



BLOOD ECLIPSE

BOOK 3

CITY OF BLOOD

A. J. LEWELLYN AND D. J. MANLY

Carden is on the run, on the other side of the world in the 'cradle of civilization' in Petra, Jordan. Far from his human lover, Rory, he's learning that reclaiming his father, Declen, the King of the Vampires might restore world order--but hasn't done much to strengthen familial ties.

Declen is angry that Carden worked as a whore and that he is gay...worse, he is furious that Carden not only fell in love with Rory, a mortal man, but abandoned him. Declen declares Carden unfit to help him in the epic battle between good and evil. He tells Carden to right his wrongs with Rory, that without love, without...*entasy* he is useless in the final showdown set to take place in the City of Blood.

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City of Blood

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CITY OF BLOOD
BLOOD ECLIPSE □

BY

AJ LLEWELLYN
□ DJ MANLY

DEDICATION

*AJ: To Edgar Allen Poe, Master of the Macabre
DJ would like to dedicate this to all the vampire
lovers out there*

CHAPTER ONE

The sun stayed high, blood red in a gray sky. It seemed Apocalyptic. *How apt*, Rory thought. This was the day of a new order, a change of biblical proportions.

"Man, this is gonna play havoc with the traffic lights," Dennis muttered beside him as red lights started to come on all over Hollywood. Red replaced white in lampposts and Rory felt a wave of anguish.

They were alive and they were back in business, but high on their hill overlooking the city he loved, it didn't feel like home anymore.

"It's going to be okay," he said with more conviction than he felt.

Vampires had taken over most of the city. Some said it was the end of the world, others said it was the beginning of change.

Rory stared at the sky, stunned by its stark beauty. But this dramatic development had nothing to do with vampires or the loss of so much blood. It was the result of Los Angeles' raging wildfires. The chronic water shortage

meant that the fires, started by rioters in the hills, were now moving closer to the city.

We'll all burn and this is hell.

Rory's thoughts became fragmented as two 747s roared overhead. He knew they were filled with water and heading to the point of origin. He felt a surge of hope as the last tank rolled down Sunset Boulevard toward the freeway. He felt like breaking into grateful applause.

His best friend, Dennis, put a hand on his shoulder as the last tank rumbled back to the military base in San Pedro. Rory felt its impact under his black tennis shoes.

Dennis let out a breath. "It's over. No more Martial Law."

Rory nodded. He knew in time they would all forget the days of blood-letting. The madness. The strange creatures that had emerged from the depths of the city, only to be destroyed by their own vampire leaders.

The city of Los Angeles would forget this like she'd forgotten earthquakes, the Rodney King riots and countless other states of emergency.

"Look," said Dennis, sounding giddy with happiness.

Rory turned around and faced the club that had started it all, the club that had given and taken so much life from him and many, many others.

City of Blood

Eclipse didn't look the same during the day, but following a nightmare four days of Martial Law, it was showing signs of indomitable life.

The big, red neon sign with the fang detail flickered on and he grinned.

Yep, we're back in the game.

Each and every resident of the city had been forced to obey curfew at sunset. Even now, Vampire Army patrols still marched the streets, keeping the peace. Rory had stayed at the club the whole time, protecting it, getting it ready for tonight.

Lives had been lost, thousands of stores looted. Hundreds of people had fled the city, but still, Los Angeles was back in business.

He pushed the heavy wooden door to the club open and admired the efforts of all involved. The club had never looked better. Red leather and vinyl trim on all the new bar stools and club chairs juxtaposed the black, fake fur sofas and lampshades.

It was decadent and lush.

"What do you think?" Thiago asked, gesturing outside.

Rory grinned at the former brothel slave. Thiago, who was Dennis' lover was a vampire who now chose to be known as go-go dancer and, in his words, *hung house husband*.

Thiago's fingers rippled through the red crystal chandelier adorning the entrance to the club he now had a financial stake in, along with all the other performers.

"It looks as good as new. Better than ever."

"Perfect," Thiago trilled. He was wearing a black leather thong and not much else, well, unless you counted Dennis' hands constantly adorning his ass.

In an hour, the club would re-open. In one hour, patrons, old and new, would come here needing to forget dark times. They would want to have fun, they would want to relax. Rory ran through his mental to-do list. Yep. They were good to go.

He found Dennis in the kitchen running through the new menu for their newly installed tasting lounge. For a hefty fee, their patrons could now enjoy an eight-course meal of small bites as vampires modeled the latest sexy creations from tinsel town's most provocative designers.

"All our girls in the house?" Rory asked.

Dennis nodded, grinning.

There were no girls, it was trade speak.

Eclipse had kept the club's surviving vampire hookers. Most enjoyed the work and wanted to stay since really, they had no idea of what else they could do with their lives. Only now, they

were here by choice and they got sixty-five percent of their income, plus all their tips.

Rory found the scantily clad workers waiting for him in the refurbished bar, early cocktails in their hands.

“It feels good, doesn’t it?” Bellis asked. A former vamp-whore, he was the new bartender. He’d learned from Silk and Suede, both now dead, like so many others. He was a handsome Spaniard with long, dark hair and an easy manner.

Six staffers had miraculously survived the attack on Eclipse and Rory had galvanized new recruits.

Bellis and his lover Wen, a lanky Japanese vampire with a bent for BDSM, now had a share of profits in the bar take. They had concocted new, celebratory cocktails.

“Here, try this.” Bellis handed him a frosted red Martini glass.

Rory sipped. “Wow, that’s great. What is it?”

“Blood on the Rocks.”

Rory smiled. “I like it.”

“We have all kinds of plans.” Wen gave him a hopeful look.

“Fantastic,” Rory said. His sex workers waited, nervous, yet excited. “I don’t have to tell you all how glad I am that you trusted me and Dennis,” he began and his voice faltered.

Thiago glanced at the others and said, "Of course we trust you. We're with you one hundred percent."

The others nodded, some still fearful that Blane, the former owner would rise from the dead.

"I don't have to tell you that I am not a vampire and I am not entirely certain a threat doesn't exist, but I have taken all necessary precautions." Rory paused. Only he, Dennis, Thiago and the now-absent Carden knew of the hidden security footage of politicians using the club's sexual services. It had paved the way for a lot of generous offers.

"We have friends in high places...and friends who wish us well. Every promise I made to each of you is a guarantee. I am here to help you. I'm here to keep things running smoothly. I hope you all know that I am available to you whenever you need to talk."

"What about the blood?" one of his workers asked.

"You're checking on the blood, right?" Bellis asked, wiping down the same shiny spot on the bar top again.

Rory nodded, hoping to sound more reassuring than he felt. "I'm on it." There was a vigorous round of applause as he wished them all a great night. He returned to his office, pondering his problem. The biggest concern of his vampire staff

had been the synthetic blood they all drank. They partook of it at varying degrees of temperature, according to their tastes, but their supplies were low.

The witch, Shawn, who had escaped death and custody, had disappeared. Security tapes showed he had smashed the vast stocks of it. He'd missed one small room containing ten sealed tanks. Eclipse had enough to sustain its staff for another week and the basement was now secure against further attack, but he had to get supplies fast.

So far, all his efforts had been fruitless. If he ran out...*if I run out, I don't want to think about what they'll do without the fake stuff.*

Rory carried the drink to his desk, checking over the pre-booked clientele. He made sure medical certificates were on file and checked the security cameras once more.

Carden had killed Blane, the former owner of Eclipse, an evil vampire who had controlled the club workers with intimidation and threats.

