a door with a window. He found a couple of big rocks on the ground. Afraid busting any glass would alert them to where he was, he set the rocks down and began to slowly rip a portion of his shirt off as quietly as he could. As he was ripping the shirt, the screams started again. He wrapped the strip of shirt around a rock. He waited for another round of screams. When they started, he cringed as he slammed the shirt-wrapped rock into the door's window.

The rock shattered the window inward, knocking glass onto the tiled floor inside. It was quiet enough, Hank thought, to be covered by the screaming. He carefully put his arm in the hole where the window had been and felt around for the lock. The air inside was cool. Once he managed to unlock the door, Hank looked around to make sure he saw no movement. He went inside once he was sure he was alone.

Aside from the little bit of light coming in the front windows, the inside of the store was fairly dark. He could make out the different aisles, but not what sat on most of the shelves. He thought of turning on the light switch, but decided not to risk it. He groped around the shelves carefully. For the most part, he found what felt like clothing. Eventually, he came across a large machete that included a sheath with a belt clip. He

backtracked to where he'd found the belts and took one that seemed like it would fit him well. He put the belt around his waist with the sheath attached and buckled it tightly. He put the machete in its sheath and sighed. He thought having the thing should give him more comfort than it did.

When he made his way to the next aisle, more screams caught his attention. He tried to block them out, but had to admit to himself the sound was making him more and more nervous. After all, they must have gotten most of the prisoners by now. He continued feeling his way through the items on the shelves, trying to find anything useful and especially hoping to come across a flashlight. Particularly the kind that came with its own batteries. He'd come all the way down the aisle before he noticed a good while had passed since he last heard any screaming. This worried him.

He picked up his pace as he headed for the next aisle. About halfway down, he found something in a thin cardboard box he couldn't identify. He looked toward the end of the aisle where the light shone in through the front windows and reflected on the white, tiled floor. He snuck over to the end of the aisle and knelt down. He put the package just close enough to the light to see it was a thin box of matches. He considered using the matches to light his way to look for a flashlight. But, remembering they could sense heat and not knowing their range, he was reluctant to do so. He stared at the matches for a few seconds. Then he looked back at the dark aisle he had been searching and sighed.

A voice in his head reminded him that they were fairly small matches and it was highly unlikely the things could sense heat from so far away. Besides, if they could detect heat that well, they would have already found him by now. With that thought, he gave in and tore open the box with his trembling hands. Once he freed one of the match packs, he dropped the rest of the box. Then he pulled out a match and lit it before he could change his mind. The match filled a small perimeter around itself with light and the smell of sulfur. The scent almost soothed him. He knew the small flame wouldn't last long, so he carefully started searching the closest shelves. A moment later he felt a stinging, burning pain in the fingers holding the match. He threw it on the ground and did a quiet dance while sucking his thumb and finger. Continuing his dance of pain, he began smacking his fingers against the side of his leg. When the stinging died down enough, he took a deep breath and sighed again.

He took out another match and lit it, moving on to the next set of shelves. In the dim light he could see flippers, snorkels, and goggles of different sizes. He moved on to the next set of shelves. Something reflective caught his eye. He looked closer. It was a compass. He took hold of it greedily, looked it over and then clipped it to his belt. By the time he finished searching the rest of the aisle, he had used half the book of matches with ten remaining. He lit another, looking at the items at the end of the last aisle. There he found what he'd been looking for. A plastic package gleamed before him containing a green flashlight with two D sized batteries. He smiled and went to reach for it when he heard a thud from above the ceiling. His heart skipped a beat.

Leaving the flashlight behind, he knelt down and slipped behind the aisle. A split second after he managed to hide himself, he heard another thud and then the middle of the ceiling collapsed. Debris came crashing down as a skulking figure dressed in dark ragged clothing dropped like a cat onto the floor several aisles down from him. Hank turned and leaned back against the aisle to hide. He could hear nothing but very obvious

and slow footsteps. It was quiet enough that if his enemy could breathe, Hank would have heard him do so.

The steps sounded like they were going away from him toward the other side of the store. He winced as he attempted to pull out his machete without making any noise. Once he managed to free the machete, he tried to propel himself onto his feet just as quietly. His left leg had fallen asleep and caused his foot to hit the floor with a light tap. Before he could straighten himself fully, he heard the sound of rapid movement above him and without thinking pulled the machete upward with both hands toward the sound. He looked up to see the figure stuck with the machete, its fangs showing as it hissed at him. Its yellow eyes resembled the eyes of a cat or a snake on a face that reminded him of a pasty male model turned crackhead. He pushed the machete harder into the creature, hoping it would die, and felt a warm drop of liquid fall into his open mouth and then to the back of his throat. He choked on it. The figure grabbed hold of the machete, pulling it from Hank's hands, and threw it aside. Hank heard the machete hit the floor as the ragged model with yellow eyes straightened itself and smiled at him.

Then the figure made a horrible, high-pitched squealing sound as it jumped down from the top of the aisle toward Hank. By instinct, Hank put his hands out to stop the thing, realizing it would do no good. When he felt his hands resisting the force of the creature, he opened his eyes to see what should have been the impossible. His hands were actually holding the thing back. It looked at him with shock on its sculpted features.

Experimentally, Hank tried gripping the thing with his hands and found it quite easy to do. He pulled the creature sideways and then flung it upward. It flew through the air and fell backward knocking over several of the aisles in a roar of sheet metal. He wiped his mouth where he felt the warm liquid and looked at his hand. It was a dark, almost black, thick substance. The creature's blood. It had to be. Hank took advantage of the moment to retrieve his machete. It took him a while of reaching around aimlessly on the floor, but he found it. He turned toward where the creature fell and saw it was gone. He looked around desperately, knowing what it would cost him if he made any more mistakes. He pulled the machete blunt end against his arm so he could slash underhand if need be. He no longer had to use both hands to hold it steady with his new-found strength. He wondered how long the affects of the blood would last as he crept around the still standing aisles looking for the thing.

He could hear a lot he hadn't been able to before. One sound was a faint rustling from behind the aisle to his right. He looked at his hands and then silently put his palms against the wall of the aisle and pushed the whole thing over without effort. He heard the same high-pitched squeal. This time it seemed to echo and bounce around in his brain. He jumped on top of the toppled metal shelving with an agility to match the creature he had just pinned underneath. He glanced down to see it writhing and hissing, only its head free. Watching the pitiful thing, he pondered what it would take to kill it. He knew all of the old lore involved, who didn't? But how much of it was actually true, he couldn't be sure. He put all of his strength into stabbing the machete down into the creature's throat. He hoped it would die, but knew if it didn't it would at least be pinned for the moment. It didn't die. Instead, it hissed louder. Hank jumped down to the floor beside the creature's head. Then he reached down and picked up the metal shelving from the thing and pushed it forward so it fell down on its other side with a loud crash. The noise reminded him his

captive had many brethren out there in the city. All eager to suck any man's lifeblood from him.

He waited a moment, making sure he and the creature were alone for the time being. Several minutes passed while Hank tried to think above the racket of its hissing. He reached down and pulled out the machete. Just as soon as he pulled the machete upward, he brought it back down blade first, chopping the creature's head off. The head began squealing again, sputtering out some strange language Hank had never heard. He brought the blade up and back down again on one of its arms. Then the other. Then in one swipe, he severed both legs. The thing was obviously still alive, but it seemed unlikely he could do much to harm it. The head rolled to one side and continued squealing unintelligible words in a shrill, soprano voice. Hank took a deep breath as he used his fingers to wipe the blood from the machete. Then he made a sour face as he licked his bloody hand clean, making sure to quickly swallow the blood. He tried to ignore the worry of infection lingering in the back of his mind.

He left the body and its severed extremities wiggling while he walked back to the end of the last aisle, the only one left standing. He put his machete in its sheath and took the flashlight from its prong on the shelf. With the flashlight ready, he went up and down the remaining aisle shining it at the shelves. He was looking for some kind of thermos. When he didn't find one, he was forced to pick up the other shelves one by one until he found what he was looking for. He grabbed two of them, a red one and a blue one. He also made sure to grab a backpack. Then he went back to where the creature lay on the floor in pieces. He put the blue thermos in the backpack while bending down to one of the thing's arms. Then he opened the red thermos, set it upright on the floor in front of him, and put its lid between his teeth. He picked up the arm, severed end facing down, and began to squeeze it over the thermos.

The same dark liquid that he had wiped from his mouth poured into the thermos in a thin stream. When the stream became a light trickle, he shook out the last little bit and threw it aside. Then he took the lid from his teeth and screwed it back on the thermos tightly. He looked over at the arm and was surprised to see, unlike all the creature's other parts, it was lying still. He wondered if doing the same to the head would kill it. He was pretty sure it would be a good start, but decided he didn't have the stomach to find out.

Then he put the red thermos in his backpack and got up. He looked around with his flashlight until he saw a sign that said RESTROOMS. He put on the backpack and then followed the sign to the men's room. The decrepit fluorescent tubes on the ceiling flickered a few times and then came to life, shining white light throughout the room. Hank let his hand fall from the light switch and walked over to examine the sink. There was a sort of rusty film collecting around the drain. He tried the cold handle first. Nothing. Then he tried the hot. Still nothing. The realization hit Hank that twenty years without artificial irrigation would dry out a desert town just a little bit. He felt a spell of panic coming on. He had expelled a lot of energy and his body was now ready to be hydrated. And what if there was no water to be found in the whole city? He rushed from the bathroom, turned on the flashlight, and spun around looking for any other doors. He saw one in the far front corner of the building beyond the open space where the metal shelving once stood. It said EMPLOYEES ONLY. He rushed toward it, found the doorknob was unlocked, and opened it.

Inside three video screens displayed different angles of the sales floor. The various body parts of the thing twitched in one of the black and white screens. Shining the flashlight around, he saw several large shelves with items that never made it to the sales floor. In the middle of the room sat a small table with several ashtrays and magazines on it. A brown jacket sat over the back of a chair at the end of the table. Just beyond the table, Hank's flashlight illuminated something big and white that filled Hank with hope. He ran forward, nearly knocking over the table and pulled the handle of the refrigerator open. The chill of cold, moist air hit him and he smiled as he looked inside. On the top shelf sat four twelve-packs of bottled water. The liquid inside sparkled at Hank. He fumbled one of the bottles from its plastic ring and twisted the cap off. He took a deep breath wondering if bottled water could go bad. Deciding that bad water was better than no water, he tossed his head back and took a long drink, some of the water spilling from his mouth and down his neck and chest. He was sure it was the best water he ever drank in his life.

He looked beside the fridge with the flashlight and saw there were cabinets and a sink. He began opening cabinets looking for food. He found none, but instead found several plastic glasses and bowls. He took one of the bowls out, poured water into it, plunged his hands in, and began to scrub. He got out the blue thermos and unscrewed its lid, setting both on the table. It took three bottles to fill up the thermos. Then he grabbed one of the unopened twelve-packs and put it in the backpack as well.

He put the backpack on and headed out onto the sales floor towards the living puzzle he had made. Then he angled his foot like a hockey stick beside the still-hissing head and began sliding it forward, covering the mouth and muffling its voice. The creature bit hard into Hank's shoe, but its fangs, blocked by the thick leather, came nowhere near his flesh. When he stopped and pulled the head from his shoe, it sat just within the lit-up portion of linoleum in front of where the aisles had been. One thing Hank did know, the vampires of Necropolis only came out at night for a reason. If this one didn't die from dismemberment, the sun would soon come up and finish the job anyway. Either way, with that done, Hank at least felt he could move on.



## Chapter 2

### The Mediator

Simon Withers was very nervous sitting in the backseat of the Empire-assigned car. After all, it was his first day and not exactly the ideal job for anyone who happened to enjoy living. The inside of the car gave off that new car scent. He wondered if his driver had also driven the former Mediator. The former Mediator managed to stick it out for a whole six months. Simon was sure he would beat that. He always thought of himself as a save-the-day kind of guy. Nervous as he was, he would get over his fear and be the one to do it for the long haul. He looked out the car window at the dark abyss he knew would be sand as far as the eye could see by the light of the sun. Then he looked ahead at the blurry glow of garish neon signs that marked one of the most famous cities of all time. After the Empire cleaned up the mess left from the second civil war, the Emperor made an example of this city. Since it had flourished so deeply in sin before, now it would be the place of death for all who sinned.

Simon smiled, relishing his part in such justice, and the tension lifted from his shoulders. What was there to fear when he stood as a representative of the American Empire of Almighty God? His smile grew, nearly wrapping around his head. A large, bright neon sign filled the top half of the windshield as the car began to slow. The sign said:

"Welcome  
To Fabulous"

The next two words, once written in bright red paint, were scribbled over with white, flaking spray paint but still faintly visible. In place of the scribbled-out city name in dark red, one word stood out written in sloppy letters: Necropolis, the name given to the city upon its rebirth by the vampires. Underneath, the final word was still mostly intact and lit up. It said Nevada. Their power taken by the Empire, names and borders were all that remained of the former states. Democracy could go, but you couldn't go taking away

people's state pride. Simon was running his hands down the smooth leather of his seat when he felt the car come to a stop. Confused, he looked around outside. He had to lean way back in his seat to see the welcome sign that was now towering above the car.

"Excuse me, driver, why are we stopped? We're not even in the city yet," he inquired.

The driver tipped his hat to Simon in the mirror. "I'm sorry sir. Didn't anybody tell you? The Mediator alone is allowed access to the city... unharmed," the driver explained.

Simon gripped at the seat, his nails digging into the leather, and sighed.

"You mean I'm going to have to *walk* the rest of the way?" he said through his teeth.

"Yes sir, I'm afraid so," the driver said, attempting to hide a smile.

Simon gave the driver a nasty look in return. He opened his door slowly in a gesture of implied superiority. Then he got out, slamming the door and almost knocking himself backward in the process. He brushed at his clothes as if to clean himself of the car's filthiness and headed toward the city.

"Um, sir? Aren't you forgetting something?" the driver's scratchy voice said behind him. He turned to see the driver hanging his head out the window and looking smug. Simon stared at him with a blank expression. His patience for the driver had vanished hours before. The driver sighed and leaned over the passenger seat and opened the glove compartment. He pulled a thick folded white paper from within and sat upright, offering it to Simon through the open window. "Take it, it's the map to where you have to meet them," he said.

Still angry, Simon stepped over to the car. He snatched the folded map from the driver without a word, turned, and started walking again. He staggered as he went, his leather dress shoes unwilling to accommodate him in such rough terrain. When he crossed the city line, he gritted his teeth as he heard the driver snickering behind him. He was beginning to wonder if his new boss, Ted Chambers, director of Vampire Negotiations, knew whom he was dealing with. Simon decided when the night was over, he would make sure he did.

Simon fumbled the map from angle to angle trying to figure out where he was as he race-walked down the street. He was too spooked by the night and the quiet city to stop and give the map proper concentration. His hands trembled as he turned it over to see if maybe the other side would start making some kind of sense. Trying to read the street sign up ahead, he noticed just how much noise he'd been making. Now that he stopped moving, the rustling map echoed in his brain over the dead silence. He stood there a moment just listening. Eventually, the echoes died out and were replaced by what sounded like the steady beat of a bass drum. It scared him as it became faster, forcing him to realize it was actually his own heart beating. He took a deep breath, reminding himself he was the only human truly safe in this place. The thought calmed him, at first because of his safety. Then, it fed his ego, taming his heart even more. When he felt as relaxed as he could get, he took another look at the map. With his mind much clearer and his panic subdued, he quickly found where he was on the map. According to it, getting to the building where the vampire's held their council was just a straight walk from where he stood.

He started walking again, this time not quite as aimlessly, now that he knew where he was and where he was going. Still a little nervous, he reached into the jacket pocket of his Armani suit and pulled out an unopened pack of cigarettes. He opened the pack, took

one out, and lit it. Simon threw the plastic from the pack on the sidewalk and dragged deeply on the cigarette as he walked. He looked up at the brightly lit colorful buildings that took up the skyline ahead. He felt his chest loosen as the nicotine caused adrenaline to release through his body.

He was actually starting to relax when in the wink of an eye a tall man with long black hair and red eyes, dressed in a black suit and bowler hat seemed to appear out of thin air right in front of him. He barely stopped himself from running into the man. When he managed to catch his balance, he immediately backed away. As he scrambled backwards, he fell on his backside and tried to scoot further away. The man looked down at him and smiled, revealing a mouthful of shiny white teeth complete with long sharp canines coming from the top row like the fangs of a dog. It was a human vampire.

"I presume you are Mr. Withers?" the man said in a deep scratchy voice with an accent Simon couldn't quite place. Simon swallowed and cringed. His first time meeting one of these blood suckers and already he was panicking.

"Y-yes. I am sir. And who... who might you be?" he asked.

"My name is Luciano Sandalio. But I am of no importance. I am merely here to guide you safely to the tower," the man said while reaching his hand out to Simon. Simon reluctantly took the cold hand and felt a chill run up his arm and down his back as Luciano helped him effortlessly off the ground. Then he brushed off the back of his clothes, reached down, and picked up his cigarette that had landed on the edge of the sidewalk when he fell. He took another deep drag and threw it back on the ground and stomped it out.

"Now, if you will follow me, this way, sir," Luciano said motioning ahead of himself with both arms.

"If you don't mind me asking, why do I need a guide if it's just right up the street?" Simon asked.

"Well, Mr. Withers, there has been a drop-off tonight from the Kansas City justice department and it seems there are still several convicts unaccounted for. So, I have been sent to make sure that you arrive safely," Luciano said casually, turning his back to lead the way.

"Oh, I see." Simon said. He found himself looking around for felons hiding in the surrounding dark alleys as he followed the vampire.

After a while of walking, the street curved to the right. As they came around the curve, Simon could see down the strip more clearly. Many of the buildings had busted old neon signs hanging all around them. Some of the buildings had large gaping holes where their front walls used to be. It looked as though several random explosions had gone off up and down the street. Piles of rubble lay just about everywhere Simon looked. The vampire stuck out his pale right hand and slid it on the top of a white smashed-up limousine as they walked past it. His hand would have been camouflaged against the white paint if it weren't for the reflection of multi-colored neon signs above.

Simon found himself staring at the top of one of the buildings up the street. It appeared to be taller than the rest and came to a point at the top, like a giant scepter. He was pretty sure it was the "tower" that Luciano had referred to. There he would meet with the vampire council, which consisted of five human vampires. He had been prepped with information about the vampires for the past month. He learned that there are two types of vampires: natural vampires and human vampires, called "artificial vampires" by some.

Natural vampires were completely inhuman. They were savage creatures with little intelligence. Human vampires more closely resembled the vampire of legend. Being once human, they could easily pass as human if they needed as they still mostly resembled their former selves. Simon knew little more than that. Prior to taking his job he had known even less. Even still, the government knew very little about them anyway. As most scientific research, particularly biological research, had been outlawed with the formation of the Empire, the government would probably continue to know very little for quite some time.

Up ahead and to the left, the building that resembled a scepter towered up into the sky, as if it were a pillar holding up the heavens. Around the entrance were dozens of palm trees and a huge shattered neon sign along the wall of it that appeared to say "St\_a\_o\_p\_ere" with several unintelligible letters in between. Below the sign was a large, black video screen. Under the blank screen was a wide balcony lined neatly with tables and chairs for dining. Simon stood, staring up at the huge structure. The vampire, noticing that his follower had stopped, turned and looked at Simon.

"The council awaits your presence, Mr. Withers," Luciano said. Simon snapped out of the spell the huge building put on him and smiled at his guide as politely as he could.

"Sorry, I've never seen such a sight before. It's a little overwhelming," he said.

The vampire did not reply but only turned and led the way through the left of two mouth-like openings at the bottom of the building. Then he opened a glass door and gestured for Simon to enter. Luciano held the door as Simon walked in. There was a deep chill in the air inside. The vampire led him to an elevator and pushed the up button with his bleach-white finger. A moment later, Simon heard a ding and the elevator door opened. The two got in and Luciano ran his hand down the myriad of buttons until it came to the very last and tapped it quickly. When the vampire moved his hand away from the button, Simon noticed that it was the 106<sup>th</sup> floor. He made a mental note to find out why no one had ever asked him if he was afraid of heights. He grabbed ahold of the railing tightly as the elevator raced upward. As he stood quietly in the elevator he noticed that the vampire didn't seem to breathe. He looked up and watched as the digital numbers changed to display the current floor. He was surprised to see that even though they were going what felt like a ridiculous speed to him, they had only just passed the 22<sup>nd</sup> floor. He took a deep breath and tried to think about something else.

The vampire stood completely still before him and neither made a sound nor flinched. It were as if he were a statue. As the floor numbers slowly changed, Simon became nervous. He kept picturing his vampire escort turning around and lunging for his neck with those sharp fangs out. He knew he was being paranoid, but he couldn't help it. The elevator ride seemed to go on forever and it was his first accompanied by the undead. He looked at the back of his hands, following the visible veins up to his wrists. Then he popped his knuckles and his neck. When his neck would pop no more, he moved to something else. He lifted up onto his toes, held his heels up, and then set them back down over and over. Then he swung his arms from front to back. He almost started whistling when Luciano spoke.

"Your heart rate is rather high, Mr. Withers," the vampire said. Simon stopped moving immediately and swallowed.

"How... how do you know that?" he asked.

"I can hear it. It is louder to me than the cable pulling the elevator. You should relax or you will end up like Roger Wallen," he said.

Roger Wallen had been the third Mediator to the vampires. He had died of a heart attack on his seventh meeting with them. Simon swallowed again. He practiced the focusing techniques the doctors had taught him in order to calm himself. Then he sneered at the vampire's back.

"I'm not a stupid coward like Roger Wallen. You filthy demons don't scare me. I fear only the Lord of heaven and earth. Roger Wallen wouldn't be dead if he had been faithful to the Lord. God punishes the weak and unfaithful," Simon said, his voice nearly cracking.

"If you say so, Mr. Withers," Luciano said, looking at Simon and smiling.

Simon couldn't help but falter a little from that grin. He let out a nervous cough and looked up at the red digital numbers. The numbers changed from 87 to 88. After a moment of staring at him, Luciano turned and faced the elevator door. Simon exhaled the breath he had been holding the entire time. Somehow, he wasn't sure how, he could just tell that Luciano's grin had widened.

After a while of focusing and eventually daydreaming about his trip home, Simon heard the "ding" that marked the arrival to their destination. The elevator doors opened, revealing a huge round open room with dinner tables everywhere. The walls were angled glass windows that looked out on the city. There were as many street lights, it seemed, as there had been stars in the sky on his way in the car. At the far end of the room was a door leading out to the balcony that seemed to go all around the building. It reminded Simon of the space needle in Seattle. He had never been there but he had seen many pictures. Luciano motioned to the door.

"The council is outside waiting," he said.

"Thanks," Simon replied. Then after a moment of hesitation he walked numbly toward the door. When he got to it, he could see several pale figures in various shades of clothing sitting at a table outside the door and to the left. He weakly pulled open the door and almost lost hold of it. One of the figures, in a movement he could barely discern, swished from the table over to hold the door for him. The gesture, probably only meant to be helpful, scared him worse than anything else had so far. A fit of laughter broke out from several of the vampires at the table; however, one of them did not look the least bit amused. The vampire holding the door was a much older-looking male, with neat, short, gray hair and prestigious features. He had brown eyes, unlike the blood red eyes of Luciano. As Simon's heart slowed, he noticed a faint, familiar, sweet scent he couldn't quite place.

"I am sorry, Mr. Withers, I did not mean to scare you," he said.

The vampires that were laughing at the table only laughed harder. One of them attempted to speak in between fits of laughter.

"Sure, you didn't, Edgar, sure you didn't," a slender vampire with short, messy blond hair said.

"Please let me introduce all of us," the gray-headed vampire said. "My name is Edgar. This is Peter," he said pointing to the blonde. "Stanislov," he said aiming his hand at a short male with brown wooly hair on his head and face. "Rachel," he said moving on to a beautiful redhead with green eyes next to Stanislov. "And Ishan," he added pointing to the end of the table to what could have been Luciano's shorter twin. Ishan was the only

one at the table who wasn't still laughing. All of them were wearing business attire as well. Ishan looked back at Simon with a look of contempt. Simon noticed that Ishan also had red eyes, yet the others did not.

"We are pleased to meet you, Mr. Withers. Can I call you Simon?" he asked in a cold tone. The other vampires abruptly went quiet at the sound of his voice.

"Indeed, sir, please do," Simon said shakily.

"Sit down then," he said. Simon pulled out the only empty chair and sat down. The sweetness he had smelled was overpowering now. It seemed to emanate from the vampires. When he looked down at the table in front of him, he was surprised to see a plate of crab legs and butter sauce beside a large wine glass before him. He couldn't smell the food over whatever aroma was coming from the vampires.

"Please enjoy yourself. It is not often that we get to entertain humans," Ishan said. Simon was reluctant, but the vampires, all but Ishan, sat watching expectantly. So, he began by cracking open one of the legs and pulling out its meat. As he dipped it in the sauce and took the first bite, he noticed the vampires watching everything he was doing with great interest. All except Ishan. A couple of crab legs later and he noticed the lust in their eyes as they watched him. His stomach turned. After Simon had gulped down all the wine, Rachel picked up a bottle and winked at Simon and refilled his glass. At one point he stopped eating and looked around at their staring faces nervously.

"Shall we get started with business?" he asked. The vampires only gave him dark looks and Ishan only sighed.

"Please, finish first, Mr. Withers," Rachel said.

Without a word, Simon started eating again. He had the distinct feeling that the vampires would be very angry and offended if he did not finish every last bite. They continued to watch him passionately. He even thought he saw Peter lick his lips out of the corner of his eyes. But, fearfully, he kept his eyes on the food he was eating and didn't stop to speak again until he had devoured the last bit of crab meat.

"So, where should we start, gentlemen?" he asked, wiping his mouth with a napkin.

Rachel coughed loudly and made an annoyed grunt.

"I'm sorry, ladies and gentlemen," Simon corrected.

"What's the matter Simon?" Rachel asked "Are you eager to leave?" she continued.

"No. I'm just a get-down-to-business type of guy," Simon said and laughed timidly.

"Oh, you are, are you?" she asked. He felt a cold foot slide up the instep of his right leg. "I like a get down... to... business... type of guy," she said as Peter and Stanislov laughed heartily. The foot was still moving up his instep and was now passing his knee, coming up to the inner side of his thigh. He went tense, and realized that as the foot moved closer to his crotch, he became more excited and repulsed, simultaneously. His excitement immediately turned to anger.

"Get off of me, whore of Babylon!" he yelled at her in disgust. She stood up and hissed at him, neon light reflecting off of her exposed fangs. Peter and Stanislov were smiling with anticipation. Edgar looked concerned and Ishan appeared to be indifferent to the whole situation.

"I would suggest you refrain from insulting us," Ishan said in a bored voice.

"Yes, I would suggest that, too," Rachel whispered, glaring at Simon.

"I'm sorry. But I won't put up with this sort of filthy sin being pushed upon me," Simon said.

Ishan went to speak, but before he could, in a flash, Peter was on top of the table with his cold hand wrapped around Simon's throat, picking him up out of his seat by it. Simon was choking. He gasped for air as everything around him seemed to fade. He heard laughter from Rachel and probably Stanislov. Ishan seemed to be complaining in the same weary voice. Simon tried to pray inside his head but couldn't make the words in his brain with his oxygen being cut off more and more. He was aware he was now being lifted high above the table. Everything went blurry and he felt all the blood rush to his head. His vision cleared some. He could see in front of him a pair of upside down feet standing on concrete behind a rail. He followed the legs down to see that they belonged to Peter. Then he followed Peter's outstretched arm to see that it was holding him by the ankle.

He tried to reach for his own ankle to free it. That was when he felt the breeze. It seemed just a little too strong. He looked up to what he thought would be the floor of the balcony. His heart almost burst as he saw the lights of the city seemingly above him, but he knew it was actually below him. He could feel his crab leg dinner moving up his esophagus as he looked down at the great city below. He screamed loudly only to hear several of the vampires reply with more laughter. He could barely make out what Ishan was saying over the laughter.

"Must everything be a joke?" Ishan asked.

Peter was saying something back, but Simon didn't hear it as he had begun vomiting. He watched as the vomit fell to the street below over a matter of several minutes. He wiped his mouth with his sleeve. When he looked up at Peter again, the vampire snarled at him, his blue eyes reflecting Simon's horrified expression.

"Maybe now you'll treat the lady with respect," Peter said.

Simon felt his stomach turn again and felt a cold spot on his lap as another breeze touched him. Great, he had pissed himself. How lovely. As if all this hadn't been enough, Peter swiveled his wrist from side to side, swinging Simon like a pendulum. Simon closed his eyes. Peter swung him faster. Simon vomited again. Some of it went up his nose and he started to choke on it. He was sure Peter would let go at any moment. He could hear Rachel screaming something at him in a horrible, gleeful tone, but he couldn't make out the words. Stanislov continued to laugh harder and harder. Peter, still laughing, taunted Simon.

"You're gonna die, Simon. Is your god gonna save you? I don't think He will, you know why?" Peter asked with bitterness in his voice. "Because your god doesn't care about you. He thinks you're scum," Peter said, still swinging Simon all the while. Simon finally coughed up the vomit he had been choking on. The volume of the vampires seemed to be rising to a fevered pitch, when out of nowhere they were silenced by a single word from Ishan.

"Enough," he said, with only a hint of emotion.

Simon felt himself rise again. He closed his eyes even tighter. Then he felt himself turning around. Before he knew it, he was no longer moving yet still felt as though he were. He opened his eyes slowly and confirmed he was sitting back in his seat. When his view came into focus, he noticed Rachel sitting right in front of him with a neat, satisfied smile on her lips. Looking around at the rest of the table, he saw that all of the vampires, except Ishan, shared her expression. Ishan looked down at his own fingernails.

"Mr. Withers, we want the Big Easy," Ishan said with what sounded like conviction relative to his prior speaking tones.

"The big what?"

"New Orleans, Simon. The Big Easy," Ishan explained.

"Now you want to talk business?" Simon asked, his voice near to screaming. "At least give me a few minutes to recover first."

"By all means. Calm yourself. Here, have some more wine," Ishan said, refilling Simon's glass.

Simon took a deep breath, picked up the wine glass, and tipped it back, gulping the contents until he emptied the glass. Then he exhaled loudly and sat back in his seat, wiping the mess from his face and hair with some napkins he had taken from the table. His heart was still beating pretty fast, but it was gently slowing down. He looked back at Ishan.

"That's not negotiable," he said, "and from what I understand you have been told this several times before." Ishan looked at him with his dark red eyes, showing the first emotion Simon had seen from his smooth face yet. It was anger. Simon swallowed hard as Ishan opened his mouth to speak.



## **Chapter 3**

### **Viva Necropolis**

Hank made sure to stuff the compass, a pair of camo pants, and a white T-shirt in the backpack before making his way for the door. He stepped around the shattered glass strewn on the floor. Making sure he was alone, he waited outside the door for any trace of sound other than the wind. Then he faced the direction he had already confirmed with the compass to be south and began to walk. As he wandered his way down the back alley behind the store, lighting his way with the flashlight, he thought about the city. It surprised him that the Empire hadn't come in and milked the place for all of its valuables. It was all completely useless to the vampires. Remembering what he learned as a child about the city before it and its original inhabitants were given to the vampires, Hank imagined what kind of treasures might still lay untouched. He was sure a greedy man would already be dead in his position. Behind the other buildings along the alley, Hank saw nothing that surprised him. Most had small dumpsters and miscellaneous trash lying about. A small motorbike lay behind one of the buildings, missing its front wheel. Underneath it, several cockroaches scurried.

He hadn't heard a scream in some time. But he learned years ago never to rely on his own sense of time. It had failed him too often before. The farther he went, the trashier everything seemed to be. At the end of the block and to his left, he could see what had probably once been a scary neighborhood to live in. The beam of his flashlight reflected off a bent, graffitied stop sign as he looked the block over. Given the low light of the neighborhood, he figured it couldn't hurt to try that way. He was still pissed the army surplus store didn't have any maps of the city. He was afraid to go anywhere well lit, like a gas station, that might have one. So, he figured his best bet would be to keep the lights of the city behind him, keep going in one direction, and hope that eventually he would be safe. Not even knowing if he would find anything to point out the city limits, however, didn't give him much confidence. As he walked down the dark street, it surprised him to

find some of the houses still had lights on after all these years. Then he remembered he wasn't the first person to run loose through the city since the war. The thought that others might have made it this far and hadn't survived gave him chills, but he tried his best to shrug them off.

Shining the flashlight at some of the houses, he walked along the dimly lit road. There was very little to see. Just old houses with heat-worn paint. The yards, or rather what was left of them, consisted of dusty ground with the occasional patch of short red and brown weeds. He continued on to the next block and then the next without incident. The only sounds were the echo of his footsteps. Eventually he started to calm down for the first time since he had been caught. For the first time in a week, he found himself able to let his thoughts wander. He found it ironic he had been condemned to die in a state once famous for legalized prostitution, considering the crime he was guilty of. He was more angry that the "prostitute" ended up being a morality cop than ashamed for what he had done. He looked up at the night sky and noticed that as he walked farther from the center of the city, more and more dim stars became visible. He was glad it didn't seem as though it would rain. But then again, this being his first visit to Nevada, he had no idea how often it rained here or how badly it could.

After walking about ten blocks or so, Hank found a knee-high concrete barrier at the end of a yard and sat down. He slipped the backpack off and reached inside, feeling around until he found the two thermoses. The first one he grabbed was red. He stuffed it back inside and grabbed the other in its place. He pulled the thermos out, unscrewed the lid, double checked it was water, and took a big drink. The water was warm but refreshing none the less. He was beginning to feel the hours since he ate his "last meal." He would hardly call it a meal, though. Miniature portions of toast, mashed potatoes, something that was supposed to be some kind of meat with gravy, and corn, all of which tasted like water. Bad water at that. He was beginning to wonder what kind of canned foods he could find in the houses. He knew better than to look for frozen foods. It had been just over 20 years since anyone lived here. He turned and looked at the house behind him. After a moment of thinking it through, he decided to give it a shot.

He stood up and pulled his machete from its sheath. He could barely make out the dried blood on the blade in the pale street light coming from down the block. The wind picked up, sending a tumbleweed in front of Hank as he started walking through the yard toward the house. Ahead, he could see a large porch above three large concrete steps. The house was made of brick. He couldn't tell if the brick was brown or some odd shade of red. The front door had once been painted dark brown but now only flakes of the original paint remained. It had a small square window towards the top. As he shined his flashlight around the porch, several spider webs reflected the light back at him in thin lines of bright silver weaved into intricate patterns. He was about to turn around and give up when his stomach growled. He began weighing his options. On one hand, he could deal with some spiders even if he did have a pretty strong case of arachnophobia. On the other hand, it was common knowledge that the suburbs, cities, and towns that once surrounded the city eventually became abandoned after the blood pact. Who knew when he would find food? Beyond that, if he made it out of the city alive, he would still be a fugitive and had little hope of being safe anywhere populated.

He shined the flashlight around again looking for any visible spiders in the hope that maybe they were long gone. His hope disintegrated when he saw a huge brown spider

sitting in the middle of one of the webs. It hung upside down a few feet to the left of the door above an old wooden rocking chair sitting against the wall. He pointed the flashlight at it and ran it along the web to the right until he could see that the web ended on the other side of the door.

"Shit," he said, cringing. He took a deep breath and before he could talk himself out of it, he charged up the stairs. He put the machete in its sheath and went for the door. He reached out and tried to turn the doorknob. It turned freely but the door would not open. He took the flashlight into his right hand and busted in the little window with the handle end. The sound of the window breaking echoed off the houses across the streets, causing him to jump and look behind himself. When he managed to calm himself again, he turned back to the door. This was turning out to be a lot of hassle.

Hank put the flashlight under his left arm and picked up the rocking chair. It felt light as he put it in front of the door. Then he stepped up onto it and reached his right arm inside the little window. Once his whole arm was inside he felt around for locks. Finding what felt like a small, oval knob, he tried turning it. As his fingers pressed into the knob, he had to push himself against the door in order to reach enough to turn it. Then it made a loud click and a large cloud of dust shot out from between the door and the door jam. While pulling his arm out of the window, Hank fanned the dust cloud with his other hand and coughed to free his lungs of the dust. Once he could breathe again, he reached down and tried the doorknob once more. With the deadbolt unlocked, it slid open immediately. Hank laughed in triumph, jumped down from the chair, and pulled it aside. Then, with a huge grin on his face and his flashlight at the ready, he pushed the door wide open. A thick, musty smell nearly knocked him over. Inside, everywhere he shined the flashlight, was a thick cover of spider webs. In just one pass of the flashlight, he counted nine spiders within the mess of webs.

"Son of a bitch," he said bitterly, looking wide-eyed at the silver threaded mess before him.

\* \* \*

Ishan sat with his mouth open about to speak when he seemed to change his mind. He closed his mouth, took a deep breath, and smiled at Simon.

"Do you know the history of this magnificent building on which we all sit, Simon?" he asked, spreading his arms out and turning his head to look from one end of the building to the other. Simon shook his head nervously.

"No, sir, I do not," he stammered.

"It's called," Ishan said, pausing with an air of mystique, "the Stratosphere. I wouldn't expect you to know anything about it. In fact, I would be quite surprised if you knew much of anything about this city's history at all." The rest of the vampires sat as still as if they were dead watching Ishan like he had hypnotized them.

Simon only nodded. Indeed, he knew very little about the city's history nor did he care to know. He knew it had once been a human slush pit of sin. That was all that mattered. The righteous Empire, of whom Simon had known and loved most of his life, had done God's will using these demons he was sitting with right now to "cleanse" the city.

"You see Simon, this building we sit atop was a source of entertainment. Not only for its breathtaking view, but for its restaurant inside, and ..." Ishan said, trailing off as he got up from his seat. Simon noticed the vampire was holding some kind of handheld electric device. Ishan pushed a button on the device and held out his arms while something huge with neon lights began to come out of the building behind him. Then the thing came to a stop and tipped downward like a huge teeter totter. When it was still, Simon noticed it was actually some sort of amusement ride. "...for its thrilling rides." Ishan said.

Simon began to sweat profusely as the rest of the vampires at the table leapt from their seats and joined Ishan in admiring the ride.

"This," Ishan said, pointing up at the ride he was still facing "is the X-Scream." The other vampires applauded.

Simon felt his stomach turn again. He was beginning to think he liked Ishan much better when the vampire seemed bored and indifferent. But now, Simon had managed to unhinge him. Realizing this, Simon began to shake uncontrollably while still gripping the arms of his chair. At the very moment Simon began to shake, Ishan turned to face him. Looking directly into Simon's eyes he spoke in the same bored tone he had used earlier.

"Peter, give Mr. Withers the time of his life."

Peter grinned with delight.

"Unless," Ishan said, "Mr. Withers, you can do something to help us?"

"It's not up to me. I'm just a little pissant!" he yelled, stumbling to his feet. "Please, I don't have the power to make such arrangements!"

Ishan's stare darkened. "Then why are you the Mediator?" he asked and then clenched his trembling jaw. As if they had been cued, Peter and the other vampires began moving toward Simon in a slow stalking prow. Their bodies appeared to be shivering. Simon was starting to wonder if it was really blood these particular vampires lusted after and not pure fear. He looked at them as they crept up to him. He knew it was pointless but his body decided it was time to go. He turned and ran with all of his might, faster than he had probably ever run his whole life. Within fifteen feet, several blurs flashed in front of him. Before his brain could process that each blur had been a vampire, he was looking up at the sky and then down at his legs dragging on the concrete floor. He could only manage to keep his head turned far enough for a split second, but he recognized that Peter was the one dragging him. He could see the others at Peter's side out of the corner of his eyes as he slid along behind them. Scared and exhausted, he didn't have the strength or determination to fight.

Simon felt himself rise into the air and watched the stars grow long glowing tails as Peter flung him down into the front seat of the X-Scream. As he sat there helpless, being strapped into an amusement ride at the top of a skyscraping tower by a vampire, Simon caught a glimpse of Ishan back at the table. The head vampire sat there like a statue leaning to his right. Even though he was seeing Ishan from behind, Simon could tell from the way his arm held up his head that he was in deep thought. He could hear several plops as the other vampires sat down in the seats behind him. Peter, however, positioned himself in front of Simon, facing him, by wedging himself between Simon's seat and the nose of the ride.

The last thought Simon had as the ride began creeping forward was that vampires were truly absurd. A moment later the ride shot forward and down as Simon felt his body

thrown back against the chair. He was sure this was what it felt like to crash a plane from the pilot's point of view. The motion only lasted a few seconds, but felt like eternity, as the vampires shouted out with excitement. Then the ride came to its furthest forward point and stopped, causing the seat belt holding Simon to jerk at his body. Simon screamed out in pain. Peter held onto Simon's seat and smiled down at him with his fangs visible, hardly showing any effects from the jolt.

"Don't you understand, Simon?" Peter yelled over the cheering of the other vampires. "We don't want to negotiate with a peon like you!" Peter's expression became serious for the first time. "We want to get things done and we can't do that with someone we can't respect!" The ride began to rise until Simon could feel his equilibrium come back and then it jerked again. Then smooth, cold hands slid down and back up Simon's chest. A female voice he knew to be Rachel's whispered into his ear.