Rory's stomach muscles clenched. *Carden, where are you?*

Dennis walked in, looking worried. "There are two National Guards out front. Are they gonna shut us down before we even start?"

Rory gave him a troubled half-smile. "No. I'm paying them to troubleshoot for us. We need

security detail. They can try on some of the guard uniforms and see what fits.”

“Oh, okay. Cool.” Dennis glanced at him. “You’re thinking about Carden, aren’t you?”

“No,” Rory lied. “I am not.” Rory had the strong, strange sensation of lying in a field of tall, red poppies with Carden. For a moment, the image stung him. He could feel the sun on his skin, smell fresh, green grass. He had never known Carden to enjoy sunlight, let alone grass, but the image filled his mind. He could feel the gossamer petals of the swaying flowers at his fingertips as he stretched out his arms. He sucked in a breath as Carden licked his arms and chest. He groaned as he felt Carden’s tongue on his face.

“You okay?” Dennis asked from somewhere far away.

Carden hovered over him and Rory’s cock grew hard.

“I love the taste of you,” Carden whispered against his throat.

“Rory!” Dennis’ sharp tone brought him back to reality.

* * * *

Rory...I love the taste of you. Carden felt the words rip from his heart as his hands reached for his lover. It was a shock when he touched a thin, dry

layer of coarse sand dusting ancient sandstone rock. Damned red sand. It was imbedded in his skin, it covered his eyes, his mouth...his soul.

He opened his crusted eyes and sighed. It had been a beautiful dream. He paused for a moment, remembering the sensation of touching sweet, mown grass. Poppies. Yes. There had been bright red poppies and Rory in his arms, naked. He'd been able to taste dew on his tongue.

Carden sat up, trying to remember how he wound up here, on the circular, snail-like top of the ruins of the outdoor amphitheater. He felt dispirited, locked in time in this ancient, astonishing city poised between the Red Sea and the Dead Sea.

He looked down around him as morning blushed around the blood-red rocks. Some called it the Lost City, but for his father, Declen, Petra had been his calling. His salvation.

And Carden's sacrifice.

He couldn't see the King of the Vampires anywhere and struggled to remember the events of the night before. *Oh...the body. Where is the body?*

A flash came to him of the city at twilight, lit by countless kerosene lamps and candles. He had snatched a robed man in the marketplace. They'd fought, but Carden won. He rarely fought with his victims, but coming to this ancient wonder in the country of Jordan had drained him.

His father's need for him also drained him. It was like nurturing a newborn. He remembered now that Declen was sleeping in one of the centuries-old tombs in the endless, deep gorges that had survived earthquakes and other natural catastrophes.

Declen had chosen the darkest one of all and after feeding from him greedily, waved his son away. Carden felt resentment building as his father slept and he kept watch.

Hunger had overtaken him and he stumbled away to find fresh blood.

"Don't kill me, my wife is with child," the stranger had said. Carden had almost relented until he looked into the man's soul and saw him beating his wife.

He remembered killing the stranger and throwing his body off a ravine. He could still hear the primal screams and yearned now for sanctuary in a dark, dry crevice. He felt around his parched lips with a brackish tongue. What he wouldn't give for a cup of the synthetic blood they took for granted at the Eclipse club.

Synthetic blood beat the real thing. You didn't have to deal with the host body's drug addictions, their crappy diets or...he shuddered thinking about it, penchant for cheap wine. He'd drained the body, become intoxicated from whatever his victim had been drinking and passed out.

His head throbbed. Carden rested a moment, lifting the hood of the long blue sheath he'd been wearing since they arrived and dragged it over his head, hiding his face. He picked his way back down to the ancient Nabataean town from the stone steps. A relic of a long-gone civilization, he wondered what songs people sang here in the amphitheater, what stories they must have told.

Carden heard the low murmur of prayers from several different mosques. Here, the melting pot of all of civilization's religions once merged. Christians, Moslems and those of Judaic faith prayed side by side amid sacrificial altars, colonnaded streets, and hovering over the City of Roses, the Ad-Deir Monastery.

Now, only the Arab religion remained and shrines to the Nabataean gods and goddesses. He felt buoyed by the still-strong faith of its people. He blended with the other men of the town, scurrying to the markets now that morning prayers were over.

It was early, empty lamps still adorning the crumbling, eight-hundred steep, rock-cut steps of the Monastery in the light of day.

No cars were allowed in the ancient city, only horses and goats.

Carden paused. He could hear the music of the Bedouin tribe from their massive tented city just outside the narrow passageway, the Siq. He

glanced at the monastery, a reminder of the work that went into building the temples and altars. Carden marveled anew at the determination of spirit. He'd never believed in anything enough to devote backbreaking hours to it and he envied it. There was a texture to such devotion.

In the marketplace outside the high stone walls, Carden saw hunks of freshly killed goats on display. He turned his gaze from a heavily-lashed goat kid's eye. Trauma. Yes. The tiny creature had known terror at the end.

He reached into his robed pocket and extracted some Jod, the Jordanian currency. "A cup of blood, please," he said in English, knowing this seller understood his language. The surly, dark-skinned man waved around a goat's head, screaming for business. He stopped, handed Carden a full paper cup and proceeded hacking the skinned, scrawny skull in two.

Carden took the cup away, downing its contents in one of the jagged alleyways that led to yet more ruins. He felt the pulse in his head and throat lessening and sighed.

He'd needed more and more blood since reviving his father who drank deeply from him with greater frequency and urgency. Soon, his father would regain his full strength and not need him so much.

Our roles are reversed. I have become the parent, he is the child. I'm not angry, I'm not afraid. I just feel...lost.

He hardened his thoughts to naked flesh on flesh. He refused to think about grass and flowers. Poppies...yes, there had been poppies.

* * * *

"Dennis, you are really overreacting," Thiago said.

"I'm not overreacting. You *promised* me."

They stood in one of the hallways and argued sotto voce as on either side of them, paying patrons waited in their bedchambers for hot, man-on-man sex.

Thiago gathered the folds of his short, red silk robe around him and drew him aside. "Look. I promised you I wouldn't let anyone fuck me anymore. I promised you it was hand jobs and spankings. You have to stop being so possessive."

Dennis threw up his hands and took a step back. "You're right, I get it. I just hate it, that's all."

Thiago stared at him for a moment, leaned forward and pulled his lover toward him, his lips reaching Dennis' ear. "Carden taught me a trick." Before Dennis could respond, he went on quickly. "He taught me how to swamp the customer's thoughts and feelings. I can actually convince them they fucked the god damn shit out of me."

"You can do that?" Dennis frowned. "You never did that with me, did you?"

"No." *But I thought about it once or twice.*

Dennis smiled. "I don't suppose you can convince them you spanked and wanked 'em, too, right?"

"No. I look forward to delivering punishment."

"Really?" Dennis perked. "You've never spanked me, baby."

Thiago was seduced anew by Dennis' passions. Just when he got annoyed with him, Dennis said something delightful. "I'll punish you, bad boy. Now go fix me my dinner."

"Wait a minute. I thought *you* were the house husband."

Thiago's attention was already on the first closed door. His first client was a single, straight man whose matchmaker suggested he was gay and should experiment. *A virgin. I can't wait.*

Dennis was watching him. Thiago turned with a reassuring wink. "Get back to the kitchen, babe. This guy wants dinner right after his...hors d'oeuvres."

"God help me," Dennis muttered as Thiago let himself into the darkened room.

* * * *

"What's going on?"

Dennis was in a bad mood.

“What’s it look like?” Pepe, the blind vampire chef, grumped.

Pepe, who had worked for a string of tasting rooms up and down the California coast, had faculties most other people never developed in an entire lifetime.

The kitchen staff seemed to smother smiles and Dennis felt like an idiot. He should have been happy with his restaurant suggestion being happily adapted by the kitchen staff. Some vampires could read human minds and he and Rory had found the best waiters possible. They would be able to read their patrons’ minds and bring out the tastiest samplings of their wildest fantasies.

“Awesome,” he said as dishes came and went with blinding speed. He watched as tiny dishes of lobster, panko shrimp with Asian dipping sauce, duck rillettes with mustard sauce and cured slices of Atlantic salmon with crème fraiche made their way to the tasting lounge.

“Wow,” was all he could say. He felt a surge of pleasure replace his anguish as the chef deep-fried oysters and a sous-chef dressed a frosted Martini glass with sprigs of watercress around a heart-shaped mound of steak tartar.

Pepe’s thick fingers reached into iced tubs of cheese, arranging a delicate display of imported

English cheeses. Dennis read the computer messages telegraphed by the wait staff to the kitchen.

*I want Dorset Blue Vinney cheese. You think the chef has that one? I know it's impossible to find in America...but oh, I'd love to try it...*Dennis watched as requests for rare Stilton and Roquefort came in. Pepe's fingers moved from the Braille-coded keyboard beside him to a small series of dishes. He wielded a small fruit knife through a fresh fig and Dennis watched, enthralled.

"Is that verjus?" he asked as the chef dotted the plate with green liquid from a squeeze bottle. "I've never seen it before...I've read about it of course. It's made from unripe grapes, isn't it?"

Pepe simply smiled and handed Dennis a tiny spoon to try it.

Dennis breathed, "You are a genius."

The kitchen staff relaxed. Pepe was happy, they were happy.

"Man." Dennis rocked on his heels. "Look at all this food. My tastes are so pedestrian."

The pastry chef handed him a chocolate cupcake and Dennis' happy pants transformation was complete.

* * * *

Thiago advanced on the thirty-something man lying on the blood-red bedspread fully-clothed. He had meanness to his expression that gave Thiago pause. *I've never been afraid of a human being in my life.* He mentally shook himself. He smiled encouragingly at the man and groaned inwardly.

He's wearing Dockers and suede lace-up shoes. Probably lives with his mother. Something about the man's demeanor was chilling, but Thiago pressed on. "Good evening, Simeon."

Simeon Harrell's voice cracked with a mix of fear and desire. "You're Number Six. What do I call you?"

In spite of a flash of revulsion, Thiago smiled. "You can call me whatever you want."

The man shifted on the bed as Thiago sat beside him. Naked under his robe, the stranger's frightened gaze moved to the vampire's hardening cock peeking from the open folds.

Thiago's hands gently moved to the man's shoes. They took some work getting them undone since they were not only tied, but knotted. He removed them at last, then the thick athletic socks he and Dennis would laugh over afterward. A tremor of fear rippled through Thiago and he was grateful that all the sex rooms were now under electronic surveillance.

He moved his fingers over Simeon's feet, working his way from the pasty, cold ankles to the

toes and under the balls of his feet, pressing his fist into them.

Simeon groaned.

Thiago moved his hands up toward the man's knees and knowing his client was more relaxed, unbuckled the thick belt at his waist, tugging down the zipper. He pulled the pants down as Simeon lay mummy-like, imprisoned by his fear and his desires, watching the vampire-whore stripping him.

Geez, dude. It would be nice if you helped. Thiago unbuttoned the man's shirt, drawing the short-sleeve checked number toward Simeon's shoulders. "You're going to have to help me." He kept his voice modulated, kept the smile on his face as Simeon's dark eyes seemed to register Thiago's words. The man on the bed lifted his head from the pillow, his eyes gazing straight into Thiago's.

Thiago slid the shirt off the surprisingly muscular client whose nerves were dissipating fast if the boner poking through his crisp, new boxer shorts was any indication. Thiago eyed the glistening slit through the opening and conquest became his focus. That was a huge cock the rookie had and Thiago wanted Simeon's first time with a man to be the mind-blowing experience he craved.

"Oh God," Simeon whimpered as Thiago's talons unsheathed themselves from his fingernails

and slashed at the boxer shorts. Simeon half-lay and half-sat on the giant bed as his paid whore touched his cock with expert fingers.

Thiago was pleased to see the client clean-shaven save for a tuft of hair at the crotch.

“You like it?”

“Very much.” Thiago ran his fingers over the patch, his talons submerging themselves again.

Simeon’s eyes flashed disappointment.

Thiago looked at him, half-drunk with his own sexual power. “You like it rough?”

Simeon nodded. “I want to try. Never had a woman who wanted to. I want you to slap me.”

“Lie back, bitch. Prop the pillow under your head and watch me suck your cock.”

Simeon obeyed, his legs falling apart as Thiago’s hands slid up his thighs, cupping his hands as they met under the heavy balls just waiting for him.

I promised Dennis. No, I promised no fucking. I wanna suck this cock. It’s so huge. I’m just doing my job. He doesn’t need to know.

Thiago’s thumbs and forefingers met around the base of Simeon’s cock and balls and he squeezed tight. His warm mouth slid over the thick, erect cock, slapping at his tongue. He flicked at the tip, greeting the slit he’d been admiring with a series of kisses.

Simeon let out a gurgling sound as Thiago took possession of him, taking his cock all the way in. The man on the bed let out a long whimper, he grabbed Thiago's head, his fingers weaving in the dark, silken hair falling around the vampire's face.

"Oh, suck me. Oh, suck me. Do what you want with me." It was a mantra. A prayer.

Thiago's mouth moved up and down on the long penis that seemed to grow under his tutelage.

"You cock whore, suck me," Simeon shrieked.

Thiago took the cock all the way down his throat as Simeon rocked against him, shooting hard. The force of his client's eruption curled Thiago's own toes. He lifted his head. "Simeon, you've been a bad boy. I need to spank you now." It was only as he took the giggling, wriggling man across his knee that he remembered they were being watched.

God help me, I hope Dennis never sees this. On his lap, Simeon squirmed, humping Thiago's leg with an already erect cock. "Listen bitch," he roared, slapping Simeon's ass. "Keep still or I'll really give you reasons to squirm."

Simeon remained still until Thiago's fingers ran along his ass crack.

"Oh, fuck," Simeon roared.

"That's just what I'm gonna do," Thiago crooned.

CHAPTER TWO

He could see now why they called it the City of Roses. As Carden watched evening approach, he realized Petra belonged to the night, just as he did. As the sun started to set, the countless, ageless rocks that made up the city deepened to different shades of red and pink. Yes, they looked like stone flowers. They stood like angry, brilliant gods, their beauty and history judging him.

Carden shifted on his hard perch high atop a stone step looking over the city from the Monastery. The nightly tour of Petra would soon begin. He yearned to hear his father's stories of the past. He longed to hear stories of his Uncle Colman, the Vampire Prince who had worked as a Dragoman, an interpreter and guide, only to mysteriously vanish.

Colman...are you alive? Carden's arms moved around his knees and he rocked back and forth. He'd never heard about Colman, never even knew

of him until he caught an image of him like a gossamer thread from his father's thoughts.

"I want to know about him," Carden had implored.

"Not now," Declen said. He'd looked devastated.

Carden watched his father in the marketplace, talking with two men. He'd banished Carden to the steps to keep watch. His father never talked to him. Declen suddenly beckoned him, then held up a hand to stop him. His father never communicated with him either verbally or by inner voice. It was as if Declen disapproved of him.