"You see, Simon, you Mediators are all alike," she said in a hiss. "So proud and righteous. So slick and slithery," she continued, her pitch and volume rising. "So weak and useless!" she screamed full on into his ear.

Silence filled Simon's left side as he felt blood run down the side of his face from his ear. Before he could even make the connection Rachel began to lick the blood from his face like a cat lapping up milk. As she licked up closer to his ear, her fangs lightly grazed his earlobe, exciting him in more than one way at the same time. She seemed to sense his arousal and immediately acted upon it. She began sliding her hand down his chest slowly. Then his stomach. She groped at the bulge in his crotch. He closed his eyes in a mixture of revulsion and pleasure.

As she did this, she began sliding her fangs from his ear along his cheek sideways. This increased his excitement for reasons he could not begin to understand. He could tell he was starting to get close. She lifted her head from his and smiled at him as if she could tell as well. He was so mesmerized with ecstasy that he forgot all about his inhibitions, his religious zeal, and his righteous Empire. He even pretended he didn't enjoy Peter standing there watching.

When he was on the very verge of climax, she pulled her hand away and in a blur of movement she punched him in the shoulder. It snapped loudly as Simon felt every nerve in his body relocate. Half went to his crotch and the other half into his collar bone, where they burst into agony. He screamed in a high pitch his vocal chords had never hit before. Peter burst out laughing. Then, at that very moment, the ride began to lean backward slowly. Within a few seconds, it was shooting backward. Simon's body pushed against the harness, causing him more pain than his body could withstand. Everything began to fade including the pain. Then Simon went into a warm, dark abyss.

When he woke up, Simon was sitting in the chair he was first offered upon arriving. The pain in his shoulder was gone and he could hear someone talking to him from both of his ears. He opened his eyes and saw the vampires all sitting where they had been earlier.

"My, sh-shoulder. It's not broken... and my ear. I can hear. Wha-what did you do?" he asked frantically. The vampires all looked at him with curious expressions.

"I'm afraid, I don't know what you're talking about, Simon," Ishan said. "Peter, Rachel, do you know what Mr. Withers is speaking of?"

"No, I haven't the slightest clue," Peter said and smirked.

"Neither have I," Rachel added, smiling.

Then, all of their faces became serious.

"Why would we do such things to our dear, sweet Mediator?" Ishan asked in his dull drone.

"Besides, the blood pact forbids it," Peter said, and all of the vampires except Ishan convulsed with laughter. Ishan, however, did manage a slight grin.

"Our business is through, Mediator," Ishan said with a strong overtone of rage.

"Oh, thank God." Simon whispered, putting his hands up to his face as if to pray. "But wait," he said, dropping his hands to his side. "We haven't even negotiated anything. Nothing has been accomplished."

"As always," Ishan said. He looked at Simon, blankly. For a split second, Simon saw Ishan's face change into a scowl and then back to normal. It happened so fast, Simon wasn't even sure what he had just seen was real. He picked that moment to get up. None of the vampires moved to stop him. With a flash of movement and a gust of wind, Luciano was at Ishan's side, leaning over and whispering into his ear. Simon pushed his chair in, turned, and began to walk toward the door. He heard nothing at all until he was about six feet from the door.

"It appears there is still one more convict loose within the city. Peter, please escort Mr. Withers back to his car," Ishan said. Simon felt his knees go weak. In an instant, Peter moved in front of him, holding the door open for him. Something about the look on Peter's face brought Simon back to himself. He flooded with anger. He was no longer relieved that his shoulder and his ear were fine. He wanted to prove these demons had hurt him. Maybe then the Empire, his beloved Empire, would stamp out this abomination once and for all.

"After you, Simon," Peter said, still holding the door. Then he winked, making sure to show his fangs as well. Simon stomped through the open door and headed across the large round room for the elevator he'd come up in. Before Simon was halfway there, Peter stood next to the elevator with his hands behind his back, the elevator down button already lit up. When Simon arrived within a few strides of the elevator door, he heard it "ding" and then open just in time for him to step in. Once inside and facing the elevator door, Peter accompanied him and hit the ground button. So far, it seemed Peter was behaving himself.

But then, the elevator door closed and he seemed to disappear. Simon jumped. He turned to check behind himself. There was nothing there. He turned again to make sure Peter was not moving with him. Then, he backed toward the rear of the elevator. When he was against the back of the elevator, he noticed movement and heard a whistle above him. He looked up to find Peter hanging from the ceiling of the elevator, crouched as if to strike. His feet were burrowed into the gray ceiling tiles. His fangs dripped saliva as he smiled down at Simon. Peter's irises seemed to be colorless now.

"I'm not going to hurt you, Simon," Peter said, widening his grin as he spoke. Then, his expression changed to false fear and he said "I wouldn't dare break the blood pact," while moving his index finger back and forth as if correcting a naughty child. Then, his body seemed to twist into a blur of motion and the light went out. A second later, Simon heard a hissing to his immediate right, so he ran toward the left side of the elevator. The hissing moved in front of him, so he stumbled back to where he had been. An instant later, he felt a slight touch against his cheek and this spooked him even more, causing him to jump toward the front of the elevator. He looked up, trying to find the digital

display, but it seemed to be out as well. Then, he felt just enough of a gentle push to the back of his knees to send him falling backwards.

He cringed, waiting for the impending collision with the floor. Instead, he landed on what felt like two cold fleshy poles. The door opened and light enveloped the elevator as the two fleshy poles revealed themselves to be Peter's arms. Peter lifted Simon without effort and threw him out of the elevator. Simon landed right on his feet, sharp pain shooting up his ankles. Before he could turn and complain, Peter was in front of him holding the glass door open. Simon gritted his teeth fiercely and marched toward the door. He could see a look of suspense in Peter's stature as the vampire stood holding the door. When Simon walked through, he felt a gust of air and looked back to where Peter had been to see the door slowly sway backward and close with no sign of Peter. When he turned back to look forward, Peter's face was a mere centimeter from his own.

"Boo!" Peter said and laughed. Then he moved a few feet away from Simon in a swift movement. "I promise, I promise, I'll stop. I've had my fun," he said with a grin.

This neither comforted nor calmed Simon. He began walking briskly down the sidewalk he knew led back to the welcome sign and the Empire-assigned car. After a moment, he noticed Peter walking alongside him, watching him with a smile. They walked on, stepping over miscellaneous pieces of brick and metal here and there. He could see the car. It looked like a toy off in the distance. As he angled his walking to adjust for the curve in the road, he felt a vibration from within his pocket. He reached in and pulled out his cell phone. The small digital display said *Ted Chambers*. He pecked angrily at the green answer button on the phone and slammed it to his ear.

"Simon, how is it going?" Ted asked, trying to sound cheerful.

"How is it going?" Simon repeated. "I'll tell you how it's going! These monsters are... are.. are.. horrible!" he yelled into the phone. "They have insulted me, corrupted me, terrorized me, and without even allowing me the ability to actually do the job I was sent here to do!"

"Simon, are you still in the city?" Ted asked in an urgent tone.

"Yes I'm still in the city, I'm almost back to the car!" he said, continuing to vent his trauma. "These vile creatures have done things to me I—"

Ted interrupted him. "Be careful, Simon, don't do anything rash. There could be serious cons—"

"I'll be careful, all right!" Simon shouted. "I'll be careful. In fact I won't need to be careful anymore..."

"Simon, wait!"

"...because I quit!" Simon barked, slamming the cell phone against his leg. He heard his own voice echoing the words "I quit" off of the surrounding buildings. Then he felt a breeze and looked around to notice Peter was standing completely still with a look on his face Simon had not yet seen him make. Peter no longer looked at him playfully. He had a look of curious interest. Like a cat when it looks at a mouse.

"So, Mr. Withers, you are no longer Mediator to Necropolis?" Peter asked, showing way more enthusiasm than Simon could understand.

"Yes, I quit! I will not suffer such outrageous blasphemy and torture!" He yelled full on in Peter's face. The reaction from Peter was not what Simon expected. Peter stood silently, a grin stretching across his face. Then, he broke out in an uproar of laughter to the point of tears streaming down his face. Simon didn't understand and became even

angrier, grinding his teeth together in fury. This only seemed to renew Peter's ongoing fit of howling. Then, after a few more minutes of guffawing, Peter leaned forward trying to catch his breath.

"Oh, that is just great," he said in a high-pitched voice still tingling with humor. "So, you are no longer Mediator protected lawfully by the Empire, Simon?" he asked and gave another chuckle.

"Yes, that's exactly what I - wait, no, what do you mean? I'm still protected, why wouldn't I be protected?" he cried desperately. Then came the distant sound of an engine starting. He turned to see the Empire-assigned car turning around and then driving away. Then, he swallowed and turned to look at Peter. Peter was no longer laughing. He straightened up and arched forward, his irises darkening to black, and his chin pulling backwards as his mouth opened to make way for his fangs.

"Only the Mediator is protected. If you are no longer Mediator and within our city then by our blood pact with the Emperor, you are now ours for the taking and no one will hear your screams," Peter said in a deep, growling voice. The next second Simon screamed as he felt his back slam against a wall and Peter's fangs tear into his throat. Then, slowly, the world fluttered dizzily away.

\* \* \*

But Peter had lied. He knew that it was possible, somewhere out there in the city, someone could hear Simon's screams. In fact, he was counting on it. Because, once he was finished draining every last drop of fiery, self-righteous blood from Simon Withers, Peter had a job to do. There was still one convict loose in the city and Ishan expected Peter to take care of this. Within his mild statement was a charge. "Finish this loose marauder before the dawn or be prepared to lose your place on the council."

It had already been hanging in the balance, his place on the council. He had angered Ishan far too much in recent times. Peter tightened in ecstasy as he imagined the blood he was consuming from Simon's throat was actually Ishan's. What he wouldn't give to take Ishan's place and drink his blood. To quicken himself with the old vampire's heart while it was still beating. But he knew he needed more time. He would first have to find this convict and prove he still deserved his place among the others. Then, when he was back in their good graces, when Ishan least expected it, he would strike. With this thought, he stood up triumphantly, holding Simon's limp body close. Then with a flick of his head, he threw the thing that was once Simon down onto the sidewalk where it landed, crumpled against the brick wall of the building. Then, he hunched down and opened up his senses. It wasn't hard with fresh blood in him. Always the blood would heighten his senses to the point of becoming almost maddeningly sensitive. He heard a rat scurry exactly 1.7 kilometers away. He knew it headed south at slightly less than a fourth of a mile an hour. He turned toward the west focusing all his senses and immediately heard the quick beating of a human heart. Then before he could hold back his amplified hearing the sound of the human's voice tore through his ears.

"Son of a bitch," the voice said. Peter burst into a run toward the sound at what he estimated to be 174 kilometers per hour, faster than Peter had ever ran before.



## Chapter 4

### Render Unto Caesar...

Toby sat down at the far end of the long table in the back of the cafeteria with his tray of food and his copy of Caesar's Bible. The orphanage, like everything else, was run by the Empire. Therefore, everyone followed imperial rule to the letter. This meant that everyone carried the Good Book and everyone went to church on Sunday. It was the first day Toby had been allowed to join the other boys for lunch. He would have rather eaten in his room again, but all the energy it had taken to attack one of the attendants and get himself confined to his room had drained him fully with his first attempt. However, being alone for three days left him with nothing to think about but his father and he became flushed with grief. He had no way of knowing when they would take his dad to the city where he would die. All he knew was the sentence. For all he knew, his father could already be dead. He could feel the pain flow from his heart, up his chest, and to his face. It felt as though it would pour from his eyes but only tears came and still the suffering went on.

He looked down at his tray of mostly uneaten food. He had consumed about one full meal's worth in the past three days of bites he had choked down here and there. Absentmindedly, he opened the book and turned to a random page. The top of the page told him he was looking at the book of *Hosea* beginning with chapter 13. He read through the first verse on the page, verse 16, and immediately slammed the book closed. There would be no comfort for him in this book. His father told him about the parts that had been taken out of the Bible. Before the Empire, there had been a man named Jesus in it. In fact the book had even been split into two sections titled the Old and New testaments. Toby's father told him about the now mostly missing New Testament. And about how the one book that remained from it had been altered, replacing the name Jesus with Caesar. Toby had to fight himself back from weeping again. Everything he thought about always reminded him of his dad. He looked over at the other boys sitting at the table. They were

all eating, joking, and laughing with each other. Some of them were laughing at him as he expected.

From watching the other boys, he learned some of them were part of some kind of gang. Not an ordinary gang. This gang was actually encouraged by the staff. It was called The Enforcers and they were always on the lookout for nonbelievers and sinners. They were led by a boy named Craig Thompson. Thompson was a tall, powerfully built 17-year-old with gritty black hair and crooked teeth who looked more like he was thirty. Billy Featherston, a younger boy in the next room from Toby, had told him all about Craig Thompson. Thompson wasn't like the other boys. He had parents who could take care of him. The reason he was here was far different than the other boys. He had barely escaped getting the same sentence as Toby's dad. The story went that Thompson had a best friend named Joey. Joey had been your typical jock. The two played on the high school basketball team together. They were as close as brothers. So close that one night when Joey was spending the night at Thompson's, having been under a lot of pressure between basketball, grades, and regular high school stuff, Joey confided in his friend. The two went for a walk out in the woods to have some privacy and Joey told Craig his darkest secret.

After Joey had exposed the truth, Craig did what he knew would make his father proud. He knocked Joey over the head with a large rock and then beat him to death with it. Craig Thompson would gladly be drained of every drop of blood by the most gruesome of beasts than have a faggot for a best friend. Of course the judge had been torn on whether to send him to Necropolis or have a parade in his honor. He had committed murder, an offense that usually meant death. However, homosexuality was one of the major morality offenses requiring the death sentence.

So, the judge sentenced him to spend the rest of his high school years in an orphanage because juvenile detention centers would be too rough for a "hero" like Thompson. Toby even once overheard the "hero" brag about his kill. Mysterious disappearances happened often since Thompson and The Enforcers started watching the other boys. When Toby was around any of the boys from the gang, they had made it obvious they were watching him, waiting for him to slip up and show his true colors. And it was well known that sinners begot sinners in most cases.

The grief took over as Toby looked away from the boys at the other end of the table. His face crumpled with anguish as his eyes gushed out liquid. He felt it run down into his mouth as he looked down at his feet and tasted the salt from his tears. He did his best to wipe them away with his hands. Then, he took his napkin and blew his nose with it. When he felt strong enough, he got up and started walking toward the opening in the wall next to the exit doors. He could hear the cold laughter behind him. It felt as if the boys were watching him through a microscope. Toby watched as his tray began its conveyor belt ride to wherever it was they all went. Then, he managed to mentally push himself onward through the double doors and down the hall. He felt some slight relief as the doors sealed away the vicious sounds the boys made. When he got back to his room, he went straight to bed.

The next morning when the breakfast call came over the intercom, Toby pulled himself out of the small bed with reluctance. He wanted to stay in bed and never get up but knew if he tried, the counselors would just make him. He had been warned during his time of solitary confinement if he kept up such behavior he would be sent to an asylum

and be one step away from following in his father's bloody footsteps. After he pulled himself up out of the bed, he took his change of clothes from the dresser, walked out of the room, and down the hall. When he arrived at the shower room, he became nervous. He would be going with the next group, made up mostly of Enforcers. Thompson wasn't with them, but they were all fairly brutal in their own respects.

The bell rang for the current group of showering boys to come out, dry off, and change. That bell was always followed by another, three minutes later, to cue the next group to come in and shower. The next bell rang. Toby walked in and took off his clothes quickly, careful not to look at any of the other boys. Staring off into space, he put all his will power into standing still and didn't so much as flinch when one of the other boys started antagonizing him.

"What's the matter, Toby? Daddy like whores more than his own son?" he hissed from behind Toby.

The other boys laughed hysterically, some of them doubling over as though the boy's pain were a riot to them.

"Aw, does the little boy not want to talk about his piece-of-shit, blaspheming father? What's the matter, Toby, Daddy not like you because you're a faggot? Is that what it is?"

Some of the other boys laughed again, but one boy in particular turned and looked at Toby fiercely with hazel eyes. He had bright red hair and freckles.

"If we find out you're a faggot, Toby, I'll kill you myself. I hate them. My dad was one of them. But I turned him in and he got what he deserved!" the boy said, looking proud of every word.

"Go on, James," the boy behind him said. Some of the other boys had already headed into the showers and James had been too busy warning Toby. James gave Toby a long dark look then turned and walked on. A moment later Toby followed the boy in front of him into the showers. He did his best to stare at the wall in front of him as the water pelted his skin. He lathered himself quickly and focused on the lines between the bricks and the details of cleaning his own body. While he reached over his shoulder to clean his back, he felt a sudden pull on his arm and the next thing he knew he was being held by two boys from behind. James appeared a moment later, having been hidden from a cloud of steam. He walked right up to Toby and grabbed him by the jaw, turning his face side to side and looking him over.

"You look awful girly. That's the first sign. I can spot 'em from a mile away. Hell, I lived with one for thirteen years. No wonder my mama left when I was little. A woman can't stay with a man when he only likes dick," James said through clenched teeth. A second later, James swung so fast Toby didn't see it coming. He felt a blast of pain and then warm, thick liquid running down from his nose. Then, James shifted his weight and swung again, this time barely visible to Toby. A fist, like a concrete block, busted into the core of his gut. He bent forward as much as he could while still being pinned by the other two boys, the air sucked from his lungs. The boys dropped him and he hit the hard, wet floor and began gasping for air. As he struggled to breathe, he noticed the sound of the bell muffled by fading laughter.

When he opened his eyes, all he could see was steam all around him. A moment later, he felt himself being pulled up from the floor. He opened his eyes to see one of the counselors, the one who stood at the shower doors making sure no one skipped a group in line, hovering over him and looking at him suspiciously.

"What are you doing playing around in here? We have a schedule to keep with. I'm marking this in your record, Evans. Go to the nurse's office, now," the man commanded him.

After Toby left the nurse's office, he went back to his room, his abdomen sore and his nose bandaged up. He found a piece of paper taped to his door with a crude drawing made with crayons. It showed a poorly drawn man colored all in pink being bitten by another man drawn in purple with large fangs outlined in black, complete with pools of maroon coming from the pink man's neck. Above the drawing was the word *Justice* scribbled violently in black. He ripped it from the wall, crumpling the piece he had gotten hold of, and fell to the ground. Curling into a ball, he released the flood of agony from within him.

## Chapter 5

### The Ancestor's Call

Hank had been pacing in front of the open front door of the house for several minutes when he finally admitted to himself he didn't have the courage to go inside in his current form. With that decided, he relaxed and sat down in the rocking chair while pulling off the backpack. Once he was sitting, he put the backpack in his lap and opened it. He fished out the two thermoses and took a long drink of water again. Then, he put the water thermos back in the backpack and stared at the other thermos for several minutes.

An idea had occurred to him. What if he drank some of the vampire blood? Would it give him the confidence to do what he knew he had to do? His stomach gave him constant warning that any moment it would start digesting his vital organs if he didn't give in to its demands. It probably wouldn't be so bad, he figured, if the last meal he had eaten hadn't had the nutrition content of a single toothpick. His stomach growled again as he looked into the thermos of blood. He wondered if the thick, black liquid would satisfy some of his hunger.

*Oh well*, he thought, *down the hatch*. He lifted the thermos and took a big gulp, forcing himself to swallow. The taste was akin to bitter metal but amplified a hundredfold or so. It was so strong it actually made his head hurt until the tang of it faded from his tongue. He wiped his mouth with his sleeve, even though there was nothing to really wipe. Then, he put the lid back on the thermos, slipped it back into the backpack, took the flashlight out, and zipped the bag shut.

He stood up, put the backpack back on, and turned to face the front door again. He turned the flashlight on and shined it in the open doorway. After about a second of standing there looking in the house, Hank started to feel the effects. Then, he literally began to see the effects as well. The glare from the flashlight was suddenly quite bright. He turned it off. He could now see clearly and normally in the dark with just his eyes.

Then, he noticed that he could now zoom in on specific things with his vision without exerting any more effort than any other physical movement.

At one point, he accidentally zoomed in on one of the spiders and nearly jumped off of the porch. He even found that controlling his fear was quite simple now. No wonder he had been so calm taking on that vampire. He focused on the different spiders on purpose now, trying to assess what he was up against. He didn't recognize most of them, but one stood out easily. Its body was like a huge black bulb with a blood-red hourglass shape on its abdomen. He had never actually seen a black widow before, but he knew for sure this was one. It surprised him to find himself thinking of it less like a monster and more like a simple obstacle to avoid. In fact, he had been mapping out a course in and around the complicated pattern of silver webs subconsciously the whole time.

Hank put the flashlight away and then hooked both of his thumbs in the straps of the backpack. Then without even raising his heart rate, he went through the doorway and began crouching and swaying through and around the complex obstacle course of spider webs. An onlooker would have been reminded of jewel-thief movies where the thief had to get through a myriad of laser lights without touching them. The room appeared to be a large living room with blue suede matching furniture scattered around and an old TV against the front wall next to the door. Only a few seconds of sleek gymnastics through the webs and he was at a large clearing toward the back of the living room. Ahead of him was a thin hallway that ended in what looked like a dining room. And in the next room, he could make out a large white refrigerator. There were only the occasional cobwebs in these rooms. He walked into the dining room, slowly at first. When he was sure there was nothing to concern him in there, he continued on into the kitchen.

He began opening cupboards and drawers. Everything was covered in a thick layer of dust. He found the utensil drawer and snatched up one of each kind and slid his backpack around to open it. Once opened, he set the backpack and the utensils on the counter above the drawer. Then he continued foraging within the drawers, adding to the accumulation of dust clouds in the room. A few drawers later and he found another key item he was looking for: a can opener. He picked it up, looked it over, and set it on the counter beside the utensils. When he was done going through the drawers, he began looking through the cabinets. Five cabinet doors later and he opened the jackpot. The smell almost kept him at bay, especially with his senses so intensified. First he had to take a deep breath (away from the cabinet) and blow away all of the dust before he could see what there was.

There were cans of chicken noodle soup, corn, green beans, carrots, potatoes, and even a couple cans of chili. There were also some various boxes of pasta and the like growing strange things on them. That, he was sure, was the source of the smell. He reached in with his hands tucked in his sleeves and began knocking the different boxes of growing things out of the cabinet. Reaching in with both arms, he grabbed about twenty cans, making a circle to hold them with his arms. He turned his face away to get a breath of unspoiled air. Then he took them over to the sink and dropped them in, knocking a huge cloud of dust up into his face. He coughed for a second and waved away the dust. Using the bottled water and a rag he found, he scrubbed the cans clean and then washed his hands. Then, he began piling the cans into the backpack.

He was just about to wash the utensils when he heard the very distant sound of running footsteps. They were too fast to be human and getting louder. As he quickly

grabbed the utensils, put them in the bag, and zipped it up, he wondered why the bastard wasn't flying. If Hank had been able to fly, there would be no second-guessing. Anywhere he was in a hurry to get to, he would fly. He put the backpack on in a rush and pulled out his machete. The footsteps steadily rose in volume. His best guess told him he had a little over 15 seconds before his visitor would arrive. He backed away from the kitchen toward the dining room and hid inside to the left of the thin hallway that led back to the front room.

By the time it dawned on him his pursuer wouldn't be using the front door, it was too late. The opposite wall of the dining room and part of the kitchen exploded before him as a thin blonde vampire with fierce, jet-black eyes that looked nothing like the other vampires Hank had seen, burst through, hands reaching out for Hank's body. The fangs were still a dead giveaway.

Hank's first impulse was to swing the machete at his attacker. He didn't make it. The vampire grabbed hold of Hank's arms just as fast as Hank swung them, subduing the blow. Then the vampire squeezed Hank's hands, almost crushing them, until he let go of the machete. As the machete was falling to the floor, the vampire moved to strike. He lunged his mouth toward Hank's throat. Hank ducked just in time and, with all of his strength, tackled the slender thing to the ground. In that moment, crashing down to the floor of that dining room, Hank was glad he drank as much vampire blood as he had. Otherwise, he would already be dead.

\* \* \*

As the convict slammed into him, Peter found himself at a loss to understand just what was going on with this ordinary man. It were as if he had almost the same strength as a human vampire, yet his heartbeat was strong. Peter's own heart beat all the time, but never anywhere near the speed of a living human. So, it was easy to tell the difference in others by simply listening. What was even stranger and caught him off guard to the point of being tackled by the man was the man's breath. He could smell it from a good kilometer away. He had the blood of the ancestors on his breath. Peter realized in that split second as he hit the ground that this man must have killed an ancestor. Either way, he had done enough. Peter was not about to lose his place on the council. Not after all he had worked for.

Peter's body rocked backward from the collision with the floor. Using the momentum from the fall, he quickly lifted the man with his legs and flipped him over himself. The man smacked against the wall with a crash and fell back into the dining room table busting it to the floor with his limp body. As the man landed on the table, Peter continued into a backward somersault and landed on his feet inside the kitchen doorway. He ran forward aiming to kick the man in his side. But as he brought his foot forward, the man rolled away from him and jumped into a sideways spin back on his feet. The two stood there a moment watching each other, ready to attack.

"What are you?" Peter asked. The man only looked at him with a dark expression. Peter didn't wait for a reply. He leapt into a double somersault, busting a hole in the low ceiling, and landed behind the man. Then, he turned and put the man in a choke hold. The convict was still just as strong though and for a moment Peter seemed to forget this. He began elbowing Peter in his side and it actually caused the vampire pain. He hadn't felt

this much pain in nearly a century. Peter gasped with the force of it. The man, taking advantage of Peter's shock, stomped on his foot. All the pain in the universe throbbed from Peter's foot. He let go and knelt forward to reach for it as if his touch could heal it. The man ran forward and began scrambling around on the floor.

Peter didn't really care what the guy was doing. All he could understand was his foot felt like it had actually broken. He cried out in a high pitch that he had never heard himself make before. He vaguely noticed the man's rustling around on the floor had become more rapid. After hundreds of years without it, the pain was strong. He looked down at his foot. It finally started healing. But the healing hurt even more than the break itself. He screamed out in agony again. Then, he heard a loud yell from directly in front of him. He looked up to see the man running full force toward him, yelling ferociously, with the machete pulled back to strike. It was all he could do just to lift up his arms to stop him. But his arms didn't reach. The machete ripped through his side and then his abdomen, cutting his body in half. The last thing Peter saw before everything went dark was the lower half of his body separate from him and fall to the floor as he fell on top of it.

\* \* \*

Hank stood holding his ribs and looking down at the two halves of vampire crumpled together on the floor. He moved forward and kicked the thing just to be sure. It seemed to be lifeless. He tried not to analyze that thought too much. The pain in his ribs grew worse, but he was pretty sure it was the vampire blood healing him. He turned in a complete circle, scanning the debris on the floor for his backpack. When he found it, he knelt down to the floor and unzipped it. Rummaging through the backpack for the thermos, he found and opened it, making the usual sour face as he forced himself to take a big gulp. Then, he closed the thermos and put it back in the bag.

A few excruciating minutes later, Hank's ribs seemed as good as new. If he had been absolutely sure the vampire who just attacked him was dead for good or there weren't possibly others coming, he would have sat in awe of his circumstances. But the need to flee electrified his every nerve. He put the backpack on, jumped through the gaping hole in the back of the house, and ran westbound. It wasn't until Hank barely missed smacking into a stop sign fast enough to end it all that he realized his ability to run had also been intensified. He looked back at the house he had run from, zooming in to make sure it was the right one. Fifteen, sixteen, seventeen blocks he had crossed in a matter of less than a minute.

He wondered how long it would take him to make it to the edge of the city at the rate he'd just run. He was pretty sure at that speed he wouldn't need to wait for the dawn. Overwhelmed with excitement by this thought, he acted on it by breaking into another all-out run. He counted the blocks as he passed them. The wind was blowing on his body as rapidly as it had riding on Toby's motorcycle. It was soothing to feel on his face and arms. He thought he was starting to get the hang of it when just after the 47<sup>th</sup> block his right foot hit the inside edge of a pothole. He catapulted up and to the right, slamming violently into a telephone pole. He fell back down onto the sidewalk with a loud crunch. After a few minutes of not being able to move, Hank rolled himself over slowly and



painfully. Evidently vampire blood could do just about anything except improve coordination.

After a while of staring up at a dim, yellow street light, Hank sat up and positioned himself against the pole that just broke his right collarbone, wrist, and knee. It was excruciating just to move, but he managed. Then he sat, waiting for the healing to finish. It was going much slower this time. Right as the pain went away, so did the feeling of power. He rose with great effort. Even though he was healed now, he still felt pretty bad. Hank tried dashing forward experimentally. His legs moved just as slowly as always. He sighed. His best guess told him there were probably only three or four more good gulps left.

Hank fought the urge to take another swig immediately. If that bastard wasn't dead or more were to show up, he would need what precious little bit he had left at his disposal. He looked back to the east. So far, no one seemed to follow him. He walked on the sidewalk at a light pace to the west, pulling the backpack in front of him and opening it. When he found one of the cans of chicken noodle soup and the can opener, he pulled them both out, opened the can, and threw the lid down on the road. Then he started walking again, taking a large swig of broth from the can. It might not have been the tastiest thing on earth, but it sure seemed so to him at the moment. When the broth was drained, he began knocking back the can so noodles and bits of chicken went into his mouth. He chewed them victoriously, grinning all the while. It sure beat the taste of vampire blood. When he gobbled the last bit, he threw down the can and retrieved the water thermos from the bag. He took several decent swigs. For a brief second, he wondered where Toby was and what he was doing. Then, he made himself forget the thought and started walking a little faster.

\* \* \*

When Peter woke up, his entire abdomen screamed in absolute fury. He could feel nothing below the pain but a slight pulling. He opened his eyes to see one of his shoes taking up his entire field of vision. Still laying on the floor on top of the lower half of his body, he lifted his arm to grab hold of his right leg and move it away from him so that the shoe disappeared, revealing a debris scattered dining room on its side. He felt a strong tingle with the pull he was already feeling below his torn abdomen. He pushed hard against the floor with his right hand and rolled his top half over so that he was laying on his back. Then, he looked down at the huge open wound that was his bottomless torso. He could see shredded organs hanging loosely from it. It was also where he felt the pulling from.

He looked to his left and saw he was now lined up with his lower half, his feet parallel to his head, and the two open wounds parallel to each other. He pushed his fists into his chest, bending his elbows and pressing them hard against the carpeted floor. Then, using his elbows, he started to slowly scoot his body at an angle to put the two pieces of his body back together. After several rough scoots, he got close enough and the shredded organs began finding their other halves as if they were magnetically attracted to each other. Then, when all of his organs were healed, his flesh and spine did the same. He lay there a while letting his body heal itself. Once he knew he was strong enough, he leaned up and let out a shrill scream in the ancestor's tongue, calling for the help he knew

he would need. It was one of the hardest things he had ever done. By calling out for help, he was giving up his seat on the vampire council. It would take a lot of work and maybe even decades to get back in. But, more than anything else, he valued living, and he had to admit to himself he had met his match. This strange human was much more than Peter had bargained for.

Peter cringed with self revulsion when he heard the sound of four ancestors returning his call from various places in the sky within a three-kilometer radius. He could hear the friction in the air from where they were flying as they began circling above the house. He rose to his feet and jumped onto the open wall where he had entered the house and then onto its roof to confirm what he heard. Directly above him, circling round and round, were four ancestors, watching him. Their dirty black rags rustled in the wind as they floated effortlessly on the air. Peter struggled to bury the enmity he felt for the creatures. He would never understand the reverence the others had for them. Sure they were the source of his longevity, the source of his strength and power. But even being these things, they were also aimless creatures. Like human babies, only existing, only carrying out the needed functions to survive.

Peter called out to them in their strange, screeching tongue. He described the man to them. He told them about his strength and abilities. He also told them about the blood, a subject they seemed indifferent to. *They certainly are mindless*, he thought. When he finished explaining, they each took a long taste of the air and darted west, just as Peter had expected. Even if the quickening from Simon's blood was over, having been wasted on healing Peter's severed body, Peter could still smell the convict. He decided to get back to the Stratosphere as quickly as possible and alert the others. He had no way of knowing how bad the consequences would be if this man made it across the city limits. Nothing like this had ever happened before.

## Chapter 6

### Simon the Zealot

Simon looked down at his lifeless body, feeling more grief than he ever had. He knew what it meant. He, Simon James Withers, was dead. Dead. Simple as that. And he hadn't woken atop a ground made of fluffy clouds at the pearly gates of heaven. There was no St. Peter waiting to take his name. Sure, a vampire named Peter took his life, but that wasn't quite the same. He merely floated above his own body.

He wondered, were the Catholics right? Was this some sort of purgatory? He floated there watching himself in misery, wishing he could kill himself, if it weren't for the fact that he'd already died. A few minutes later everything around him began to glow. After a moment or so, he could see a brilliant white glow. Then came a flash of red and everything changed. He felt solid again. Looking down, his body was much smaller than he expected. It sat on what looked to be the front seat of a car. He recognized his best Sunday suit from when he was eight years old. He fingered the buttons and put his hands in the jacket pockets. He could feel the fabric. Then he put his hands up and felt his own eight year old face, just as he remembered it. He ran his hands through his hair. It was all so wonderful until...

"Now, listen honey, don't you go messin' up that beautiful little hair of yours, ya hear? Mama spent too damn long gettin' it just right for Sunday school," a female voice said.

Simon swallowed. Then very slowly he turned and looked. Beside his eight-year-old body, gripping the wheel, smoking a cigarette, and dressed in a red dress that could give any preacher a cardiac arrest, sat Simon's mother. She smiled at him with her bright red lipstick-covered lips, her curly brown hair lightly bouncing in the wind, and Simon fought back the urge to vomit. Of all the places Simon had never expected to end up when he died, this was by far the last. It might as well be hell, to end up eight years old in a car with his whore of a mother and on the way to church, no less.

A few minutes later, they pulled into the gravel lot of a small white church surrounded by wheat fields. She pulled him through the door and once again he went through the humiliation and torture of seeing all the good people of the church look at her. The women (and some of the men) looked at her with contempt. The rest of the men looked at her with lust in their hearts. His mama was causing all these poor men to sin and she didn't even care. She enjoyed it. He felt his face go scarlet as she pulled him along the aisle between the pews. He couldn't help but think of his father. It took everything he had to keep from weeping. No wonder he had left her. If only he'd taken Simon with him.

Simon sat down quietly next to his mother, where she had patted the seat in expectation. When it was time for church to start, the Reverend Joseph Bells spoke a powerful sermon on the dangers of the flesh. Simon wished his mother would have actually learned something from it. But this wasn't his first time going through this day. He knew what would happen and if it wouldn't change her ways, what would?

After the sermon, Brother Thompson, the Sunday school teacher, stood up and Simon took his cue to escape from his mother's dirty presence and run to be with his friends in line to go to class. He did his best to enjoy every sweet moment of playing with the other kids. He relished the teacher's lesson about the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. He especially enjoyed the part where Lot's wife looked back even though the angel had told her not to and she turned into a pillar of salt. He pictured his mother when the teacher told the story. He wished that God would turn her into a pillar of salt. He felt a great surge of guilt then fought it back, reminding himself she deserved what was coming to her. He knew from experience that God punishes the weak and unfaithful.

When they arrived back home, he went to his room and slammed the door as he did many times in those days. He took off his suit and changed into a T-shirt and shorts, telling himself he would just stay in his room while it happened. He found his favorite toys and sat down to play with them. The minutes went by like hours and after what seemed like forever the sunlight finally started to dim outside. Then, while waiting, lying on the floor in his room, he fell asleep, just like he did that very day. He dreamed about hell and demons just like he had that day. He tossed and turned in his sleep and in his dream he held up the cross and the demons kept on coming. He cried out to God to come and save him from them, but God didn't come. They chased him up mountains and through deserts and no matter how fast he would run, they were always right behind him. Then, he tripped over a large rock in the desert and fell on his face. The biggest demon looked down at him with its blood-red face and its black goatee and smiled as it reached out to grab him. He woke up in a cold sweat and made a mild whining sound, the same as he had that day. And just like that day, that was when he heard her screaming.

He didn't have to listen to recognize his mother's voice. He knew it was coming. He wanted to stay in his room but something pulled at him. Some force he couldn't resist. It pulled him up to his feet. Then, it pulled him to his bedroom door and made him open it. As the door opened, the screams were no longer muffled and began to fill his room. Then, it gave him a push and he started walking out into the living room just outside his bedroom. The sound of growling made him jump. When he landed, just like that day, his feet made a loud thump on the old, hardwood floor. His mother's screams stopped. She pled in a whisper.

"Please," she said. "Please don't hurt my son," she added, her voice almost breaking out of the whisper.

"Don't worry baby, I only came for you," a deep voice returned in a mocking whisper.

"Then please, don't let him find me like this. Please, go away" she begged, barely holding on to a whisper.

"No," the voice said loudly.

A rush of loud movement began and Simon heard bed springs creak violently as the man's voice breathed loudly and deeply. Then, the voice moaned. His mother made no noise at all. Then, after a few minutes, Simon thought he heard a faint whimper from her as the bed creaked even louder. The force that pulled him seemed determined to make him relive this nightmare all over again. He could feel it pull him toward the hallway just past the living room leading to his mother's bedroom.

He knew what he was about to see. He'd seen it hundreds of times throughout his life in his worst nightmares. He never saw all the man's face. Only the teeth behind that vicious smile. And the black eyes as they stared back at him. Everything else about the man, in every nightmare, had been a blur. The real memory long since buried in his brain. The force pulled him to the left and into the hallway. The sound of movement echoed off the narrow, paneled walls as Simon walked barefoot down the hall toward his mother's room.

He could see the door at the end of the hallway. It was currently ajar. Light spilled out onto the hallway floor from within the room. The floor creaked again as he walked and his mother whispered a prayer, stumbling over her words. The creaking and the man's moaning voice continued as if nothing had changed. Simon felt an anguish fill his body in anticipation of what he was about to see for the second time. He felt like he was crying but when he put his hands to his face, it was completely dry of tears. When he got to the door, his hands reached out against his will and pushed the door forward. He fought with all his will but his hands just kept on pushing, until finally the door went wide open.

There before him someone he hadn't expected to recognize laid on top of his mother. The monster had messy blonde hair and a vicious smile Simon wouldn't forget this time. Peter. Peter had raped his mother all those years ago. He looked at her and saw the pleading in her eyes. Peter only smiled at him, continuing his assault. But for the second time, Simon felt only hatred for his mother in response to those pleading eyes. How could she let him do such a thing and not fight back? He was sure she enjoyed it and only pretended to be unwilling. It was, in Simon's eyes, what she deserved. Even as horrible as it was to observe. But even more, he hated this vampire who not only raped his mother, he now knew, but also took his life and forced him to relive this hellish night once again. Though he was sure Peter couldn't have done these things knowingly to him, it made no difference to Simon.

After what seemed an eternity watching this traumatizing scene, everything around him began to glow again. There was another red flash and everything changed. Now he was just one year older, in his living room, standing and watching the television as his mother sat right up in front of it, watching intently. She smoked a cigarette, sitting Indian style with a large round, black ashtray on the floor in front of her. Simon knew immediately what he was watching. It was the first of many live evening press

conferences called by a man named Joseph Caesar. Joseph Caesar was the leader of a militia called the Seven Seals of God. On the TV, he raised his arms to hush the large crowd and began to speak as Simon listened with excitement.

"I am the lamb of God," Joseph Caesar said. "I have been found worthy by the Lord of all of heaven and earth to break loose the Seven Seals of God and open the scroll of life!" he yelled as he beat his fists on the podium before him. Simon felt a chill of pride run through his entire body. This was much better to relive than what he'd just endured. Right here, he was reliving history in the making. He was watching the first step marking the beginning of events leading to the Empire. There before him on the screen, speaking behind a podium to a crowd of reporters and spectators, stood America's future Emperor. Simon could hardly contain the pleasure filling his heart. As he listened to Emperor Caesar continue his speech, Simon noticed the glowing again. He didn't want to go.

Regardless of what he wanted, next came the red flash taking him somewhere new in another time. It was dark and explosions erupted all around him. He was wearing his camouflage fatigues. One of the devil's men came out from behind the remains of a black truck. The man wore United States Army fatigues. These were the wolves in sheep's clothing. Caesar had taught his army this. The United States had turned away from God. Its government had abandoned him and Joseph Caesar and the Seven Seals of God had brought about God's great war, Armageddon, against them. It was the last war, Simon knew from reading his bible. It would bring about the peace on earth that God had promised.

Simon pulled the trigger of his fully automatic Ak-47, bringing the man down in an instant. He watched with hatred as the man twitched for a moment then went utterly still. Then, Simon moved forward, stepping over the body, looking for more of them. He kept an eye out at all times for bloodsuckers. Ever since the war broke out, they seemed to be everywhere. They no longer tried to hide except in the light of day. They often attacked men from both sides. The constant spilling of blood had brought them here. He knew now, though he didn't then, why some of the vampires seemed almost human while the others were anything but. It was mostly natural vampires attacking men as they fought for the fate of the country. Either way, he hated them all the same. Except for Peter. Simon hated Peter even more. The sound of explosions echoed in the distance as Simon walked onward beneath a gigantic concrete bridge towering over him. It looked almost black in the moonlight. Simon was just about to look behind himself when the glowing started again.