He knows I am a whore. Carden had gleaned a fleeting image of Colman Adair. He seemed very much like Declen, but laughed more. Carden watched his father. Maybe coming back to life after years of being dead, stuffed in a priest hole would knock the humor, the joy out of any man. His gaze drifted across the marketplace. He could smell wine and cooking meat. He had taken his eyes off Declen for only a moment, but now he was gone.

The Bedouin tribe's music drifted across time and stone. Carden's gaze flittered from one person to the next below him. He tried not to worry about not being able to find him, but now, he knew Declen would need him badly by now.

Why did you leave the square? Carden's thoughts went out in a silent call. He watched the endless parade of foreign tourists clip-clopping on horseback through the daunting Siq, the stone passageway from the rest of the world to here. Dispirited, skinny horses seemed to perk up as much as the humans at the sight of the ancient city.

Dad, where are you? Carden left his perch and took stairs further up the incline. He could see the entire city and worked hard to tune into Declen. In the distance, he saw the Bedouin tents and sighed. Declen must have gone there. He ran down the stairs as people gathered in the square, awaiting the start of the tour.

On either side of him, Carden heard a proliferation of languages. An old lady fed grapes to a goat lying at her door. Carden glanced at her. She'd thrown water at him when she found him asleep by her back door earlier.

He hurried on as she shouted something at him. He moved through the Siq, which was hot and dark. Ahead of him, Carden saw the gigantic stones of varying shades of red lining the city. A donkey grazed at the dirt outside a makeshift tent. There wasn't a blade of grass for miles. He felt sorry for the creature, but kept moving. When he felt he was out of view, he took off in flight. His meager strength kept him going into a long jump.

He landed badly, twisting his right ankle and then, took off again. Several extended sprints later, he arrived outside the tented city and looked directly into the well-lit, lavish entrance of one of them.

His father was sitting in a large wicker chair like a Pasha, a woman kneeling at his feet with a washbasin. She put it on the ground and urged Declen to put his feet in it. She swept the water over his ankles as Declen dried his hands on a rough towel. The eternal red sand rendered the white towel pink.

"Dad," he said.

"Son."

Declen's smile was snide. "You found me."

"Yes. Do you need to—"

"I need for you to leave me alone. I have all I need now."

"But—"

"No buts."

"But, Dad!"

"Carden Adair, I've seen what you've done, the horror, the havoc you wreaked. You are no son of mine, no heir to my kingdom until you deal with what you started."

"But, Dad—"

"Go on. Go back."

"I can't go back. I've spent my whole life without you. I won't lose you again."

Declen touched the woman's head and using his fingertips, brought her face to his. He said something in another language and she lowered her gaze, backing away. The King of the Vampires sat with his feet in a bath of water and stared at his only son. "You are no good to me until you learn the value of mercy, of compassion. Until you accept love. I'm not thrilled your choice is...another man, a mortal man at that, but, my child, until you embrace love, until you believe in it, we have nothing left to talk about."

"This is insanity," Carden said. "There's a war—"

"Don't be so melodramatic. There will always be a war. Do you think the battle between good and evil is new?" The revived king leaned forward. "You have a duty now. It starts with entasy."

"Entasy?" Carden echoed.

"When you have fulfilled that duty, you will find me."

"Where, back here?"

"But of course," Declen said. "I gave you life, you gave it back to me. Now I require faith. Here, I shall find it in abundance." The old man beckoned the woman toward him. "Happy trails, Carden." Declen closed his eyes as his attendant resumed washing him.

* * * *

Inside the club office, Rory watched the scene unfolding both on stage and on the digital monitor. It had been a brilliant idea to do a Seventies Disco night. He'd never seen so many bell-bottom pants or love beads in his life. He shook his head. Two of the club's strippers were wearing tight, see-through plastic shorts and had fashioned a child's plastic pool into a yellow Jell-o pit.

They were performing to Plastic Bertrand's *Ca Plane Pour Moi*.

It was an unusual choice, but it got the crowd hopping. Within a few minutes, after a lot of wrestling and Jell-o flinging, both dancers were naked, their plastic pants in the happy grip of two horny clients. The dancers seemed to be having a great time. One of them Rory recognized as a new recruit called Cowboy.

He was a big muscular Texan who was now offering his naked ass for the patrons to fondle. A few licked the Jell-o from his chest and groin and Cowboy let out a *yee-ha* and threw himself back into the pool again.

Rory laughed, watching the guy have fun with food.

Cowboy emerged with a hard cock covered in yellow slime, swaying to the jerky music.

Rory grinned, watching two eager patrons lick his cock.

"What a ham," Dennis muttered from his vantage point by his left elbow.

Cowboy grabbed his pool buddy, a slim, reedy athletic gym junkie vamp called Amp, owing to his penchant for mixing sex, rock and roll and the occasional high voltage electricity into his sex acts.

As Cowboy held Amp's cock in his Jello-o covered fingers, the two men kissed. The patrons' hands roamed the two men's bodies and Cowboy picked up his partner, draping him over the edge of the pool, ass up. "Want me to fuck him?" he asked.

The crowd went nuts.

"Everything okay?" Rory asked Dennis.

"Yeah. I'm just worried about Thiago, He extended his session with his first client. They're waiting dinner for him. Have you checked on them?"

Rory smiled at him. "Boy, you *are* jealous."

"No. I'm worried about him."

Rory glanced at his clipboard and flicked on a switch. Thiago was pulling on his robe, the client, whose back was to the camera, was getting dressed.

"I have to see you again," Simeon said.

"Well, you'll see me. We're having dinner," Thiago responded.

“What a creep. Doesn’t he ooze creepiness?” Dennis asked.

“Who said that?” Simeon said, glancing around.

Rory flicked a switch. “Oops.”

“Oops?” Dennis looked at him and the two friends laughed.

* * * *

The night air in Petra oozed a thick sensuality. *Entasy*. Internal bliss. His father seemed to have found something close to it with the woman washing his feet. Carden bit down on a wave of bitterness. Maybe he hadn’t, maybe he’d just found a different type of bliss. *Caring...comfort*.

Carden missed his mother. He wasn’t sure what he’d expected when he resuscitated his father, but he tried hard in the moment he walked away from the city not to feel resentful. He found a clutch of Bedouin tents on the outskirts of the tribe’s enclave and smelled roses on the air. He stopped and inhaled the clear smoke. Ah. Hookah. Somebody was enjoying it.

Carden followed his nose and found a pair of British travelers, a father and son, enjoying a smoke at a low-lying wooden table. He watched for a moment as they inhaled from long pipes hooked up to an ornate glass chamber filled with

flower petals and fruit. The scent was intoxicating. He'd never smoked a hookah before, but when the father stopped inhaling the smoke and lay the long tip on the table, pointing it toward Carden, he understood he was invited to join them.

The glass canister stood on the ground and attendants moved fast, pouring mint tea into tall, thin glasses. Carden who ordinarily never craved the things mortals did, took a sip of the tea.

"I'm Nigel Heyman," the younger man said. "This is my father, Stuart."

Carden held the hot tea on his tongue and stared at the contents of the hookah canister, which stood on the ground. He saw pomegranates, apples, mint leaves and rose petals. He thought of the hungry donkey and smiled at the two men.

"My name is Carden." By force of habit, he didn't use his last name. Whores didn't have last names in the brothel. As if in defiance, he added, "Adair." It hurt to realize he'd accepted sexual slavery to save the life of his dying lover. It infuriated him to think he'd endured years of this half-lived state.

"Please, help yourself." Nigel Heyman indicated the pipe.

Carden reached out his left hand and caught the gentle headshake from a Bedouin attendant's head. He switched hands, using his right. *Ah, I*

remember now, they consider the left hand dirty in Jordan.