Everything became brighter in a brilliant white glare until flashes of red began occurring rapidly at random. This time they brought only images of different times and places in his life. He saw his father slamming the front door when he left for good. He saw his mother in her coffin on the day of her blessed funeral. He saw each and every face of the men he murdered during the great war. Then came the women. The women his disgusting addiction led him to desecrate himself with. He saw his own face struggling between pleasure and abhorrence as he let them tear apart his innocence and feel the pleasures of his flesh. Then, in a blur, he saw the Stratosphere towering in the sky as he felt a burning in his neck. At first he thought he was reliving his death, but then he realized he was physically seeing the Stratosphere.

The next moment, he became distracted by intense agony all through his body. He was actually feeling his body. He was still lying on the sidewalk, the top of his head

pressed against the brick building. But there was something else and it was all wrong. The side of his neck burned. Long black hair spread all around his right shoulder draping over different parts of his face. He screamed out hoarsely as he understood what he was feeling in the side of his neck and what the black hair belonged to. The thing smelled of mold and something else much more vile. As the burning spread out through all his veins, Simon's panic mixed with confusion as he remembered he hadn't felt this way the first time being bitten. The sensation changed. It felt electrifying. His limbs vibrated with pleasure. He felt the vampire's fangs slide, somewhat painfully, out of his flesh. It reminded him of getting stitches after the numbing shot. The tingling he felt all through his body was much more important to him at this moment. The vampire stood up, fully in Simon's view, and looked down at him. Its eyes were completely black and it smiled at him. Scraps of old black fabric hung from the crude dark tunic covering the natural vampire. Simon lay there motionless, afraid to do anything. A split second later, the thing burst into the air, still smiling down at him as it flew. Then, in a flash blurring southeast, it disappeared.

Simon didn't get up for a long time. He watched the stars in the sky. He could see countless more than ever before, even on the clearest of nights. He could see water particles hanging in the air and small wisps of cloud beyond the vision of any human being. A wave of revulsion went over him as he realized what had happened, what he had become. He recalled all the years he had spent building his righteous life. He thought of all the horrible things he would have to do now if he was going to survive. His mind raced through his memory for everything he could recall about the filthy abominations. He began to sob as he lifted into a sitting position, bringing his knees to his chest. Tears flooded down his face. Even his emotions seemed to be amplified.

He gripped the knees of his pants as he wept bitterly, ripping them. He looked at the torn material in both of his fists and threw it at the ground. He used his right shoulder to wipe away some of the tears. As soon as his shoulder was close, he smelled what he knew to be Peter's scent there. He wasn't sure how he knew this, he just knew. His pain and horror faded to the back of his mind. He stood up quickly and deliberately. He could sense a trail of motion with Peter's scent. His heart was screaming out "Kill him." Simon made no hesitation. He broke into a run that caused the concrete and blacktop below him to burn into the rubber of his shoes. The friction of the wind warmed his body as he began following the scented trail. An exciting feeling came from inside his mouth. His canines extended. A shudder went through his body as he imagined himself ripping Peter apart with his bare teeth.

## Chapter 7

### The Shadow of Death

A shrill scream came from behind Hank and echoed off the surrounding houses. Although it was distant, Hank recognized the shrieking. It sounded just like the first vampire he'd encountered. He hooked his thumbs in the straps of his backpack, took a deep breath, and ran. He could see nothing but abandoned houses and empty streets. He veered toward the house closest to him. The house had a more modern style than most of the others. What little he could make out of the fading, cracked paint on the outside walls was a very dull gray.

The screeching sounded again, coming without an echo this time. Hank looked back as he ran and saw three dark figures flying above the houses several blocks behind him. He faced forward again just in time to see the far corner of the house right in front of him. He grabbed it and slid down onto the dusty ground beside the structure as if he were sliding into home.

Peeking around the corner of the house, lying on the ground, Hank could see the creatures still coming for him. *Sense of smell, you idiot*, he thought. Hiding was of no use unless he could hide somewhere that would block his scent. He sat back against the house, scrambling to figure out what to do. He thought about drinking more blood and making a good run for it. But after his recent clash with his surroundings, he decided that would not work.

His next thought also involved drinking more blood but this time using its power to help him fight back against the monsters. But he knew he would have to use the remaining blood he had in order to pull it off. He was sure he couldn't do that if he wanted to make it the rest of the way out of the city alive.

A loud, piercing scream came from one of the vampires and echoed strangely off of the next house. They were much closer now. The instant the sound hit his ears, he jumped to his feet out of animal instinct. Seeing a solitary reflection of neon glow halfway toward



the back of the building, he went directly for it. If he was right, the light reflected off a window. As he came closer, he confirmed it.

The window hung low enough that he might be able to climb in if he could open it. He tried to push up on the window. It wouldn't budge. He took a few steps back away from the house. Then with a running start, he jumped, shoulder first, and slammed into the glass, hitting it with a thud. He fell backward from the spring of the impact. The window seemed to stare back at him unimpressed.

A shrill rattle pierced through his ears. He looked up and could barely see the outline of a figure coming into view just above the roof of the house. Two glassy black eyes from the pale face of the figure were the only things peering out from the darkness.

\* \* \*

When Peter arrived at the top of the tower, he wasn't surprised at all by the less-than-warm welcome he received. As he opened the door leading out to the round balcony of the tower, he found all four of the other vampires waiting eagerly at their table when he knelt timidly before Ishan. This did surprise him. Ishan sat at the head of the table as he always did.

"Where is this convict and why have you not brought him to us?" Ishan asked while motioning for Peter to stand.

"I almost had him. I followed the sound of his heartbeat to an old house and timed it perfectly. But he moved almost as fast as we can," Peter said.

"You expect us to believe this?" Ishan asked.

"Wait. There's more. His strength was like mine as well. That, combined with the blade he carried, gave him the upper hand over me," Peter explained in a rush. The council members not openly pitying Peter showed him obvious contempt. He looked at them pleadingly. Ishan gazed back at him with a dark expression.

"Only a human vampire could match your speed and strength, Peter. What could you possibly gain from letting this man go?" Ishan asked.

"No, he had a mortal heartbeat. I have nothing to gain from trying to deceive you. You have to understand. This man was different. He was..." Peter began shaking his hand in mid air as if the words were there for him to catch. "He - he - I could smell the blood of the ancestors on his breath," he finally got out in a quick, excited shout. A change came over each vampire's expression. They were all intrigued and some of them even a little confused. But Ishan looked concerned.

"The blood of the ancestors?" Rachel asked as they all stared at Peter in awe.

"Yes, it was on his breath and I could also smell some more. I think it was contained somewhere within a backpack he wore. In some sort of sealed container, I think. The smell was weak but different than just a trace would be. It was almost... subtle," Peter said beginning to calm down. He followed the rest of his equals as they turned their eyes to Ishan who sat in intense concentration.

"Where is this man now?" Ishan asked.

"He was traveling west. I came to warn you as quickly as I could. I sent four ancestors after him. The four of them should be able to finish him quickly if they haven't already."

"No," Ishan said, bursting from his chair, lunging toward Peter and grabbing him violently by the collar. Peter's ancient master was beginning to frighten him. He now witnessed more emotion from the vampire than in the entire two centuries he had known him. He was unable to keep from showing the shock that he knew was all over his face. He opened his mouth to offer retrieving the man when, in a flash, Ishan was gone. The rest of the council sat, their mouths still gaping.

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Hank's heart beat at an alarming rate as he looked up at the vampire circling the sky above him. The other two were getting louder now as they approached nearer to his position. He rose from the ground clutching his shoulder. He tried again to push the window up. As his hands slipped over the glass surface, more screeching bellowed out above him. He made a decision before he could stop himself and knelt down low as the vampire's screams bounced off the nearest house. A moment later the backpack was open and he took a small, calculated swallow from the red thermos that was now very nearly empty. In movements faster than he could carry out or witness without the blood, he put the thermos in the backpack and slung it into place. Then he jumped, somersaulting himself through the window with a loud crash of breaking glass.

For a split second he landed on his feet then fell backwards onto the dark, hardwood floor inside the house. He put his hands out to catch himself and cut open his right palm on some of the glass scattered on the floor. His hand started to heal before his eyes as he stood up staring at the seemingly magical process. Then, he looked around the room. The walls were colored with a light wood finish. The room seemed to be empty save for some familiar silver stringy patterns draped in random places.

The screeching came again, grabbing his attention. This time it seemed to be causing a strange reaction in him. He not only heard the sound with his ears but he also heard it in his head. Only, in his head, he heard it as very simple words he could understand. The words he heard were *man* and *house*. When this clicked in his brain, Hank ran toward the back of the house looking for some sort of escape route. As the kitchen came into view, he saw a downward stairway and ran for it.

When his momentum brought him headlong into the linoleum-floored kitchen complete with ancient pale appliances, he found the floor in this room much slicker than where he'd taken off from. His feet slipped out from under him and he fell hard on his back. He felt a slight crack in his vertebrae and then a moment of excruciating pain later it seemed to be gone. He quickly lifted himself up from the floor and dove for the stairway as the sound of shattering glass filled the room from every direction.

As if to corroborate what Hank was hearing, a sharp pain shot through his left shoulder blade. He reached back and touched a piece of glass with his hand. One of the dirty, powdery-faced creatures watched him with cat-like eyes as it struggled to get the rest of the way through the window. Hank pulled out the piece of glass, turned, and threw the blood-smeared shard at the vampire. It stuck into the creature's chest, unnoticed. Hank turned back around and quickened his pace. He had no idea where he was going and started to realize he might not have anywhere *to* go. He was glad he drank the vampire blood when he did since he could now see well inside the lightless basement. He

hoped against hope the basement might lead to some sort of trap door or otherwise hidden exit he could use to escape the house and his pursuers.

Another screech came from upstairs sounding inside his head as simply *underground*. The sound was followed by several explosions of wood, insulation, and drywall all around him. He was surrounded by a white cloud of dust beginning to clear and revealing three vampires poised like cats ready to attack.

One of them jumped on Hank's right shoulder and sunk its teeth into the back of his neck. Hank leaned forward, grabbed the vampire with his left arm, and flung it over his body, causing the vampire's teeth to rip out a chunk of his flesh. A strong burning sensation came from the wound as he lunged forward before the other two vampires could get hold of him. As he came forward, the vampire he'd thrown got back up just in time for Hank to slam into him head-on. Then, inertia kept the two bodies going and they smacked into the cement wall. The vampire fell to the floor and seemed to be scooting away. Hank was a little dizzy but otherwise okay.

He shook his head for a moment to bring back reality. He took a quick look at the wall then back behind himself. The wall was solid, a clear dead end. The two vampires still in the fight were launching forward, their yellow eyes glowing in the darkness. Hank saw them in the dark in a sort of negative film view as they flew toward him.

He went for his machete, but it was too late. One of the vampires latched onto his right shoulder with its teeth. The other grabbed hold of his arm and sank its teeth in, its eyes glazing over. Hank's right hand rested on the machete handle as they drank his blood where he stood. He tried to shake them off and pull the machete free.

The pain in his shoulder made it daunting to lift his right arm with the weight of the blade. But he managed to punch the vampire in the face, knocking it loose from his shoulder and freeing the machete at the same time. He brought it upward from its sheath, striking the vampire he just knocked from his shoulder underhand.

The blade sliced open its abdomen and the creature fell backward onto the floor. He then brought the blade back towards himself and thrust it into the other one's back. The vampire broke free from his arm and hissed at him as it tried to make its way for his neck. He tackled the creature from himself and bolted for the stairway that brought him into the basement.

He made it to the top of the stairs with one long jump. Then he leapt again even farther, sending himself through the opening that had been the window the vampire came through. As he fell to the ground, he heard new screeching from directly above him. He fell about ten feet down to the ground and landed on his hands and knees. He sprang clumsily to his feet and ran toward the neighboring yard.

He could move without any pain now. After a few minutes of running through the dust and tumbleweeds, he heard two screeches erupt in the air just behind him. He turned to judge their distance, turned back, and without nearly enough notice, saw a tan wooden fence he hadn't spotted before. Right after seeing the fence, he struck it hard with his entire body, unable to slow himself down in time. He busted through and fell face down on the ground.

Before he could get back up, the two vampires behind him had leapt on him, holding him down to the ground and sinking their teeth in his back. He tried to struggle, but could feel the life force drain from him as they helped themselves to his blood. The extra senses

started to fade and he started to panic. Before long, his normal vision became blurry and the sounds of the creatures sucking his blood faded off in the distance.

Hank no longer had the strength to hold back his pain. He wept as Diana's pale, lifeless face appeared in his mind's eye. She looked just like she had the day he buried her. Except for the mouth. Her long, silky, straight black hair framed her face and her vivid, blue eyes looked desolately into nothing. But now two long pearly fangs protruded downward from her mouth. Her soft lips formed into a savage grin. The image abruptly vanished as two more pairs of fangs pierced into his flesh.

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In what were to him a series of simple motions, Ishan caught the scent of the man from Peter's body, turned, and dove off the side of the tower in the span of a microsecond. The wind gusted up around him as his body fell toward the pavement below, the man's scent still fresh in his mind. The experience wasn't particularly thrilling to him, though it was certainly a break from his usual routine. What was really compelling, he thought as he plummeted, was what Peter had told him about the convict. Convicts didn't last long in the city. It never dawned on Ishan the blood of the ancestors might, on its own, have any effect on a human. From what the human vampire scientists had learned so far, the ancestors produced a venom that, when released into a human blood stream, caused the transformation from human to human vampire.

He already knew from his own experience the human vampires were unable to produce this venom themselves and therefore couldn't make other human vampires. He also remembered the venom had traces of ancestor blood within it. But this man's heart beat as though he were still human. This was all so new to Ishan. It took a lot of experimentation and research to learn what they had so far, but it had never been thought of to feed ancestor blood to a human and observe the result.

Now, here was a live specimen. A human being who managed to find something they had not in merely a few hours. But as Ishan landed on the blacktop, causing a small earthquake, something else about the situation bothered him more. Exciting as this news was, it would also be very dangerous for the vampires and perhaps others as well. Ishan began to run. He reached a speed of roughly two hundred kilometers an hour in only a few short seconds. If the Empire found out the blood of the ancestors could give humans the strength of a human vampire, they would surely come to claim it as their own. They would use it against their enemies. They would want to learn to harvest the ancestors' blood for themselves. They would want to know so much that had been, for centuries, kept safely secret. With that thought, Ishan mentally pushed himself and gained another twenty kilometers per hour in speed.

He had covered thirty or so city blocks when he caught the man's scent and began following it. It led well beyond the once-commercial districts of the city. He could make out a faint human heartbeat, its rate dropping quickly. Ishan's memory flashed for a moment to the taking of the city and his expression became bitter with distaste. If the ancestors hadn't needed the blood of so many, he would have let some of them go. For centuries now, it took all of Ishan's will to keep his compassion for them secret. He was sure if Peter found out, there would be no stopping what would come. The others would overthrow him. Peter would manage to gain their loyalty and they would help him take

Ishan's blood. Once Peter had the blood, he would have all of Ishan's power. Ishan would die and Peter would be the strongest human vampire alive.

It was exactly how Ishan gained his place over a thousand years before. Had it really been so long? Eight centuries before Peter had even been pulled from his mother's mortal womb, Ishan, just over half his current age, took the blood from Romulus. Romulus had founded the city of Rome along with his brother Remus, in 753 B.C. Then, he killed his brother and disappeared into obscurity only to sit back and watch as his creation engulfed everything in its path. Romulus had only been a few hundred years older than Ishan when he killed him. So, the biggest impact was the change in leadership. But if Peter were to take Ishan's blood, there was no way to know what it would do to him. If Peter survived, the nearly three-thousand-year-old blood would give him unmatched strength and speed.

All these thoughts ran through Ishan's mind as he turned corners, leapt over buildings, and slammed through trees while following the man's scent. As he cleared a house made of gray stone, the smell hit him intensely. The heartbeat was incredibly slow now. When he landed perfectly on his feet, he stopped and felt all the energy from his body burst into the pavement. A moment later, with little effort, he bounced out of the small crater the shockwave of his landing had made. He stalked through a cloud of black smoke expelled from the small explosion of blacktop. He followed the man's scent as it led him three houses down from where he landed. The heartbeat was almost gone now. Ishan came to the dusty yard of a dull gray house. With a movement of sheer grace, Ishan flashed through the yard and stood over the man. The convict lay on the ground just inside the demolished opening of a tan fence. Four ancestors were latched onto him, draining the last of the blood from his lifeless body.

## Chapter 8

### Message Undeliverable

The padded room sounded just as dead and artificial to Toby as it did the last time he'd slept there. By his count, it was the fifth day since he arrived at the orphanage and his fourth day in solitary confinement. He sat curled up with his legs intertwined at the head of the small bed, his blanket wrapped around him. This time the excuse for putting him in here was a fear for *his* safety. After finding him curled up on the floor of the outside hall, they said they were afraid he would try to hurt himself. So, this time they only allowed him a bed, a pillow, a blanket, and a bathroom. And though things were bleak and could only seem to get worse, he did feel a slight glimmer of hope. He could feel it in the very core of his existence, shining dimly like a single star in a dark cloudy sky. It was just that this one tiny star was surrounded by so much darkness. He shuddered as he breathed in, replaying the memory of his father being carried away from him. He swallowed and told himself he would just have to keep his focus on that single star.

He sat on the bed looking at the wall ahead of him. Pure white foam lined the walls in square, puffy patterns. Even the door, which stood directly in the center, was covered in the same fluffy-looking design. The only things in the room which didn't look like they were made out of clouds from heaven above were the four cameras, one hanging at each corner of the ceiling. The irony of the situation had dawned on him early on. They claimed to be afraid that, because he'd become so upset, he might be self destructive. With his father about to be executed or maybe already having been, what else was he supposed to feel? But here they went putting him in a locked room, leaving him with nothing but his thoughts.

He had almost fallen asleep staring at the glaring white wall when he heard the doorknob jiggle. He hazily looked up, confused by what he saw. The door was cracked open and a sly blurry face peaked inside the room. Toby blinked hard a few times to remedy the blurriness. After three times, when he opened his eyes, he was finally able to

focus on the crooked grin hanging in the doorway. His heart went into overdrive as his brain matched the pattern of the face with its correct owner. Craig Thompson grinned wider when he saw that Toby had recognized him.

In the next instant, Craig came inside the room, closed the door behind him, and sneered down at Toby. Toby reached behind himself with as much stealth as he could manage. When he felt the bottom of the blanket, he hesitated for a second and then threw his arms forward, throwing the blanket overhand at Craig. As his opponent focused on the projectile coming for his head, Toby launched himself head first at Craig's unguarded abdomen. He was able to tackle him to the ground but his advantage didn't last long. Craig spun himself around as he stepped back up on his feet and swung an angry kick with his left leg into Toby's side. The blow knocked the air out of Toby's lungs. He fell forward flat on the ground and rolled onto his back as he tried to no avail, to draw air.

After a moment, he managed to breathe, but it was painful. Craig's expression now became one of cold hostility. He knelt forward, pressing his kneecap into Toby's chest and pinning the younger boy's arms down with his enormous hands. Toby tried kicking his legs to get free or at least get a good hit in but it was no use. As soon as he would get closer to Craig with his feet, the huge lanky boy would cringe and push harder with his knee, piercing Toby's solar plexus with excruciating force. After a few more tries, Toby gave up and tried relaxing his muscles. As Craig continued to look down at him, that vicious grin returned. He leaned forward so his face was only an inch in front of Toby's. Toby's eyes almost crossed trying to refocus. Craig looked from one eye to the other, waiting until Toby could see him in all clarity.

"Tonight's the night you know," he said gently but with a sort of glee.

Toby didn't understand what he was talking about. Realizing this, Craig went on.

"In about an hour and a half a bus full of convicts will arrive in sin city just in time to pay their dues," he said, his eyes lighting up. "And I'm sure I don't have to tell you, little Toby, that your daddy is one of 'em."

Toby's heart went into his throat and he felt a stiffening in all of his body. In one quick spasm, he sucked in all the phlegm he could gather into his mouth and blasted it up into Craig's face. Craig let go of his arms, scrambling to wipe the mess from his face. In that moment of surprise, Toby swung his left fist into Craig as hard as he could. The punch knocked him out of the way. Toby stumbled to his feet and ran for the front, right corner jumping and waving his arms in front of the camera. He would have screamed, too, if he thought it would do any good.

As he jumped and flailed his arms, he heard something behind him. The next thing he knew, Craig held him in a full Nelson, lifting him off the ground. He felt warm, quick breath on his left shoulder.

"It's pointless to try and get someone's attention when there's no one even there to see you," Craig said in a triumphant whisper. "My friend Byron mans these cameras at night. He loves to smoke. In fact, he loves to smoke so much that if I happen to supply him with a few packs of his favorite brand, he'll gladly take a break from watching the camera of my choice," he added with arrogance.

Toby tried again to struggle but could only manage so much before the pain of Craig's squeezing, pulling his shoulders slightly from their sockets, became too much to bear. Toby's face began to soak with tears streaming from his eyes as he realized he was

losing sight of that one tiny point of light that grounded him. As he wept, he felt vibration from behind him. He knew it was Craig's laughter.

"Why don't you just kill me already?" Toby shouted in sobs.

"Oh, that would be too easy and not nearly enough fun," Craig said and laughed. "It will be much more fun to watch you die inside tomorrow when the news comes on the cafeteria TV and they list the names of those confirmed executed."

Exhausted, Toby lamely struggled again for a moment only to be overpowered all the same. In a powerful jolt, Toby felt his body thrown forward and he landed on the bed. Behind him came the sound of Craig slapping his hands together as if to dust them off.

"You have yourself some sweet dreams, now Toby, okay?" Craig said in between laughing. Then, Toby heard the door open and latch shut. He rolled over and looked up. Craig was gone.

He wondered if Craig spoke the truth. Was tonight really the night? Would Toby's father, the only person left in this world that mattered to him anymore, be drained of his blood by monsters tonight? He felt a shiver erupt through his body at the thought. He wondered how bad it would hurt. If his father would think of him. If he would cross the threshold of death and find Diana, or pass away into an unknowing oblivion. With that thought a long-forgotten memory flooded into his mind. He saw Diana on her death bed. He remembered the moment clearly now. His father had gone to get the two of them lunch. Diana hadn't been conscious the entire day. But for a brief moment while her husband was gone, she woke. She recognized Toby and asked him to come close. When he came close enough she kissed his cheek and smiled at him warmly.

"It won't be much longer," she said as if she were talking about the end of a season or a bad storm.

Toby didn't know what to say. As he looked at her like a deer in headlights, she spared him the need to speak and continued.

"It's okay, Toby. It's just the way of things, you know. I'm in so much pain right now. When it happens, well, I'll get a break from all of that, now, won't I?" she asked, looking into his eyes with a weak smile. She coughed fiercely for a moment then started to speak again as she grabbed Toby's hand, squeezing it tight. "When I'm gone, I want you to tell your father something for me. It's important. He's not going to want to hear it for a while. I know he won't. But when he's ready, and I know you'll know it when he is, I need you to tell him this," she said before giving him the message. He squeezed his blanket firmly as he remembered this long-ago moment frozen in the back of his mind, obscured by daily life, adjusting to the loss of the only mother he ever knew. He never delivered the message and, now that his father was about to follow Diana to that cold place beyond the known, he would never be able to, either.



## **Chapter 9**

### **For Toby**

In the darkness that surrounded him, Hank began to see flashes of memories. He saw his father go off to fight in the great war in his United States Army fatigues. He saw his mother stand over his father's casket in the graveyard the day they buried him, just a month before Hank's fourteenth birthday. He saw Toby the day he was born, the little tuft of short golden hair barely covering his head. Then, he saw Diana. This time, he saw her from right before she died. Toby and Hank had spent the last month with her in her room at the hospital. Those last days she looked so drained and weak to him. She had always been strong and supportive, but now, she needed the support. Hank's face became red and irritated from the steady flow of tears covering it. Why did this have to happen to her? She was only thirty-seven. Hank held her hand as she lay there unable to speak, her chest rising regularly as her body took deep gasps of air.

The cancer snuck up on them. Hank and Diana had known each other for 17 years and shared only 10 of those years together. They met through Billy Mayfield just three years after the great war ended, during Hank's sophomore year of college. At the time, Diana was Billy's girl. Diana and Hank hit it off immediately. Hank constantly had to remind himself that she was with Billy. Through the years, things changed. Hank dropped out of college, Toby was born, and Diana went on to grad school. They barely kept in touch for years until chance would have it one day Hank picked her up in his cab. The two did some light catching up and exchanged phone numbers. One day a few weeks later, Hank came home to a message on his answering machine from Diana wanting to get together sometime. The next week the two of them took Toby, who was by then a strapping toddler with unruly blonde hair, to Eagle Creek Park for the day. Diana adored Toby and Toby took to her instantly. Within a few short months, Hank and Diana were married and bought a house on the west side of Indianapolis.

Diana was every bit as perfect for Hank as he always thought she would be. Toby already started calling her Mom before they even married. By the time they found the cancer, Toby was thirteen and already rebuilding his first car. He probably barely remembered that she was not his biological mother. The three of them were as close as any family could be, closer than most. Hank and Toby watched that day as her breath quickened faster and faster until she gripped hard on Hank's hand and then went limp. When the nurse took Diana's pulse and declared the time of death, Hank and Toby held each other and grieved over her empty body.

Hank watched this scene as though it were a movie. Only this was his life and his pain. It seemed so real, like he relived it. He wanted to die. He looked at Diana's face and the grief overcame him. She's dead, he thought, feeling the neverending shock of truth. Three years now and still it never failed to overcome him. He knew it would continue for as long as he dared to keep breathing. *So, why not just give up*, he thought. Maybe, just maybe, he could be with her again. Maybe he didn't have to fight so hard to stay alive. Maybe he didn't have to go through the pain day in and day out just to be there for Toby. Then, he felt a wave of deeper grief followed by intense guilt. Toby. How could he be so weak when Toby needed him so much?

He made himself detach from his feelings, reminding himself it was the past. He watched as a slightly younger version of himself and Toby hugged each other desperately. These last few years had all been for Toby. Hank made himself remember what was here and now and what was important. He was shocked to feel tears stream down his face as he made this decision. With the present filling Hank's mind, a desperation flashed over him. He knew he had to get up. For Toby. He had to get out of this place and find his son. He put all of his will into waking up. He thought of Toby growing up over the years. He pictured all the dangerous possibilities that could happen to the boy if Hank didn't make it. He told himself what he knew to be true within his heart.

Diana would want him to be there for Toby. Diana would want him to be strong. With that last thought, his will grew and he felt the darkness slip away. His eyes fluttered as he saw a different kind of darkness. After a moment, he realized he could see the ground really close to his face. Strange hands had wrapped around his head and pain seared in his neck. He experimentally tried to blink. It was pretty weak at first, but after a few tries he found he could do it. He could see the arms of the creatures as they held tightly to his head. His vision went in and out of focus as he felt the life continuing to drain out of him. Then, he opened his mouth wide. He took a deep breath and lunged his teeth into one of the vampire's arms. He heard a hiss come from directly above his ears and then it turned into a whole spectrum of sound after the creature's blood trickled into his mouth.

\* \* \*

At first, Ishan thought the recovery of the convict's heartbeat was a figment of his imagination. But when the man bit hard into the ancestor's arm and began lifting himself up with three ancestors still attached to him, Ishan felt the greatest mix of surprise and excitement he had in years. He called to the ancestors in their tongue to let the man go. They obeyed with some resistance and floated up beyond his reach. The man looked up at

them as if they should feel lucky to be flying at all. He didn't seem to notice Ishan. Ishan knew he could do this the easy way and take the man prisoner. But he also knew he would need the man to trust him to be of any value. So, he looked at the man, wet his lips, and spoke.

\* \* \*

"Well done," a voice said from behind Hank.

Hank flipped himself around as quickly as he could, poising into a battle stance, vampire blood dripping down his chin. Before him stood a slightly short, light-complected man with long, black hair, black eyes wearing a nice black suit. The man smiled at him like you would smile at an animal you wanted to come to you. Hank stood still, waiting for the right moment to attack. A great urge came over him to drink more of the blood. It was so strong he almost started to look around for the backpack that came loose from him at some point.

"It's okay, Mr. Evans. I'm not here to harm you," the man said calmly, his smile becoming more genuine. Hank smiled back with mocking disgust.

"Just like your buddy wasn't trying to harm me either, huh? Or these filthy, flying fuckers here?" he shouted, pointing up at the four floating creatures who hissed in return. The man in black laughed with great amusement. Hank had to fight to keep from also laughing at his own tongue twister. He pulled his mouth out of the smile it was trying to make into the best look of distrust he could muster.

"I assume you are speaking of Peter. Peter is hardly my... *buddy*," he said, emphasizing the word with contempt.

Hank could see the sheer honesty in this statement and started to slightly relax. Had this man called off the vampires hovering above him?

"Henry, do you mind if I call you 'Henry'?" the black-haired vampire asked.

Hank sighed. He hoped his gut was telling him the right thing.

"Call me Hank," he said, loosening his stance.

"Very well. Hank. My name is Ishan," he said and then paused a moment. "Ishan Achari," Ishan added with obvious reluctance.

The vampire was going beyond his own comfort level to extend a sincere greeting to him. Hank saw this as a sign he had some sort of advantage, but what that could be, he couldn't begin to imagine. He nodded to Ishan as politely as he could manage.

"What do you want, Mr...." Hank closed his eyes for a second to think "Achari?" he asked.

"First of all, I would prefer you refrain from calling me by my father's name. Second, I need the opportunity to study you," Ishan said dryly.

"You need to what?" Hank asked.

"I need to study you. You have stumbled upon something rather remarkable. Something we never found in all our centuries of research. You see, no human has ever drunk the blood before," Ishan said.

"And what if I don't want to let you study me?" Hank asked. He was going to find out just how bad this vampire really did *need* him.

"Then, I will need to find a way to persuade you," Ishan said and then added, "peacefully... beneficially."

Hank looked at him sternly, thinking about what this meant. Could it be this easy? Could he simply let this man study him and find a way to find Toby? How? How could this vampire do anything to protect Toby? He was sure that he couldn't be studied if he was allowed to leave the city. He let his expression falter.

"I don't think you can do that," he said regretfully.

"Surely, Mr. Evans, there must be something that you want," Ishan said.

"There is. But it's not going to be possible. I want my son. I want him to be safe and the only way I know that can happen for sure is for me to take care of him myself," he explained. Ishan was about to speak, but Hank continued. "Now, I'm certainly not stupid enough to have him brought here. And I'm also not too dim to believe that you will be able to *study* me if I leave the city. Besides, how would you pull it off? I'm sure the Empire won't allow it."

"Hank, the Empire need not be involved. I'm not sure that I have a solution to your problem, but I can assure you it would be best if you let me seek one out."

"What happens if you can't and I decide to walk away?" Hank asked, though he was sure he knew the answer.

"Then I will escort you safely from this city myself," Ishan said with a strange look of pride in his expression. Hank had an impression that there was something more to this vampire than all the others, especially the one Ishan had called "Peter". An aura of power emanated from Ishan. From his gestures, his cordiality, his manner of speaking, right down to the look in his eyes. If he was lying, he could have fooled even the most crooked politician.

## **Chapter 10**

### **The Implant**

Simon stood facing the back of the demolished house Peter's scent had led him to. He could now smell several other strange odors mixing in with Peter's. He jumped up into the large damaged opening and started looking around inside. He saw plenty of scattered debris of drywall, wood, and tile covering most of the kitchen floor. As he continued on into the dining room, he couldn't help but notice the large, pulverized table on the floor. It was obvious not all of the damage was due to an impact. What he saw in the dining room were signs of a struggle. Simon couldn't help but wonder who Peter would be struggling with, though.

After a few minutes of investigating the place, Simon decided to try and single out Peter's scent and follow it farther. He climbed back out and went around to the side of the house. There he noticed one of the other smells again, only much stronger. A deep, longing feeling in his gut told him it belonged to a human. He mentally followed the scent in the direction it led. A radical change came over him. It came at the moment he realized he could now also smell the blood of that same human. He no longer cared about finding Peter. A desire beyond any human emotion to follow the human trail overtook him.

As he took long, staggering steps, following the intoxicating fragrance of that blood, he became dizzy with the intensity of his yearning. It took a concentrated effort, but he was able to coordinate himself enough so that he could run. The wind began to pick up, filling his nose with the heavenly odor, as he soared forward. He closed his eyes with anticipation of the taste he now knew to be the core of his new existence. It was as if all his mental, physical, and emotional desires could be quenched with the mere taste of that blood.

He noticed the smell becoming tainted with another as he got closer. It was a strong dust smell mixed with new pavement. He couldn't recall ever really recognizing it before;

yet, it was as though he had known its identity all along. His new body made no sign of being affected by the black, dusty smoke clouding around him. He could see through it enough to take careful note of the large hole in the road. When he came to it, timing it just right, he leapt over it, and landed on the other side. He felt a twinge of himself come back as an old anger reminded him why he shouldn't be enjoying himself.

But before he could feel guilty, the scent of blood overwhelmed him as he realized he was close to its source. A moment later, he blazed through the other side of the dark, dusty cloud, the air clearing instantly in front of him. About a hundred meters before him, he saw the man and someone he hadn't expected. It was Ishan. Only now as he looked at him through this new, strange vision, he saw a sort of energy pulsating and flowing outwardly from the vampire. It surprised him enough to make him flinch but the desire was too strong to be held back. He lunged toward the man in a burst of speed. He saw a flash of blurry movement just before his teeth sank in. Immediately, he knew something was wrong. This was not the taste he had been longing for. There *was* no real taste. But plenty of pain. Something akin to electricity jolted throughout his body. It felt like he'd bitten into a power line. The temperature of his blood rose. The jolting intensified and his veins were on fire. All the fluids in his body began to evaporate. Images were swirling around in his mind. They made no sense. He saw a large ancient structure. He thought he recognized it, but he didn't know precisely what it was. Something from Greek or Roman history. He couldn't be sure. He saw a dark cave. Within the cave glowed two yellow, cat-like eyes. The image became clearer as if he were moving closer. The shadow decreased, revealing the creature's face. It reminded Simon of the natural vampires he saw in Mediator training videos but only vaguely. The face was longer, more oval. The features softer, more delicate than what he witnessed in his training. Before the darkness overtook him, Simon realized he must be dreaming. One of the few things known about them, natural vampires were asexual. There were no females.

\* \* \*

Hank took a deep breath realizing he was still alive. Ishan stood facing away from him. The blonde, desperate-looking creature that caught Hank off guard and dived right for his throat was slumped over Ishan's shoulder, his teeth buried into Ishan's neck. He looked as though he were in agony the whole time. Now, he hung from Ishan's shoulder completely limp. Ishan leaned forward, turning to face Hank at the same time, and gently pulled the vampire from his neck. He laid the body carefully on the ground, then knelt down to study the creature and sighed.

"Are you all right?" Ishan asked.

"Uh, yeah. A little shaken, I guess, but I'll be just fine."

"Good."

"Is he dead?" Hank asked, looking at the vampire's frozen expression.

"No, at least not ultimately."

"Why did he lunge after me like that? I was under the impression that you were some kind of leader here," Hank said, beginning to doubt Ishan's promises.

"I am. This was a case of fledgling blood lust. You see, Mr. Evans, you would have given him his first quickening. He can't have been infected more than an hour or so now."

"Infected? Are you telling me that this is some kind of disease?" Hank asked, pointing down at the unconscious vampire's bared fangs.

"No, Mr. Evans, not quite exactly," Ishan said in a tone that told Hank it would be in his best interest to be silent a while. Ishan reached out and picked up the body with one hand and gently set it over his shoulder, stood up, and turned to face Hank.

"Shall we?" he asked, stretching his free arm forward in a "right this way" gesture. Hank obliged, reluctantly.

\* \* \*

Jeffrey only meant to take a five-minute nap before he fell asleep. Now he wondered just how long it had been since he sat at his desk with his now-cold cup of coffee. It was a strange sounding alarm that woke him. He looked at the glowing computer screen in front of him to see what time it was and what was going on. Most of the screen filled with a giant red font that read: "Warning: Five Hour Threshold Complete." He cursed as he realized he'd slept for three hours. He would really be lucky to keep his job. He should have notified his superior once the three-hour threshold had been crossed, let alone the five-hour threshold. In fifteen years, no one had ever reached the three-hour threshold, so he never dreamed it would become a problem.

For a split second, he wondered if he should try to wait it out in the hopes that whatever lucky son of a bitch made it this long wouldn't last much longer. Then, his more reasonable side won over and he picked up the phone, almost dropping it from his sweaty palm. He dialed Chuck Lotinger's number as his finger kept shaking over the buttons. As soon as he touched the last button, the dull drone of ringing began to sound from the ear piece. His heart seemed to swell with anticipation as he waited for his boss to answer the phone. After the fifth ring, a groggy, angry voice answered.

"Somebody had better be dead!" Chuck growled over the receiver.

Jeffrey swallowed hard. Chuck wasn't a fun guy to talk to under normal circumstances. Jeffrey was unsurprised to note he would be even more unpleasant in this particular situation.

"Well, sir, it's Jeffrey. Actually the problem is more that someone is still alive." Jeffrey heard some commotion over the phone and then Chuck replied.

"Are you talking about what I think you're talking about, Mr. Avery?"

Jeffrey cringed hard as he went to answer.

"Yes, sir. I know I should have called two hours ago. I fell asleep, sir. It's never happened before. It won't happen again," Jeffrey explained in desperation.

"You're damn right it won't happen again. Start tracking vitals. I'll be there in less than fifteen minutes. You'd better hope for your sake that this guy doesn't become the first to make it to sunrise!" Lotinger hung up, leaving a dial tone buzzing in Jeffrey's ear.

Jeffrey put the phone down in a daze, wondering how he would tell his wife he lost his job. Then, it dawned on him that he could be charged with futility for this mistake. After a few minutes of freaking out, he snapped out of it and followed the orders Chuck had just given him. Hopefully, this man wouldn't last. He typed in the command *LV* to bring up the man's current vitals. The cursor spun to show the computer working. *Connecting...* appeared on the screen. When the vitals from the man's wireless implant finally came up, Jeffrey did a double take. The man's adrenaline level went beyond a

lethal level and his blood pressure was surprisingly normal. An adrenaline reading like that should have raised the lucky bastard's blood pressure to a critical degree. His heart rate was mostly normal as well. Slightly elevated, but no more than if he were simply walking. As he got toward the bottom of the readings, Jeffrey came to brain activity. Those numbers were even more insane than the adrenaline reading. What was happening to this guy? It was like he was on some kind of super PCP or something. Only PCP had been pretty much nonexistent for 17 years now. It was wiped away with all the other illegal substances in the cleanup that followed the initiation of the Empire.

When Chuck arrived at the station, Jeffrey could barely contain himself as he spouted off information about Henry Evans's vitals. Going back through the logs, he found the man's adrenaline and brain activity had jumped back and forth several times throughout the night from normal to the plateau he was at now and back. He went over the data with Lotinger, who listened keenly. Then Lotinger asked the very question Jeffrey had expected.

"Have you run diagnostics on the implant, yet?"

"Yes, sir. Everything came back fine. Unless the diag software is corrupt, this data is the real thing," he said, smiling wide. Lotinger looked back down at the computer printouts with a worried expression.

"You think it could be anything other than a drug?" Lotinger asked, still staring at the paper.

"I don't know, sir. At first, I figured they made him into another bloodsucker. But his heartbeat is too normal for that to be the case. Plus, I don't know what to make of his vitals bouncing back to normal every once in a while," Jeffrey explained, pointing out readings in the logs on the computer screen. "It's as if this guy is some kind of Incredible Hulk or something. Almost every time his heart rate starts to accelerate, bam! It just goes right back to normal and everything else goes crazy."

"Well, Jeffrey, standard protocol would dictate we hit the kill switch on this guy. But I think you'll agree this situation warrants some investigation first. Don't you think?"

Jeffrey fought back the aggravation he felt. Chuck had purposely frightened him with the possibility of losing his job and maybe even his life. They would have just killed the poor bastard anyway so there hadn't been anything to really worry about in the first place. But he straightened himself up and spoke reasonably.

"It's definitely worth keeping an eye on. Maybe this man knows something we don't," Jeffrey said.

"Exactly. I had better make arrangements to inform Lord Caesar," Lotinger said. Then, he got up and walked out the door heading off to the left.

Jeffrey let out a long sigh. Then, he took a sip of his cold coffee as he looked over more of the logs. He was surprised to note that, just in the last hour, the subject's heart rate had almost faded out completely. But then, it went right back to normal and there was that crazy jump in activity again. Only this one wasn't following a rise in heart rate. The man was almost dead. So much for the Incredible Hulk theory. Jeffrey began to look back through the data for any other signs that could help to explain what was going on. Then, he noticed, looking back through the different occurrences of plateaus, that the rise in heartbeat couldn't have been the cause directly. There was too much variation in the amount of time and speed that the rate changed. The more he looked at the data, the more



he couldn't help but think it had to be some kind of drug. Whatever it was, it seemed to be happening on purpose.

When Chuck came back in Jeffrey's office, he was talking on his cell phone. It sounded like he was explaining the situation to the Emperor. Jeffrey tried to wait patiently and not interrupt but had always found himself unable to keep from blurting out important information when someone was on the phone.

"...yes, sir, it seems to be coming on whenever the convict's heart rate accelerates. Yes, sir. Uh-huh. I'm sorry, sir, can you hold on a second? Mr. Avery seems to have something he needs to tell me," Lotinger said, angling the phone away from his mouth and focusing his attention on Jeffrey.

"Actually, sir, I've found evidence that leads me to believe it's happening by choice and not in direct result of stress. I think it might be some kind of..." Jeffrey broke off, noticing Chuck's attention seemed to return to his phone.

"What was that, sir? Of course, sir, not a problem," Chuck said, smiling into the cell phone as he reached into the inside of his coat and pulled out a large revolver with a silencer attached. Before Jeffrey could even stand up, he heard a slight ping sound come from the barrel as it pointed at his head. The last thing he saw was Lotinger continuing his phone conversation as if nothing had happened.

\* \* \*

As Hank walked alongside Ishan, he was surprised to notice he wasn't afraid at all. He knew Ishan could easily crush him without a doubt. He also knew that, even if he drank all the blood he had left, he wouldn't be fast enough to run away. He looked curiously over at the vampire walking and carrying the one who Ishan called Simon.

"Is it difficult for you? To move at such a slow pace for me to keep up?" he asked.

A slight smile began to form on Ishan's face.

"It's actually quite refreshing. I haven't taken a walk at such a pace for many centuries. To tell the truth, I had forgotten the novelty of such a walk, seeing the stars sit still above my head for once," Ishan said, looking up at the sky and laughing in nostalgia.

"So, how old are you, if you don't mind me asking?" he asked.

Ishan looked surprised.

"Why do you seem so surprised by my question?" Hank asked.

"It's just that... if anyone else had ever wondered such a thing, be it human or vampire, they had not the courage to ask. Though I would have gladly answered," he said. "When I was still human, time was not measured so precisely as it has been for many centuries," he said.

"So, you don't know how old you are?" Hank asked with great interest.

"No, no. I do. The idea, really, the numbers are arbitrary to me. I was not born into a world with a precisely wound clock branding each moment in time with a number of reference. The human calendar is simply a mortal attempt to gain power over that which is always and forever his undoing. Ironically, in doing so, he enslaves himself even more to Father Time and his unmerciful will."

"So, you're avoiding the question then?" Hank asked, unimpressed.

Ishan laughed.

"Most vampires have less intuition in all their years. Yes, I never thought after all this time that I would feel, well.. embarrassment at the thought of telling someone my age. Maybe it's because you are human. As one who walks in darkness, I should feel proud," he said as he re-positioned Simon's limp body on his shoulder. "Not long after the venom filled my veins and I could only walk in darkness, I entered the city of Rome, a youthful Indian boy intrigued by the concept of a constitutional republic. But the Roman Republic was then still newly buried under the dirt of its successor."

"Ancient Rome?"

"Yes, ancient," Ishan said and the word *ancient* sounded like acid on his tongue.

"Wow, that's what? Two thousand years? But wait, wasn't Rome an empire like America?"

"Not then. Like the United States, Rome was once a republic based on a constitution, checks and balances, and senators. Senators who were also hunted down and murdered."

Hank took all this in slowly, trying to imagine these things. He could barely remember when his home had been called the United States. Mostly he remembered the years of chaos. He had a vague memory of singing in unison in a large room with a large crowd of people. He didn't remember most of the words but he knew they had been important somehow. As the skyline of the city began to come up seemingly from the ground, Hank remembered three words from that song, now long forgotten. Let freedom ring.

\* \* \*

"Flight 307 is ready to board," said a delicate voice over the intercom. Chuck Lotinger got up from his seat and made sure his suit was still smooth and wrinkle free. Then, he picked up his briefcase containing all the information on Henry Evans he had compiled as the Emperor had directed him to. Whatever was going on with this man sure had the Emperor worried. It was certainly out of the ordinary to have him kill an imperial employee, let alone use public transportation as a means to carry out a secret mission. But it was all in good fun and hardly a problem for Chuck. He knew secrets. After all, he had been promised the reward of a lifetime and was not about to pass it up. Not to mention the other reward he would get if he happened to find that this man Henry had managed to live through the night. He was counting on it. He wanted the man to live just so he could kill him with his bare hands, knowing that he was killing a man even the vampires hadn't managed to kill.

As he boarded the plane, Chuck wondered what was happening to Henry Evans that had the Emperor so up in arms. It wasn't like Joseph to act so irrationally.

Once Chuck was seated he looked through the file he had on Evans. He stopped when he found a picture of him from five years prior, when, according to the file, his wife had still been alive. Hank Evans smiled up at Chuck Lotinger from the photograph with bright green eyes and long shaggy, straight hair which Chuck knew from the other pictures had since been cut short. Chuck smiled back, sure deep inside himself that this man would be the first to make it out of that dreadful city alive and Chuck would be waiting for him there with an even bigger grin.

## Chapter 11

### Beneath the Neon

Stones of all different sizes littered the ground as Hank followed Ishan toward the middle of three graffitied, concrete, underground tunnels. Above the three entrance ways stood the edge of the blacktop from the highway. The tunnels sloped downward. Ishan stopped where the gravel and cement met and turned to face Hank.

"No matter what happens in here, you are not under any circumstances to drink any of that blood. Do you understand?"

"Yes," Hank answered as he exhaled.

Ishan could be scary if he wanted. The vampire nodded, turned back to the abyss ahead, and began moving forward. Hank followed wearily. He was starting to feel the effects of not sleeping. As they entered the pitch black tunnel, he was almost knocked over by the stench of mildew. Though the ceiling seemed low, neither Hank nor Ishan were tall enough to have to crouch. Ishan stopped and put one arm back for Hank to stop also. Then, he turned his head.

"You will want to stay close to me as we continue through these tunnels. They are the dwellings of the ancestors."

"The ancestors?" Hank asked, though he was pretty sure he already knew what Ishan was referring to.

"The ancestors are the others. The ones who fly. The ones who were attacking you when I found you."

"Won't they stay away from me if I'm with you?" he asked.

"Only if you stay close. Then, they will think you are mine."

"But I thought you were the leader here."

"I am the leader of my kind. The ancestors have no leader here," he said, then paused as he turned to the right to follow a different tunnel. "At night, they mostly roam the city."

This place is where they go to sleep while the sun is up. But some of them may be here at this time of night. So, keep quiet and follow me closely."

*You don't have to tell me twice*, Hank thought. He grabbed hold of the tail of Ishan's jacket and kept as close as possible.

"These tunnels used to be storm drains for the city. However, when it became ours, I had my people cover the drains with cement so the ancestors could live here. Being much like their natural habitat, it suits them well."

Hank thought the word *natural* was pushing it a bit, but decided he would keep his mouth shut. All the while, the blonde fledgling's feet hung from Ishan's shoulder. Every once in a while, Ishan would shift right and almost hit Hank with Simon's legs. Hank nearly went stiff with fright when he felt what he thought to be a large spider web scrape against the fingers of his left hand. From the feel of it, he could tell there must have been much more of it and he tried hard not to imagine the size of the spider that created it. Between the darkness, the horrible smell of the place, and the spider web he just found, Hank started to feel a strong sense of urgency he knew could easily turn to panic. He tried to calm himself but found he was on the verge of hyperventilating.

"It would be wise to calm yourself, Mr. Evans. If there are any ancestors here, they will hear you well," he said.

Hank tried to focus on the jacket tail he held in his hands. After a few minutes, he calmed enough to let his mind wander a little. Then, tossing around different aspects of what he'd learned so far, he thought about the army surplus store. That reminded him of his backpack and all its contents. He let go of Ishan's jacket with one of his hands and slowly unzipped one of the zippers on the bag. When he was sure it was open enough, he reached inside and felt around. It took a few minutes but he finally felt the hard round cylinder of the flashlight and pulled it out. Raising up on the tip of his toes, he turned the flashlight on, shining it ahead of them and over Ishan's left shoulder. Ishan let out a long annoyed sigh.

As Hank shined the flashlight over the sides of the tunnel, he was surprised to find a vast array of colorful graffiti far more artistic than he would have expected. It was like some of the world's greatest artists had holed up in this dark, dreary place with nothing but spray paint. When the flashlight shone on rusty metal handles lined upward like a ladder, Hank moved the beam up to the ceiling of the tunnel to see exactly what Ishan had been talking about. He could see metal grates with hardened cement falling through like gray mud frozen in time in mid-drip. They were about to come to another crossway of tunnels. It looked like a four-way street of tunnels. As they came closer, Hank saw swift movement and before he could make it out, Ishan shifted to the right. His arm shielded Hank from the open tunnel way they now faced. Hank couldn't see anything since he dropped his flashlight, which now illuminated the tunnel they just came from. The next second, he heard a low growl followed by a high-pitched hissing. Then, he was surprised to hear an even fiercer growl come from Ishan. He could feel its vibrations from the tail of Ishan's jacket.

He saw more movement ahead of them and was able to catch a glimpse of their adversary. It was one of the "ancestors," as Ishan called them. It appeared to be backing away down the tunnel they now faced. Ishan shifted to the right again, walking backwards and pushing Hank along as well. After a while of walking in reverse, Ishan

stopped and Hank accidentally kept going, slamming right into something hard with his back. It had some sort of ridge sticking out that Hank assumed was a door handle.

"Ow," Hank said, reaching over his shoulder to rub the sharp pain. Ishan turned to face Hank and made a gesture for him to move out of the way. He did so without question, still holding his back. He couldn't see what it was Ishan was doing but he guessed it involved entering a sort of code by some means. Then Ishan pulled at the ridge, confirming its purpose to Hank. As the door unsealed inward from the wall, bright light shone out from all around the edges in thin rays shining outward like sun rays through broken clouds. The light was no brighter than an ordinary electric light but the darkness had filled Hank's vision for so long that his eyes were extremely sensitive to it. It left large purple and blue ghost images in his field of vision.

At first, Hank was so blinded he couldn't see Ishan had went on ahead. He reached out his arms and moved forward feeling his way. He wished he was back in the pitch black of the tunnel now. At least the darkness didn't hurt his eyes like this terrible blinding light did. He closed them for a moment, squeezing hard, hoping to make the huge, bright-colored shapes go away. After blinking a few times, they faded to a dark yellow but still fought on for dear life. Then, he opened them to see Ishan standing, waiting patiently in what looked like some sort of round hallway up ahead. Hank sprinted in his direction as Ishan turned and continued walking down the strange hall. He could see through the glowing spots enough to notice several different cultural decorations on the circular walls all intermingling together into one intricate pattern. Most of these looked Oriental or African.

His eyes began adjusting to the light more as they came to the end of the hall. It ended in a huge open room with a high ceiling. He could now see that the entire place had the opposite vibe as the tunnels. The walls were a sterile white untouched by any trace of artwork and were naked in an ugly sort of way. He also noticed spotless windows of which he could see other rooms within. He followed one of the walls upward with his eyes, surprised to find they all went upward into a slope, making the ceiling look like the inside of an egg.

It seemed to Hank the vampires had also added this on after they inherited the city. Everywhere Hank looked in this place reminded him of a brand-new hospital. The large open room contained many tables with what looked like electrical equipment, computers, and various-sized glass beakers. It reminded Hank of his high school chemistry class. Among the various tables and computers were at least a dozen other pale figures in white coats all busy doing different tasks. Some typed at their computers, others read paper readouts, and others wore goggles handling small medicine droppers. Hank couldn't help but chuckle at the sight. They looked like mad scientist vampires. Their flesh almost matched the white of their coats. When they were completely in the room, Hank heard voices all around him as if he were surrounded by many people. He circled around in fright. Ishan smiled and put a calming hand on his shoulder.

"It's the shape of the room. It causes voices to equally distribute throughout," he said. "Come on. This way," he added, pointing ahead. Ishan walked toward the far wall, greeting several other vampires as he went. Hank followed, trying to calm himself and taking in his surroundings as he did so. Ahead of him, he noticed a door. Ishan stopped in front of it and turned to Hank.

"Sit here and wait for me," he said, gesturing toward a plastic chair sitting next to the door. "I must put Mr. Withers here in a safe place for the time being."

Hank took off his backpack and sat down as the door Ishan entered slammed shut. He put the backpack in his lap, holding onto it like a security blanket or a teddy bear while he looked out at the many vampires doing lab work. Some of them went back to their business while he noticed others watching him with a hungry look in their eyes. He was hoping that walking in with Ishan would label him off limits. As he looked around with more time to scrutinize the scene, he noticed something he hadn't before. Several of the vampire scientists were performing tests on subjects lying on metal tables. When he recognized what the subjects were, a chill ran up his spine. They were the "ancestors."

He noticed one exceptionally tall African-looking vampire with shoulder-length hair tied back in a pony tail in one of the windows. He was putting trays of dirt inside a machine, sifting through other trays, then picking out bones and other things Hank couldn't identify. After a while, he scanned the entire room to find all but one vampire had lost interest in him. The remaining vampire watched him intently. When Hank looked back at the vampire, an average-looking Caucasian, with brown eyes and short black hair, he returned Hank's glance with a wave and a smile. The smile appeared all the more creepy by the long yellow fangs sticking out. Hank waved back nervously with a face he was sure was anything but smiling. As soon as he lowered his arm, he looked away, slumped his head, and stared at the floor, waiting for Ishan to return.

\* \* \*

Ishan walked down a long rectangular silver hallway toward a vault door at the end. It was guarded by a single tall human vampire Ishan knew simply as Terrance. Being a leader of so many, he never recalled everyone's full name but made it a priority to at least remember their common name. As he came within ten feet of the door, Terrance nodded and stepped aside, opening the vault door for Ishan without question. Ishan nodded back and spoke.

"Wait here for me."

Terrance nodded again in acceptance. Then, Ishan angled himself so he could get through the narrow opening without disturbing the body dangling over his shoulder. Behind the door, Ishan entered a small room with several pieces of furniture and a solitary bed. It was one of several hundred public sleeping chambers kept open for any vampire to use, either human or ancestor. He carefully set Simon down on the bed, wondering if he should strap the newly born vampire to the bed, just in case. Even though he hadn't actually said it, the term *vampire* left a bad taste in his mouth. His mind filled with all the different names his kind were called over the centuries. In his native land of India some called his kind Baital, some called them Pey. In Rome and Greece, they were known as the Lamia, the Strigae, then the Vrykolakas. There were so many names as he traveled around the world. The Upir, the Skatene, the Sukuyan, the Vulkodlac, the Undead, the Vampir, the Vampyre, and more. Always, each name added its own strange variation of truth. But not a single one ever came quite close enough to the real thing.

He watched as Simon inhaled and exhaled peacefully. He wondered if he would awaken at all. For the first time since Simon bit him, he wondered just how much blood

the former Mediator took from him. If he survived, he would be something to contend with for sure. With that thought, Ishan turned and went for the door. Once he was out of the room and back in the hall, he addressed the guard.

"Who sent you?"

"Rachel, sir," he answered.

"Rachel?" Ishan asked.

Terrance nodded.

"Good. Now, I know it's not normal procedure, but I need you to clear your schedule for the foreseeable future and guard this door at night. At least, until I tell you otherwise."

"Yes, sir," Terrance said, nodding again.

Ishan decided now was the time to put Rachel's loyalties to the test. He'd known for a long time that she was sympathetic to Peter's "cause." But he wasn't yet sure how far she would be willing to go for it. Or which side she would choose if a division was ever made. It was a test. She knew Ishan would have Terrance guard the room, if he trusted her. It was imperative that he not show any signs of doubt. Besides, if Simon survived, he would be more of a threat than any of the others would expect, having consumed some of Ishan's blood. He thanked Terrance and began walking back toward the main lab.

\* \* \*

The door opened with a loud ear-splitting screech causing Hank to jump and almost fall out of his seat. He looked up, relieved to see Ishan coming through the door. Hank could tell that Ishan was aware of the tension building in him by the amusement showing on the ancient vampire's face. Hank couldn't help find it amusing as well now that, along with Ishan, his sense of logic returned. It was especially laughable when he realized if any of them were going to kill him they would have as soon as Ishan left the room. He knew how fast they could move. He had seen several more examples of their speed and precision of movement.

"Come with me. I have someone I would like you to meet," Ishan said in a welcoming voice.

Hank stood at once, wiping the sweat from his forehead. He followed as Ishan led the way toward the wall to the left of where he'd been sitting. Hank long ago lost his sense of direction within the tunnels that brought them here. The door Ishan opened, a thick white door with a single silver lever pointing downward, led into the room with the African vampire he noticed earlier. As they entered the room, the tall man turned to face them. When he recognized Hank for what he was, a flash of hunger showed on his face. It disappeared just as quickly as it came as he centered his attention on Ishan.

"What gives me the privilege, sir?" he asked politely as he slowly nodded.

"First of all, let me introduce you to my friend. Hank this is Isingoma, Isingoma this is Hank."

As he introduced them, Isingoma nodded and Hank made a slight waving gesture with his hand.

"Hank, in his short time in our city, has made a breakthrough worth our attention."

Isingoma's posture changed.

"What is this breakthrough?" he asked.

Ishan explained what he could and what he didn't know he had Hank fill in. When they finished explaining, Isingoma stood frozen, looking at Hank with a new expression of amazement on his face. It might have been dumb luck that brought about these circumstances but Hank got the impression Ishan and Isingoma felt it wasn't quite that simple.

"This is all very extraordinary. We will have to run some tests and see what is going on in his body while he's under the influence of the blood. I will call for Kato. I'm sure he will be interested in this development and we will get everything ready. The equipment is very delicate, so it will probably take us an hour or so to have everything set up," he said and then left the room in a flash.

"Meanwhile, if you want, Hank, I can take you somewhere where you can rest if you like?" Ishan asked.

"Thanks. I don't know if I can sleep in this place, but I'll sure as hell try," he said, stretching his body.

Ishan smiled and then opened the door for Hank. The two walked along the edge of the room.

"So, when should I expect to find anything out about Toby?" Hank asked.

Ishan looked thoughtfully for a moment.

"I will send word to find out where he is tonight. Once I know that, we can decide what the next move will be. I have people on the outside who will do just about anything I want that they can get away with. If we need to, I can set it up so one of them adopts your son and have him turn up missing."

"Wow, is it really worth that much to you? I mean, how do I know you won't just kill us both when you're done with me?"

"Well, I don't suppose you do. I have given my word. If that is not enough for you, all I can tell you is that I introduced you truthfully to Isingoma. You have gained my respect. Albeit in a much shorter time span than any one man has in the past, whether he be of your kind or mine," he said. "You have shown an unimaginable will to survive," he added.

"I suppose," Hank said, fighting back the river of anguish dammed within him. It was that same will to survive that went against every reflex in his being. In his sweetest dreams, Toby didn't need him to stay alive and he could release himself from the heavy burden of living. They arrived at a door much like the one Ishan took Simon through. Hank couldn't tell if it was a different door or the same one. It had a chair exactly like he'd sat in earlier. They entered the door, Ishan first, and walked into a silver hallway that reminded Hank of a vault. They followed the hallway to a circular intersection that met up with three others in a slanted X pattern. They followed the far right hallway as it curved to the left. Hank noticed many other short hallways, with vault-like doors at the end of each, branched off of the hallway they followed. He wondered what those strange rooms contained. After a while, they reached the end of the hallway and Hank was, by that time, not surprised to find yet another round solid steel door with an electronic number pad in the middle of it.

Ishan tapped numbers on the keypad, his fingers blurring with speed as Hank watched in awe. Then about a second afterwards, there was a loud metal click. It sounded like a deadbolt the size of a tree being unlatched and then the door became slightly ajar. Ishan pulled it open and gestured for Hank to enter.



"Are you sure this is necessary?" Hank asked.

"Well, there is just one small thing I haven't told you yet."

Hank didn't like the sound of that.

"Peter is still alive. And although, as I said, we are not friends, he does hold a seat on the high council of my people. He probably won't much longer, but he may be a threat to your life."

"But I cut him in half. How could he have lived?"

"There is not much that can actually kill my kind, Mr. Evans."

Hank wondered if he made the right choice after all.

"In the meantime, enjoy my quarters. Get some rest and I will come for you when we are ready for you." he said, reminding Hank of every waiting room he had ever been in.

Hank walked toward a humble bed at the far end of the small room. He heard the large door close behind him as he kicked off his shoes. He looked around trying to find the light switch. He was relieved to find it was conveniently located on the wall by the bed. He turned off the light and sighed with relief as he closed his eyes while collapsing down onto the bed. He lay there, eyes staring up at the darkness.

## Chapter 12

### The Challenge

Hank woke up to the sight of a dark-skinned, hungry-looking vampire trying to shake him awake. He became conscious enough to recognize the face floating above him was the face of Isingoma.

"What is it, Ising...uh," he tried to pronounce the foreign name in his half asleep stupor.

"Isingoma? No, I am Kato. I have been instructed to wake you. Ishan has been challenged. You must come," he shouted as he continued to shake Hank.

"All right, all right. I'm waking up. Why is it so urgent to wake me up?" he asked, looking over the vampire that looked identical to Isingoma. Judging by his sense of manners, he was obviously not him.

"So, uh, Kato, is it?"

"Yes."

"Okay. Kato, are you and Isingo-whats-it twins then?"

"You figured that out all on your own, did you?" Kato asked.

Before Hank could give him a dirty look or a snide reply, Kato picked him up from the bed and set him down on his feet.

"Ishan's leadership has been challenged because of you," Kato said, grabbing Hank by the arm and pulling him toward the open doorway.

"Why me? What did I do?" Hank asked as they entered the hallway.

"By protecting you, Ishan is taking great risks. He is risking his leadership, his life, and with what you know, he is now also risking all of us, especially the ancestors," Kato said as he led Hank down the silver corridor. "Since Ishan is being challenged because of you, you are at risk now as well. As part of his Challenge, Ishan must protect you. It is our way that if one of our kind is willing to risk another of his own for the likes of one of you," Kato said with contempt, "then he must be challenged and willing to protect your

life and his own. In Ishan's case, protecting his life also means protecting his place as leader of the council. If he should lose and the one who challenged him takes his blood, then they will take his place. If that happens, Peter would then offer your blood to the ancestors as a sign of loyalty."

As Kato said this, Hank thought of Toby and began to struggle while still being held by Kato's arm.

"You have no choice, human. You must come with me," Kato said as he held steadfast to Hank's arm.

Hank tried again to struggle, but Kato's arm was locked on him like a steel vise. He dragged Hank by the arm until they came to the main laboratory. The lab was completely empty. He walked across the silent lab until he came to an out-of-place-looking elevator door. He typed in a code on a number pad in a blur, his fingers moving too fast to even darken the glowing buttons. The elevator door opened and Kato pushed Hank in hard and blocked the doorway in a flash. It was hardly needed as Hank was lying on the floor with the wind knocked out of him.

He lay on the floor gasping for air as Kato stood facing the closed elevator doors whistling an unfamiliar tune. A sharp pain in Hank's chest told him he was on the verge of pulling in some oxygen right as the elevator made a "ding" sound. The doors opened to reveal the inside of a parking garage. Hank sucked in a large gush of air right before Kato picked him up like a sack of potatoes. Then, Kato burst forward in a speed faster than Hank had ever endured before. He could hear a fast movement of feet hitting concrete at the rate of machine gun rounds. He tried to watch where they were going, but could only see a dull gray blur for a few seconds. It became a dark mass with streaks of white Hank assumed were either the stars or the lights of the city. Just as soon as he could see the darkness, he felt a strong wind and the feeling of falling.

When Kato landed, Hank heard a loud crack and felt himself slip slightly. Then, he sensed painful stings as several chunks of something hard burst into his legs like shrapnel. The next thing he knew, he could only feel wind and the feeling of unreal momentum. He tried to breathe but found it nearly impossible. After a few seconds, he felt himself slipping from reality. A few more seconds and he went unconscious.

When he woke up, Hank's sinuses were dry with the smell of desert and his head throbbed with anguish. Soft, warm sand contoured around the shape of his body. He lifted his head and heard the sound of sand sliding from his hair. He then looked up to see a pair of Ishans standing over him, surrounded by two large crowds of vampires, each Ishan holding a hand out to him. He reached out with his left arm for one of the hands and watched as his hand went through the phantom Ishan's hand. Then, he smacked himself in the forehead with the same hand, shook his head back and forth, and took another look. As he focused in on the two hands, they moved into each other until at last they became one. Hank then reached for the solitary hand and Ishan helped him up.

Once he was up on his feet, Hank could tell there had really only been one crowd all along, just like Ishan.

"You don't seem to have taken the trip well," Ishan said, smiling at Hank.

Hank gave him a dark look.

"It's okay, you have the easy part. All you have to do is run like hell. But I have to keep the both of us safe in a much more proactive way," he said, nodding at Hank.

That was when Hank noticed Peter. He couldn't help himself.

"Hey, you can hardly tell I cut your ass in half now. You guys should have seen him," he said to the crowd of amused vampires. "He plopped right to the floor like a pile of bricks."

Peter's face twisted with anger as several of the vampires in the crowd laughed heartily and even Ishan cracked a smile. The next moment, before Hank even realized she was there, a female vampire was holding his wrist up above her head for all the vampires to see. They all went silent and watched attentively. Hank struggled against the powerful redhead with all his might to no avail. Then, she brought down his wrist in front of her face and, with a sharp stabbing burst of pressure, ripped it open with her teeth. Blood rushed out like a river of crimson. A cold sweat went all throughout Hank's body. Then, the female yelled out in a high screeching tone and dropped him to the ground as a rush of movement blurred above him.

\* \* \*

As soon as Rachel dropped Hank's body to the ground, signaling the beginning of the challenge, Ishan leapt forward and grabbed hold of Peter's head before he could move. He was sure Peter would have some sort of trick up his sleeve if he was confident enough to call him out like this. Grabbing him and stopping him from any chance of trapping him seemed to be the best strategy. The problem was he hadn't expected Peter would actually be one step ahead of him.

The moment his hands touched Peter's head, he felt a slick substance he didn't recognize. Then, he twitched in pain as his hands started to smoke. It had to be some kind of acid on the tips of Peter's hair. Peter took the opportunity to slam himself forward into Ishan. Shock stole over him as he realized he had lost control of the situation.

He was far too strong to be overpowered by Peter; yet, Peter was doing just that. His hands were in such agony that he could not grip with them and both of his arms were limp. Peter pinned them down to the ground as he straddled Ishan's body in the sand. Then, he lunged his head downward, sinking his teeth into the left side of Ishan's neck. Out of sheer reflex, Ishan grabbed at Peter's face. Peter screamed a strange screech of horror as whatever burned Ishan's hands melted through several layers of his forehead and cheek.

Ishan swung his body to the left, rolling Peter off of him as he jumped to his feet, and kicked Peter in his bent-over torso. Peter's body went flying in a spinning motion through an explosion of sand. Ishan lunged downward into a crouching motion and put his hands into the sand in order to soak up whatever chemical was burning his flesh. Then, he stood up and turned around to find Hank. The man lay silently on the ground, a stream of blood branching off into a copper muddy pool a foot from his wound. Several of the younger vampires from the crowd watched in hunger as the blood pooled in waste.

Ishan looked at his right hand to find it almost healed. He knew there wasn't time to wait for it to fully recover. So, he rushed down beside the pale body and put his right hand over Hank's wound. A luminous yellow glow spread out from inside Ishan's hand. His hand glowed red as if he were holding a flashlight underneath his knuckles. He could feel that familiar tingle from within his palm. But he could also hear fast movement in the sand from about a hundred yards behind him and knew he would soon have to let go of Hank's wound before he could fully heal it. He held on as long as he could and, right

when he could feel the pressure within the air telling him Peter was only inches from slamming into him, he let go of Hank's now mostly healed hand, letting himself be blasted away from Hank's side. He lifted his feet so they wouldn't tear Hank in half as he flew away from him.

In mid-flight through the dry air, he also gripped hold of Peter's shoulders and flung himself around with more effort than it should have taken. But with enough strain, he was able to fling Peter from him and land, crouching, on his feet. Peter, however, caught his balance quickly and also landed on his feet. For the first time in several centuries, Ishan found himself furious. He was utterly sick of Peter's feeble rebellion and through with allowing it to go on. He felt his eyes gloss over as the familiar thin black film covered them. He let out a loud, low growl that he intended to hold back. His hands were held out, visibly ready to claw through Peter should he come any nearer. A look of desperate fear flashed across Peter's face and just as quickly disappeared with obvious effort. Peter's attempt at concealment of his fear only cut the imaginary tie holding Ishan back. He threw himself forward, slashing his claws in motions faster than Peter could ever block, let alone counter. A moment later, Peter lay panting and bleeding in between two sand dunes.

The crowd of vampires chanted "Cryosan" in the tongue of the ancestors. It meant simply "to end." It filled Ishan's blood with a self-righteous wave of power as he pulled his right hand back, in position to slash open Peter's throat for all of the rest to drink. As Peter closed his eyes, the moment passed, Ishan relaxed his arm, and stood up to the grumpy sound of disapproval from the crowd. He held up his hand and said in the ancient tongue, "Versol" meaning "outcast."

Peter leered at Ishan. This was even worse than dying. Being outcast from the city would be a disgrace beyond any death because it meant he would die at the hands of the Empire. Imperial law forbid any vampire to live outside of Necropolis. But the call had been made and Peter would be foolish to disobey. He got up with a bitterness in his eyes and looked at Rachel, who stared back at him with a great anguish of indecision in her eyes. Then, she took a deep breath and turned away from him. Great suffering showed on his face and he held out his left wrist and ripped it open with the claws of his right hand, letting blood drip out onto the desert. This was a symbol of remorse and sorrow well known to all who watched. No one showed pity, however. Peter turned and started walking toward the southern city limits everyone knew was only several miles ahead. He left a trail of blood in the sand as he went, head down in shame.

Ishan felt the effects of the battle as his body began to shake with weakness. Rachel caught him as he fell backward with exhaustion. She picked him up gracefully and carried him, parting the crowd as they came through.

"Please, let me finish what I started," he said.

"Yes," she whispered in reply as she carried him over to Hank's body. It was not quite as pale now, but he was still unconscious. The rip in his wrist no longer bled but was still in disrepair. Rachel set Ishan down as he knelt over Hank's wrist and grabbed hold of it with his right hand again. It began to glow once more as Ishan felt the last of Hank's skin regenerate. Hank coughed. He tried to pull his arm away, but Ishan continued to hold on. Then, after a few minutes, he let go of the wrist knowing it was completely healed.

He was becoming concerned. It was taking considerably more willpower to heal than it had before and he was now aware of the reason for his multiple weaknesses on this night. He knew this would be the result but he had completely forgotten when the time came to act that somewhere near half of the blood that flowed in his veins now resided in Simon. If Simon survived, he would hold an equal share of the oldest blood. It would come down to a fight. Only one could rule over the city. It would be a battle Ishan was not sure he could overcome. It had taken much more than he expected to fend off Peter. With the blood, Simon would be a much worse opponent. He would be an equal match for Ishan.

Ishan turned and looked up at Rachel. He could see the desolation in her eyes. He reached up and took hold of her hand. She looked away as her hand hung perfectly still, purposely not acknowledging Ishan's grip.

"I'm sorry, Rachel. I know what it means to lose someone so close," he whispered. She continued to look away for some time. Then, she glanced back down at him and squeezed his hand attempting to smile.

"I always knew it would happen. I blame only myself," she said.

He was about to argue, but before he could, she put a finger to his lips to quiet him. Then, she bent down and picked him up in a swift yet somehow careful motion. Ishan looked over to see Hank getting up from the ground and brushing sand from his body with a confused and disgusted look on his face. He gazed over at Ishan with a worried expression. Ishan returned the look with one of understanding. He knew now although he won the battle fairly, Peter had also won in an unexpected way by merely calling out his challenge. It would now be inevitable that Hank would no longer wish to stay in Necropolis.

The other vampires dispersed in small, random groups as Rachel carried Ishan back toward the heart of the city accompanied by Stanislov, Edgar, and Hank.

## Chapter 13

### A Cyclone of Bodies

After a while of riding in Rachel's arms at a human's pace, Ishan could see Kato coming toward them in the distance. He judged that the lone vampire was at least several kilometers ahead and moving closer fast. The other two vampires had since gone on ahead and were now lost in the dark of night. Within several minutes, Kato arrived with a sense of urgency quivering in his tone and every muscle in his body.

"Kato, what is it?"

"They're dead, master. They're all dead except for my brother, thank Anansi," Kato said, praising a god Ishan knew to be from Kato's native land.

"Who?"

"There were many. The only ones my brother remembered for sure were Luciano, Eduardo, and Gabriel. Most were still fledglings. They destroyed most of the lab equipment, too."

Ishan stiffened when he heard this.

"Is the data safe?" he asked.

"I don't know. Some of the others are trying to get the backup systems online to check."

"Why would they do this?"

"They want what Peter wanted, master. They want to take action against the Empire now. They attacked us in Peter's name. They follow him now," Kato said with anger.

At the mention of Peter's name, Rachel seemed to twitch in surprise.

"Rachel, can you run with me on your shoulder if I hold on?"

"Yes," she said, distracted.

"Good."

He looked at Kato. "Kato, you take Hank."

"Yes, master," Kato said, his accent becoming more and more prominent.

Hank made a face of dread as Kato picked him up. Within a second, they were all racing toward the southern entrance of the city drainage system. Ishan tried not to notice the feelings and memories that came from holding onto Rachel's body. Now was not a time to mourn for lost love. Especially when there were more recent friendships to mourn.

\* \* \*

Hank put all his willpower into holding the meager contents of his stomach as Kato moved like lightning. He soared through the various tunnels, swiftly changing direction with the slightest bit of effort. More than once, Hank's hair brushed against the ceiling or some corner between tunnels. He held onto Kato tighter than he had ever held onto anything before. Within seconds of entering the tunnels, they came to a dizzying stop. It took several minutes for Hank to realize they were already back in the lab. Once he did, he wondered if it was truly the same place. It seemed only a shell of its former self. All around him bodies, blood, and broken glass littered every space. Rachel gently set Ishan down and he fell to the floor, his body shaking with the loss of many. Without lifting his head, he spoke loudly to Kato.

"Kato, have the ancestors been summoned?"

"No, master. I was waiting for your word."

"Kato, you have it. Please, call for them."

Kato nodded and was gone in a blurry flash. Ishan struggled to his feet. Seeing this, Rachel rushed forward to try and help him, but he shrugged her off of him. She backed away to give him space.

"So many good friends. All gone over nothing more than *politics!*"

The word echoed off the egg-shaped ceiling as if Ishan had just yelled it again behind Hank.

"Hank, come with me."

"Master, let me help you," Rachel said.

"No, I must speak with Hank alone," he said with absolute authority.

She nodded, disheartened with his continuing outburst. Ishan walked toward one of the doorways without bothering to see if Hank followed. Hank scampered to catch up with the angry vampire. The sound of many strange voices got his attention and he turned to see dozens of "ancestors" filling the room. As he backed toward the doorway, they began sinking their fangs in the bodies still strung out on the floor. Others licked the blood from the floor. His stomach turned as he crossed through the doorway. What was left of the metal door bent inward inside the hall as though it were a plastic toy bent by a young child at play. The different sounds of the strange beasts bounced off the walls as Hank tried not to notice. Ishan was a few strides ahead, walking in what Hank thought was a familiar direction. A few familiar turns later and he was sure of it. Then, the two arrived at Ishan's personal quarters. Once they were both inside, Ishan closed and locked the thick vault-like door. He gestured for Hank to sit and once he did, Ishan took the seat across from him.

"I know you are no longer willing to stay here. I understand. But you are in danger if you leave, and not just from the Empire. If Peter really was behind this attack then he will most certainly be on the lookout for you. Right now, you are a symbol of my choice to



form an alliance with those humans who would oppose the Empire. Peter and his followers do not want to include your kind. They want to take on the human race as though it were the Empire itself. And I know I made a promise to escort you from the city myself. But in my present circumstances and health I am unable to do this."

Hank looked at him and knew that his own face had turned at least three shades redder when Ishan said this.

"Before you become angry, I think you will find my alternative solution most accommodating."

Hank exhaled, letting a little of the steam from his body.

"What do you have in mind?"

"Five of my strongest and smartest to lead you from the city."

Hank relaxed a little.

"That seems more than fair," Hank said.

"I also have something for you," Ishan said and got up from his chair. He turned away and walked to the opposite wall where he opened a small hidden cubby. He pulled out several long glass vials. Then, he put all but one away. The remaining vial was filled with scarlet liquid. Ishan closed the cubby and turned around to face Hank. Holding up the vial, he spoke as he looked through it, seeming to examine it.

"This vial is filled with the blood of an ancestor. It is the last of my backup stores for testing. It came from willing subjects. It should give you an advantage if you should need it. Also, I had a curious idea I wanted to try before you go which might benefit you," he said, smiling for the first time since before Hank had slept in this very room.

"I'm listening," Hank said, intrigued.

"Well, when one becomes like us, their heart eventually stops beating. Some take longer than others. It has long been a theory of mine that this could be a matter of self control. If one were to try purposely, he could make it stop or start at his command."

Hank was becoming nervous as he realized where Ishan was going with this line of thought.

"I just want you to try something. If it doesn't work, forget about it. But if it does, it could help you to hide in perfect stealth from even one of my kind."

This got Hank's attention and overpowered his hesitation.

"Okay, then, what do I do?"

"Well, first you drink, of course. Just a small drop for now. You will want to save as much as you can," Ishan said, handing the vial to Hank.

Hank took it nervously, but eagerly. The power he felt under the influence of the blood could easily be addictive and he longed to taste its metal acidity again. He tipped his head back, held the vial up over his open mouth, and with great effort, only let a small drop fall down onto his tongue. A shudder of pleasure went through his body as his senses heightened immediately.

"Now. You will want to concentrate on the sound of your heart beating."

Hank looked down as if with all these powerful senses he would be able to x-ray his own chest and see his heart. But he found it helped him focus on the steady beating within.

"Now, I want you to imagine it slowing down."

Hank obediently imagined his heart slowing. At first, nothing happened. But after a long time it began to slow and a thrill ran through his body causing his heart to pick up its pace again.

"Shit."

"Did it work?"

"Yes, but then I got excited and it sped back up."

"But that's great. Try again," he said.

Hank nodded and took a moment to attempt focusing on the beating of his heart again.

"This time, I want you to keep slowing it down until it is barely beating at all. But remember, do not get ahead of yourself and become excited again. Otherwise, you will ruin any progress you could make."

Hank tried again and it worked, at first. But once again, his pulse increased from the excitement.

"I can't do it."

"No, I think you can. But it will have to be some other time. Unless you want to wait until tomorrow evening, I had better send you and your convoy off before the coming dawn."

"Wouldn't it be safer for me to go during the daylight hours?"

"Between the Empire and Peter's connections outside the city, probably not. If I had to guess, I would think you would be safer getting out of the city as fast as possible. Once daylight comes and you're as far from here as you can get, you should be able to blend in or hide easily. And I would suggest you try not to drink the blood during the daylight hours. I'm not sure but I think it could very well cause you some damage."

Hank thought hard about this. He wondered just how safe he would be from anyone once he crossed outside the city. But he knew he had to find a way to get back to Toby even if it meant leaving the only ally he'd ever met. Maybe, once he found Toby, the two of them could manage to get passage out of the country and find asylum in another land. He daydreamed about that for a moment, wishing with every fiber of his being that it could happen, but knowing it just wasn't that type of world.

"Okay. I guess let's get to it then," he said, trying to convey his gratitude for all of Ishan's help.

Ishan nodded in understanding. As the two re-entered the main lab, Hank was surprised to find the room empty of bodies and debris. He looked at his reflection in what was left of one of the windows across the room. Ishan leaned against the wall behind him and began pushing buttons on an electronic panel built into the wall. Within seconds a voice came from the panel. Hank recognized it as Kato's.

"Yes, master?"

"Kato, I will be sending Mr. Evans out of the city and he will need a worthy escort. I'll need Boris, Rodney, Carlos, Yavo, and..." he paused for a moment and then an unexpected voice interrupted his silent thought.

"I would be honored, sir," Rachel said, her voice coming over the same intercom.

Ishan let go of the button on the panel for a moment. He looked torn in a way Hank hadn't yet seen. Then he sighed and pushed the button again.

"Yes, Rachel. Would you be so honored as to lead the group?"

"Yes, sir. I would," she said.

"Good. I will need you all ready within the next fifteen minutes or so. I would prefer to see our guest safely out of the city before dawn, as I'm sure none of you would like to feel the effects of U.V. rays on your sensitive flesh?" he said with a morbid humor in his voice.

In less than five minutes by Hank's best estimate, all five of his guardian vampires were reporting for duty. He did his best not to finger the vial now hidden in his clothes. Ishan assured him, when closed, the seal could block the smell from either kind of vampire. He also made it very clear he was not to use it unless it became a matter of life or death and under no circumstances was he to let the others know he had it. It worried him at first, but he also thought Peter's rebellion was creating a paranoia within Ishan.

"Thank you," Hank said to Ishan as the group was about to begin their journey back through the tunnels. It had been decided Boris would carry Hank and the rest of them would flank him so they could get him to the city limits as fast as possible. Ishan nodded and smiled. Then, he turned to discuss other matters with Kato and another vampire Hank didn't know. Boris knelt down and Hank climbed onto his back, piggyback style. Then in a burst of speed unforgiving of Hank's stomach, they sped off through the tunnels like a cyclone of bodies.