“What brings you to Petra?” Stuart asked him.

“Traveling with my father.”

The two men exchanged smiles.

“Is he with you now? Perhaps he’d like to join us,” Nigel said.

“No. He’s back in the other direction.” Carden inhaled the smoke and held it in his throat. He tasted tobacco and mint. He couldn’t taste the fruit or flowers, but as he laid the pipe on the table facing Nigel, he smelled the roses on his own breath. He felt lightheaded and wondered if this was the attraction to smoking in this ancient form.

“Hookah smoking began in India,” Stuart said as if reading Carden’s thoughts. “Of course now, the Middle East has adapted it and perfected it.”

When it was Carden’s turn to smoke again, he felt himself growing inwardly hot. He felt very strange. He picked up the pipe and inhaled. The father and son voices swam to him from across a great tide.

Too late, he caught the attendant shaking his head again. He realized then that the attendant had been trying to warn him. Not about using his right hand, but to alert him. He felt his eyes growing sleepy.

Drugs.

* * * *

Thiago watched his client's shining eyes as he cracked open crab's legs served over crushed ice.

Simeon stuffed a piece of crabmeat into the warm butter sauce and licked it from his fingertips.

"I watched that Andrew Zimmerman on that TV show, you know, *Bizarre Foods*? And he ate the beating heart out of a living frog. Now that's some sushi I'd like to try."

Thiago couldn't respond.

When the waiter appeared a few moments later with a large frog on its back, its entrails exposed, the heart still beating, he had to look away as Simeon's chopsticks delved into the body cavity and removed the organ.

"Can I have another one?" Simeon asked.

Thiago knew his first instincts had been right. The guy was a wacko. He picked up his glass of iced passion fruit tea and made a mental note to tell Rory never to book him with this lunatic again. He felt Simeon reaching under the table for his thigh and Thiago sighed as the client's hand rubbed at his crotch.

"I can't believe I have to wait thirty days to get my hands on you again," Simeon said and attacked the second frog with child-like gusto.

* * * *

Carden. Rory feared for Carden. For the first moment since they'd been separated, he sensed his lover was in deep trouble. He paced his office, feeling faint and breathless. *Oh God.* He fell into his chair and loosened his tie. *I know this is him...not me. He's in trouble.*

He tried to focus on breathing. *Problems.* He had plenty of problems of his own. He needed to get fresh supplies of synthetic blood. Although he had plenty of damning evidence to use against human officials in Los Angeles, he had nothing on the vampire leaders who said Rory had to wait like everybody else for supplies.

I haven't told them how bad it is, how short we are. I was afraid they wouldn't let us reopen and we needed to get busy again. Why do I care about these guys?

Rory's heart seemed to beat faster. He reached for the water bottle on his desk, flipped open the lid and squeezed some water into his mouth. He choked, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. His phone rang and he checked the readout.

The Mayor's office. He hesitated before taking the call. "Good evening, Mr. Mayor," he said, eyeing the action on stage.

His rough and rugged Cowboy was on his knees, sucking a patron's cock as his stage partner Amp, fucked him in the ass.

“Giddyup, Cowboy!”

Amp held a metal probe in his hand and slid it under Cowboy’s torso, connecting with the man’s right nipple. A blue crack of electricity blew out of it and Cowboy jolted.

The crowd roared appreciatively and Rory turned his gaze, listening to the Mayor’s raced declarations.

“I’ve tried everything, Rory. I can’t find the synthetic stuff anywhere. I’m sorry. I did my best.”

“Thank you. I appreciate your efforts.”

Rory replaced the receiver and glanced up to find a man standing in his office door. He realized it was a client and was annoyed the man had slipped past security and found his way in here. Rifling through his memory bank, he realized it was Simeon Harrell. The man Thiago had entertained.

“May I help you?” Rory asked, trying not to show his annoyance with the man. Rory didn’t take in the man’s response at first. He realized now, glancing back at the stage that the man Cowboy was sucking off was one of his new security guards. Good help really *was* hard to find.

“...so I was wondering if I could book him in advance?”

"I'm sorry?" Rory shook his head. "I apologize. Been a long night. Could we please start again?" He indicated the seat opposite him.

Simeon took it. "I just said that I know I can't have sex with Number Six again for thirty days and I want to book him in advance, unless you can bend the rules this once and let me see him sooner."

Rory smiled and turned to his laptop. "I can't bend the rules, but I can most certainly book you an appointment in thirty days. Did you see the nurse after your session?"

"Yes," Simeon said. He seemed to be taking in the office contents. "Nice operation you got here."

"Indeed we do. I'm looking at your EKG results." *And your black granite American Express card.* "I think we can bend the rules *slightly* and book you in twenty-one days from now."

"Thank you." Simeon smiled at him and accepted the square booking card. "I appreciate it. Please put a one hundred dollar tip on my charges, with my compliments."

"You don't have to—"

"No, no, I insist. And I want my lovely Number Six to get a thousand dollars."

Rory stared at him a moment, relieved his conversation was being monitored by security cameras, should this nut case...er...client ever contest the charges on his card. "I'll handle that

for you right away," Rory said and prepared the man's bill.

"If there's anything I can ever do for you, just let me know," Simeon said and turned to watch the action on stage.

* * * *

Carden woke up on a gurney in a long, dark hallway. His left hand was cuffed to a water pipe and water dripped on him from somewhere above him. His eyes opened and he saw he was in a cavern or basement of some type. His head felt heavy as he tried to look around. He was no longer in the robe and realized as his left hand moved down his side that he wore a thin hospital gown.

He twisted around to look and saw other gurneys lined up on the wall behind him. Only one appeared occupied, but it was a mound covered in a sheet. Apart from the drips, he heard no sound, save for distant voices.

He waited a moment. *I can't hear human heart beats. Whatever...whoever is under that sheet is dead. Oh...maybe not. I haven't been tuning onto much since I got to Jordan...but still it's not moving.* For the first time in his adult life, he felt true and genuine fear.

Carden tried the handcuff on the pipe, but it stayed on his wrist. He took a few seconds to

adjust to his circumstances. The handcuff was loose enough to slide along the pipe.

As quietly as he could, he inched the handcuff along the pipe. It made a loud, scraping noise and he waited. Nobody came. As he moved, the gurney moved with him. His legs felt wobbly and he found himself infuriated with his diminished capacity. The gurney moved with him, slapping into the head of the gurney ahead of him. He moved to his knees and dragging the cuff along the pipe, moved onto the second gurney. Two more to go and he'd reach the gurney with the mound on top. He heard a noise and panicked, but the voice he heard was a cough and he realized somebody was walking above him. His eyes adjusted to the light and he could see pinpoint holes in the ceiling.

I can't believe this is happening to me. He reached the gurney with what he now realized was a body and climbing over and around it, hesitating when he could detect no odor of human decay under the mound. He was aware now that the dripping water fell on the concrete floor. Its sound was loud...urgent, as he reached out a determined hand and drew back the sheet.

* * * *

"Do you mean to tell me that they're not really eating all this fancy stuff?" Dennis asked Rory as the club wound down its last hour. Over drinks in the bar, a few staffers gathered in small groups, the sound of happy chatter over Depeche Mode's *I Just Can't Get Enough* throbbing from the disco floor.

Rory twirled the stem of his fresh Blood on the Rocks and shook his head, laughing at Dennis' woeful expression. "Nope."

Dennis' eyes widened. "I could swear I ate the chocolate cupcake Chef Pepe made me."