## Chapter 14

### Withdrawals

Hank's arms slipped again as he put more strength into regaining his position on Boris's back. His legs had long ago turned to jelly from the effort of keeping them wrapped around his escort's waist. He longed for a seatbelt on this crazy roller coaster of a vampire. He didn't know which was more dizzying: the incredible speed they were moving at or the blurring sight of motion all around him. The street lights stretched into streams of different colors. He closed his eyes, trying to steady his stomach. He tried to picture Toby's face but found he couldn't bring it clearly into focus. He was angry with himself for that.

But the more he tried, the more a different face came into focus. Peter's face filled his mental screen with a dark expression. It was so vivid Hank had to open his eyes again to make it go away. His head was cocked to the right leaning against the back of Boris's thick neck. He opened his eyes just in time to see something strange. A flash of movement didn't fit the pattern he'd watched repeat itself with each revolution of vampires. It was too fast for Hank to understand, but the result was not surprising. Something seemed to block the spinning circle of vampires like a stick in the spokes of a bike wheel. In an instant, Hank found himself and his vampire steed blasted off course and headed for a large tan, brick building covered in epic graffiti. He looked around to see the other vampires flying away in random directions like bowling pins in the midst of a strike.

Just six feet from the building, Hank's stomach dropped as everything went into a streaming blur and then Boris came to a graceful yet devastating landing on his feet. Hank could feel the bricks barely graze against the bottoms of his shoes. Then Boris threw Hank's arms and legs off of him, turned, and picked him up, holding him like a baby. He ran, carrying his little bundle of joy with him to the other side of the building. Then he put Hank down on his feet, motioned for him to keep his mouth shut, and get down low. Hank did so without argument. Facing away from him, Boris crouched down into a strange position that seemed more cat-like than anything else. This was made all the more strange by Boris's bulk. He was far too huge to look so feline.

An explosion erupted somewhere on the other side of the building bringing Hank back to the reality of his situation. At the sound, Boris ran to the far side of the building to look around the corner. Hank couldn't help feeling completely vulnerable. A moment later, he heard another explosion. This one sounded much closer. In between the reverberations of the blast and realizing what it was, Boris was back in position in front of Hank, waiting for anyone to come along and dare to confront him. He heard movement to his right and saw Rachel coming swiftly around the corner, a large slash across her cheek and several other battle scars on her skin and clothes. She looked at Boris with indecision.

"It's Luciano. I think he's alone, but there is no way to be sure yet. I barely got away from him. Where are the others?" she asked, desperately circling and looking around.

"Don't know," Boris said in his thick Russian accent. She glanced at him with that same unsure expression. But before she seemed to come to a conclusion, Rodney and Yavo came running from the other side of the building. Neither of them appeared to even have a scratch on them.

"Carlos is dead," Rodney shouted. Hank recognized a deep mourning in Rodney's voice as he gave them the news. "He was drained completely."

"It was Luciano. He almost got me, too," Rachel said. "But I turned the tables on him and then he got away from me," she added. Then her expression became one of worry. "I don't think we can risk any more high-speed flanks. We had better walk mortal the rest of the way," she said. It took Hank a moment to understand this statement. "Boris, you continue to stay with Mr. Evans. Yavo, Rodney, you two and I will flank still but over a much larger radius at a mortal pace. That way, we can keep on the lookout for more distant intruders and have the advantage when they arrive," she said.

Each of the other vampires nodded when given their instructions.

Before long, Hank and Boris seemed to be alone, the others flanking so far off they couldn't be seen. The tan building seemed to be one of the last remaining buildings to mark an immediate transition into open desert and remote roadways. They walked along one of those desolate roads as Hank looked up at the stars. He was tired of looking around to see only desert, the remains of abandoned construction projects, and long weathered billboards with ancient advertisements of products, services, and places long gone.

Hank watched as shooting stars faded out over a dark horizon. Boris moved every so often, solitarily flanking Hank in shifts. At one point, Hank heard a swift movement and was surprised to find Boris behind him jumping up in the air and grabbing hold of a bat. The bat might have been minding its own business if it weren't for the paranoid air to Hank's situation. In a single motion, Boris flung the flying critter to the ground and it landed with a loud slap and moved no more. Hank stood watching it for several minutes before Boris gestured for him to move along and then punctuated the unspoken statement with a deep grunt and a sigh.

Hank started walking again as Boris took up his next shift. As he walked, he felt in his pocket for the vial of blood. Moving it around in his fingers inside his pocket, he wondered if he could take a drink now without being noticed. He sure needed it now. But he felt an obligation to Ishan to keep his word and keep it secret. He decided to wait until Boris switched to his northern flank again. This meant he had three more flanks to go as the last included his catch of their flappy intruder during the last northern shift. He

wished he'd retrieved his backpack and his machete before leaving, but he wasn't given much time to make a list of demands.

He was feeling that same growing need like an itch he couldn't scratch. Only it didn't itch, it burned like desire, but much more potent. He knew what it meant. He was becoming addicted to the stuff. He couldn't understand how such an awful substance could evoke so much emotion in him. It wasn't the power that he longed for. It was something else. Something he couldn't put his finger on. Something much deeper. He realized he was gripping the vial tightly in his pocket, on the verge of shattering it. As he loosened his grip with great effort, he heard a loud, deep shout of pain that made him jump with fright. Before Hank could say "vampire guardian angel," Boris was right in front of him, his back to him and circling closely and swiftly.

After a few minutes, Hank heard what he thought to be Yavo's voice.

"He got Rodney! He's been drained just like Carlos!" he cried. Boris seemed to be swearing under his breath in Russian.

Hank knew something was wrong when he could hear fear in the voice of a vampire. He didn't know who this Luciano fellow was but he was beginning to guess he was strong and determined to have taken out two of them so quickly. He wondered if he would make it out of this place alive. Between his diminishing hope and the deteriorating situation he was in, things were not looking good. He was really hating himself for not already taking a drink of his magic potion now that he was too closely protected to drink the stuff undetected by his guardian vampire. He worried he wouldn't get another chance. He could still hear the echoing of Rodney's last sounds in his head. But when he focused on what he could actually hear, he was deafened by the silence of it all. A faint breeze gave ambient texture to the background as Boris's movements made only the slightest patters of footsteps on the road.

A loud howl rose up far off to the northwest, making Hank jump again. He wasn't completely sure because he hadn't ever heard one before, but he thought it might be the sound of a wolf. He also wasn't sure wolves could even live in the desert. In order to calm himself, Hank looked back up at the stars, trying to find the Pleiades star cluster. He further calmed himself by trying to remember all he could about the cluster. The Pleiades were the Seven Sisters in Greek mythology. He also knew they were found in the Taurus constellation. As he tried to remember what it was the Jewish people had called it, he looked down and saw something on his shoe that put fear back into his heart. He stopped dead in his tracks and held his breath as he looked down at the huge stinger on the creature sitting on the tip of his sneaker. He heard a whisper ahead of him.

"What is it?" Boris asked.

Hank couldn't talk or move.

Boris sighed and drooped his shoulders in disgust.

"It is just scorpion, nothing to get so worked up for," he said with a tone of obvious annoyance. He leaned down and flicked the small yet vicious creature off of Hank's foot, sending it through the air in multiple pieces.

As soon as it was off of him, Hank exhaled with relief. Boris just looked at him with an aggravated sort of pity and then turned to keep watch again. Hank could hear him grumbling under his breath, something about how he couldn't believe they were risking their lives for "miserable scaredy cat afraid of own shadow." At first, it annoyed him, but he knew his fear of arachnids was well beyond a reasonable level.

Hank found himself at that point unable to focus on the stars. He thought about Toby, wondering what he was doing at that very moment. He tried to focus on the billboards and make sense of some of them, but most were weathered to the point he couldn't make out the words. Some of the pictures, however, were still understandable. One showed several girls in bikinis, another showed a man in a suit with some sort of luxury car sitting behind him. One that was particularly hard to understand seemed to have a heavyset, dark-haired man with big sideburns wearing a white jacket with rhinestones on it and brown tinted sunglasses on his face, pointing with both of his fingers to his right. But the part that made the least sense was the pair of wings that seemed to have been painted on the man's back. Hank lost all track of reality as he stopped and stared at the strange billboard. He was snapped out of it, however, when Boris whispered at him.

"Stop wasting time staring at King of Rock and Roll and get moving again already."

This statement sparked some glimmer of memory in Hank, but questioning it further was not worth dealing with Boris's temperament. He sighed and began walking again as Boris went back to his strange flanking. Once again, Hank caressed the vial inside his pocket. He wanted just one drop so badly. The longer he went without it, the more he needed it. He wasn't exactly sure when it started, but the cold sweat he had broken into was now sending chills down his spine as he also felt a gripping in his chest, as if someone were squeezing his heart. He started gently tapping on the side of the vial, nervously. He looked down at his arms and was surprised to see they were covered in sweat. Evidently his current company had been dead far too long to recognize signs of human illness. He could feel his heart, which still felt like it were in a vise, speeding up. Each heartbeat more painful than the last.

He caught himself squeezing the vial way too hard again and made himself let go of it. But once his hands were out of his pockets, he couldn't figure out what to do with them. He swung them robotically like pendulums, one at each side. He could feel the breeze on his sweat-soaked palms, sending another chill down his back. Boris was now returning to his western flank and would next be moving to the northern one where he would be behind and facing away from Hank. It was almost here. He could feel the yearning for it in every bone in his body. *Nothing's coming, Boris, just go already*, he thought viciously. *Come on!* Boris was starting to swivel his body in what was becoming to Hank a familiar calculated movement when a long, high-pitched scream broke out. Hank nearly jumped out of his skin with the initial jolt of it. He also found himself putting his right hand back in his pocket reaching for his new security blanket.

"Wa.. was that Rachel?" he asked Boris who was once again circling Hank uncomfortably close. Hank thought Boris would've made an excellent hockey goalie. He was probably too brutal for soccer. As Hank pictured Boris in a hockey mask, several strange muffled screams filled the void. Then silence again. Distant sounds of sand kicking and bodies hitting the ground. Yavo's voice rose up in an almost squeal of a scream.

"It's Rachel! She's..." then abrupt silence. If there had been any chance before of getting a swig of that blood unnoticed it was gone now. Boris kept even closer as he whispered out into the darkness.

"I think... I think both are dead," he said, tearing down Hank's last wall of confidence. The hell with keeping it a secret anymore. He all but ripped the vial from his

pocket, his hands shaking as he held it out in front of himself. Boris was busy watching all around for Luciano. Even though he was absolutely terrified, Hank could concentrate enough to recognize a hint of fear in his now lone companion. He couldn't make his hands stop shaking enough to open the vial. His heart beat faster than he'd ever known it to before. It felt as if it were trying to beat its way through his chest cavity and out into the open air. He finally gripped the glass tube with both hands and put the sealed top to his mouth and gripped the white plastic stopper with his teeth. It took several turns but he finally got it to loosen some.

Several things happened then in a burst of confusion. Just as soon as Hank pulled the stopper out of the vial, releasing the smell of the blood into the air, Boris swung around in alert. In the split second Boris's attention was captured by the tiny vial in Hank's hand, a sudden collision erupted. It knocked out all of Hank's senses for a moment. The next thing Hank realized, he was lying on the road, the vial was gone, and Boris was on the ground struggling to get to his feet. As Boris tried to get up, Hank noticed movement from behind him. It was already too late. Boris had only gotten up on his knees when Rachel jumped up from the ground behind him. She grabbed his head and in one quick motion, twisted it off his shoulders like the ragged head of an old doll. In the next blurry second, before Boris's body even had time to slump forward, she gripped the body and sank her face into the open wound that had once been Boris's neck.

Hank scrambled around looking for the vial. All he could see was sand, rocks, dust, and the strange remains of a house in mid construction. He looked back to see Rachel savoring the remaining blood in Boris's body. A sickening thirst filled his own body and he was beginning to shake violently with the chill of it. He wasn't sure which he was afraid of more, dying, or not finding that vial. He threw himself hands first onto the road, running his fingers through rocks and dust in search of the thing. He felt all around his immediate area then lunged into the sand beyond the road, bringing himself closer to his busy predator. She didn't seem to notice. He kept fumbling around trying to look for it, but the darkness was far too concealing. If only he had it, then, none of this would be a problem. In the next second, Rachel stood up and threw her head back, letting out a strange screaming howl that echoed dissonantly in Hank's skull. He stopped still where he was but could feel his body shaking in protest. After a long moment of holding her head back, Rachel brought it upright and bored her eyes into Hank's.

"What's the matter? Looking for this," she said, revealing the small plastic vial in her right hand.

It took all of Hank's willpower not to lunge for it.

She smiled coyly at him.

"I can smell the sweat on your body. You hunger for it, don't you?" she asked gleefully. "I can't imagine feeling the hunger as a mortal. It must be terrible. It takes so much to contain it even with all this power," she said grinning wider and yet more gruesomely.

Before Hank could even let the breath from his lungs, Rachel had moved from the road to just in front of him. She reached out with her left hand and grabbed his chin. Her hand felt like an agonizing vise gripping him. Then she flipped the top from the vial with her thumb nail in a single movement. Hank's human senses wouldn't allow him to smell the substance from such a distance. Noticing this, she put the plastic tube up to his nose.



Hank was unable to resist, and sniffed long and hard. His shaking became even more uncontrollable. Rachel laughed heartily at this reaction.

"Please, just give it to me or kill me, please," he pleaded in a mumble through her hand. She looked at him thoughtfully, almost compassionately. Then, she let go of him. He fell down to the ground gripping his chin where her fingers had just been clamped like a steel trap.

"I'll tell you what," she said, grinning again. "Go get it."

She pulled her arm back and lazily tossed the vial. Her lazy toss sent it way off across the road and somewhere inside the partially constructed house beyond. Without care for his own safety, Hank struggled up onto his feet and ran with all he had toward the rotting, unfinished house. As he came close to the road, he tripped on a rock the size of his fist and found himself barreling forward, head first. He crash-landed on the road scraping his forehead and palms on the rough pavement. His face stung with anguish when he got up. He took a quick look behind him to find Rachel still standing in the same place and looking at him with amusement. Then, he turned and ran for the house again. As he came closer, he could see construction had been interrupted much more prematurely than he originally thought. The walls were nothing more than rotted wood with no drywall even installed yet. He had to lean forward to keep his balance as he made his way up the large sand dune that the skeletal structure of a home stood on. He found himself using his hands to help him move faster up the incline like a monkey running along the ground.

Once he pulled himself up onto the porch, he lay there panting as he tried to catch his breath. He looked across the road for the vampire and saw no one there. His heartbeat increased even faster, though he wasn't sure how it could at this point. He used his arm to roll himself over then used both arms to lift himself up from the porch. Once he was on his feet, he tried to find a doorway through the myriad of closely lined planks and tarps that covered the whole front of the building. He began sifting around tarps and trying to find planks far apart enough that he could fit in between them. After looking behind four tarps, the fifth one revealed an entry way. He hastily went through it, not noticing the lack of a floor beyond, and fell instantly down into a large pile of lumber and miscellaneous things he couldn't make out in the pitch black pit.

He tried to lift himself up but stopped when a sharp, throbbing pain blasted through his left shin. He screamed in agony. He was sure he had broken it. To make matters worse, an overhead spotlight came on, filling the pit he was in with a blinding glow of white light. Then, he heard footsteps on a distant floor a ways out and above him. Rachel watched him from the edge of an unfinished floor in the next room beyond the one he had fallen through. The light surrounded her, casting a long strange shadow in front of her that came all the way down to the ground in front of Hank. But something else caught his eye. Just ahead of him about twenty feet was a small plastic object gleaming in the spotlight. It was the vial, all right, and it was well beyond his reach, enveloped by the dark shadow cast by his pursuer. It would be especially hard to get to with a broken leg. But he lunged himself forward and began pulling himself with his hands. The pain in his leg was nothing compared to the unlivable hole he felt in his entire being now. He had to drink that blood, not just to survive, but to be whole as well. Maybe even to be anything at all more than completely empty. He screamed out in fury as he drug himself forward inching himself closer and closer toward this one tiny point of light surrounded by so

much darkness.

## Chapter 15

### The Drinker's Curse

The intense weakening of his body started again as Ishan made his way back to the main lab from his quarters. He took the time to use the terminal in the room to send a message to the Emperor. The terminal controlled a system within the Stratosphere designed by the Empire. It was supposed to be the only device that could communicate with the outside world and was restricted to only send direct messages to the Emperor himself. Of course, Ishan's kind had been smart and resourceful enough to build their own means of communication. Now that his message was sent, he needed to find Kato and make arrangements for the new security measures that were now obviously going to be essential for reconstruction.

When he arrived in the main lab, he glowered at its emptiness. So many years of hard work wasted in a single night. The animal within wanted Peter and his followers to attack at that moment. But his sense of reason told him he was in no condition to fight and what was left of his operation could not likely survive another hit so soon. Besides, it was nearing dawn now and most of the others were asleep. Kato came out of one of the sub-labs to the right of Ishan and looked at him expectantly.

"Has the backup process been initiated?" Ishan began walking toward him and felt a sudden jerk in his legs.

"Master, are you all right?"

Ishan couldn't understand why he was unable to make out Kato's face. Everything darkened and went out of focus. He felt himself crash against the floor like a feather. All of his senses seemed to be slowing down until...

Darkness.

\* \* \*

Kato watched as his master collapsed to the floor. He had enough medical and biological research background that he was probably the best person for Ishan to be with. He raced to the small man's side and put his ear to Ishan's forehead. He listened with his enhanced sense of hearing for the telltale sound he had become accustomed to for determining if a subject was alive. It only took a moment before he heard the synapses still firing. It would be so much easier and require less anticipation if their hearts could only beat or they had a pulse, but that would be too easy. He reached his arms under the frail body he knew, if animated, could turn him into dust with proper motivation. He carried Ishan down the opposite hall from where Ishan's quarters were. He followed the hall down until he passed another slanted x-shaped four way.

About a hundred feet ahead, he arrived at the end of the hall to an unmarked door. He held Ishan with his left arm as he used his right hand to dial in his access code in the key pad. A second later, the door unlatched with a loud metallic click and opened for him. He resumed carrying Ishan with both arms, turning in order to bring him in head first. Inside, he took Ishan to the first available bed, the second bed closest to the door. The first bed contained the former mediator whom Kato had also moved earlier in the night. From what Kato understood, he'd been taken by Peter after openly quitting his position and found by an ancestor. It was strange. This man was the first to have been infected within the city as it was now. For several centuries now, the ancestors gave the privilege of deciding a human's worthiness to Ishan. He didn't know exactly why. So much between Ishan and the ancestors was kept between them. But this man had been changed without Ishan's consent.

Kato adjusted the strap on a brain scan headset and put it on Ishan's head. It was a perfect fit. He plugged one end of a data cable into it and the other into the bed's monitor on a tall tan shelf next to the bed. Ishan's brain activity filled the screen in graphical spikes between two horizontal lines, one at the top of the screen representing maximum activity and one at the bottom which represented zero.

Once he was sure Ishan's readings were at a safe level, he turned to the infirmary's other guest and went to the terminal beside Simon's bed. He pulled out the ancient keyboard and began pecking at the keys with his index fingers until Simon's monitor brought up the log of his brain activity. Kato was amazed by the many outrageous spikes happening at random every once in a while. They were constantly going up to maximum, but these were different. They had happened within three minutes, within fifteen minutes, and within an hour. Each spike well over the maximum safe level. From what Ishan had been able to tell him, it was understandable why it was happening. A shared and often unspoken gift they managed to hide from the Empire had been experienced by each and every one of them. Upon drinking blood of any kind, lifelong memories of feelings and experiences passed from the carrier to the drinker. In Kato's best guess, Simon was experiencing over two thousand years of memories within his comatose state at an incredible pace.

He pulled a pen light from his pocket and moved closer to Simon's bedside. With his left hand, he held open Simon's right eyelid, the eye underneath moving swiftly from side to side in a hyperactive REM state. He shined the light into the eye. No response. He

wondered how long it would take for the newly born thing to awaken to its new, strange existence. He let go of the eyelid and opened the other, shining the light in this one as well with the same result. Then, he typed out some notes on the terminal and logged out of the system, sliding the keyboard back into place.

\* \* \*

For the longest time, Simon experienced nothing but a sort of darkness. He knew he wasn't unconscious because he was aware. Though conscious, he knew of nothing more than a simple sense of void. He saw nothing, heard nothing, and felt nothing except the experience of knowing. He was sure he should have felt something else. Fear, maybe. Something. But it just wasn't there. Then everything changed. A distant point of light appeared. It grew. Eventually he saw a colorful circle ahead of him, light pouring out from it at every angle. As the circle came closer, it began to resemble the outside of a tunnel. He saw movement inside. When it arrived close enough to focus on, he realized it was not simply movement he saw within, but something much more strange. It was like the tunnel was actually a lens and he was looking through to someone else's reality. A bright flash like lightning seemed to momentarily blind him, and then, he no longer simply looked through the lens but seemed to be in that someone else's reality.

Simon felt as though he merely existed inside another body, unable to move or speak. He could see what this person saw, from their short perspective, leading him to believe he was inhabiting the body of a child. But even stranger, the view before him was a humble room within an oddly built structure. The dirt floor and ceilings were anything but symmetrical. All this he noticed from what he managed to glimpse within the child's movements. He tried to will himself to look down at the body he was trapped within, but seemed helpless to control any of its motion. A thought repeated in the child's mind with great excitement. It was intriguing and annoying at the same time. He understood it even though it was in a language he somehow knew to be Sanskrit. He learned several things from the child's mind. He was a boy of only eight years old who lived in India and whose father was a boat builder.

Then a deep voice came from outside the room speaking also in Sanskrit.

"Ishan, my son," the voice said, "are you ready to come with papa?" a tall, smiling, dark-skinned man asked as he came into the room and leaned in front of the boy. Simon felt Ishan's young head bob up and down with great exhilaration. Then, the man's smile brightened and he reached out his hand and ruffled the boy's hair. Simon was in no way surprised with the enthusiasm the boy showed. He'd been unable to stop thinking about going with his father. It would be the boy's first time learning to build boats himself.

He was not only excited about learning the family trade, he was also ecstatic to be going where his father worked. The boat builders worked in the port city of Muziris. The small village they lived in lay just outside the city, but Ishan hadn't been to Muziris before. He hoped he would get to see the Roman soldiers his papa had told him about. Or the Greek and Arabian traders; they all sounded very interesting to the boy. He also longed to look up at the great statue of Augustus that towered over the city. Muziris was the greatest of all of India's many ports of trade with the Roman Empire. The Romans came bringing gold and wine in return for spices like pepper and ginger. In India, pepper

grew like a weed in great numbers. But the Romans valued it highly, using it in many kinds of food.

Simon's anger was coming to a boiling point. He had seen, heard, felt, and learned enough. He wanted to wake up now. He tried to scream. Nothing. He tried with all his willpower to move. Still nothing. It was like nothing he ever felt before. He could sense everything his young host could, but affect nothing at all. He couldn't close his eyes and block it out. He couldn't block the thoughts out. Nor could he turn and run away from the body he was imprisoned in. But lingering in a small, dark place within Simon was something he hadn't expected. He loathed it. Why should he care about Ishan's past? Why should he want anything to do with it? But still it sparked his interest and it didn't seem he had a choice but to indulge this strange curiosity.

\* \* \*

An alarm sounded from the small device in Peter's pocket as he sat in the gravel underneath the underpass outside the entrance to the tunnels. He pulled the device out and smiled at it. It was time now. The drug he slipped Ishan would now be fully active and Ishan would be incapacitated enough for Peter to make his move. He only hoped everything else was in place. He stood up and brushed away the gravel sticking to his clothes and walked toward the mouth of the middle tunnel. He knew the Ancestors would be of no concern as they had always went into The Sleep earlier than the others. When he came to the entrance of the nest, he saw his biggest worry was inconsequential as well. The password override he'd chosen to be entered into the system had been taken care of. He prepared himself to attack as the door opened, but as planned the hall inside and the room beyond seemed to be empty. If his directions had been followed, all the others would have been sent to their chambers by the time he stepped inside. As he came down the silver hall, he smiled in response to its emptiness.

\* \* \*

As Kato looked over the long printout of Simon's brain scan, he heard movement from outside the door of the small infirmary. He stopped what he was doing and listened. Then, he heard a light tap on the frosted glass window of the door. He took a moment to compose himself and gently set the long roll of paper back down on top of the printer. He opened the door casually, expecting any one of the many vampires who might come here looking for him or Ishan. Instead, as soon as the door was ajar, he was surprised to see Peter standing outside the door, smirking.

\* \* \*

Hank could see the vial just ahead of him as he crawled for it. He thought he might be close enough to reach it. He drew his arm out and stretched his fingers toward it. Not quite. He was about to pull his arm back when he heard a swift movement and a swooshing in the air. Before he could look up to see what happened, a foot came crashing down in front of him, crushing his hand as it landed. He screamed as the worst physical pain he ever felt came from what was left of his hand. He didn't bother looking up,

knowing the foot was attached to Rachel. He could only lie there and moan in agony. She lifted her foot and he could see the mess that was left behind. He felt nauseous. If he hadn't been in so much pain, his nausea might have overtaken him. But the torrential stinging from his hand made him forget he ever had a stomach.

Rachel had moved from his line of vision. He tried to look around for her but couldn't bear to move too much as each slight movement of any part of his body heightened the terrible mixture of throbbing and stinging of his hand. He tried again to turn his head and felt fingers slide up the back of it. He screamed out as they gripped a full handful of hair and pulled his head back. He felt a slight, cold breeze hit the right side of his face and then heard a whisper that turned his world upside down.

"If you'll just die now, Hank, we can be together," Diana's voice whispered in his ear.

A wave of pain with more sting, pressure, and throbbing than any physical ailment could ever manage filled Hank like water overflowing a glass. He couldn't understand what he was hearing. Was Rachel channeling his long-lost wife? It didn't make any sense. She whispered in his ear again.

"It's okay, honey. It will all be over soon," she said.

Hank squealed in a pitch he hadn't known his vocal chords capable of. He turned his head just enough to see Rachel's face next to his with a menacing grin baring her pointed canines.

Then, in Diana's voice, she spoke again.

"What's the matter, Hank, don't you recognize the true love of your life?" her voice dripping with bitterness and sarcasm.

Hank looked at her in terror. He couldn't understand what was happening.

"How are you doing that?" he cried.

"Neat, isn't it?" she asked in her own voice. "You see, some of us have talents beyond the rest. I happen to have the talent of mimicry." she said, widening her smile and showing more teeth.

"But how?" he whined, trying to find the words to complete the sentence.

"Oh, that part was easy. Not even a talent, really. Just the drinker's curse. You see, all of us learn much from those we drink from."

Hank looked at her, his face a mix of confusion, anger, and anguish.

"Don't look at me like that. I know you're not smart enough to understand. When I spilled your blood for the challenge, it spilled onto my tongue. Not a lot, but enough," she said, still smiling.

He had forgotten about this. It all made sense now, though it didn't soothe the pain, not even a little bit. She pulled back on his hair again, causing the floor of the building above to be the only thing in view. Then, she slithered her face against the side of his and whispered into his ear in Diana's voice again.

"I'm only supposed to kill you. But after you insulted my lover and I saw yours from your very memory, I decided to have a little fun with you along the way," Hank was spinning in place, trying to figure out who she was talking about.

"Lover?" was all he could get out as Diana's voice seemed to resonate throughout his skull.

"The greatest of us all. The one who will soon take his rightful place as our master and lead us to victory against your puny people," she said.

Hank still didn't get it and was sure his face was showing it. He took a moment to gather some courage and warm up some of the chill in his heart.

"You'll have to forgive me. I piss off a lot of people and I can't make anything out of all this gibberish. Give me a name, you psychotic bitch!" he yelled as he struggled to free his head. He felt his neck crack slightly as she pulled harder in a quick motion. As he felt his consciousness slipping, he heard her speak once more.

"Peter!" she said, caressing the name with her lips. As his brain tried to process what she had said, Hank's vision began to blur. Then, he felt everything slide away from him.

\* \* \*

"You're early," Kato said, pulling the door the rest of the way open.

"I can't help it that everything is going even smoother than I planned," Peter said.

"Not quite everything," Kato said angrily. "You told me Isingoma wouldn't get hurt, you promised!"

"He's alive, isn't he? Besides, he put up more of a fight than they expected. If I had been there myself, I would have been able to prevent it, but you know as well as I do where I was then."

"I don't care where you were or how much of a fight Isingoma put up!"

"I'm sorry, Kato. I will give your brother a special place in *my* council."

Kato relaxed, thinking this over for a moment.

"All right. Come in, then," he said, gesturing inside.

\* \* \*

Peter stepped into the room, looking greedily at Ishan's body.

He took slow, deliberate steps toward Ishan's bedside. He gently ran his hand down Ishan's face, over his chin, and down the front of his throat then down the side of his neck. He stopped when his fingertips were hovering just over the carotid artery, savoring the excitement of what he was about to do. Then he leaned down onto one knee and whispered into Ishan's ear.

"Goodbye, old friend. I hope your dreams are filled with things vivid and sweet. Because, they will be your last." He moved toward Ishan's neck. Then, with utter loss of control, he lunged his teeth into the ancient vampire's neck, piercing right into the artery he had singled out, and drank.



## Chapter 16

### Break On Through...

From within the void, Hank noticed a trickle of light as fuzzy shapes and colors started molding together into movement. Maybe it was because of the voice he had just been painfully made to remember, but the movement before him resolved into Diana. No, it wasn't Diana after all. It was *her*. The girl from downtown. The one who got him into this mess in the first place. Well, that wasn't completely accurate. He shared a big part of the responsibility as well.

Even though she was dressed like trash, she took his breath away as soon as he saw her. He was crossing Illinois Street, minding his own business. She looked so much like his dead wife that Hank found himself staring at her from the middle of the street and only realized it when he was woken by several angry car horns. He was there now, all over again, watching her. The sound of car horns and disgruntled shouts for Hank to move caught her attention and she turned and looked right at him. He froze again just like he did back then. He tried to fight it, but he found himself doing just as he did that day.

He raised his arm to keep her attention, but she turned and race-walked away from him. This time he understood why. He failed to notice the first time that he must have looked like a madman looking for an innocent victim to assault. Just like the gesture itself, he was unable to stop himself from repeating his next move. He ran after her. She had just disappeared around the western corner of West Ohio Street, looking back at him as if in fear for her life, just like she had then. He never knew why he had taken off after her, not even then. He hadn't thought it was his wife, he just wanted to talk to her for some strange reason. As if meeting her would give him some kind of closure that nothing else had so far. This time, even though he knew how ridiculous his reasoning had been, he found himself still unable to prevent his actions. He grabbed hold of the two-tone granite wall to help slow him as he spun around the corner. He called out to her as he set foot onto the sidewalk of Ohio Street.

"Ma'am! Please, wait! You look like someone. I just want to talk to you," he yelled out as he gestured toward her again.

Almost breaking into a run, the woman seemed to have no interest in meeting Hank. She reached into her bag as she started to run and pulled out a cell phone. The phone had shiny, gem-like designs on it. Every other second or so, it reflected a blinding ray of sunlight into Hank's eyes as the woman ran with it at her ear. As she talked into the phone too fast for Hank to understand, he saw her glance periodically at his reflection in the windows that lined the building beside them to the left. The next thing Hank knew, she made it to the end of the block and swung left fast, following North Capital Avenue. Hank noticed as he turned onto the street himself that the same configuration of four windows grouped between stone pillars lined this side of the building as well. But it didn't last long. The building ended at an opening between itself and the next building that lead into a parking garage built into the next building.

She turned left and ran into the opening for the garage. Hank knew what was coming but had, by this point, realized that there was no escaping the fact that he was going to relive it completely untaunted from the first time.

The pimp came running out from the ground level of the garage right on cue, baseball bat in hand. Hank stopped immediately, holding his hands up in a gesture that clearly said, "please don't hit me." The Diana clone ran behind the pimp without looking back as if she were running for home base in the major leagues. The heels of her shoes nearly broke off as she waddled for the garage.

"Starla doesn't hook up with anyone without an appointment made through me, ya hear, son?" the pimp said as he aimed the bat in Hank's direction. He stood about six feet tall, wearing a brown corduroy suit with a purple silk handkerchief hanging from his jacket pocket and a cowboy hat that almost matched the color of his suit. Aside from the handkerchief, his clothes nearly camouflaged his pale skin. And here it was, the crucial moment, more than any other, that Hank wanted so badly to do over. It was the last chance he could have taken to walk away. Even though he knew in the real world, no one could really go back and do anything over again, he still tried to will himself to do just that. But no dice. He once again found himself reaching in his back pocket for his wallet with his right hand as he continued to hold his left up in that gesture of safety. The pimp, with a look of greedy curiosity, watched him as his arms loosened, letting the bat rest against his shoulder.

"How much for your trouble? Please, I just need to talk to her for a little while. She looks just like my..." he trailed off as the pimp let his right hand steady the bat against his shoulder and reached out to snatch Hank's wallet from his hand. In any sane situation, this move would have pissed Hank off and he would have said as much. But he didn't want to spoil his chance at speaking with the girl. It was like he was in a trance. The pimp was counting all the money in Hank's wallet and looking pleased. Hank had just withdrawn a large chunk from the ATM to make a payment on the car he was buying for Toby. He would still have time to get more out and make the payment. He just had to talk to this girl who looked so much like his Diana. When the pimp had taken all the cash and thrown the wallet back to Hank, he turned and whistled behind him.

Slowly and cautiously, the girl came out of the shadows of the garage and made her way toward the two of them. Once she exchanged glances with the pimp, her whole aura seemed to change like the difference between night and day. Before Hank could stop her,

she was caressing up and down his arm with her fingers and beaming at him. The effect was immobilizing, as her expressions were too much like Diana's.

When they entered the room at the Hilton down the way on Market Street, Hank found himself simply staring at Starla. She returned his stare patiently. She seemed to wait for some kind of instructions. When none came, she sat him down on the foot of the bed. Now that he had her attention and had spoken with her, he realized all he really wanted was to look at her for a while. To watch her face make the different expressions it made, whatever they be. To fade into the illusion that she had never died in the first place and everything was right with the world. After a while, she spoke.

"You like to watch, huh? You want me to take off my clothes so you can see a little more of me?" she asked coyly.

"No, that's okay. I just want to look at you. You look so much like her," he said.

Her expression changed to one of pity as he felt tears slide down his face. But just as quickly as that, her expression changed again. She put her hands on his chest and slid them up over his shoulders as she moved closer to him. It was so reminiscent of something Diana would have done that it caught him off guard. He let himself be gently pushed back onto the bed as she leaned forward and began kissing his neck. The illusion disappeared and Hank wept. Starla stopped in obvious aggravation and sat up abruptly, still straddling Hank.

"What's the matter, huh?" she asked in exasperation.

Hank went to say something, but she put her finger to his lips and wiped the tears from his eyes with both of her hands.

"Suck it up, hun," she said and then started pulling Hank's shirt up.

He tried to stop her, but in his emotional state, she had the upper hand. Before he knew it, she had both their shirts off. He couldn't help but notice the silky black bra she wore and felt a surge of mixed feelings. He hadn't been with a woman since Diana, so it wasn't surprising that he felt desire. Yet, he also felt a revulsion as he realized how different this lookalike of his loving bride really was. She was sitting there attempting to unbuckle his belt as he tried to, as gently as he could, push her away from him. The result was that his hands were on her shoulders in what must have looked like a willing action to the police officers who busted in the door the next second. It wasn't long after that he found out Starla and her pimp were infiltrated and given a chance to regain their freedom by luring in would-be customers. For the second time, Hank wondered if that brief moment in which Starla showed him a look of pity was just an act or the real thing.

\* \* \*

Kato was getting nervous as he watched Peter drink from Ishan. He started to worry that any moment someone else would rush in. He paced around the room, waiting for Peter to finish. The whole situation seemed to be taking an eternity. After finishing with Ishan, Peter would move on to drain Simon in order to completely seal his place of leadership. While passing Simon's bed in mid-pace, Kato couldn't help noticing a gleaming reflection from Simon's face. He took a closer look and was surprised to find tears streaming down each side of Simon's otherwise peaceful face. Peter seemed to notice Kato's nervous demeanor. He stopped drinking from Ishan and looked at Kato with contempt, his eyes fully black with bloodlust.

"Leave us," he said. "When you wake, this city will be mine and you will be rewarded."

\* \* \*

Simon knew time was moving faster than normal, but it came far too soon anyway. He had grown to love Rajan as his own father, and now here he was lying in his deathbed. The fever came several days before and the local Hindi medicine man had done all he could do. Twenty years had passed in Ishan's life since the first moment Simon woke to it. Through and with Ishan, he learned to build boats by hand with Rajan with no blueprints or plans. He learned to build the outer shell then the frame, improvising as he went. He had spent day in and day out in this surreal world from long ago building boats for years and yet only minutes. He felt the fire of the fever burn through Rajan's skin as the dying man gripped Ishan's hand tight. As he watched the last breath leave Rajan's body in a long sigh and felt Ishan's mourning pour out, he couldn't help feeling a spark of longing for his mother. As Ishan's tears ran, Simon felt the sensation as if they were his own tears being spent. Through those tears, he wept for all the years of hatred he had felt for his mother.

\* \* \*

The thirst woke Hank as the smell of the ancestor's blood filled his nose. He opened his eyes trying to ignore the several points of agony fighting for his brain's attention. He found himself lying on the right side of his face and he couldn't move his head at all. The vial took up most of his vision as it came into focus. The hand holding it was attached to an arm that stretched back to a blurry shape he knew to be Rachel. She was holding the vial just close enough for him to smell yet far enough he would not be able to reach it with his only mobile arm. Nevertheless, he still tried to reach out for it. Even though it was obvious his attempt to get a hold of it was feeble at best, Rachel edged the small transparent tube away all the same. Again he heard the voice of his Diana.

"Haven't you ever heard of tough love?" her soft beautiful voice asked. Hank clenched his eyes shut, unable to remove his wife's face from his internal vision. When he opened them to look again, everything was blurred from the tears filling his eyes. He reached out for the vial again with even more futility. As his right arm stretched out, it pulled on his left hand that was now stuck to the ground by his own dry blood. He let out a scream, unable to contain the pain.

"Give me the vial," he said in a deep, tortured tone. He closed his eyes again, infuriated by their inability to focus on anything.

Rachel answered him with bitter laughter. Then, she spoke in her own voice again.

"Oh, I will, in time. But first I want to see you hunger for it! I want to see your thirst turn you inside out. I want to see you burn for it!" Her lust for his pain dripped from every word.

Hank still couldn't reach anything with his hand. He tried to simply wipe his own tears and found he couldn't even manage that.

"Here," Rachel said. He saw a flash of movement in the blur and immediately felt a cauldron of fire boiling his left hand as it was ripped from the ground where it stuck. "Let me help you with that," she added, laughing over his screams.

He scrambled to get away. Now that he knew he could reach, he wiped his eyes with his right hand as he fell over on his back. Standing over him, he could see Rachel looking down at him and enjoying the spectacle before her. He could also see what was left of his hand as it hung from his left arm. Every single finger was broken. His middle, ring, and little finger had all broken the skin and were sticking out of the bottom of his knuckles. That was where the blood came from.

They bled freshly now as his hand throbbed harder than any wound he ever had before. He could feel nothing else. He tried to stand up, forgetting about his broken leg. Now his leg screamed at him as well. Rachel watched the scene with gratification.

"More!" she said, leering. She flashed the vial in his face, snapping it away before he could even get near it with his right hand. Then in a move that surprised, sickened, and excited Hank all at the same time, she began to strip off her clothes, one piece at a time. When she was completely nude she walked over to Hank, still holding the vial, and pushed him down onto his back. Then she put the vial in her mouth so that her two sharp canines blocked it from falling out as she straddled him. Caught by surprise, Hank didn't know what to do. Between the pain and the slight arousal, he found himself unable to act.

He snapped himself out of it and tried to reach for the vial with his one good hand. When his hand was within reach, Rachel grabbed it and pinned it down against the ground. Then she thrust her pelvis into his as her grip on his hand began fracturing his right hand. The combination of senses overwhelmed him and he wasn't sure which one was truly dominant. With both his hands now useless, Rachel let go of his right hand and sat up while thrusting once more. Then she took the vial from her mouth and opened it. Immediately his focus changed as he watched her pour some of the scarlet contents of it into her hand. She then took her hand and smeared the blood in it onto her neck in a line down between her breasts and then down to her navel. Hank tried with all of his will to bend forward to get just a taste of it. When he moved, the throbbing in both his hands brought him abruptly back down as new tears blurred his vision again.

Rachel smiled as she watched his attempt. She mockingly licked the remaining blood from her hand and then threw the vial over Hank's head. It made a distant sound behind him, letting him know it was unreachable. Then she leaned forward again, rubbing her body against his and keeping her torso far below his face. She moved up to the side of his face, careful to stay out of reach of his tongue, and whispered in his ear in Diana's voice.

"Make love to me, Hank," she pleaded. Hank began to sob uncontrollably. That was what Diana would say while she was still alive when she wanted him. The memory of it flooded back into Hank's mind, driving a knife into his heart. He needed to ask her what the fuck was wrong with her. He needed to burn her alive and rip her apart. But he knew he first had to endure and play along. It was the only chance he had. He whispered back to her, as composed as he could manage.

"Okay."

In her own voice Rachel whispered, "No! Say it. Say it like you have said it to her!"

Hank took a deep breath.

"Gladly," he whispered.

His sobbing became more intense as she began to unzip the top of his jumpsuit. He barely noticed the physical pain it caused when she pulled the sleeves from the two bloody pulps that were his hands. He was in too much emotional agony. She continued sliding the jumpsuit down his body. As she pulled it off his legs, the sharp torment of his broken leg intermingled with the outpour of grief, causing him to double over from the force of it. Even still with all that he was suffering, his male body betrayed him in its excitement. He hated himself for being unable to control it. He knew his true feelings were quite different from what his body was exhibiting.

Her hands pressed down onto his chest as she took him into herself. Immediately the phrase "You can't rape the willing" came to mind, reminding him of the typical stereotype that men could not be truly raped. But here he was... being raped. She began to rock up and down on him. It was exhilarating and horrifying all at once. She screamed his name in Diana's voice, sending chills down his spine and chilling his heart as well. She ripped at the flesh on his chest with her fingernails and began licking the blood from them. All the while, he got closer and closer. And then as his face tightened in ecstasy and revulsion as his body went into orgasm, she leaned forward, offering the now-dry blood on her chest to him. He licked it at once, while still in mid-climax. Suddenly all of his sensations were heightened and he found himself convulsing with euphoria and hatred. In that moment, he became mentally void. When it finally ended, his body relaxed and reality came back to him.

He opened his eyes and looked up at her with absolute loathing. She returned his look with one of satisfaction. In that moment, he could tell that his hands were healed as he realized he was making them both into fists. He wanted to wipe that look off her face. Once again, he wanted to rip her apart. But this time, it was a different feeling causing it. With the blood in his system, he felt something much different than before. The intense longing for the ancestor's blood he had felt was now replaced with an equal feeling of blood lust. Only this was a different kind of blood lust. Then, he noticed something else. He could also feel something strange grazing against the tip of his tongue. Two things. They were fangs. In Diana's voice, she spoke with obvious sarcasm.

"Was it good for you?" All of the pain he felt thinking of Diana and feeling as though he had betrayed her filled him again. Rachel's grin widened in victory. That was all it took. He let himself give in to the blood lust. He lunged forward and bit into her neck and began to drink. He gripped the back of her head with his hands to hold her in place as she feebly clawed at his back to pull him away. Images flooded into his mind. Pleasure beyond even the climax he just experienced filled his entire being as his body tingled in strange electric vibrations. And the taste of it only added to the effect. The flavor alone seemed enough to lift all of his grief and replace it with bliss and power. He opened his eyes in the thrill of the experience, blood dripping from his teeth, and his irises were now shining in crimson.

## **Chapter 17**

### **Mr. Sandburn Bring Me a Dream**

The boys in the cafeteria weren't even trying to hide the fake vampire fangs they were all wearing. They leered and laughed at Toby as he went by with his tray and tried to find a place to sit down where, just maybe, he wouldn't have to see any of them. Of course, none of the staff members were around. Not that they would do anything about it. It was hard enough for Toby to keep himself contained during lunch without this salt in his wound. He sat down at a spot facing away from most of the boys. It was toward the back of the cafeteria which was mostly decorated in cool colors. The concrete block walls were a light blue and the tiled floor was a gentle teal.

Toby stared at the floor helplessly, wondering what kind of god could make such a world and let it persist in such misery. His stomach growled, reminding him he should probably eat something or else give his hosts more reason to lock him away in the "Safe Room" again. He wanted to do his best to get into his normal room again. It would be hard to manage with the way the rest of the day seemed it would be. But it would allow him to carry out the plan forming in his head. Logically, he knew it would never work, but he was planning to run away, nonetheless. He decided it would be better to run away and maybe have some sort of hope of getting a death sentence like his old man. Then he wouldn't have to deal with the Empire he knew to be full of evil.

After he ate what he expected was enough food to pass as normal, Toby got up and walked toward the front of the cafeteria to send his tray away. He noticed most of the boys had cleared out at that point. He was relieved to see that Craig seemed to be gone as well. He could only hope not to cross Craig's path for the rest of the day, but he knew better. Craig made it obvious he would do his best to relish Toby's horror today. Toby put his tray on the conveyor belt and watched as it gracefully floated away. Then, he turned to leave the room and was overwhelmed to find himself standing well in the shadow of

Mr. Thompson himself. Craig looked down at him with his typical sneer, which was enhanced by the fake fangs sticking out.

A switch seemed to flip in Toby's head and, with strength and power he didn't know he had, he charged into Craig, throwing punches with all of his might. The move, coming out of nowhere, had thrown Craig off guard and Toby knocked three punches into his temple in what seemed like a microsecond, knocking him to the ground. Once on the ground, holding his head with his now bloody hands, Craig was helpless to defend himself as Toby fell onto him, continuing to swing at his face and chest. A tall, burly staff member with thinning, dirty blond hair and a beard grabbed hold of Toby and pulled him off the other boy, who now lay battered and seemed to be twitching. Toby was surprised to feel no remorse for him, but was instead filled with anger that Craig had caused Toby to lose any hope of getting back into his normal room soon.

The burly man pulled Toby away from the scene, still holding him by the arms. He muttered something to himself about seeing something like this coming from Toby all along. Toby was completely unsurprised to see another staff member waiting outside of the safe room as the man pulled him around the hall. The other staff member, a short, stocky, younger man opened the door while the burly man pushed Toby inside. The door clicked shut as Toby caught himself from falling face first on the floor.

After what had probably been only twenty minutes, but felt like forever to Toby, a knock came from outside the door. Toby had been lying on the bed doing the only thing there was to really do in this room: think. He looked up at the door to see who would enter. He knew it was too early in the day for any of The Enforcers to pay him a visit so he wasn't worried too much about who it might be. A moment later the door opened to reveal Mr. Sandburn, one of the senior staff members. Toby met him the night he was "admitted" as they called it. He wasn't completely sure, but he thought it had been Mr. Sandburn whose face he spit in that night. The middle-aged man looked down at him severely, the lines of stress showing on his face. His blue eyes attempted to bore into Toby, but failed miserably as Toby had more horrendous things to deal with at the moment.

"Toby, we need to talk. I'm sure you know what about," he said with deep authority. Toby merely looked through him as he wondered how long it would be until the news came on and if he would even get to eat dinner in the cafeteria after what had happened. Sandburn sat down at the foot of the bed and cleared his throat.

"I know you are under a lot of stress. I can only imagine how you must be feeling. But you could have killed that boy, Toby. Do you understand that?" he demanded. Toby couldn't help but feel a spark of defensiveness.

"He was wearing vampire teeth and last night he broke in here and beat the shit out of me!" Toby realized his eyes were exposing the extent of his pain by shedding massive blinding tears in quick gushes. Mr. Sandburn's face tightened with disbelief.

"How dare you make up such nonsense. No one but staff members have keys to this room and they are all of exemplary reputation!" he shouted, standing up midway through. "I suggest you sit in here and think about the consequences of hurting people and telling lies. You are *this* close," he held his thumb and pointer finger a centimeter apart, "to ending up in Necropolis like your father! Lucky for you Craig Thompson only suffered a mild flesh injury and had no concussion. However, he will have to spend the night in the hospital because of you," he said and then looked at the door. "Someone will be here to



escort you to the cafeteria when it is time for dinner. Until further notice, you will spend all of your time either in this room or with a chaperone." Then, he turned and walked out the door, slamming it behind him. Toby lay back down, setting his head gently onto his pillow. Then, he released more of the emotional burden from within his chest and sobbed fiercely as he curled his body into a ball. His weeping worsened as his mind filled with a primal simplification of what he was feeling. Over and over the words *I want my Daddy* repeated in his mind and eventually he cried himself to sleep.

Toby woke to the sound of the door of his room closing. He flung into a sitting position to assess his situation. The room was empty of anyone other than himself. But one thing caught his attention after a moment's scrutiny. A piece of paper lay crumpled at the foot of the bed. He reached forward and unraveled the paper ball. In crude scribbles much like the artwork left on his door the other day, a message for him had been written. It said, "You're going to pay for Thompson!" and underneath in much bigger letters was scribbled, "Tonight!" Both exclamation points were almost ripped into the paper by its author. Toby was torn between his fear and the anger he felt at that moment toward Mr. Sandburn for refusing to listen to him. After a few minutes, the fear won over and Toby lay watching the door, his stomach twisted in knots.

## **Chapter 18**

### **The Awakening**

The sense of time in this new realm was proving to be unfalteringly chaotic to Simon. Either it moved incredibly fast or incredibly slow. He never had an interest in ancient history and was now finding what he saw around him to change this to his very core. The centuries had begun to speed up so much that the time Simon experienced Ishan's mortal life seemed to last longer than the last seven centuries had. He was now seeing the ancient Mayan port city of Tulum through Ishan's eyes as Ishan continued his search for the place of the ancestors.

Ishan had started his search shortly after hearing rumors from some of his kind who had traveled through Rome around the time the Roman Empire began to crumble. It wasn't the first time Ishan heard rumors of his kind having settlements in a strange land where sophisticated human civilization hadn't yet flourished. A place where primitive natives still ruled the land and relied on their own hunting skills to survive. Many of the tribes worshipped the vampires as gods and some of them told stories passed down from many generations of one who was greater than all of the ancestors and human vampires. This ancestor was said to be able to make the earth quake and to kill men without lifting a finger, just by willing them to die. The stories had been told to them by several different groups of vampires and they all seemed to fit together to make a whole.

Ishan had chartered a ship, a crew of human vampires, and a few humans to take him out west to find this strange land he had heard so many rumors about. That was how he arrived at Tulum. When they found the city, he ordered his crew to hide themselves in the nearby jungles and await his next command. At first, the people would have nothing to do with him, but he learned the native language quickly and began to use his gift to heal the sick. He healed many and so the people there thought he was a great medicine man sent from the gods. However, the Mayan society was run by its own medicine men who held great power. Fearful they would lose their power and following to Ishan, they told

their people he was really a demon. Of course, this lie could have easily been confirmed in the minds of the Maya by simply catching Ishan in the act of feeding. It wasn't long before he found himself having to leave before the medicine men found him in his place of slumber. In the time he spent there, he only found one piece of worthwhile information anyhow. A raft floated ashore one day containing a very sick man. He was as primitive as the Maya but from some other place. Through vague hand gestures and drawing pictures in sand he claimed to be from land to the northeast. The Maya did not travel the sea and knew little about northern cultures. The man's bronze skin was much like the Maya but his tall stature and the furs he wore were quite different.

The man had been brought to Ishan to be healed, but he was too deep in delirium from a fever much like the one that had taken the life of Ishan's father. Ishan had, for several centuries, hated the gift of healing he'd been given in what he then called his "afterlife." He had spent long periods of time brooding over whether his gift might have been able to heal his father had he possessed it before the fever became too strong. As the man was close to death, he seemed to see Ishan for what he truly was and called out the word "Stikini" as he sat up and pointed at Ishan, his head and chest drenched in sweat. It could have just been a hallucination, but it was all Ishan had to go on. So when he left Tulum, he knew he would be sailing northeast. If the man *had* seen Ishan for what he really was and Stikini was the word for his kind he must have seen others like him somewhere.

Ishan and his crew set sail one late night headed for whatever land they would find to the northeast. They brought along one of the Maya medicine men and some of his loyal guards to feed from on their journey. After a voyage of many nights floating along the sea only lit by the unimaginable number of stars hanging in the sky, they saw land in the distance ahead. They made the calculations necessary to change their trajectory in order to arrive at the shore the next night instead of the morning. Ishan and his brethren would have been quite vulnerable if they had arrived on land by the light of day.

As the land came closer and closer, Ishan watched it impatiently. The desire to understand himself and his kind had, by this time, overtaken even his thirst for blood. If there was an answer to find here, he would find it or die trying. As the ship hit land, Ishan commanded the unliving of his crew to join him for a search of the immediate area. While the living worked toward getting the rope ladder down to the ground from the hull of the mighty craft, Ishan and the six other vampires of his crew jumped down and landed in the swamp with catlike motions. They spread out with Ishan taking the middle as they searched the beach. There were sand dunes here and there coming up from the ground. The array of scents in this place was confusing. Ishan could smell the sand and the ocean from behind him, but he could also smell fresh water up ahead. But another scent caught his attention as he made his way up a nearby palm tree to look out ahead. It was the scent of the ancestors. He had only found a handful of them in all of the centuries since one of them had bitten and infected him with the venom, but it had been enough to allow him to recognize the scent. The smell was overwhelming in this place. Stronger than he had ever experienced before.

Before he was completely down from the tree, it seemed to explode out from between his arms. The next second, he was falling to the ground and had to maneuver himself so he would land on his feet. When he looked up, he saw a human vampire he'd never seen before. The vampire was dressed much like the man who had washed ashore

in Tulum, only his eyes were black with blood lust. Ishan put his hands out in front of him in a gesture of peace. Oblivious to this, the vampire jumped from the top of the tree and swung his arms inward in order to use his claws on Ishan. Ishan grabbed his arms and, with a great show of strength, he managed to break the vampire's fall by only holding his arms. The vampire tried to squirm but Ishan held him. Then, he tried speaking in all the languages he knew in an attempt to get through to him. But none of them seemed to spark anything but a high-pitched screeching from the man. The sound reminded him of the ancestors. Finally after a while, Ishan let him go and the vampire turned away and ran.

Ishan waited a few minutes giving him a head start, hoping to trick him into thinking he wouldn't be followed. Then when the man's footfalls sounded as though they were far enough ahead, Ishan sped after him. The reason the smell of fresh water had been so strong dawned on him right as his foot slammed full on into the marsh, making a loud splash. He then remembered he hadn't heard the other vampire splash at all. He spun around to see a large crowd of human vampires lunging forward to grab hold of him. The next thing he knew, he was fighting them off left and right purely by instinct. But there were too many of them and before long he was worn out and they carried him away. Once again, he tried to speak to them in all of the languages he knew, but the rest of the human vampires only seemed to speak in those strange screeching sounds the ancestors made.

After a while of traveling, they arrived at a large cave. The vampires put him down and seemed to be surprised that he was not struggling to get away. Upon entering the cave, Ishan noticed from the echoes that it was a very complex maze of tunnels and chambers. After a few moments, he felt himself lose control of his body, yet his body continued to move. It followed the others regardless of what he told it to do. The lack of control was nearly enough to cause him panic. But before he could, he remembered the stories of the one who could kill men by willing it and wondered if this strange force making him move now came from that very vampire. The tunnel they followed ended in what Ishan's best guess was probably the middle of the cave system. It was a large open chamber with stalactites hanging from the ceiling.

There was a clear center to the chamber where the stalactites and stalagmites had been removed and a sort of altar was on the ground. Ishan found himself walking right toward the altar. The feeling of panic crept back into him. As he came closer to the altar, he noticed another cave in the far wall beyond it. He wasn't completely sure since he couldn't even control his own ability to focus, but he thought he saw movement. His body began to kneel down on the altar. He saw more movement coming from the tunnel. His head dropped as if to bow and he saw a small, pale pair of feet walking toward him from the cave beyond the throne. When the feet were right in front of Ishan, he felt his head begin to raise slowly. His view moved up the bare, smooth ankles. They connected to equally soft legs that slanted slightly outward as they came up to hips covered by a colorful, strangely weaved garment. The hips rounded up to a thin abdomen which slanted up to the chest in a v pattern. The navel was bare and the breasts were covered with a matching multicolored garment which strapped around the delicate milky neck which was draped in long, black wavy hair. Her face was the most beautiful thing Ishan and Simon had ever seen. It was a perfect teardrop shape with upward slanted brows and shimmering irises of burgundy. Her lips were slight as she smiled revealing her fangs.

The fangs caught Ishan's eyes immediately now that he had some control of his body again. They were twice as long as a normal ancestor's fangs. To his surprise, she held out her hand as if for him to kiss it. He leaned forward unsure if he were doing the right thing. She spoke.

"Don't be afraid. You are not mistaken," she said fluently in Ishan's native Sanskrit. He softly kissed the hand, indulging in the taste of her skin. He felt himself becoming intoxicated. Simon felt it, too. It was an emotion Simon had never experienced in his own life. It tore into his heart and swept away his soul. In these strange vampire eyes, he somehow saw his mother how she had always been and he had never seen her to be when she was alive. He saw and felt that here was a presence he could fall in love with and yet he hardly knew anything about it. He wasn't sure which reality it clicked in first, his or Ishan's, but the realization came almost simultaneously for the both of them. She had some sort of power over Ishan. It was animalistic, yet emotionally complex. But even with the realization met, he could do nothing to stop it. It was as if she were a wine that had inebriated him fully or a force that could not be conquered. Yet still he found himself not wanting to pull away from this sweet power she seemed to emanate.

"Now come with me," she said in a voice that demanded with lust. Ishan found himself unable to resist and almost nearly floating along after her as she turned and walked beyond the altar toward an opening in the far wall of the cave. A burning passion spilled over from Ishan as he followed this goddess of vampires. Images began to fill up his mind. At first, he didn't understand. But then as they took shape and came together, it all started to make sense. She was talking to him in his mind. Telling him secrets that, before telling him, only she had known. He was to be her lover. She had known he would come. It wasn't just that she knew that someone would come, she knew that Ishan would come. She had done all in her power to speed up the process but still he would have come regardless. Because he was the one strong enough to be her mate. He alone. It had always been this way. This was where they came from. Her mother's blood ran through him and entangled with his human blood. The human vampires were hardly a side affect of the venom. It was a natural process. Only through the human vampires could the ancestors breed. And it took thousands of years for one to become even barely strong enough to survive the mating process. *And, she told him in his mind, You, Ishan, are more than strong enough.* Ishan found that this pleased him more than anything ever had.

She took his hand, nearly stopping his heart as she came to the mouth of the cave wall. Though he knew she could tear his arm free from its socket without so much as a slight tug, she very gently led him along into the darkness of the cave.

\* \* \*

Flight 307 landed in Boulder City in the early hour of morning just before dawn. Chuck Lotinger unbuckled his safety belt, stood up slowly, and stretched with pleasure. He enjoyed life, but he enjoyed it to its fullness on the days he was able to take it from others. And two men in less than twelve hours, now that was a doozy. Chuck smiled as he pulled out his one suitcase from the overhead compartment. He began to whistle as he walked down the aisle of the plane toward the nervously smiling flight attendants waiting to guide him from the plane. He could smell the fear on them. Most people knew, could not mistake, there was something about him that just wasn't safe. He enjoyed this as well.

He savored the terror that grew in the young, petite stewardesses as he leaned in close to them and with a shit-eating grin to stop them all, said, "If I were you, ladies, I would lock your doors tonight. There's a killer on the loose." He soaked in the shock that swept across their faces and his grin grew in sync with the paling of both of them. Then he nodded to them and said, "Good day," and exited the plane.

When he was through the pathetic excuse for a terminal and outside the building, he found the car assigned to him waiting as patiently for him as a car could ever wait. It was a '68 Corvette Roadster just as he'd requested, bright red, and eerily reflecting the lights of the parking lot. Chuck slid into the driver's seat and lowered the visor with his left hand then smoothly caught the set of keys in his right. He replaced the visor to its original default position, put the key in the ignition, and started up the beast with a roar. Then, he flipped a switch and backed out as the convertible top began to raise above him. The next second, he saw the desert stretched out before him in the pale blue light of the early dawn. He peeled out of the parking lot toward it as the convertible top finished sinking down behind his seat, a cloud of dust exploding behind the Roadster. As he sped down the narrow two-lane highway, the wind blew through his hair and the sound of the engine surrounded him with its pure might. He was sure he had the most exhilarating job on the planet. It really was turning out to be the perfect day, he thought. But then, a moment later, all of that changed. His cell phone rang. He raised it to his left ear and answered with excitement.

"I'm en route now, sir. I'll be there in less than twenty minutes at the-" his face flushed as he was interrupted. The muscles in his neck tightened and he clenched his teeth as the Emperor spoke. This was not turning out to be his lucky day after all. When the conversation was over, he carefully put the phone back in his pocket, using all his self control to keep from throwing it out into the desert, never to be found again. His eyes narrowed as he pushed harder on the gas pedal with his foot, tightening his grip on the steering wheel.

\* \* \*

A throbbing pain he hadn't felt in over a thousand years stretched from Ishan's throat and spread through every vein in his body as a weak form of consciousness started to dawn within him. He hadn't felt such agony since the night his heart stopped beating. A large blurry shape was slowly coming into focus hovering over him. It was so close, he couldn't make it out at first. He could make out flesh and something yellow in color. Hair, it had to be hair. The hair was blonde and the pain he was feeling was rooted below the hair. It was all so confusing. He had been giving his people orders, making the way for Hank to leave, and working on getting his science team to recover the backup system. Now, he was floating in some kind of abyss, losing a second life to the one at his throat. But worst of all, he was sure that he knew who was at his throat, but he couldn't bring the name to his mind. This was bad. Even in his weakest states, he always had the sharpest mind and the most detailed memory. Something was very wrong. He started to feel a limpness all throughout his body. After two thousand years, it was all about to come to an end. He only hoped Hank made it out alive. It was the only way. But he hadn't told him why it was so important and this brought a stabbing sense of regret almost more excruciating than the fangs in his neck and the taking of his blood.

The head with blonde hair popped up revealing a sneering face with fangs dripping blood as it gasped for air. Peter, that was his name. As soon as the face was visible, the name followed suit. Things were coming back to him now. However, strength was not. Peter continued to smirk at Ishan with the same head-splitting grin.

"Hello, old friend. Nice to see you could awaken so I could see the sad, sad look on your face. I must say it brings me great pleasure," Peter said.

Ishan inhaled raspily and tried to speak in reply, but nothing came.

"Oh, don't waste your last breath on me, old friend. With every breath you keep, the more rich blood that's left for me, the more... *power*," he said, relishing the word, "left for me."

Ishan tried to move but Peter only laughed as Ishan's body merely shuddered instead. Then Peter's expression changed from one of humor to one of anger and he thrust his head back down. Ishan felt the younger vampire's fangs pierce into him, making a fresh wound.

\* \* \*

Not an ounce of compassion filled Peter as the memories of Ishan's life played out before him. In fact, he felt only satisfaction as he learned the most intimate details of Ishan's life. He even savored the times of suffering, though he experienced them as if they were his own. He watched, through Ishan's memories, the first time he met the ancient vampire. He felt firsthand the feelings that came with Ishan's first impression of him. What he felt jolted and infuriated him. It had taken a few minutes to recognize the emotion as Ishan had felt it on that day. It had a depth to it that wasn't far from sorrow, and yet simultaneously, inferiority, of which Peter knew all too well. When it hit him, he had nearly physically taken his teeth from Ishan's throat. Ishan had felt pity for him. Rage swelled through him as he realized this. What reason did he have for pitying me, he thought. It should have been the other way around. Ishan, always hearkening to the queen's every desire. An existence of pure slavery, it had seemed to Peter. But he also remembered that very day from his own memory and the first impression he had felt of this now-dying vampire. He felt intrigue and even some reverence for the ancient fool. But now, and for a long time now, he could only feel contempt for him. He was a coward, idly standing by while his own people were kept as slaves. The only one he never betrayed was his precious queen.

\* \* \*

It was almost laughable to Simon, when he saw himself in Ishan's memory. Even in their last encounter, after he became a vampire, he saw himself for the weak, meandering thing that he was, and had been all of his life. For a short while after experiencing these memories, Simon barely felt or understood anything else as he was overcome with a feeling of worthlessness and self loathing. Had he really led such a despicable life as this? Had he always had such a limited compassion for others? Then, he thought of his mother and the way he blamed her for what had been done to her. Then, as if all of the empathy he should have felt for others throughout his life had been bottled up inside and was now pouring out at once, he felt an explosion of pain, sympathy, and guilt. As he came to

terms with this, he realized the memories had stopped, and he was now within his own unconscious mind as if alone in a dark room.

But then he heard sounds, strange sounds, and realized that he was in fact conscious. He strained to open his eyes. At first, the same darkness was all that he could see. Then, his vision was completely gray and fuzzy for a long while. He knew that his eyes were adjusting to the lighting in whatever room he was now in. The strange sounds continued. He could hear the incessant beeping of what sounded like hospital monitoring equipment and something else. The "something else" was what confused him. It sounded like French kissing maybe, or a person sucking on something. He closed his eyes and opened them again, repeating the process several times over.

His sight began to restore. He was first able to make out the black-dotted, white ceiling tiles above him. Then, he looked downward to see the wall that was before him. It was white as well, only completely vacant of any other detail, save for a few electronic devices and a chair in front of it. He looked to his left, the direction the strange sucking sounds were coming from. He first saw the long flow of Ishan's hair. But the contrast of blonde hair intermingling with it demanded his attention. Then Ishan's body jolted as if he were convulsing and Peter's face was revealed as he drank from Ishan's neck. The fury of what happened to him came back to Simon then and it was now combined with a new thing. It was now linked with a desperation to save Ishan, a vampire for whom, he realized, he now cared deeply for. The impulse from his brain told him to lunge for Peter, but his body did nothing. Ishan screamed out in pain almost as if he realized that Simon could do nothing for him. But Ishan showed no signs of coherency other than agony. Simon tried yet again with all of his will to move and still his body did not comply. A deep rasping sound came from Ishan as the ancient vampire continued to hold on to his own life. But Peter only sucked harder in response.

\* \* \*

Peter was surprised enough when he found out Simon had managed to be chosen by the ancestors as a host. He was doubly surprised now to learn just how much of Ishan's blood the fledgling vampire managed to drain before it knocked him out. If he hadn't have been so wrapped up in Ishan's memories, the edge of fear in him would have developed more fully, but he was too emotionally involved to let it consume him. He had good reason to fear. It changed things a lot. It meant the only reason the battle between Ishan and himself went so smoothly was due to Ishan's extreme weakness. Arrogantly, he had assumed that Ishan's state was more due to being worn down in the fight. It also meant that Simon was now possibly a much more formidable opponent than Peter expected. He could feel now that Ishan was just on the verge of dying. He savored the taste of it, the blood and the thought that this contemptible thing would die. He had loved him once. Back then, he would have taken on the Empire on his own, if Ishan had asked him to. He had never known that he could feel so much in one single moment. But now, the time was his to inflict anguish. He began sucking harder, wanting more and more for Ishan's life to end forever.



\* \* \*

Simon focused all his concentration on his legs. At first nothing happened, but after a moment of harvesting all of his mental strength his legs began to twitch. Relief flooded his heart, and he tried again, pushing harder this time. His left leg moved slightly. As it moved, he felt an electric jolt through his entire body, a feeling akin to pins and needles. The sensation grew until his skin, muscles, and bones felt like they were vibrating. It reminded him of what he experienced when he changed from human to human vampire, only much more complex and enhanced. After a moment or so, it faded and he was left with a pleasurable vibration throughout his core. At that moment, he knew he could move. He knew he could move fast. So fast that he realized he was already in the air, lunging for Peter, before he had even finished his thought.

## **Chapter 19**

### **One Foot in Front of the Other**

It hadn't been what Hank expected. Of course, he hadn't really had much time to expect anything anyway. But the experience that overcame him was completely alien to anything he ever encountered. He was pretty sure it was mostly because he had never been a little girl before. But now, in all the information going into his brain from his sensory organs, it would seem he was a little girl. But not just any little girl. He was a little girl named Rachel. He experienced himself wearing a poofy, bright red dress and dancing around gleefully to the tune of an airplane overhead in what Rachel's brain remembered to be her back yard in the summer of 1934. He noticed the pretty sparkles that shone at random on the ruffles of the dress. He felt his eyelashes bat as he shared Rachel's dream of being the most glamorous princess in all the land. But then, dark clouds cast over the sun and an all-encompassing shadow covered the ground before them and Hank felt Rachel's stomach twist like a rag being wrung. The shadow took the shape of a large man as Rachel began to cry.

"It's okay, darlin'. Daddy just wants to play with his little girl," a rough voice said from behind them.

After only a short few minutes of being a girl, Hank experienced the most horrible thing a little girl can be made to endure. Not just once but several times. It quickly became clear to Hank that Rachel's brothers took after their father in more than just looks. Before long, Hank was experiencing puberty all over again but from an undiscovered spectrum well contrasting the first. All the while he also experienced a form of slavery as well. A mental slavery, a sexual one, and the general sort as well.

Rachel cooked, cleaned, and let herself be violated in more ways than just physical. She was passed around by the three of them like a rag doll on any given night. But then, it all changed. She was seventeen and walking down a dirt road at night, smoking a cigarette, going anywhere but home. She knew what was waiting for her. She was now

hours late and would get it much worse than any other given night. The corn fields adorned both sides of the road like a princess's long golden curls down each side of her face. Rachel cried thinking of that long-lost little princess inside of her. They had killed her little princess long ago. Well before, she learned to use her body as a means of getting what she wanted with anyone but her family. Why not use what she had to get out of class, or get a little cash, or even get a free ride out of town? She had tried that once. It worked so far as getting out of town, but her father had found her. Then came the worst beatings of her life followed by the most terrifying assault her father ever put her through.

Coyotes were singing their tune in the background of the full moon as headlights from a motorcar turned around the corner up ahead of her. Before she could get herself hidden between a couple rows of corn, the car slowed as it pulled up to where she was. It came to a complete stop and the window opened, revealing a strange smile attached to a blonde boy who looked like he was in his early twenties. Hank recognized him right away. Peter hadn't changed at all in nearly a century.

"Hey, dish, you want a ride somewhere?"

Hank felt himself blush and simultaneously heard and felt a high-pitched squeal come through his chest and out of his mouth in a slight giggle.

"Sure, handsome. Where you headed?" Hank felt Rachel's vocal cords vibrate into speech.

"Anywhere you want, gorgeous."

"Anywhere but here will do."

"Well, get in then," he said smiling widely.

Hank couldn't help but notice Rachel almost consciously, but not quite, realizing for herself that something was strange about that smile. Whatever it had been was out of focus. He felt her rationalize that it must have just been her imagination. Peter reached across the seat of the black Ford Model T and opened the door. Rachel, blushing, got in and closed it beside her as Peter put the automobile into gear and began to let off the clutch, making the car push forward.

Peter took her out to Dickson City to a fancy restaurant that night. The waiter took her for an adult and gladly served her wine without a second thought. She had a wonderful time with this stunning older man. After that, he took her dancing and before long she found herself alone with him back in his motor car parked in an alley behind a swing club. They started with small pecks at first and before long they were rapidly probing each others mouths with their tongues. She was feeling lust for the first time in her life as no man had ever made her feel before. She never understood before this moment why all the other girls talked with such swoon about men. Then he was opening her blouse and kissing down her chest. He made his way back upward and began kissing around her collar bone and then along her shoulder toward her arm. She had never felt a longing such as this. All those years of abuse had never let her feel anything at all pleasurable from a man's touch. But now, it was like a new world had opened up around her. She began to moan in pleasure as he kissed his way back toward her neck. She clutched at the steering wheel as she felt a luscious pressure in her neck. She began to moan louder as the windows of the car steamed up with fog. She felt a sweet darkness begin to fill her all over and screamed out in absolute delight. In slow motion and at the speed of light all at once, the passenger door of the automobile flung open in a burst. A bright flashlight flooded the inside of the car with light as she squinted her eyes in the

direction of it. Peter let go of her neck and she saw him way too quickly wipe his mouth from the corner of her eyes.

"You kids get out of here before I have to take you downtown," a loud nasal voice said from behind the flashlight. Then the door was slammed just as fast as it had been opened.

Rachel straightened herself and began buttoning up her blouse as Peter started the car and put it into reverse. It was only after they were back on the road that she noticed the small scab that was starting to form on her neck. She felt as though she were in another world. Her head floated along on top of her shoulders as the car drove on. Before long, she found herself being dropped off at her house even though she hadn't given Peter directions. In that same daze, she got out of the car, walked into her house, and went to her room without even looking at Peter. Nothing about this was strange to her in any way. As she lay down in the bed and closed her eyes, she heard the sound of screaming and a struggle from somewhere in the house. Then everything went silent for a long time. Still none of this was strange to her. Finally, she heard a rooster crowing just before she fell asleep.

The next day Rachel was rather confused to wake up and find the house completely empty. She didn't know what gift God had bestowed on her to cause her father and her two brothers to be gone without so much as a bruise on her or in her. She got up and fixed herself a big country breakfast and enjoyed a long summer's day reading on the front porch with a big glass of freshly brewed tea that usually only the men of the house were allowed to have. She was astonished to find herself feeling a pang of worry when evening came and still her monstrous brothers and father hadn't arrived home. When the last rays of sunshine faltered over the horizon and the sound of crickets filled the air, an immense fear gripped her. She went inside the house and locked the door and lodged it shut with one of the kitchen chairs. She was certain they were out there waiting. They were waiting for her to lie down and stop watching for them so they could come in and catch her just as soon as she was off guard. Then they would give her the raping and beating to end all and maybe even finally kill her. She paced around the house wondering what she should do.

After an hour of nervous pacing, she nearly jumped out of her skin when headlights filled the front yard as a motorcar pulled into the gravel driveway in front of the house. She knelt down below one of the front windows and peeked out the corner of one of the curtains. What she saw turned her world upside down. It was her terrible male blood relations all right. But not how she had expected to see them. They were lined up in the grass on their knees, each with a rag tied around his mouth. They had looks of fright on their faces and made muffled, whining sobs like dogs through their cloth-covered mouths. Rachel couldn't help letting out a giggle at the site of her abusers in such a docile and embarrassing pose. Then she saw the missing piece of the puzzle. Standing beside them, talking real gentle to them in a completely belittling tone, was Peter. After a moment passed he turned and looked right at her as if he could see her just as clearly as she could see him. He shouted to her.

"It's all right, Rachel. You can come out now. It's all right now. These bastards will never bother you again," he said and then turned and moved in a blur.

Rachel was filled with that same driving lust as she realized that in a movement too fast for her eyes to make out clearly, Peter had slapped all three of the men in the face,

turning their heads to the side and leaving each a purple bruise on their left cheek. In a rush of haste, Rachel got up and moved the chair from the door, unlocked it, flung it open, and ran to embrace her newfound lover. As they embraced, they seemed to spin forever together in the wind and the grass in front of her wicked old man and brothers as their moans were muted by the rags tied round their mouths. She was in heaven with this man. She didn't know what he was about to do to her kin, but she was sure it was going to end with them never being able to hurt her again. Peter whispered in her ear.

"If you want me to, I'll kill them right here in front of you."

She giggled loudly from the tickle of his breath on her ear and from the thrill of his words.

"But if I do it, first you must make me a promise," he continued.

"Anything," she said smiling and giggling in his arms.

"Promise me you'll be mine, all mine, forever," he said, his voice rising beyond a whisper.

"Yes! Forever," she said solemnly as she looked into his eyes. But the next thing that happened was far too brutal to keep from tearing her out of the spell she was under.

Peter smiled, opening his mouth and laughing, revealing his fangs to her. A tight fear gripped her heart as he swiveled effortlessly and pulled her father's neck up to his face. Then he tore his fangs down into the man's neck and began to suck the blood, tearing his flesh carelessly. A scream tore out from her involuntarily. Inward, she felt a barrage of conflicting feelings. But ultimately what won out was the curiosity she felt and the joy that her oppression from her brothers and father was finally at an end. She laughed hysterically as her father's body became visibly lighter and lighter. It was a rush to watch. When good ol' Dad's fat, writhing corpse fell to the ground with a plunk, she found herself wanting more.

"Jimmy next!"

"Which one is Jimmy?" Peter asked, licking the blood from his face.

"That one!" she said pointing down at the brother on the right who was shaking his head rapidly, her face morosely excited.

Peter lunged into him like a tiger crashing onto an elk.

The next instant, Rachel found herself running forward and kicking Jimmy in the chest over and over again all the while swearing at him at the top of her lungs. Then as Peter continued to drain Jimmy, Rachel turned to Bobby who was now lying sideways on the ground trying to get his tied hands out from behind him. She ran forward like a bullet and flung her body at him feet first. She could feel his jaw break beneath her shoes as she landed on top of him. She got up and kicked him in his abdomen with all of her might. Blood was pouring out of his mouth when Peter finally got to him.

When the deed was done, she took Peter into the house and made love for the first time ever in her life. She had lost her virginity long ago, but on this night, she lost her family, her torture, and her inhibitions.

They burned the house that night with the only blood relatives she had ever known inside. Then, they took off and headed south. Peter promised her that she could have what he had. She sure wanted it. She wanted the strength and the power. She had been disappointed when she learned it was a gift that he couldn't give her as she had read about it in books and stories. He told her all about the place they were going to. He told her all about the hive hidden in the city. The Big Easy. He told her about Ishan. The one who

chooses, he had said of him. For her to become as Peter was, she would have to submit to Ishan and pass the test of the ancestor queen. He told her the strange way in which the ancestors and the human vampires lived together off of each other. It was a strange word he used to explain it. The word was "symbiotic". He explained to her that there were many men among the ancestors but only one female, the queen. But the strangest thing of all he told her was about how the ancestors reproduced. In a way, they didn't. At least, not alone. The male ancestors, although there were many, were all completely and absolutely sterile. But once in several millennia, he told her, something strange happens. Among the many infected by the ancestor's venom, the queen picks one of great age and power. And through mating with him, she impregnates herself.

Hank had almost forgotten who he was as the experience seemed to go on forever and yet had only just begun a short while ago. He was learning so much that he hadn't expected and wasn't sure he really wanted. As the vision moved on outside of time, he saw Rachel and Peter arrive in New Orleans. He saw them arrive at the hive and Rachel and Ishan introduced to each other. He lived through Rachel's transformation from human to human vampire as she was given to a crowd of ancestors who covered her body in bites, draining all of her blood. Ishan asked the queen if Rachel was worthy. The queen said Rachel was and the males gave her the venom. He saw many faces put to death by Peter and Rachel over decade upon decade. After seeing so many of them, some sense of reality started to come back to him. He felt his physical body, his arms gripping her, his teeth buried into her neck. With a great amount of effort, he pulled his teeth free of her flesh. But the visions continued.

He saw the war and the blood pact through her eyes. He saw the founding of Necropolis as the vampires flooded the city and devoured every living person they could find. The innocent and the reprehensible. Finally, he saw the planning that went into their betrayal and felt a confirmation of the power he could feel Peter had over her.

\* \* \*

The vision began to fade as he found himself lying on the ground panting rapidly. As the real world began to focus out in front of him, he turned his head and looked over to see Rachel's limp body crumpled over and still. He hadn't wanted to kill her. He reached forward quickly and turned her around to look at her face. A vicious scowl was etched into it, solid and frozen. Her flesh was already beginning to decay. Noticing this made Hank jump back in revulsion.

He'd been sitting there for a long while, sobbing and shaking. He was aghast at what he had become. How would he protect his son now? That old longing came back to haunt him. If he were a vampire now, all he would have to do was wait for sunrise. That was it. All it would take. The cold emptiness showered over him and he shuddered violently. His mind was made up. He told himself it had been decided for him. His heart beat intensely.

Now that he was one of them, he would no longer be of any use to Toby. He could only hurt his beloved son now. So the choice was easy. He now realized he no longer had any reason at all to live. With a stealth and nature he had never known, he climbed his way out of the pit under the partially constructed house. When he set foot on the ground floor, he looked down at Rachel's body below. He could smell the flesh rotting from where he stood. It made his stomach turn.

He lifted his foot from the ground, letting sand rain down from his shoe into the pit, turned, and made his way out of the tarp-covered wall. Beyond came the sandy ground in front of the structure. He started back toward his original course, heading east on the road he had followed most of the night. His plan was simple. Keep going east until the dawn wakes. Then to hell with all the pain. To hell with all the misery. To hell with this life and all it had done to him in vain. Tears swept down his face as he went. His body was exhausted yet he put in every effort it took to lift and drop his feet back and forth, left and right. One foot in front of the other.

## **Chapter 20**

### **Peter's Rebuke**

As Simon's body flew through the air toward Peter, his mind caught up, making time seem to slow to a halt. In that long moment, he realized he needed to land so he wouldn't harm Ishan. With that thought, he used his new sense of balance to guide his landing just in front of Peter. Then his feet slammed into the floor and he rose back into the air, clutching Peter by the front of his jacket. He sprung up from the floor hard enough that the two of them more than cleared Ishan's hospital bed completely. The result ended with Peter's body crashing through the far corner by the door. Pulverized brick and mortar scattered everywhere and the air became thick with its dust.

Simon found himself unscathed by the blowback of debris as he focused on his enemy. Peter lay bleeding from the head and dazed in the hall outside the infirmary. After a moment of watching him, Simon advanced. Peter began scooting backwards, awkwardly clutching at his head. For a moment, Simon felt sorry for the wretched creature. In that second, while he was vulnerable, Peter made his move, jumping up into the air feet first, kicking Simon in the face in mid backflip. Then Peter ran, lunging over anything in his way with the full speed of his preternatural ability.