Rory pointed a finger at him. "You really did eat a chocolate cupcake. The rest of the stuff, he conjures."

"Dang." Dennis sat back in his leather lounge chair. "Well...I don't understand. I saw dishes and dishes of food go by and I watched people eat it. If they're not really eating it, don't they go hungry?"

"That's the beauty of it," Thiago said, leaning into Dennis and kissing him hard on the mouth. "Hey, that Blood on the Rocks is pretty tasty. Do you know I have come to adore sloppy seconds?"

Dennis grinned at him in a loopy way and Rory sipped his cocktail.

"Sorry," Dennis said, noticing his friend's bleak expression.

Rory waved away his apologies. "Don't worry about me. Nothing this little baby in my hand here can't fix."

"But are you really drinking it?" Dennis asked.

Thiago and Rory laughed.

"Of course I'm drinking it." Rory lifted the glass to his lips again. "See?"

"So how come they don't leave here ravenous after paying for the most expensive meals in their lives...that they don't actually eat?"

Thiago and Rory traded glances.

"What?" Dennis was pissed now. "What's going on?"

"Darling, I would tell you, but you know you can't keep a secret," Thiago said.

Dennis fumed. "If that weren't true, I'd kick you in the ass for that...but I've changed. I want to know the truth. You can trust me, I swear."

Rory put the drink on the table and beckoned Dennis closer.

Dennis and Thiago leaned in to him.

"Hot dogs. We feed them hot dogs."

"Hot dogs?" Dennis started laughing. "Wait...what about the vegetarians?"

"Soy dogs." Rory grinned.

"That's genius!" Dennis declared.

"I'll drink to that!" Rory turned to Bellis and indicated another round of drinks.

City of Blood

* * * *

Out on the disco floor, Simeon Harrell seethed with jealousy. He'd found out his beloved Number Six was called Thiago and he had a boyfriend. A human boyfriend. *If he can love that douche bag, I'll make him love me.*

He resented being swept out with the other patrons. He had a special relationship with Thiago. Number Six belonged to him. He felt the anger grip him as he glanced into the lounge bar and saw Thiago kissing the human. *Dennis. They said his name was Dennis.* It suddenly occurred to him that the vampire whore hadn't kissed him once during their session.

I'm not waiting three weeks. Soon, he will be mine. He waited outside for the valet to bring his trusty Ford Focus into the Blood Eclipse's circular drive. He stiffed the valet on a tip, ignoring the outstretched hand, and pulled out onto Sunset Boulevard. He wanted to wait and see where Thiago and Dennis went, but the traffic was crazy. There was no place to park on Sunset Boulevard. He could park and walk back.

He turned a corner on North Olive and stopped just past the red zone. He kept the car idling as he opened the receipt for his evening's adventures and blanched at the total. Three thousand, seven hundred and twenty seven dollars. For a moment,

he worried that somebody would realize the credit card had been stolen before he got a chance to come back and see Thiago again...when he kidnapped the vampire and took him for his own.

No. Nobody would know the card was stolen. The cardholder was safely secured, alive and well...almost kicking in the storage unit down on Crenshaw.

Should he go pay him a little visit and fuck him? Or wait until morning? When was the last time he'd fed his sex slave? Two days. There was water in a dog dish on the floor of his cage. He could wait until morning to bring him food.

Two Army guards moved toward him. He held up his hand, moved the car back into drive and moved forward. He burped and smiled a little to himself. *Man, those frog hearts were tasty...just like hot dogs!*

* * * *

Thiago stared at the booking sheet and his heart sank. He had that creepy Simeon booked in twenty-one days. He sighed. Then he glanced at his tip sheet. He closed his eyes and opened them again. A one thousand dollar tip. Wow...he glanced back at the booking sheet. So he could deal with the crazy for tips like that. He felt a hand on his shoulder and turned to find Dennis smiling

at him. "Wanna celebrate?" Thiago asked him, slipping his arms around Dennis' waist.

"Sure, what did you have in mind?"

"I'm thinkin' some poker...maybe some hearts...and a little funky chicken for a chaser."

Dennis laughed. "Funky chicken? Is that what we're calling it now?"

"Well, this was Disco Night...I'm still in the vibe, babe."

"In that case, if you're a very good boy and you let me win a game, I'll shake my booty for you."

Thiago grinned. "I look forward to that."

* * * *

Carden held his breath as the sheet came down over the body lying next to him. He was certain he was here to be harvested for organs and as he took in the long black, matted hair, he still wasn't prepared for the shock of seeing the empty holes where eyes had once been or the ransacked chest cavity. It was a child. A young girl. She couldn't have been more than eight or nine. He resisted the urge to barf.

"How did —"

Carden glanced up to see Nigel Heyman stepping out of an invisible panel along the wall.

"Stuart!" Nigel screamed, but self-preservation in Carden was strong. He yanked his cuffed arm.

The pipe gave way and water spewed everywhere. He flew at Nigel Heyman who was no match for him. He kneed his captor in the chest, throwing him to the ground. He held the struggling man's head in his hands as he put the full weight of his body on Nigel's chest.

Carden's canine teeth elongated and he clamped onto Nigel's jugular vein. He bit enough to disable him, assured when he detected no roses or fruit on the man's oozing life force. He drank deeply from him...*ah...this...this is entasy.*

CHAPTER THREE

Shawn was smiling, and it seemed to be irritating the hell out of the vampire, Dominick. God, he was one sick looking fuck. He doubted if even Carden would be able to do much with the likes of this one.

“Are you planning on saying anything?”

Shawn looked up from where he sat perched on one of the velvet-covered pews in the shrine Dominick and the other immortality seekers had erected their God, Carden Adair. “Can’t you read minds, Dominick, or is that also stunted?” Dominick’s horrifying appearance, which left him looking like a walking corpse, had been perpetrated by a vamp who’d left the job half-finished.

“You try my patience.” His voice sounded like a gravelly roar, as it echoed off the walls of the musty underground cave. “You say that we are winning, but yet, I don’t see Carden here, do you?”

“That’s your problem, Dominick, you have no patience.” Shawn stood. He studied the likeness of Carden on the wall in front of him. God, he was beautiful, sensual, sexy, and Shawn was suddenly struck deaf, distracted by his thoughts.

A hand on his shoulder whirled him around and ripped him out of his daydream. “I want action, and I want it now.”

Shawn shook off his hold. “Action? What do you call the last few weeks? Thanks to Carden’s descent into his baser instincts, the entire balance had been thrown off. Mortals have lost control of this city. They’ve had to turn to vamps to control recent events. And we have the key. We have Lionel Chapman, and he is the producer of synthetic blood. Without that, we will bring Eclipse to its knees. Rory will have no choice, but to come to us for what he needs, unless he wants to have a bunch of bloodthirsty animals on his staff. And when he does, we’ll have him. And Carden will be ours.”

“Carden has lost his humanity. He cares nothing for that mortal. You are assuming a lot. Instead of sitting around on your laurels, you should be out there hunting for Carden.”

“And then what? Who’s going to bring him to us? You said it yourself. There is no one powerful enough to bring Carden to us against his will. We

need Rory to do that. When the time is right, I will contact Rory and tell him that the blood is his. "

Dominick sighed. "How long?" he insisted.

He smiled. "As long as it takes. Isn't Carden worth waiting for?"

* * * *

Carden knew that Stuart Heyman stood frozen in the corner of the room. Carden licked the remainder of Nigel's blood clean with his tongue and sealed it over with his salvia. He took his time, then dropped the bloodless corpse on the floor.