As soon as the shock wore off, Simon began his pursuit, finding himself much more agile and unnaturally fast than he'd even been as a fledgling vampire. He bounced off side walls and somersaulted over medical carts, moving faster than he knew his human eyes had been able to register. He knew every corner of every room in this place from Ishan's memory. After a few minutes of speeding through the hall, he spotted Peter up ahead, moving moderately slower than himself. But ahead of Peter, he could see the hallway was coming to the large open room. Then, he saw Peter enter the room flashing off to the right. Almost immediately afterward, Simon came flying into the room himself, stunned to find it had changed so much from what Ishan's memory of it had been. The room he knew from Ishan's recollection had been intact. This was the same room, only



everything in it was broken, scattered, or both. He calculated his options as he landed on his feet facing the hall.

The next thing he knew he saw a flash of light and was overwhelmed by a severe sense of weakness and pain. Then it was gone.

He heard a faint movement from behind and turned just in time to duck from the Samurai sword Peter swung at his head. Simon lunged forward and grabbed hold of Peter's hands, still on the hilt of the sword, now pointed toward the ground. Peter, using Simon's force to his benefit, spun away from him and Simon felt a blow to his abdomen and fell backward a few feet. Next, Peter jumped and dove for Simon, his sword held with both hands and aimed downward. In the instant before Peter would have struck, Simon dove forward, slamming into Peter's waist and sending him face forward toward the floor. Before Simon could get back on his feet, Peter managed to reach out and take a swing at him with the sword, cutting a long wound across Simon's chest. Simon rolled backwards onto his feet as he felt the wound already closing.

He looked down at his chest to see the blood drying behind his shirt. Peter stood up, visibly tired, his hand barely gripping the sword as the blade's end lay against the floor.

"How does it feel?" Peter taunted.

Simon looked at him, confused.

"How does it feel to have become the thing you hate most?"

"You don't know anything about me," Simon said, feeling his hatred for Peter overwhelm him.

"Actually, Simon, I know a great deal about you. I know why you hate your mother, for one," Peter said, letting his words sink into Simon.

"So, it was you. You raped my mother."

"You can't rape the willing, Simon."

Peter's words sparked the anger within Simon like a match to gasoline. He flew at Peter, knocking the sword from his hand, sending both of them toward the wall across the room, and slamming Peter into it. Behind Peter, the wall was cracked and indented around the shape of his body. Peter looked up at him in a daze.

"I've been watching you for years, Simon. And you know what the damnedest part is? I don't even know why." Peter slouched, and then curled up into a ball, lying sideways on the floor. "It's like this voice has been telling me what to do in the back of my head, all my life. I don't know what it is, I just do what it says, and I get what I want."

Peter pushed himself up with shaking arms. "Until now. It told me not to tell you this. But I want to so much. I want to tell you about all the dirty little secrets I know about you. I want to shame you before I kill you. I want you to feel what it's like to be humiliated and betrayed like I was."

Simon watched stunned by what he was hearing as Peter dragged himself up to his feet, looking at him with a renewed sense of purpose.

Simon's vision flashed again. This time, the vision became something more distinct than just light. He saw the inside of the infirmary. He also felt the same sense of fear, and pain again, only this time he could tell the pain was coming from his neck. Then it was gone again, and so was Peter.

Simon spun around just in time for Peter, in mid run, to stab into Simon with his sword. Simon fell on his side to the floor, the sword still in his gut. He slid onto his back and heard the tip of the blade scrape against the tiled floor while immense pressure

exploded in his lower back. He screamed in agony. Peter watched with a smirk of victory. Then, he walked forward assertively and pulled the blade from Simon's body. Simon let out a howl as the sword slid out of him.

Another flash from the infirmary took over Simon's senses. This time he felt as though he had transported back into the room. Every sense was there. Even thought. He knew at that moment he was Ishan, and he was going to die if Simon didn't get back in time.

Then Simon was back in his own body again. Peter was raising the sword, preparing to end the battle in one determined swipe at Simon's neck. He swung, and with a simple movement of his hands, Simon slapped the sides of the blade, his palms stopping the sword's momentum without injuring himself at all. Then he lifted with his hands, bending the blade like putty. Peter dropped the sword and began screaming at Simon.

"You're just a pawn! The whole reason that voice told me to watch you and to rape your whore mother was to..." Peter stopped and twitched. He made sounds with his mouth, but words would not come out. He clutched at his throat. He started coughing up blood as he looked at Simon in disbelief. Simon watched, conflicted as to how he felt or what to do. Peter reached out to him as if for help. Simon pulled his hand from Peter's reach, watching with horror as the vampire's face started to shrivel. Peter opened his mouth to speak and as his tongue touched the roof of his mouth to make an utterance, Simon's consciousness flashed to the infirmary again. When he was back to normal, he saw that Peter's body lay completely withered and lifeless. He turned and ran back in the direction of the infirmary. When he arrived back, Ishan was lying in the bed, waiting for him, looking almost as bad as Peter. Simon knelt down beside Ishan and looked into his eyes.

"What can I do to save you?" he asked.

"You know what to do. You have more than just my blood."

"But, I don't know how."

"Remember how you felt me do it before. You do know, just remember, and do what I did."

Simon found remembering all too easy in his newfound condition. He grabbed hold of Ishan's hands and let his compassion consume him, like Ishan had when using the gift of healing. Just like in Ishan's memories, the energy of his compassion transformed and became a new energy, a tangible one. It flowed through his body. Then, like Ishan, he focused on redirecting the flow of that energy from all the rest of his body, until it was all concentrating through his hands. Ishan's body jolted as Simon felt the flow of energy blast from his hands and into Ishan. He watched as Ishan's flesh became firm, and his color slowly changed from a dull gray to a glorious pale white. When the energy was expended, Simon saw that he was not finished and realized what he had to do. He tilted his head to the left.

"Drink," he commanded. Ishan looked in his eyes and hesitated for a moment. Then, looking dazed and flushed, he plunged his face into Simon's neck and began to drink.

## Chapter 21

### The Rising Sun

If there is one thing in the desert as numerous as the many grains of sand, it would be the stars in the sky. Hank noticed this all too well as he spent those inevitable moments walking by the light of those stars. Aside from them, his surroundings were pitch black. Even his own body was invisible to him as he looked down at it. As he stumbled his way through the desert sand that he could only feel by its clumsy footing and coarse texture, he dazed off into his memories. One particular memory took shape in his mind and played itself out for him, taunting him with its long lost happiness. Toby had been just shy of a year old when the memory originally took place. It was before Diana, and before he woke to the realization that the government he had lived under ruled through deceit, slander, and murder. The memory was, ironically enough, the day Toby took his first step.

"Come on, buddy boy, you've almost got this," Hank said to his glowing little boy.

Toby looked at the couch where his father sat expectantly. His arms reached out like a sleepwalker as his hands opened and closed to grab on to the air to keep his balance. He started making groaning noises like when he wanted to eat, or wanted a toy, or anything else that tickled his fancy. Hank slid down onto his knees on the floor and reached his hands out to Toby just beyond the toddler's reach.

"Toby, you can do it. Remember how Daddy showed you? Just pick up your little footsie and bring it forward, plop it down, and do the same with the other one."

Toby groaned louder with a hint of whining in his voice while shaking his tiny hands for his daddy to grab hold of. Then in his determination for his father to comply, he leaned forward to reach for him. The next second, something miraculous happened. He leaned forward so far that his leg instinctually lifted and swung forward and he fell onto his right foot without even realizing what he had done.

Hank cried out with excitement, "You did it, son!"

Toby looked down at his foot planted on the ground and laughed, doing a little dance. Then he lost his balance and crumbled to the floor, laughing harder in that loud, boisterous way that toddlers do.

\* \* \*

Chuck was speeding along when he decided he wasn't going to let the bad news ruin his mission. Sure it changed things, dreadfully, but it was what it was, he thought. He would just have to pretend it was just another day at the office, hunting down prey, and murdering them in cold blood. He had adapted to this line of thinking so much he was almost smiling again. But then he came to the mess of collided, abandoned vehicles covering the exit to US Highway 95 North.

"Fuck!" he screamed as his last effort to enjoy his mission disintegrated. Then he gripped the handheld navigation device that was wirelessly locked onto the location of Hank Evans's implant and began to peck harshly on the tiny keys with his thumbs. When the alternative route appeared on the display, it took everything in Chuck's will not to fling the device out the window. Instead, he tossed it into the passenger seat with deliberate constraint and heaved the gearshift up into reverse. The Roadster accelerated backwards and then with a few swift movements, Chuck swung the 'vette onto US Highway 95 South in the opposite direction. He pulled out his cellular phone and held down the number two, speed dialing the Emperor's main emergency line. The line rang once and then Joseph's scratchy voice greeted him.

"Yes, Lotinger?"

"There is a detour in the original route. It's going to take me another hour and a half to make up the difference. I, I, I'm sorry, sir, it was unavoidable."

The Emperor sighed with obvious contempt.

"I appreciate your informing me of this, Lotinger, but I do not wish to hear your voice again until it is telling me what I want to be hearing. When you have taken care of your assignment, I will be most glad to speak with you. In the meantime, make it so."

"Yes, Your Holiness," he said. An empty dial tone returned his declaration of allegiance. He scowled at the phone then put it back in his pocket and sped on.

\* \* \*

Even in the warm, dry air of Nevada, the breeze hitting Hank's tear-soaked face sent a chill down his spine. He'd been sitting on his knees in the middle of the desert for some time now, resting his sore legs. He had long since veered from the road and could no longer remember which direction it had been. Sure he was no longer in a place that would shade him from the sun's deadly rays, he slumped forward and turned, plopping down onto his back in the cool sand. As he lay there gazing up at the whole of the dark sky filled with stars, a meteor shower stretched across the sky in brilliant hues of blue and green and he wept. The only faith left in him now was the promise made by Ishan to make sure that Toby would be cared for in the event of Hank's death. His faith in life, and in himself, had scattered adrift with the wind that was now blowing sand into his face.

When Hank woke up, he knew immediately from looking up at the sky that he had slept for some time. It was still dark, but the stars were different. The patterns were the

same, but they had shifted to the west a ways. He was shaking violently. At first he thought it was from the cold desert night, but after a few minutes he realized what the true culprit was. He was thirsty, and unlike so many others lost in the desert, it was not water that his body was calling for. He no longer felt overwhelmed with depression. In its place lay a desperation, a yearning so strong he could hardly sit still. He stood up and began to stagger quickly forward in the direction he had been heading all along. He knew there were no humans left in Necropolis. His sense of morality fought him as he went, but his body moved as if he was completely unconflicted. He tried to think of his son, and what the boy would think of his father becoming such a monster, and although tears streamed down his face, he kept on. His legs shook with each step to the point of losing his balance every few footfalls or so.

The wind had picked up, causing more and more dunes as he went, further complicating his journey. He couldn't stop thinking of that first moment when the blood of the ancestors had touched his tongue. At the time, it seemed so insignificant. Now he longed for it, as if it could turn around all of his bad fortune and make the world whole again. Several times, he attempted to run, but found himself far too weak and kept walking his wobbly shuffle. He began to wonder just how far it was to the nearest living human being. There would be plenty of desert to cross, he was sure. The rational part of his being told him he wouldn't make it before the sun rose. He decided to continue on anyway. Either way he would get what he wanted if it meant his death or someone else's.

\* \* \*

The roadster's tires squealed as Lotinger barreled down the ramp to get on I-15 North. He was glad the 'vette had been left with a full tank of gas, considering his trip would likely work out to take much longer than it was supposed to. He had regained his enthusiasm about his mission now and was anticipating his arrival with almost as much pleasure as he had before things changed. He was mentally inventorying the items he would need once he arrived. Lucky for him, he had brought his scope just in case. The fact that he would now have to use it instead of doing the job up close and personal was almost the worst part of the changes the Emperor made to his instructions. He tried to swallow his bitterness and focus on the dimly lit road ahead.

After a while, he zoned out as the beam of the Roadster's headlights flooded over the pavement in front of him. Some of the many faces of his favorite past victims flooded his mind and he relived their murders in his memory, soothing himself into a state of contentment. He thought of his all-time favorite kill, Roger Tresney, and the brilliant look on the man's face as Lotinger strangled the man to death with his bare hands. He hadn't killed many with his hands, and certainly none quite as intimately as Roger. He had broken more than a handful of necks, beaten a man to death, and even drowned a couple of unfortunate souls. But the strangulation had been by far the most intimate of them all. Drowning was a close second, but strangulation had allowed him to not only embrace his victim, but to look into his victim's eyes as he took their life. He had found the moment to be quite moving, feeling an equally tender and erotic emotion beyond any he had felt in any sexual situation in his life. He was vividly remembering the moment when Roger's eyes had glossed over when Lotinger noticed the abandoned truck far too late. It had been hidden by the night and his own memories up until now, but in that split second before he

hit it, it was lit up bright green like a giant metallic Christmas tree. Lotinger let off the gas and eased into the brakes, cool under fire, knowing if he slammed them, he would flip the Corvette and surely die. As the Roadster slammed into the truck at nearly fifty miles an hour, Lotinger prayed to his master, knowing it was *his* will for him to complete his mission. Knowing this gave him absolute confidence that he would survive to do just that.

\* \* \*

Hank had been trying to stop his restless body for quite some time by thinking of Diana. He wondered, inflicting himself purposely with this anguish, if he were to die, would he be with her. He had bounced around all his life between faith and skepticism, back and forth. But now, it seemed as though he had a chance, albeit a small one, to find out for once and for all. He told himself he could dive full on into that chance and just lay back down as he had before. But, his body would hear none of his reasoning any longer. It continued on as though he were a puppet on a string into the screaming silence of the desert.

After a while longer of walking, he realized that his choice might have been made for him as he saw the very edge of the eastern horizon begin to fade into a dim light blue. While on ahead, he saw still only empty desert as far as he could see. It seemed to him that his body should give him back control, but it did not. It would limp on, with or without him. He knew that now. He accepted this. His legs had long been cramping, and he would have liked his last moments to have been at least somewhat comfortable. With the dim glow of predawn came the disappearance of the stars. One after another, they winked out before him until, after a while, they had all been swallowed by the enveloping gray-blue sky that was engulfing the horizon. He looked into the murky waters of the heavens, mesmerized by what they held in store for him. He had finally stopped walking and stood mouth agape as he stared up numbly into space, as though he were in a trance.

He could see specks of black soaring through the sky that he knew had to be birds. He watched them for awhile, saying his last goodbye to the world. As they came closer, the sheer beauty of their movements made him weep for all of the nature he would leave behind, all the moments like this that he would never again experience. He pictured what it would be like to see these things with Toby just one last time.

The bird that caught his eye first arched as it dove playfully around the others, and then rose back toward the upper atmosphere, spinning slowly in its ascent. A thunderous blast resonated from ahead of him like an explosion and he found himself jumping in pure terror. His retinas focused in the direction of the sound and he could see a great dust cloud coming up from the desert.

A change shook through him. The numbness had dissolved in a fraction of a second and was replaced with the dread of dying. Whether it was his body's natural instinct to preserve itself or he truly had a change of heart, he didn't linger to discern for himself. He looked all around him, seeing nothing but desert everywhere he looked. There seemed to be nowhere to hide from the sun. He did the only thing he could think to do. He dove into the sand and started digging as fast as he could, using the whole length of his arms to shovel sand aside.

He scooped left and then right, resembling an Olympic swimmer with his movements. As he dug nearly three feet of sand from the surface light spreading all around him. He dared a glance back at the horizon to see the sun had not quite risen yet, but would surely at any moment. He stumbled back around to dig as fast as he could. His arms shook violently as he lifted up the heavy sand and flung it away. The more sand he flung, the heavier his arms became. They were like limp noodles hanging from his shoulders.

In utter desperation, he threw himself backward and used his legs to push the hole deeper. For a few moments, he made some progress this way but his legs had already been weakened from the hours of walking. His right leg spasmed in the most painful muscle cramp he ever experienced in his entire life. As he lay on his side trying to beat his leg in order to loosen the cramp, he felt the warmth of the sun on his back. Only it wasn't its usual morning warmth, it was burning his flesh.

He tried to push himself into the tiny hole that he had dug. Even with crouching, he could only fit in up to his waist. The sun was rising, and he could feel it spreading up his body. He was about to re-situate himself headfirst into the hole when he glimpsed what was now a full fiery sun blazing over the edge of the horizon. His face began to burn and then his sight went black. All he felt was the burning and he couldn't help but wonder why it had to last so long. In his mind he said his last goodbye to Toby, and called out to his long-lost wife to come to him and see him through to the other side. When nothing changed, no voice came to his aid, no light illuminated no tunnel, he knew that he had been right to doubt all those years.

There really was nothing. Nothing at all beyond the frailty of existence that he had known. Nothing past the point of no return. Nothing but the love, pain, misery, torture, fleeting memories of the pale blue Earth. His body fell backward into the sand as he gave up the fight for his life. Dust knocked up into the air from the collision his body made with the ground. The dust collected around him and he started coughing as it filled up his lungs. In mid-cough spasm, he saw flashes of light. But there was nothing magical about this light. After a longer coughing fit, the light went from glimpses to a slowly progressing image. As the image came into focus, a wave of confusion flushed over him. He was seeing the desert again. He was seeing it in the light of the sun. His flesh still felt as though it were roasting, but it was beginning to seem bearable. He looked down at his exposed hand. He could see some slight noticeable blistering, but it wasn't getting worse. After standing up on his feet and checking all of his limbs for functionality and limberness, he screamed out in joy. He was alive, after all. He didn't understand it, but then again he still didn't understand how he had lived through the night either. It was a known fact that vampires could not survive the exposure to the sun. He started wondering what *was* really happening to him if he were not truly a vampire. He quickly reached in his mouth with his sand-covered right hand and at first had to fight to stop the gagging and spitting of sand that his mouth reacted with. Then after he was able to wipe enough sand off, he tried again. The two fangs were there still, but smaller. And if they had shrunk this much, he hoped, maybe they would shrink even more. He jumped up in the air in gratitude to whatever luck had gave him this magnificent second chance. Then he took a deep breath and exhaled, smiling a smile of true happiness for the first time in many years.

\* \* \*

Even though he hadn't slammed on the brakes, Lotinger felt the Roadster flip forward when it smashed into the green truck. His head crashed into the ceiling of the 'vette and then flung back into his seat just as fast from the hold of his seat belt. From outside the windows of the car, the Earth was a blur spinning in some direction, but exactly what direction that was, Chuck couldn't tell. Faded black pavement zoomed closer in the side window as the Roadster battered itself into the road and lay still. After a moment of delirium, a quick analysis of his situation told Lotinger that his left arm was broken, his head had suffered a definite blow, and likely both of his ankles were sprained. Biting his lip through the pain, he reached with his right hand under his broken arm and unlatched his seatbelt with excruciating, deliberate movements. Then he pulled his right arm free from his mangled left arm and reached for the rearview mirror. It was just out of his reach at first. But as he stretched upward, his arm aching, his middle finger was able to get a slight hold on the black plastic casing. Eventually he was able to pull it little by little until he could get the rest of his fingers over it and began to pull himself tediously upward.

His right arm swelled with screaming pain as he lifted himself up from the door of the Roadster. When he was able to put his first foot down, he was ready for the pain that shot into his ankle. In fact it was nothing compared to the arm, making it almost easy to stand on. But easy as it was, it was not very sturdy. He found his balance severely altered once he stood on both of his feet. Between lifting with his foot on the gear shift and pulling himself up with his one good arm by the side mirror, he was able to pull himself out of the car. By then, the sun was out completely and the full light of it blinded him for a moment as he lay hanging half out of and hunched over the passenger door of the horizontally sitting Corvette.

After a few moments, when his sight returned, he continued pulling himself the rest of the way out of the 'vette. He remembered the small tracking device he had been using to pursue his current prey. He knew instantly it was in neither of his pockets, the last place he had remembered it being was in the passenger seat. He looked back down into the 'vette and saw nothing resembling the tiny gadget. He tried to fight back his fury that he might not be able to find it and might not be able to complete his mission. The thought of disappointing his master flooded him with pure hatred for himself. It was, after all, completely his fault, and he deserved to be punished for it. After envisioning all the horrible ways he deserved to be slaughtered, he finally was able to focus on looking for the device. He dropped down from the bottom side of the car landing on his feet, but springing forward from the impact and banging his head on the car's all but shiny muffler.

He rubbed his head lamely and began scanning around the car for the device. He found that when he swung too quickly, his left arm tried to shoot outward and jarred his entire existence. So, he held onto it gently with his good hand when he needed to swing himself around in a hurry. He searched the ground of the entire perimeter around the car and the scene of the accident with no luck. He focused farther outward from the accident, letting his eyes adjust to the change in focus when he noticed a speck in his peripheral on the hood of the truck, just under where he was looking. He let his eyes slide over the speck and focus, but he couldn't make it out very well. He moved closer and no sooner



had he confirmed it was the device than it started to vibrate wildly. He picked it up and quickly navigated through its menu to see what it was trying to tell him. He grinned wide when he found what he was looking for. The device was telling him with its vibrations and blinking lights that his target was within a mile radius now.

He put the device in his pocket, grabbed his bad arm, turned around, and dashed for the trunk of the Roadster. He no longer had the keys to the car anymore as he headed toward it. He was hoping against hope that the trunk would have opened from the jolt of the accident. When he got to it, it was tight as a drum and he began slamming his non-mangled side into it with no results. He looked around for some sort of way to break it open. He sure as hell wasn't going to give up now. He got inside the cab of the truck and started looking around for any kind of tool he could use. There was nothing there, so he opened the compartments attached to the bed of the truck. The first two, he was unable to budge the cover, but the third opened freely for him. Inside, shinier than the shiniest of metal weapons, sat a long tire iron of gleaming silver. Chuck could see his own gruesome, stretched-out reflection in its base. He grabbed it with his one good hand and spun it around between his fingers. It twirled like a baton, sliding swiftly between his fingers as though it were a ball bearing already greased. Great pleasure filled him as the tire iron spun in his hand, and he began to whistle cheerfully. When he finally opened up the trunk, he ended up having to put his right leg into it along with his one good arm, but it gave sure enough. He pulled a single long, thick, black case out of the trunk and slung it by its strap over his shoulder. Then he pulled out the device and began following its directions until he was as close as the Emperor would allow him to get. Then he found himself a nice sized dune to set up behind.

He laid the case down on its side and opened the latches along its front. Inside the case were fitted pockets with pieces of his long range sniper's rifle and its many attachments for various different convenient uses. He sat down in the sand, crossed his legs, and started piecing the rifle together with his one hand, using his lap and legs for leverage. Once the rifle was complete, he attached the scope. Looking through it, he scanned the area where the navigation device claimed that Hank Evans was currently located. Sure enough, there he was. It only took a second to focus in on him. He was flailing about like a fish in the sand. Chuck Lotinger growled. He certainly wasn't going to get a good shot if the man wouldn't sit still. He watched the strange motions the man made as he rocked back and forth and kicked wildly at the sand.

"What the hell is he doing?" he asked the desert as if it had a logical answer for him. The man's kicking slowed and eventually he plopped to the ground. This was even worse. Now, he was lying so close to the ground that Chuck could barely see him. A renewed hope came to mind. Maybe Evans would just lie there, and Chuck would have to go and do the job by hand. Maybe that would be a good enough excuse for the Emperor. And just as quickly as this idea excited him to his very core with possibility, the man sat up. Then he jumped to his feet and began to spin around and shout. Lotinger had heard of people succumbing to the mirages of the desert before. Usually after dehydrating in the sun for hours, the mind could do all kinds of things to try and come to terms with its inevitable situation. But then, after a long moment of hysterics, the man stood completely still and took a deep breath. And as he exhaled with a huge smile on his face, Chuck Lotinger took the moment, lest it not return, fired a single shot into Hank's heart, and watched as the man's body crumpled to the ground.

## Chapter 22

### Toby's Last Stand

Mr. Sandburn took it upon himself to personally escort Toby to dinner that evening. Toby was unable to keep his eyes off the TV screen as he followed Mr. Sandburn to the table in the far back of the cafeteria. With a senior staff member present, the rest of the boys behaved like saints. But Toby barely noticed. He was too busy nervously awaiting the list of *Penitents*, as they had been called for years now. He was torn between feeling morbidly hopeless and desperately optimistic. And though Mr. Sandburn had spoken previously as though he had compassion for what Toby was going through, he didn't seem to care what Toby was about to experience. Either that, or he had forgotten, which wasn't much better in Toby's mind. The news focused on the continuing drop in crime throughout the nation, the record high employment rate, and most of all, all the good things the Imperial Church and its leader, Emperor Caesar, had been accomplishing for the great American Empire. Toby couldn't help but think that anyone with half a brain had to be able to see through the obvious layer of propaganda. But he had watched many people, children and adults alike, sit drone-like as the TV told them how to think about their mighty Empire and its God. Even some of the smartest people he had met in his life bought into the belief that their role as a citizen was to help keep America holy and pure from what the Emperor called the *iniquity of liberty*.

"Coming up after the break, what you've been waiting for all week. The list of *Penitents* is in, which, as always, brings about the perfect time to praise our great Emperor for the safety that we all share, and to remember what happens to those who do evil deeds and live sinfully within the walls of the holiest nation on Earth," the news anchor said sternly. The break consisted of a ten-minute-long sermon performed by the Emperor himself, on the virtues of attending the weekly Imperial Church services and drinking the weekly communion, which the Empire claimed would not only run your cup over in the happiness department, but would also help to spread patriotism and holiness

throughout the land. The sermon ended in prayer and Toby was forced to bow his head with all of the other boys and staff members. When it was over, the news anchor returned to the sound of triumphant orchestral music to read off the names and the offenses of the *Penitents* who had died the night prior.

"Jared Rodriguez, 19, who committed the robbery of a Gainesville, Florida grocery store. Roger Compton, 36, who committed the murder of a Columbus, Ohio man," and the list went on as Toby heard nothing but meaningless words, waiting for the cue that his father's name would bring. But suddenly, as if he had awoken from a trance, Mr. Sandburn stood up from his seat and strode toward the TV hanging from the upper wall. Toby sat paralyzed, unsure of whether he really wanted to stop him or not. But James Henderson wasn't quite so unsure. He moved quickly up to Sandburn, attempting to take his attention from what he was doing. Toby couldn't hear what the boy was saying, but he could tell from James's expression that he was laying it on thick as an innocent query of the utmost importance. Sandburn lingered for only a moment and motioned for James to talk as he walked with him towards the television set. Then without hesitation he turned off the TV as the name "Alex" and a last name that Toby thought started with a "C" was being listed. As Sandburn was focused on what he was doing, James gave one glaring look at Toby.

It didn't seem a stretch at this point to think that it was probably James who had left him his death threat that afternoon. He thought about how he should feel about that. He certainly didn't have the strength to fight, but he still had enough hope that he did not want to just lay down and die. Even though he wanted to know the truth so badly, he was sure that if he had heard the rest of those names, his father's would have been listed, and that little glimmer of hope would be completely gone. He wanted to hold onto it, no matter how impossible it seemed. When Mr. Sandburn returned to sit beside him again, he apologized to Toby for forgetting about the program and offered to pray with him for his father's soul. In any other situation Toby might have been angry with the man, but he had to give Mr. Sandburn credit for turning off the television, and whether purposely or not, helping to retain what little hope Toby had left.

After Mr. Sandburn decided that Toby wasn't going to eat his dinner, he led Toby back to his room. A newfound hope in the man caused Toby to plead his case again.

"Sir, someone left a death threat in my room for me earlier today. I know it was James Henderson, sir. You have to believe me."

Mr. Sandburn sighed and looked at Toby solemnly.

"Toby, there is no way any of the other boys could possibly get into your room. It is kept under constant watch. I know this has been a trying time for you, and I hope that you will get some rest and seek guidance in your prayers. Lord Caesar is merciful and is always waiting to heal those in need," the man said.

Toby could only look at the poor man with disdain. He wanted to have the energy to shake him and ask how he could say such things of the very man who had set the laws in motion which took his father to that very city in the first place. But instead, he lowered his head, and when Mr. Sandburn opened the door, Toby walked into his room and collapsed into the bed.

Toby awoke to the sound of many voices he couldn't quite make out at first. He opened his eyes but saw only darkness. The voices continued in a dull, indistinct reverberation in the background. The sound was so confusing that he couldn't tell if it

was far away or right in front of him. He attempted to call out for help but found he could only make an indistinguishable noise, and that it hurt his jaw quite profoundly to even do that. He was not surprised to find his babbling returned with laughter from the voices he could tell were in the same room with him. There had to be at least ten of them. Another painful sound escaped Toby's mouth as he reflexively cried out in fear.

"What's the matter, Toby, your father not here to save you?" James asked. "Is he too dead to help you?" He laughed along with all the other boys. Toby dug into a hole within himself as he heard these words. He had no reason anymore to lie to himself. His father was surely dead and he had no one left in this world. His weeping was only a fuel to the laughter that had now become almost deafening. The cloth that covered his eyes was ripped from his face. The room he was in was very dimly lit, but there was enough light to tell that it wasn't his cell. It looked dank and moist, like some sort of underground cellar or basement. Piping of all shapes and sizes covered the ceiling. The sound of dripping water was the only thing that filled the silence as the small crowd of boys dressed in capes made from bed sheets and sporting fake vampire teeth stood leering at Toby.

They pushed him to the ground. They took turns kicking him in his sides as they circled around him, his body folding inward from the shock. Then some of them began stomping on his legs and a loud crack came from his right ankle. The boys yelled insults as they beat him. Everything from "faggot", to "whore", to "sinner", and even "murderer". Then four of the boys held his arms and legs as James sat and straddled Toby's chest. James gave him a grim smile and took out the vampire teeth from his mouth and looked them over.

"I got these special, Toby. They're not like the others the other guys have. These are sharp, made of real bone. I even sharpened 'em a little extra," he said, winking at Toby.

Toby tried hard to struggle, knowing what was about to happen and wanting, needing to get away from the horrible thing that James was about to do. But the boys held tightly and Toby quickly wasted his strength. James laughed loudly and then put the teeth back in his mouth, biting down, making a dull clicking sound that was deep enough to give away the fact that they were quite solid. Toby let out a scream, the loudest he could muster, but another boy quickly filled his open mouth with a large rag. James gave him one last smiling glare and then thrust his mouth between Toby's head and left shoulder and bit down hard on Toby's jugular, the solid teeth tearing more than slicing his flesh. Toby clenched his teeth and nearly choked on the rag in his mouth. The laughter died. Some of the boys looked at James as if he were mad.

"What the hell are you doing, James? I thought you were just going to scare him," Charlie Welch pleaded.

Several of the other boys shared his look of fear, but said nothing. Even the boys who had been holding Toby's arms and legs had let go as they watched James in disgust. Toby tried to move his arms to push James away but he found them to be too heavy to move at all. The world began fading in and out. Toby saw darkness, then he saw James sitting on top of him, the fake teeth dripping with blood. Each time he was back in the room, there were fewer and fewer boys alongside James. The last thing he remembered was returning from the darkness to the sound of a gunshot. James's face had changed. He jumped up from Toby in an instant, pleading to an unseen person for his life. There was a swift movement, and then James let out a scream. Then, standing above Toby was a man

in his mid forties, dressed in a gray suit, his left arm bandaged in a sling. Toby faded back into unconsciousness as the man looked down at him curiously, with a hint of a grin.

\* \* \*

As Chuck Lotinger signed the last of the paperwork that checked Toby Evans out of the orphanage, he listened with as much patience as he could manage while the senior staff member Mr. Sandburn carried on to him about the boy.

"I told him, all right. I told him that Lord Caesar was merciful, and waiting to help those in need. I told him, and he didn't believe me, so I prayed for him myself. And I'll be, here you are, a representative of the Master himself. You've come to show him the way, haven't you Mr.-"

"Lotinger, sir. Yes, I have. The Emperor himself is waiting to meet this young man and lead him back to the path of righteousness his father steered him away from for so many years," Lotinger said almost too enthusiastically. After the paperwork was all signed and Chuck had suffered as much of the man's incessant jabber as he could stand, he said his farewell and walked out to the waiting Imperial car and slipped into the back seat. Behind the car, the ambulance waited.

"Let's get on the road, the Emperor is waiting," he said to the driver, who needed no further prompting. The driver, a young redheaded man covered in freckles, flipped the switch that activated the siren and put the car in gear. Lotinger watched Imperial Orphanage #4254 blur away through tinted glass as both vehicles drove away.

## Chapter 23

### The Ultimatum

At first, there had been nothing. Nothing at all, not even an awareness of the lack of anything. Then, slowly, a weak sort of perception began to grow from the darkness. A sensation of realizing existence, but completely void of nature or identity. There was also the wanting. The deep need for something yet undefined. The sense of presence, of life, developed into something more as sounds rose all around the mind. Then a pale, blurry light emerged from the nothing. A single color filled this new vision. The color was gray. A flood of memories sparked from the recognition of this single color. Images of storm clouds, sediment, rocks, various metallic objects, and sidewalks formed in the mind. These things swirled into patterns and warped into other colors and images until a spark ignited in *his* mind. That much was certain. He was a boy, or was he a man? Recollections of times and places as a young boy morphed into visions of events much more complex. He was a man. This knowledge, now acquired, only sped up the process of recall that his brain was fighting its way through.

But a hazy, dark memory brought forth another possibility. The faint impression of feeling sharp fangs pressing against his lips from within his mouth reminded him of a more recent past than his prior remembrance had. He remembered the blood then, and how much he needed it. This also awakened the realization that his sensation of touch had not yet returned.

Wondering if the ability to move was beyond his reach as well, he experimentally attempted to close his eyes. The gray blur before him began to shrink as his eyelids gently closed. Then blackness. He then attempted to raise them. A slightly clearer gray blob started to grow in front of him. He could make out the obscure lines that intersected in rectangles to make a concrete wall. He tried to lift his head then, and almost immediately, the nerves came to life throughout his body as the various muscles worked to allow his movement. Worst of all was the physical twinge of needing the blood, but

after a second, it subsided slightly and something else came into focus. A sharp pain in his chest made him gasp for air at the flash of memory it uncovered.

He had been in the desert. He had survived exposure to the sun, even though he'd expected to die. He was not a vampire after all. But why then did he still long for the blood so much? He remembered feeling as though he had been given a second chance. Was that memory a fraud? As the concrete wall came more into focus, a brief moment from his childhood played out in his mind. He was sitting at a desk in a classroom with 20 or so other children, hoping with all of his will that the teacher, Mrs. Vance, would not call on him. Several of the other children had their hands up as she looked around the room with her oval glasses sitting at the tip of her nose, her face filled with eagerness. He knew that eager look, he had seen it many times. She had always looked like this when she wanted to pick on one of the children. And more often than not, he had been her favorite choice to bully. This particular day was no exception. On her fifth round of looking over the classroom, her gaze came to a halt on him and she raised her arm and pointed to him as she took a deep, satisfied breath.

"Hank, why don't you tell us why an empire is a more effective government than any other type in the world? And don't forget to cite examples," the old woman said and then smiled impishly. Before she even finished exhaling, he had lunged at her, bitten deep down into her neck and... No, that was not what happened. Knowing this did not take away the thirst that had just doubled within him.

He gritted his teeth to try to subdue the hunger. Once his mind was as clear as it would get, something sparked from the memory. He was Hank. And it wasn't human blood he longed for. Knowing this seemed to bring everything back into focus. He could even see clearer and sat up with far less effort than it had taken to simply lift his head. He was sitting on a single slab of concrete in a small rectangular room not much larger than a broom closet. All of the walls were plain gray concrete, and there was a single solid metal door at the far end of the room, beyond the head of his "bed." There were no windows, nor were there any items in the room with him other than the concrete slab he sat upon. He wracked his newly awakened mind for some sort of clue as to where he was. Nothing came, save for that single moment he now knew to be the last thing he could remember. He had been shot. But as he examined his chest, he realized that whatever he had been shot with had not broken the skin. In place of the gaping wound he expected to find there was a purple bruise and a single red point in the middle of it that looked similar to a needle hole. It must have been some sort of tranquilizer.

He put his shirt back down and attempted to stand, finding his legs shaky and stiff. When he was completely upright, he tried taking a step. He had very little sense of balance. Between this and the fact that he couldn't stop shaking, he nearly fell over. Luckily the wall was near enough for him to grab and hold himself up. He used it for support as he slowly made his way toward the door. Reverberations of faraway sounds ricocheted through the thick metal of the door. As he leaned against the door, he took in a deep breath and for the first time since he had awoken, he tried to speak. It took a moment to stop his teeth from chattering. Then, he tried to make a soft sound. This attempt brought only the sound of air from his mouth. The second go sounded like a quiet choking. A few more tries resulted in variations of the first two. But on his sixth effort, a faint word sounded from his vocal chords.

"Hello?" his voice creaked weakly. This was going to be harder than he thought. He took another deep breath and braced himself as he pushed his diaphragm into this one. "Hello?" he yelled hoarsely. But all he heard in return was a faint metallic echo of his own word in his own voice. Balancing with his left arm, he beat against the door with his right fist. The door boomed deeply with each strike. No response. His eyes rolled into the back of his head as he fought off the returning thirst. He spent several minutes pressing into the door with his hands. It was more for the slight relief it gave him than to actually do anything to the unyielding door. He sighed and made his way back to the slab of concrete, still using the wall for support as he went. There were spots of blood along the wall and floor that disappeared with a second glance. He sat down on the slab and sat back against the cold, concrete wall. He decided that all he could do now was wait.

There was no way for Hank to tell just how long it had been since he had fallen asleep sitting up in this strange cell. He wiped the drool from his mouth, noticing again that he had no fangs, and did his best to dry the rest that was on his shirt. He looked toward the door, remembering then that it had been some sort of sound that had awoken him. Or had it been just a dream? He waited, watching the door with nervous anticipation. As badly as he wanted to know where he was, he equally dreaded to find out. He went into something like a trance from deep concentration as he listened. He was startled out of the trance by the abrupt sound of clanging from behind the door. This was followed by the fast clicking of gears turning from within the metal door. Then, an even louder jolt vibrated through the floor as the thick door began to shudder. A high-pitched squeal hissed from the door as it swung heavily open. Two men stood in the doorway, one wearing a suit, his left arm in a sling, the other dressed as an imperial sentry, the likes of which Hank had seen many of prior to arriving in Necropolis. Behind the two men, the hallway was just as gray and drab. The man in the suit came forward, smiling.

"Mr. Evans, we are here to escort you to the Emperor's chambers. He would like to see you. I think you will be most pleased to hear what he has to say."

"And you are?" Hank asked.

"I am Charles Lotinger, the Emperor's personal assistant," Lotinger said, still grinning.

Hank had a good idea there were likely all kinds of extraordinary errands the Emperor's personal assistant would be responsible for.

"So, if you will, please, come with me," Lotinger added in a less pleasant and much more demanding tone.

Hank saw no choice but to comply. If for no other reason than the submachine gun the sentry pointed generally in his direction. But even more so he could see that Charles Lotinger was not someone to be easily reckoned with. Even when you've been through all that Hank had the night prior. But most of all, he was shaking uncontrollably and knew there would be no way he could put up any kind of fight. With his obvious submission shown, Lotinger motioned with his right hand for the sentry to move him. The sentry pulled Hank forward by his wrist, causing him to tumble forward to the floor.

"One of the aftereffects of the tranquilizer you were given is poor depth perception and balance. Are you having any trouble remembering anything?" Lotinger said, as he extended his right hand to Hank. Hank accepted it and, with Lotinger's help, pulled himself up from the floor.

"Not anymore."



"Good, it usually takes a while for the amnesia to wear off. That's just the Midazolam in the mix, has some nasty effects sometimes, that one. Here, I'll give you some help." Lotinger took Hank's arm and began leading him forward as the sentry followed behind. Every few minutes or so, the barrel of his submachine gun would touch Hank's back. He was pretty sure this was not by accident. He was surprised his treatment hadn't been much worse. The last time he was in the Empire's custody, they had hardly given him anything more than a rifle butt over the head, and a good shove for every lax movement. The hallway was no more exciting once Hank was in it than it had looked from inside the cell. He found the next hall they turned at to be just as featureless. What he also noticed was just how quiet it was in this place. There were sounds, but they were muffled and very far away. The lack of other people especially interested him. There were many other doors along each hallway; all of them looked the same, save for each having their own unique six digit sequence labeled at eye level. His had been 461286. He had noticed it as the door was closed and relocked. The lack of windows throughout this place made Hank curious.

"Are we somewhere underground?" he asked. The sentry instinctively rifle-butted Hank in the back, knocking him out of Lotinger's grip and sending him down on his knees. He looked up to see an expression of rage take over Lotinger's face. The sentry was already backing away, as if he had shot a bear and the bear had managed to survive. After a long tense moment, Lotinger seemed to have calmed down. He sighed heavily, and then spoke through clenched teeth.

"Mr. Evans is the Emperor's guest and is to be handled with care, do you understand me?"

"Yes, sir," the sentry said, his face red and constricted.

"Forgive him, Mr. Evans. Working down here, he has become far too used to bullying people," Lotinger said as he helped Hank up for the second time.

"So, this place is underground?"

"Yes, it is a particular type of facility used for those who are, or have been affected by, vampires."

"You mean some of these cells have vampires in them?"

"Yes, most do." Lotinger laughed. "You didn't think all of the vampires within the Imperial border lived in Necropolis, did you?"

Before he could answer, they were at the end of a hall and facing a strange set of black elevator doors. Lotinger let go of Hank, who was now leaning against the wall. He then waved his good hand over a blue glowing screen to the right of the doors and it instantly turned green, opening the elevator. Once they were inside, Lotinger allowed Hank to lean against the elevator railing for support. It was a short trip that must have only gone down a couple of floors, Hank estimated. When the elevator opened, Hank was surprised to see such a small room before him. Lotinger took Hank's arm and pulled him up to a walking position and turned to the sentry.

"Return to your duties, I can take it from here."

"Yes, sir," the sentry said and then saluted.

Once Lotinger and Hank were through, the elevator doors closed behind them. The room inside was dimly lit and medium-sized. It looked like an office to Hank. In the middle sat a large, sturdy, darkly finished desk with many papers and things scattered about its surface. Behind the desk, sitting in an oversized leather desk chair, someone was

facing away from them. Hank's withdrawals intensified as he recognized a scent in the air. It was weak, but he could have smelled even a drop of it with perfect clarity at this point.

"Welcome, Mr. Evans," a voice said from the chair. Hank felt as if he were in a sort of vacuum, the sounds of the room were crisp and echoless. "Have a seat, I will be with you in a moment." The Emperor's voice sounded scratchier than Hank remembered from television. Hank was confused as to why he was being made to wait, as the Emperor seemed to be just sitting there, doing nothing. Just as soon as this thought entered Hank's mind, the chair swiveled, and he was surprised at what he saw. It was the Emperor, all right. He was wearing his blinding white robe, as he always seemed to be. But something was very different about him. His brown eyes were very bloodshot, yet he looked younger than Hank remembered. His hair had been somewhere between gray and white but now it was just gray. But his skin was what stuck out most. It had been slightly wrinkled in the past few years, but was now youthful in appearance.

"I'm going to get right to the point, Mr. Evans, I have a business proposition to offer you, and I think you will find yourself quite," he paused, "unmistakably," then leaned back, "unable to refuse." His smile gave off a look of compassion mixed with contempt. Hank found himself tongue tied as he sat shaking wildly. With what little coherence he had, he wondered why he was still alive.

The Emperor cleared his throat and continued. "I have once again found myself in need of a mediator, thanks to unfortunate events that occurred last night, and your ability to survive, where no man has formerly done so, has given me the expectation that you would manage this position considerably more successfully than your predecessors," he said and laughed.

Even in his current position, Hank wanted nothing in the world less than to ever go back to that dreadful city. He found himself shaking his head almost as insuppressibly as the rest of his body.

The Emperor's good humor vanished as his mouth lined up completely straight. "You will find it to your benefit to know the consequences of not accepting my offer before you decide so hastily, Mr. Evans."

In an instant, Hank found his chair swiveled around and facing a large screen mounted on the wall. Looking over his shoulder, he could see a hand grasping the back of his chair. It belonged to the man who had called himself Charles Lotinger. Hank turned back to face the display. Static filled the screen and then flickered until an image took its place. There, in black and white, was Toby. The boy was curled up and crumpled in the corner of a cell similar to the one Hank had just come from. His voice quivering madly from the emotional jolt and the sickness of addiction, Hank called out, "Toby!" He lifted from his seat and fell to the floor as he reached out for the screen. Just as quickly the image went completely blank.

"Now, Mr. Evans, are you ready to negotiate? Or shall I instruct Mr. Lotinger to inflict the first consequence on your son?" Hank lunged up from the floor almost drunkenly, nearly reaching the desk, save for Lotinger grabbing hold of him and throwing him back in his chair in a single motion.

"You let him go or I swear-"

"What, Mr. Evans? What can you do to me?"

Hank was still struggling as Lotinger held him down in his chair with one hand. Everything going on seemed to combine at that moment to further worsen Hank's condition. His shaking became violent as he glared at the Emperor. He was beginning to feel as though he would die if it went on much longer. The Emperor, noticing his physical state, smiled wryly.

"There is another component of this deal, Mr. Evans, that you have not allowed me to yet include, by way of your premature refusal." His face changed then to one of tremendous compassion. "I know why you suffer," he said in a gentle voice. "I know what it is you need. I know what it is you hunger for, and I can take this pain away from you."

He nodded assuredly with an even more nurturing expression. Hank knew that the man wasn't lying, he had smelled the blood in the room ever since he had entered it. It was the biggest reason he was losing more and more control over himself. The Emperor picked up a black box that sat atop the desk and pushed some buttons on it. The next moment a strange, secret compartment opened and the presence of ancestor blood overpowered Hank's every sense all at once. Before he could stop himself, he reached out with both of his hands for the tiny glass vial that sat snugly inside the small, velvet-lined drawer. Before his hands could get to it, Lotinger grabbed his collar from behind, keeping him just out of reach. The Emperor let out a dry laugh.

"Ah, ah, ah, Mr. Evans. As you should well know, nothing in this world is for free." He grinned at Hank with a devious smirk that said *I've got you right where I want you*. Near to choking, Hank was still reaching out for the vial. "You see Mr. Evans, it's like I said, you cannot refuse me. If you do what I ask, your son will be spared much unpleasantness, and I will supply you with all the blood that you will need." He paused for a moment and his smile widened, "Indefinitely."

Tears were now streaming from Hank's face.

"Wi-will you le-let Toby go?"

"Yes, but you will both be kept track of. Especially you. And your performance will determine whether he will stay in your care." His face went grim. "Or mine." The Emperor swiveled lazily in his chair a little to the left and sighed. "So, what do you say, Hank?" The word "Hank" sounded strange coming from him; it was too informal.

"So, if I do well, T-Toby can stay with me?"

"Yes, if you do well, Toby can stay with you. You will be paid a generous salary, and I will keep you supplied in blood. There is no good reason not to take this deal."

"But, what if some-something happens, out of m-my control, wha-what then?"

"Mr. Evans, I'm an understanding man. You only need to concern yourself with doing your job well, and no harm need come to the boy." Hank knew then he was lying, but saw no other choice. There was no conceivable way he could save his son otherwise. And the blood was right there, he could have it. He could have it whenever he needed it, and he really needed it right this moment more than anything. More, even, than Toby. Anger rose up in him at the thought, and he denied it, as if he could really lie to himself. He drooped his head forward and began to weep. He felt Lotinger's grip loosen on his arms. Through his tear-soaked eyelashes, he could see the Emperor smiling victoriously.

"Mr. Lotinger has a device in his pocket. All I need for you to do, Hank, is swallow it. It will repair and upgrade the monitoring device that is already inside you. With this device, I warn you now, we will be able to see and hear anything that you do, in real

time. And if you try to have it removed, not only will it kill you, Mr. Evans, I will kill your son. Do you understand?"

Hank nodded shakily. Lotinger let go of him and turned him around, then pulled the capsule-like device from his pocket and held it out to give to Hank. Hank took it and within a moment, Lotinger provided him with a glass of water with which to ingest it. He put the capsule on his tongue and with one long gulp of water, he swallowed it, feeling the urge to cry, but holding back with what little strength he had.

"Congratulations, Mr. Evans, you are now one of the most important assets to the American Empire, and please, by all means, drink." Hank turned to see the Emperor holding the vial out toward him. He swiftly took it from the Emperor's hand, and crouching down to the floor, pulled out the stopper. He put the open vial to his lips and slowly tipped it back. His tongue felt magnetized to the liquid as it came closer. When the first drop touched, he felt the world stop. His heart rate increased as a feeling of intense ecstasy overwhelmed his every cell. He tipped his head further and smiled as the blood flowed down his throat. It reminded him of the first time the blood had splattered into his mouth. Immediately he realized that something was different about this blood. It was fresh. That was why it reminded him of the first time. He dismissed a brief curiosity at how this could be. What did it matter to him, so long as he had it. He smiled as he looked up at Lotinger, who was looking down at him with a sort of contempt in his features.

"Very well. You will be briefed and trained for a time dependent on what you will require. I will monitor your progress from time to time, and then, we will send you on your first assignment." The Emperor was standing now, looking down at Hank and appearing quite accomplished. "You made the right choice, Mr. Evans."

But he didn't feel like he had. What little of himself was left at the moment felt like he had sold his soul.

"I suppose now you would like to see your son. Mr. Lotinger will take you to him."

At the mention of his son, Hank immediately began to wipe his mouth as a sense of self-consciousness brought him fully back to reality. Then, he picked himself up from the floor and straightened out his clothes as if anything could be done to give him the appearance of being well tailored. He looked at the Emperor, unsure what he should say. Then, Lotinger knelt in front of the desk.

"My Lord."

The Emperor nodded and gestured his blessing for Lotinger to leave. Hank followed him, saying nothing more to the Emperor as he went. Once they were back in the bland hallway, Lotinger swung around violently, the sling holding his left arm lifting slightly from the movement. He grabbed hold of Hank's throat with his right hand, pushing him up against the wall.

"Next time you will show His Holiness the respect that is due to him."

Hank held his breath. He wasn't afraid anymore. He knew he was stronger than this man. Now that he had drunk the blood, he was sure he could break any one of this man's other bones with very little effort. But, strong as he was, he feared the man would not take him to Toby if he fought back. When Lotinger finally let go, he turned and Hank followed him through the hall. They took the same elevator they went through before, going back up, a few floors further than Hank had been.

When they arrived in front of cell number 076458, Lotinger typed in a code and opened his right eye wide as he leaned toward what looked to Hank like a nozzle. It shot

a red beam of light into Lotinger's eye, and a sound, sort of like a chime, went off. The door then made the sound that Hank remembered his making when it opened. Once the door was open, Lotinger stepped aside, gesturing for Hank to enter. But the look on his face was one of hatred. Hank tried to ignore it as he entered the room.

When he was inside, he saw that Toby was not as he had been when Hank saw him on the screen in the Emperor's chambers. He realized then that it must have been a recording, for the boy lay motionless and breathing deeply on his slab of concrete. Hank sat next to him at the edge of the slab quietly, so as not to wake him. He brushed his hand against his son's face and then put his own face in his hands and began to cry, partly from joy and partly for fear of the future, but mostly for what he had done to his son and himself by making this deal. Remembering the capsule he had taken, he wondered if there would ever be a way that they could escape.

## Chapter 24

### Baptism by Fire

After Ishan finished drinking from him, Simon laid him back down on the bed. He couldn't believe what Ishan had done. Simon had offered Ishan his blood back, but Ishan had only taken half. Something else had happened, too. Some strange connection formed between the two, beyond anything that Simon could comprehend. It started before Ishan drank from him, but it was much fainter then. The difference between before and now was like listening to someone through a bad radio signal compared to standing right in front of them, face to face. He could see, hear, and smell everything in the infirmary. He even reached out and touched the cold side bar of the hospital bed that Ishan lay in. And yet he was also feeling all of these senses through Ishan simultaneously. Ishan had been experiencing Simon's memories for hours now. If it had only been Simon's life, it would have been over in a matter of minutes. But, Ishan's own history was now a part of Simon's memory. Simon knew, however, through this new link between them, that Ishan wanted to experience the cycle of his own past in private. It was almost as if they could think with the same mind.

He left the room to begin assessing the damages that had been sustained to the nest and to the ancestor's tunnels. He knew that he was doing as Ishan would have done if he were conscious and able to move, but he did not mind. He wanted to give Ishan his privacy and things would need to be rebuilt soon. He had accepted this place as his home from the moment he woke up in that infirmary next to Ishan. After he was finished examining the mess, he checked the sleeping chambers. Most of them were occupied. Of course the rooms that belonged to Peter and the other vampires who had taken up with him were empty. But, upon checking, Simon was surprised to find the rooms of Rachel, Boris, Yavo, and Rodney all vacant as well. Had Peter's men killed them? A strange pang of anguish filled him as he not only felt Ishan's loss, but felt it himself as well. Living through Ishan's life, he felt as though they were his family, too.

But, still another possibility existed. One in which Simon knew all too well, that Ishan did not want to accept. However, regardless of how it had happened, they found themselves hoping that Hank had made it out of the city alive and in the custody of the Empire. It was the only chance they would get. It had been one of Ishan's better ideas to include a clause in the blood pact giving him the option to choose a mediator. At the time, the Emperor had seen no reason to prevent it. But by now, Ishan and Simon were sure he was now concerned about the choice Ishan had made. They wondered if the Emperor had any clue what made Hank so special.

\* \* \*

Lotinger entered the Emperor's chambers, bowing low as he came. The Emperor looked up from his desk and raised his right hand in a gesture of acceptance. Then Lotinger stood up stiffly as the Emperor turned his attention back to the papers on his desk.

"You asked to see me Your Holiness?"

"Yes, Mr. Lotinger, and I suspect that you know exactly why as well," the Emperor said, not bothering to look up this time.

"Yes, my Lord. I acted against your will by striking the convict, and for this sin I should pay the penalty." Sweat began to bead on Lotinger's forehead.

"Yes, Charles, you should, and you will. I cannot afford to have someone so close to me who cannot prove themselves completely and utterly faithful."

"But Lord, I am faithful. I am your most faithful servant. I would follow you through the gates of hell. I would lay down my life for you." Lotinger's voice shook with devotion and desperation.

The Emperor looked up at him then. Lotinger staggered backwards a little as he noticed that the man's eyes were completely black.

"Lord, please!" he begged. "Everything I've done, I did for you."

With the swiftness of a tiger, the black-eyed thing was on him. Lotinger's back slammed into the floor. The Emperor's hands wrapped around Lotinger's throat and he began to asphyxiate. As he fought for air, he thought of his all-time favorite kill, Roger Tresney, and how he murdered him. It was so sweet that he would die the same way. He was no longer afraid. His Lord was delivering him. And what better way to go? Trying to ignore the pleading signals of his brain and body, Chuck Lotinger focused on the black eyes of his master. It was like they were one now. He wondered if Roger, looking up at him that night, had felt the same.

\* \* \*

When Toby woke up, he saw nothing at first. After a few minutes, his eyes adjusted to the dimly lit room. It wasn't his room, and yet it was filled with all of his things. He sat up and looked around. He saw that he was even lying in his own bed, with his own sheets and blankets. Half sprawled out in a wood-stained chair to the left of the bed, his father slept. A book lay open on his chest as he snored mildly. The wound in Toby's neck was now only a dull ache. He put his hand there and felt the gauze that covered it. He remembered vague moments of waking several times since he had left the orphanage. He

remembered the Imperial sentries taking him, on a stretcher, to the cell. He remembered crying out painfully with joy when he awoke to find his father holding him gently. He also had a vague recollection of waking in the backseat of a car he had never ridden in before, and watching the sunset through the side window above his feet. But he had no idea where they were now.

He looked up at the walls of the room. It was much larger than his father's room in their home. He wondered how his father had survived the city of the dead. He looked over at him, then. A chill went through his body as he realized, truly, for the first time, that his father was okay. He thought of waking him and telling him how much he loved him. But he couldn't bring himself to interrupt such a peaceful sleep. Then he remembered the message that Diana had asked him to give to his father. He told himself there would be plenty of time for that. He would tell him tomorrow. He watched one more time, as his father's chest rose and sank with the rhythm of his breathing, and then lay back, closed his eyes, and slept.

\* \* \*

When Ishan had completely woken, Simon carried him to his chamber to prepare for the great sleep. Simon was hungry now, but he knew his first real taste of human blood would have to wait until the sun went down. Simon laid the other vampire down onto the bed and sat down on the floor beside it. The two vampires looked at each other, with the same curious expression. Simultaneously, they both thought of how much their lives had changed in the span of one single night. They knew that the next night would bring many challenges. There was much to investigate. First of all, they knew that Peter's followers must be found. It was imperative to discover how Peter had managed to enter the nest. Peter's body would have to be autopsied as well. But more important than all of this was finding out what had happened to Hank and his guides. If Hank survived and the Emperor held his part of the blood pact, there just might be a chance.

All of this was going through both of their heads as if they were one mind. It seemed to be happening more and more. Simon wept. Ishan nodded at him, and then turned around to give the man some privacy. After seeing centuries of the horrors that had been caused by the Roman Empire, and many others after it, Simon could not hold back his shame for having been a part of one himself. He saw patterns now, within the American Empire, that only many hundreds of years of experience could train the eye to see. He also saw many that should have been obvious to him in the first place. But this was not the biggest reason that he wept.

He knew now that his Emperor was by far not the savior he claimed to be. In seeing this vast history through Ishan's eyes, he had learned many things. That knowledge had forged a sense of doubt within him. In all of those many centuries, Ishan had not once come across any evidence of God. Quite the opposite. He had found, time and time again, nothing more than any human had ever found. Year after year, century after century of disease, suffering, death, hope, treachery, love, betrayal, kindness, and vengeance. Simon realized then that he was grieving for the loss of his god. Knowing this, he lay down, pulled his knees to his chest, and wept even more.

\* \* \*



The sound of birds singing obnoxiously brought Hank back to consciousness. Every muscle and bone in his body ached more fiercely than he could ever remember. He was aware of the hunger gnawing at him. It wasn't his stomach that was telling him it was time to be fed either. He had been unable to miss the fact that this hunger seemed to come from within his chest. It reminded him of the way he felt when he had been addicted to nicotine. Only, this was much worse. He wondered if it was anything like the stories he had heard about heroin addicts. He was willing to bet this feeling was much closer to that.

Toby lay in the bed, sound asleep. Hank stood up quietly and set the book he had been clutching on the dresser behind his chair. He tiptoed out of the room and down the hall toward the master bedroom. He didn't like this house. It was too sterile. He would have gladly kept his home, but the Empire had already auctioned it off along with most of his things. Only the items that were of little or no value were returned to him. Lucky for Hank, these were the things of most importance to him. Of course the Emperor had made arrangements for a new place, a new car, a new everything, it seemed. At least with the salary he could go out and buy himself some clothes that he would want to wear. His closet was filled with Imperial branded suits. When he arrived in his room, he found the bathroom inside, and went in, closing the door behind him. He opened the closet door to reveal a nearly full size refrigerator. He opened it, and reached for the first vial he saw out of hundreds that occupied each and every shelf. He pulled out the stopper and swigged the dark red liquid quickly. As much as he wanted to savor it, he knew that Toby would likely wake up soon, and he did not want Toby to know what his father had become. He looked at himself in the mirror with utter hatred at what he saw. His blood-tarnished fangs were beginning to shrink back to their normal size. He turned on the water and brushed them vigorously. When he was finished, and satisfied that his teeth looked human, he went back to Toby's room. Toby was awake already when Hank came in. He looked up at Hank with a weak smile.

"Hey Dad."

"Hey!" Hank said, smiling widely at Toby. "Looks like somebody is starting to come out of their coma."

Toby laughed a little and then started coughing as he sat up in the bed.

Hank sat down in the chair and patted Toby on the back in mid cough.

"So, where the hell are we?"

Hank laughed.

"This is our new house."

"You're kidding."

"Nope, this is all ours," for just the price of my soul, and the risk of your safety on a whim. He continued to smile.

"You have a lot of explaining to do, Dad," Toby teased.

"Well, I'll do my best, bud, but I'm telling you right now, I'm not so sure that I won't need some of it explained to me."

He told Toby the story of what had happened the night before, leaving out the shameful parts, like his new addiction, and what Rachel had done to him. Then Toby told him about how horribly the boys at the orphanage had treated him. Hank couldn't help but feel as though maybe he was making the right decision. At least, they were together now. After they had talked for a long time, he was about to get up to fix their breakfast

when Toby reached out for him. He bent down and hugged his son as softly as he could. Still embracing him tightly, Toby whispered into his ear.

"I remembered something when I was in the orphanage. And I'm sorry I didn't tell you before, Dad." Hank could hear the sadness in his son's voice. "I really should have told you before, but so much happened so quickly back then."

Hank stood up while holding onto Toby's hand and wiping the boy's tears with his other hand.

Toby looked up at Hank with a sorrowful expression. "Diana wanted me to tell you something after she died. She told me in the hospital." He started to sob.

"It's okay, Toby. I understand. Take your time if you need to."

Toby took a deep breath. "She told me to tell you that she put a key somewhere, in a special place. She said you would know where. She said when you found it, you would know what it was for, too."

Hank took a moment, letting what his son just told him sink in. He didn't know what to think. A key? Why would she hide a key from him somewhere? And why didn't she tell him, instead of Toby? His curiosity led to longing. Whatever her reasons, if Diana had left him something he damn well wanted to know what it was.

"Toby, thank you for telling me this."

"But, I should have told you a long time ago. I'm really sorry Dad."

"I know Toby. It's okay. I think that might be why she told you instead of me. I think maybe she was counting on you forgetting. Maybe she wanted it to wait a little while, you know?"

Toby shrugged. "I guess so."

"Well, don't worry about it. How about we have some breakfast, huh?"

Toby smiled a little. "Yeah, I am pretty freakin' hungry."

Hank stood staring with the fridge door open as he numbly mulled over in his head what Toby had told him.

\* \* \*

Simon was admiring Cassiopeia from the roof of an old liquor store when he heard the paddywagon coming. He was sitting at the edge, his legs hanging, from the knee down, over the edge. The stars twinkled at him in the darkness in a way he had never experienced before. He looked out into the distance and saw the truck off in the desert. His new, heightened senses would take some getting used to. He was nervous. He felt Ishan in his mind and soul. The much older vampire was attempting to comfort him telepathically. It did cool his nerves some knowing that Ishan was there with him, even if he wasn't there physically. Tonight would mark his first kill. He had some reservations about what he was about to do. He found it completely ironic to know that he had killed his share of men as a human being, and only now as a vampire had he gained a real sense of empathy for life.

He asked Ishan again, in his mind, "Are you sure this is something I have to do alone?"

"Nothing would be gained if I were present. We are all alone the first time, and so you will be too. If you are unable to survive on your own, you will be unable to share this place of leadership with me."

Simon gave up then, knowing there would be no way to change Ishan's mind. He knew from Ishan's memories that, having the eldest blood, the two of them would only need to feed but once every several years. And since Simon had never drunk human blood before, while Ishan had fed recently, here Simon was, all alone. He couldn't help but laugh at how strange vampire metabolism was going to be. Then, he heard some subtle movements in the air above him. He looked up to see an amazing sight. He recognized the dark shapes at once. There were dozens of them hovering in the air. They were natural vampires, or the "ancestors," as Ishan would call them. Simon felt mixed things about them. If it hadn't have been for Ishan's memories, he would have felt nothing but hatred for them. He watched them float around the air, waiting for the paddywagon, with a combination of reverence and scrutiny. They seemed hardly intelligent at all, yet Ishan believed they were somehow superior to the human vampires. He knew why Ishan felt this, he could understand, to a degree. But there were so many signs that said otherwise. The truck was close now, only five blocks away. Sure, the queen's intelligence was transcendent, he thought. But the males of the species didn't seem so intellectually lucky. Simon could sense that Ishan was taking great humor in his current speculations. The truck was slowing to a stop now. Simon stood up on the edge of the ledge, perched to jump, the toes of his shoes over the edge. He had chosen this building precisely for its closeness and height. Based on Ishan's experience, he was able to calculate that it was just short enough for him to jump from and not do any damage to the road below on impact. It certainly wouldn't do anything to him.

He heard a sound he presumed to be the back door of the paddywagon unlatching. As the doors to the paddywagon opened, and the smell of human blood filled his senses, Simon lost all of his inhibitions. His rational mind seemed to disappear. The next second, he heard what sounded like a fire extinguisher blended with shouting and coughing. About 30 men came stumbling out of the back of the dull black truck. The ancestors were still floating in the air. For some reason, Simon had expected them to instantly swoop down and finish off the men in mere seconds. Then, the paddywagon sped away. The men began to scatter, most of them still coughing as they went.

Two of them headed down the alley just underneath Simon. He waited until they passed, and then stepped from the building. The fall only lasted a second, but it was the most exhilarating thing Simon had ever felt. He crouched just as he landed, his right hand out before him for balance. He felt like some sort of cat. He didn't do any damage to the road, but he definitely made enough noise to scare off his prey. The two men turned as they ran, one of them shouting something unintelligible to the other, before both of them started to run faster. Simon took off after them, moving like a puma in the jungle. As he came closer, their particular scents differentiated in his mind and he labeled them as Number One and Number Two. Number One was much faster, it seemed, as his scent was getting farther more quickly. Number Two followed Number One for a while, but then after a few minutes of being left in the other man's dust, Number Two veered away on his own path. Simon, feeling that Number One would be more of a challenge, and naturally siding with the underdog, decided to let Number Two go. He heard the sound of a fence being climbed ahead of him, about where his ears were telling him Number One would now be. As he picked up his pace so that he could jump the fence, he heard something else. It almost stopped him in his tracks. He hadn't done Number Two any

favours. He heard the man's screams as they echoed higher and higher off the buildings from behind.

Simon somersaulted over the fence at just barely the right time. His hair brushed against the barb wire that crowned the top of it. As he landed, the man screamed in mid-run, his head turned back watching him. Number One stumbled and fell, scraping one of his knees on the blacktop. Simon had thought of taking his time, but the open wound, combined with the smell of blood that had already been surrounding him, was too much for him. He shot forward like lightning, stopping right in front of the man. He leaned forward as the man attempted to scoot away from him, holding his scraped knee at the same time. The man's movement, along with his sobs, awakened something of Simon's conscience. A drop of blood on the pavement, where the man had fallen, caught Simon's eye. He bent down and dabbed it with his finger and put it to his tongue. The first thing that Simon experienced was the rush of strength that came from this single tiny speck. Then came the flash. It was almost instantaneous, yet it was nearly 10 years worth of memories. It was terrible. The things this man had done sickened Simon as they lingered in his mind's eye. He hadn't expected any of the man's memories to transfer from a single drop. Why hadn't he seen the man's whole life, as he had seen Ishan's? Before he could answer himself, Ishan did.

"The amount of memories you experience is relative to the portion of blood you have ingested," Ishan said inside Simon's head.

This made sense. The images of what Number One had done to so many young girls before and after murdering them wouldn't go away. He saw them over and over again, as if they were happening now, and would repeat for all of eternity. He felt his muscles tighten and his fangs extend. The man was several yards away from him now, frantically trying to get back on his feet, but falling again instead. Simon could now hear why, as two pieces of bone inside the man's knee rubbed against each other. It was too subtle for human ears, but Simon could hear loud and clear that this man had fractured his kneecap. He felt no pity, though. All he could see when he looked at the man's pleading face was the faces of his many victims in all of their youth and innocence. Still seeing a collage of horror from the man's past, Simon leapt onto him and sunk his fangs into the man's neck and started to drink. Justifying each gesture by the fury inside him at the images he would now carry always in his mind. And then, the man's whole life flashed before Simon's eyes while he felt the body lighten gradually as it neared death.

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It had been on his mind for days, and he dared not say a word of it out loud. He wanted more than anything to talk to Toby about it, but he knew doing so would risk the Emperor's learning too much. Sure, he could see and hear everything that Hank could, but he couldn't read Hank's mind. That much was at least still private. Hank was very thankful of that.

He was sitting in his new Empire-funded living room, watching his son through the window in the front yard talk to some of the neighbor boys, all of them laughing every now and then. Ever since Toby had told him about the key, Hank longed to go and find it. He knew exactly where Diana would have hidden it. There was no doubt in his mind. And whatever it was, it was for him only.

He'd be damned before he would share something like this with the Emperor. The very thought of the Emperor knowing about it felt wrong. And though he wanted so badly to find out just what it was that Diana had left to say to him, he was convicted to wait. He had to find a way to remove this link between himself and the Emperor. But he had no idea how to do it. He knew about as much biology as the average third grader, and with being a human surveillance device, he couldn't very well so much as look at anything that would imply that he was trying to find a way out of his predicament. He had agonized over the situation in his head often over the last several days. The only possible solution he could come up with (and he didn't dare think of it as anything more than that) was that maybe Ishan would be able to help him somehow. But how would he communicate with Ishan without tipping off the Emperor? He felt hopeless every time this reality came back to him. Watching his son smile with his friends, Hank knew that Diana's message wasn't the only reason he had to find a way out of this mess. The answer had to be there, he just hadn't found it yet.

\* \* \*

As Simon stood over the lifeless body of Wilbur Framner, his first human victim, he felt no guilt, but also no triumph. The world seemed a little more hopeless, and yet a little more fascinating. He had been standing there for nearly an hour, he realized then. Since he had awoken with Ishan's blood, he found himself able to keep track of time quite precisely in his head. Ishan spoke up to him then, telepathically.

"Now that you are finished feeding, you will want to come back to the nest soon. It is almost time for the meeting of the council, and soon Isingoma will have the results of Peter's autopsy."

Questions began to flood Simon's brain. He had been so preoccupied with what he was doing, and his own emotions, that he had barely paid attention to what Ishan was experiencing. He was finding that even with being a vampire, sometimes being so connected to another's senses overloaded his mind beyond its capacity.

"Any trace of Kato come up yet?"

"Not, yet."

"How is Isingoma taking it? His own brother working with Peter."

"He is angry. He didn't believe it at first. but when he saw the evidence, he had no choice."

Simon could find nothing to say to this. It was a sad thing to him, but he need not express this, as he knew Ishan understood and felt the same. He began walking north at a human pace toward the nest. He wanted so badly to feel human again, but knew from more than just his own experience just how impossible such a thing was. He looked up at the sky and found Cassiopeia again. It hung in the dark sky unmoving, and yet moving ever slowly always. It had already moved to a small degree from where it was before.

Simon took in the many buildings along the way, some crumpled in fractions, others without a visible scratch to be seen. From time to time, he kicked piles of debris and rock as he went. He was still struggling to put together all of the pieces of who he really was now. He had, not long ago, been human, believed in his Empire, believed in his God, and believed himself to be a good person. Now, all of these things were stripped from him, and what remained was new and pliable. His future had equal potential for just about

anything. But he knew he didn't want to go on killing humans. He knew that Ishan was already making some headway in this area. But it was likely that a real breakthrough would take many more years. Years, we have, Ishan kept assuring him. But they both knew the sooner they found a solution, the sooner the Emperor's rule would break down. Without the need to fear the vampires, the people would no longer need to fear the Empire. From this would come a chain reaction. Ishan had seen it before, and so had Simon through Ishan's eyes. When the time came, there would be a war. A war like no other.

\* \* \*

"I can't believe you're actually going to wear that stupid suit. Did you think I wasn't going to find out how we got the new house? How we got the new car?" Toby yelled.

Hank stopped messing with his tie and turned his attention from himself to Toby in the mirror.

"I told you, I had no choice. Who knows what they would have done to you? I wasn't about to take that chance."

"What do you think Diana would think about this?"

Hank swallowed, closing his eyes.

"Toby, you know that's not fair. Besides, I'm sure she would have done the same if your life was in danger."

Toby had no reply. He continued to glare at his father as if his expression was reason enough to change Hank's mind. Then, he turned and walked out of Hank's bedroom slamming the door on his way.

Hank let out a sob. He wanted so badly to tell his little boy why he couldn't just run, why he couldn't simply walk away. But, at the same time, he was glad that Toby was sheltered from the truth. He couldn't imagine putting his son through that kind of fear.

He went back to straightening his tie. When he was done, his glance wandered over his appearance until his gaze came to the rectangular monstrosity that marked every Imperial branded suit. The American Imperial flag. Its stripes were a dull black and white, and where the 50 stars had once been, there remained only one. One white star over a black background to symbolize one powerful emperor over all.

Hank turned away from the mirror, if only to prevent himself from ripping the flag from his garment. He needed to leave, anyhow, or he would be late for the holy ceremony he had to go through to sanctify his position. As he didn't believe in the ridiculous Imperial religion, he knew the ceremony would be all the more hollow.

\* \* \*

In what had once been a circular restaurant within the top of the Stratosphere, dozens of human vampires sat at the many tables waiting for Ishan to address them. Simon watched them from the corner of the room. He was even more nervous than he had been for his first kill. The vote for Peter's replacement on the council was about to begin and Simon knew that Ishan would nominate him. The room was noisy with anticipation. All around Simon, he could hear them talking about what had happened the night before. Many of them were talking about Peter and the missing vampires. But almost all of them

were talking about Simon. Most of what had happened the night before had somehow circulated throughout the group. What mostly concerned them was the connection that had forged between Simon and Ishan. After several more minutes of listening to the gossip flooding around the place, silence filled the room almost at once. Simon sat up straight and looked up to see Ishan, Edgar, and Stanislov making their way toward the middle of the room amid a flurry of vampires trying to find a place to sit down. When they were all seated, Ishan began to speak.

"As you all know by now, Peter is dead and Rachel is missing still. We have called together this open emergency council meeting to elect a replacement for Peter. If there is anyone who would like to be considered, please come forward." The room was still for several minutes as Ishan waited. Then, a tall vampire near the far corner from Simon stood up, towering over the sitting vampires at his table.

"I wish to be considered," he said.

"Very well, Antonius, you will be the first candidate," Ishan said. "Anyone else?"

When no one else came forward, Ishan cleared his throat.

"Since no one else has come forward, I will add a nomination to this election. I nominate Simon Withers."

The room became loud with discussion.

"Silence," Ishan said. The room went completely still. "Do either of the candidates have anything they would like to say for their campaign?"

Simon sat, paralyzed.

"Yes, I do," Antonius said. "When I was human, I held a place on the Roman senate in the last days of the republic. I served my nation well before its freedom was mutilated. My opponent here, a rather recent former employee of the Empire, hardly knows our ways. How, then, shall we expect him to be a councilman to what to him would be an alien people? I urge you before you vote, to think about these things." He said. He waited a moment, letting his words sink in, and then sat down. Ishan turned to Simon.

"Simon Withers, do you have anything to say in reply?"

"No, sir," he said.

"Then I will speak for you." He looked around the room. "Had Simon not acted last night, this council would no longer stand, and we would be seeing the end of yet another republic. In drinking my blood, he has painfully gained experience equal to my own. I would ask that you consider what I have said when you cast your vote. Thank you. You may cast your votes now."

The three remaining council members started passing around slips of paper and pencils to the seated vampires. When Simon received his, he quickly scribbled *Antonius* and folded it in half.

\* \* \*

Hank stood fixed like a statue in the large church. He could see the Emperor seated in the throne at the middle of the stage. Above and behind him a large American Imperial flag waved from its flagpole. Sentries were lined up all around the place. In the many pews were the most devout followers, along with pilgrims from all over the world. Anyone who had watched television knew this scene from watching any average Sunday afternoon's television feed.

The First Church of the American Empire was the most popular church in the world. Mostly from notoriety outside the Imperial borders. Behind him was a long line of men and women awaiting the same ceremony as he was. He was third in line. They were all to be sanctified before entering service to the Empire. The first in line was called up to the throne. A stiff-looking bald guy walked up the steps to the top of the stage and knelt before the Emperor. The Emperor touched his shoulder.

"You may rise," he said. "Richard Durago, put your left hand on my bible and raise your right hand."

\* \* \*

The council had been gone for several hours when it was announced that the votes had been tallied, and the results would come soon. A few minutes later, Ishan, followed by his fellow council members, came out looking pleased.

"The new council member by unanimous vote is Simon Withers."

Simon gaped at them. Before his mind had time to process the news, vampires were flooding in all around to congratulate him. But as he shook hands and tried to hold conversations with everyone he could, he saw behind them to the far table. There sat Antonius looking at him with an envious expression. Simon went back to chatting with the many vampires eager to congratulate him.

\* \* \*

"Come forward, my son," the Emperor said, gesturing toward Hank. Hank walked toward the stage. He wondered if he had knelt before the Emperor before would the horrible beast of a man be making him do this now? When he was right in front of the throne he knelt down like he had seen the others do. He noticed, as he looked at the emptiness on both sides of the Emperor's throne, that Lotinger was not present, and wondered why that was. Then a clammy hand touched him, and he felt nauseated immediately.

"Rise, my son. Henry Evans, put your left hand on my bible and raise your right hand."

Hank did as he was told.

"Do you swear to serve the American Empire of Almighty God with dignity and pride?"

"I do." He could feel his heartbeat in his throat.

"Do you swear to uphold the laws of this holy nation and the laws of your Lord, Joseph Caesar?"

"I do." He was sure tears were coming down at this point, but he made himself stand still. The Emperor only smiled then.

"Very good, my son, come closer and I will sanctify your soul."

Hank moved close enough to the Emperor to receive the holy touch. As the Emperor leaned forward to touch his forehead, he whispered to Hank.

"Your first assignment is in seven days. Do your job well and you will be rewarded." He grinned. "Fail, and your son will die slowly as you watch, do you understand?"

Hank glared at him.



"Yes, I do."

"Good then. Go and prepare. Your instructions are already waiting for you." The Emperor put his cold, slimy hand on Hank's forehead then and gave it a slight nudge.

Hank let himself fall backwards, simulating what he had seen here tonight, and on television for many years in the past. When he rose up from the floor, the Emperor spoke out loud once more.

"You have been sanctified, my son!"

Hank looked around at the crowd as they cheered passionately. Their faces all showing the same vacant yet desperate expression.

He made his way down the steps and through the long path that divided the two large sections of pews, toward the door. Along the way, he felt many hands reaching out to him, tugging on his sleeves, and patting him on the back, or whatever else they could reach. It was all he could do to block them out, so he walked faster.

When he was out the door, he went straight for the car. Once he was there, and sure no one was watching, he knelt over beside the passenger door and vomited on the pavement. When his stomach was empty and the heaving finished, he wiped his mouth on the sleeve of his Imperial jacket. Tears streamed down his face as he sobbed.

In a week's time, he would arrive back in Necropolis, and then, he would have to find a way to tell them about the bug. Then, they would have to find a way to fight back. His sobbing subsided as his suffering melted into fury. As he looked down at his own vomit, a gleam of light caught his eye. It was the Imperial Star on his sleeve.

His father had died fighting for his country's freedom. And for what? Hank had lived his whole life afraid of the Empire. But now, he wanted nothing more than to see its undoing. To be its undoing. To take back that same freedom his father had died for.

## Message from the author:

Thank you for taking the time to read my first novel. Obviously, it ends with a bit of unfinished business. [Fading in Darkness: Empire of Blood Book Two is now available on Amazon.](#) You can [order the trade paperback or one of 100 limited edition hardcover copies of the book on my website](#) and you can even have it sent directly to your Kindle when it is available (which could possibly be prior to the official release date). In the meantime if you have any questions about the series or me or find any errors just email me at [shiningincrimson@gmail.com](mailto:shiningincrimson@gmail.com) and I'll get back to you as soon as I can.



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—**Stephen Bacon**, author of PEEL BACK THE SKY

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## Escape From Saturn and LiberatedServant

For many years before I wrote fiction, I was (and I guess still am) a musician. I sang, played guitar, bass, keyboards, piano since I was about 12 years old. From 1998 to 2000 I sang, played guitar, and wrote music for the Indianapolis based band LIFT and from 2000 to 2001 I sang in the band Godtrip. In 2001 I also played guitar for a very short stint in the band Resurface. Between 2001 and 2003 under the moniker ESCAPE FROM SATURN I recorded about 20 industrial rock/metal songs with a 233MHZ Compaq desktop computer, a Shure SM57 microphone, and a crappy Creative Labs sound card and somehow managed to end up with a fairly listenable 17 track album titled [10 Million Ways to Say Goodbye](#). I released it myself online to a handful of friends. Without a backup band to help promote it, it didn't really get the attention I felt it deserved. But such is life.



Years later I recorded some acoustic songs that had a totally different vibe, then I started experimenting with some acoustic versions of the ESCAPE FROM SATURN songs and realized what I was working on was different enough from EFS to warrant a new title. Hence LiberatedServant. I recorded several demo songs and had planned to compile them together as a short EP called [River's Rising](#) and never ended up getting around to it.



In 2005 I started the metal band Burning Alive which dissolved quickly into another solo recording project. Around 2006 to 2007 I did some mobile studio recording in both Indianapolis and Nashville and also sang in the metal band Kobayashi.

Cue this past year, I'm going through old files and find some of my music tracks, videos, etc. and I decided maybe it was time to give both albums a better shot. So, I recompiled [10 Million Ways to Say Goodbye](#), remixed the tracks for [River's Rising](#) and put them up on Amazon. They're now both available in CD and MP3 format on Amazon! [Click here to listen to samples or purchase either album.](#)

## About the author:

Robert S. Wilson was born in Bloomington, Indiana during the blizzard of '78. His first taste for fantasy, science fiction, and horror came from watching episodes of *The Twilight Zone* and the stories his mother told him about a supposedly haunted house his family once lived in.

He is the author of the *Empire of Blood* series of books. His novella, *The Quiet*, appeared in the anthology *Not in the Brochure: Stories of a Disappointing Apocalypse* and his story *The Last Time I Saw My Brother Nathan* appeared in *A Quick Bite of Flesh: An Anthology of Zombie Flash Fiction*. Robert also co-edited *Horror for Good: A Charitable Anthology* of which all net proceeds go to amfAR The Foundation for AIDS Research. His dark sci-fi short story *Coma* will appear in *[Nameless] Magazine* in 2013. The next book in his *Empire of Blood* series *Fading in Darkness: Empire of Blood Book Two* will be released on April 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2013.

Robert lives in Middle Tennessee with his wife and two kids and spends most of his time wondering where all the time went. Samples of his work as well as the free audio serial for *Shining in Crimson* can be found on his website at:

<http://www.shiningincrimson.com>

You can also find him and *Shining in Crimson* on Facebook at:

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