Stuart's thoughts came to his mind clearly, as if he had spoken them aloud. *He's going to kill me...God...he's one of those blood drinkers...he's not human...I didn't want to do this...it wasn't worth the money. Damn it, fuck, I don't want to die.*

Carden met his gaze. Stuart Heyman made a move, but Carden was already blocking his way.

"How did you..." he was breathless, staring at him with wide, terrified eyes.

Carden shrugged. "It's unimportant. How many people have you killed?"

"I...never...not me...him, my son...he did them all. I only..."

"You're an accomplice. You are as guilty as he. I have no compassion for you."

"You're going to...bite me?" His back was flat against the wall.

Carden shook his head. "No, I'm full. I'm just going to kill you."

Stuart Heyman started to scream, but the scream lasted mere seconds.

Carden reached out with one hand, lifted him off the floor and with one twist, broke his neck. He studied him for a few minutes before letting go. *A human who sells body parts? Huh. And they say we're the monsters.* Well, he thought, he wouldn't be doing that anymore.

He turned, glanced at the body of the young girl, which lay on the slab. He walked over and picked her up in his arms. He just couldn't leave her there to rot. He'd find some way to bury here. "It's okay," he said softly, "I'll make sure you have a place to rest."

* * * *

Rory sat staring at the computer screen in the small office at Eclipse without really seeing it. Dennis and Thiago had talked him out of going to Ireland to find Carden. Thiago told him that Carden would probably be gone by the time he got there. And of course, there was the fear, the fear that Carden, would hurt him, kill him even. "I don't care what they say about you," he said

aloud. "I know that you really felt something when we were together. But why, why didn't you come to me, tell me what was happening? Maybe all of this could have been avoided."

Carden was possibly the most powerful force that existed. That was a lot to digest. Of course Rory had known that his pure blood made him powerful, but just how powerful, that remained to be discovered. But would he ever come back? Was he still out there? And all the evil which had been released the moment that Carden had lost control, what was all that? No one could ever really feel secure anymore. There was too much unexplored terror out there. A knock on the office door caused Rory to turn around in his chair.

Bellis stood there, one hand on the doorframe. "Want me to lock up, boss, or..." He lifted an eyebrow.

"It's okay, I'll do it," Rory said, turning back to the computer. Rory suddenly felt Bellis' two hands his shoulders. "You work too hard." He said, beginning to massage him gently.

Rory closed his eyes. Um. That felt wonderful.

"You're really tense."

"Yeah. There's been a lot of pressure lately."
And I miss Carden so damn much.

"I know you miss him."

Rory turned and looked at him with a raised eyebrow.

"Sorry." He grinned. "I'm good at reading thoughts, especially when I have a..." he licked his lips, "Rory, I want to fuck you."

Rory's gaze melded into his. He felt breathless. Bellis was beautiful. There was no question of that. And he knew he could give him what he needed but...

"No buts," he said. "This doesn't mean you love Carden less, and I could never hope to compete with Carden." He pulled Rory to his feet. "Let me love you tonight, please Rory."

Rory went into his embrace, accepted the smooth, passionate caress of his mouth on his. He felt his body respond, his heart quicken, his cock grow stiff. *What if Carden never comes back to me?*

He will. But he's not here now, Rory. I'm here. Love me.

* * * *

Simeon grabbed the man's hair and fucked him harder. "Thiago...baby...yeah...yeah." The body under him went limp. "What damn good are you?" he cried out, punching the naked body over and over. "You're not him. You'll never be him." The man under him moaned.

Simeon lifted his leg off him and began to march around the room. "How did you ever convince me to take you on, to honor you with my

body, my cock?" He glared at the half-conscious man. "I should kill you for this. I should just leave you here to rot."

Simeon watched as the man tried to lift his head. "You're not pleasing me anymore. You're going to have to die." He shook his head. "A waste. What a waste, and so much damn trouble." He sighed and picked up the knife. "I don't need you anymore you see, I have Thiago now, my beautiful Number Six."

* * * *

It was a horror show, the rows and rows of organs, which appeared to be pickled in glass jars, hooked up to machines, frozen in ice, millions of dollars on the black market, representing hope to those who were dying, those who had the money to pay. But what about those who died to save them, the poor, the disenfranchised, the ones no one cared about? Who would speak for them?

You, my son.

Carden was surprised to hear his fathers' voice. He smirked, not even flinching as the guards shot rounds of bullets into him. He ignored the poor natives who scrambled to escape, knowing they were seduced with the pittance they were paid to support their starving families. Instead, he killed the white man with the British accent in the lab

coat, and the military commandoes who protected him.

He stepped over the bodies and headed to the exit, the stiff body of the dead girl in his arms, refusing to think about the horrors, which had occurred here. Before he left, he tipped over a bottle of chemicals and threw a match at it. The flames licked the walls in seconds, and as he walked across the deserted field, he could smell the scent of the scorching organs being consumed.

Well done.

You are speaking to me now? I'm surprised since I am such a disgrace to you.

You have forgotten who you are, what we are about, Carden. I fear I did not teach you well enough.

I am no savior.

You were the only balance. You are responsible for many atrocities due to your desire for vengeance.

Would you have my mother's murder un-avenged?

It is not our way.

Fuck...our way.

Silence.

His father had decided the conversation was over. *Fine.* He found at last, a place to rest in an old cave outside the village, not far from where he had buried that poor sightless girl. He wondered what color her eyes have been. The voices had stopped at least, the ones that called to him. They had stopped as soon as his father had been resurrected. His resurrection had restored the

balance. So the world didn't need him. His father was back. He could reign forever for all he cared. He turned over in the dirt and tried to will himself to sleep, but something hurt suddenly.

"Rory?" He spoke aloud. He looked around. It was as if he was there with him, but he wasn't alone, and then he saw it, he saw it all.

* * * *

Rory moaned as Bellis took him, there down on the floor of the office. "Oh God, Rory, you're fucking beautiful. You have such a tight ass."

Bellis' cock was thick and he'd planted it deep inside of Rory without too much fanfare. He sensed exactly what Rory wanted, what he needed. Rory was hot for cock, just about any cock would have done, and of course it didn't hurt that the vamp attached to it was a red-hot, Latin beauty with magic hands.

"Oh yeah, oh yeah," Rory cried out, slamming his fist into the carpet as his cock began to pump.

Bellis grabbed Rory's shaft and began to jerk it as he emptied his own load into Rory's ass, his lips crushing against Rory's shoulder.

Rory went down on the floor. Bellis rolled away from him and lay on his back. When Rory looked at him, his eyes glowed a little.

"I guess that means you're satisfied." Rory smiled as he moved closer and ran a hand down over his chest to his stomach.

"That was nice." He turned his head and smiled at him. "I'd love to do that with you every night and wake up with you beside me in the morning so that we could do it again."

"Whoa!" Rory sat up. He laughed a little. "Don't get too..."

Bellis grabbed his hand, pulled him closer. "I've wanted you for a long time, Rory. But first there was the mortal, then Carden. I didn't stand a chance. But Carden..."

"I love him."

"He's not here."

Rory swallowed.

Bellis sighed. "Rory, I'm happy not to be a sex worker anymore. I want to play it clean. I want to love one man, have one man love me. I want it to be you."

"I'm flattered but..."

"Carden is not coming back, Rory."

Rory's mouth dropped. "Don't say that."

"I'm trying to prepare you. You deserve to be happy. Don't wait for him. He's not...like anyone else."

Rory nodded. He couldn't argue with that.

“Rory, stay with me tonight, here, there are plenty of rooms here at the club.” His eyes were soft, pleading.

Rory didn't react fast enough and just as he went to speak, Bellis kissed him again. The kiss was compelling and suddenly, Rory didn't want it to end.

* * * *

Dennis thought Thiago was joking when he threatened to spank him. The thought both terrified and excited him. He'd seen it done at the club and it kind of turned him on.

When Thiago grabbed him and turned him over his naked lap, bringing his hand down on his bare ass, it stung like hell but his cock was hard again. They'd already been fucking for two hours. Thiago seemed especially horny, and he gave Dennis the cock sucking of his life before driving into him with such intensity, Dennis thought he was going to lose his mind. Now the sensation of those powerful hands on his bare ass was turning him on big time, and he moaned and squirmed with absolute pleasure as Thiago spanked him now with gusto, reaching down to torment his nipples with his free hand.

Dennis accepted the punishment gladly, toying with Thiago's cock at the same time by reaching

underneath him. The agony of the blows lessened and Thiago turned him over on his lap and ran his hand over his chest and began to gently cuff his cock, his balls. Dennis cried out, his hips pumping upwards.

Thiago pulled Dennis around, encouraging him to face him, his legs straddling his hips. "Ride me," he urged. "Ride my cock."

Dennis faced his lover, his legs on either side of his powerful flanks. He slide his hand up and down his hard cock, his tongue jutting out to wet his lips. Their mouths devoured each other, tongues dancing a slow dance as Dennis suck down onto Thiago's huge, solid organ. Oh God, the sensation was incredible, no words able to describe the feeling of that cock moving upward, deeper, burying itself in his nerve lined cavity. He screamed. Thiago laughed, lifting up and carrying him across the floor. Dennis' back slammed against the wall. "Baby," he groaned, slouching a little as he moved his cock in and out of Dennis' ass hole.

"Oh yeah, God, god, fuck me, Thiago, fuck me."

Thiago's head went back. He roared, his eyes glowing in the semi lit room. He rutted and rammed and finally, as Dennis came with a shout, he filled him with a soothing flow of his own cream.

Minutes later, they lay together in Dennis' bed. Dennis held him close, kissing his lips tenderly, murmuring his name. "I love you, Thiago."

Thiago smiled. "I know, baby. I love you back."

* * * *

The sun was not yet up as Carden emerged from the cave. He was surprised to see the place surrounded by what looked like Bedouin goat herders. They stood, watching him, chanting something. For a moment, Carden thought they intended to keep him prisoner. But suddenly, several of them fell to the ground at his feet. One of them spoke to him in Aramaic, keeping his eyes downcast. Aramaic was a three-thousand year old language, considered to be the language of divine worship, believed to be the language spoken by Jesus. It took him a moment to decipher it, but he had always had the ability to understand any spoken language, all pure bloods did.

They were not trying to keep him prisoner. They were treating him as they would a god, some kind of supernatural entity. Carden touched the head of the man in front of him. "Please," he said in the man's native language, "I am not deserving of this."

The man remained where he was. When he spoke, it was with reverence. "You are the life

giver, the drinker of blood, the essence. You bless us with your presence.”

“I am a disgrace,” he said sadly. “I have lost the purpose of my immortality. I have lost love and hope, and morality. I have shamed my father.” Two blood tears rolled down his cheek. He had no idea why he was speaking these words in front of this humble farmer. He cleared his throat. “Be gone,” he said, waving his hand.

He walked around the man, past the others with their heads bowed. He’d lost Rory. He knew that. But it was to be expected. Rory had decided to share the bed of another. If he was vampire or mortal, he couldn’t tell. And it didn’t matter. He had to go back, not to beg Rory to forgive him, to take him back, because he was undeserving. Everything was different now. He’d tasted human blood. He could never go back. The only thing he could hope for was to control his urges, to drink from those who deserved their fate, and to stop what he’d already begun.

Shawn was still out there. He could feel him. And Rory was in danger somehow. He could feel that, too. After he’d been forced to hear Rory’s cries of pleasure and watch him move under the weight of another, he’d felt the danger, and he saw Shawn’s face, laughing.

He probably could never win back his father’s approval, but he had to put an end to this terror.

Vampires were running Los Angeles, and their prey, humans were at their mercy. He had to take responsibility for letting that happen. He had to stop them, stop Shawn, and find a way to put Rory behind him.

“My punishment,” he whispered. “I let my vengeance control me. I was weak. I forgot what it felt like to hold you in my arms, my love. I’ll make it all right again. I’ll give you back your city. I’ll learn to live in solitude and hope that I can gradually come to forgive myself.”

Ah...entasy!

* * * *

Shawn stared into fogged-looking glass he’d conjured. Every night, he scrolled for Carden. Every night, he hunted in the fog. He saw nothing, until now. He was coming home. He was on his way back to LA. He smiled. It was time to call Rory, to tell him the good news about his connection with Lionel Chapman, the blood manufacturer. He was just about to pick up the phone to call Eclipse when his doorbell rang. He let out a sigh and slammed down the receiver. It better not be Curse. The stupid ass already had enough power, running the whole God damned city, and if he screwed up again, leaving dead bodies around, that was his problem. “I’m not

going to clean up after you this time, Curse," he muttered as he opened the door.

"Hey there, Shawn."

It was that psycho, Simeon, grinning like a loon. He was crazy as a bedbug, but useful at times. Simeon had come to get his fortune told a few years back when Shawn was doing that as a sideline. He'd do anything if the price was right. "What do you want? I'm busy right now."

"I want your help with something." He barged through the door and flung himself on Shawn's sofa.

Shawn fixed him with a stare. "Spit it out. I got things to do."

"I want you to help me kidnap a vampire, and kill his lover."

"Is that all?"

"I'll pay."

"You couldn't pay me enough to do that. Vamps are not so easy to subdue. Who is it?"

"He's a whore over at Eclipse."

"At Eclipse?" Shawn murmured. "Um. Which one?"

"His name is Thiago. He's a hot hunk. And he's mine."

"Who's his boyfriend? Is it a guy named Dennis?"

"Yeah, that's the one. I just want him dead. I don't want his slimy hands touching my whore."

Shawn rubbed his jaw. "I'll consider it."

"Tell me how. I'll do it myself. How do you drug a vamp?"

"There are a few ways, but you're dead meat if it doesn't work."

"Like how?" He stood. "Tell me how? I'll risk it."

"Even if you drug him, how are you going to get him out of the club? He's a big guy, plus that place is filled with vamps."

"Magic. You're a witch. Arrange it."

"It will be expensive."

"Money is no object. Here's my number." He passed him a card. "Call me when you're ready to talk business."

Shawn glanced at the card. "Hey, this card says, Alan Spencer. Where did you get this?"

"I just slit his throat and he was kind enough to let me live in his condo. And I got to go. I got company waiting. He's a little tied up."

"You killed Alan Spencer?"

"I picked him up in a gay bar. He looked like he had money. You got a problem with that?"

Shawn considered that, then shook his head. "Actually no, you might have done me a favor. I don't like to share."

"Share what?" He paused, glanced at him.

"Never mind." He wasn't about to tell this sick fuck about Carden. "I'll call you in a few days."

"Fine. Let me ask you something. Got anything around that would make the unwilling hard?"

"Viagra."

"That will do."

* * * *

Bellis was looking at him when Rory opened his eyes. He'd been dreaming. There were dried tears on his face.

"Are you all right?" Bellis asked, touching his cheek.

"He was saying goodbye."

"Who?" Bellis' handsome face peered closer.

"Carden." The tears ran faster now. "It's over. He's closed the door."

"How do you know this?"

"I just do. When I woke up, it was in my head."

Bellis kissed the tears off his cheeks. "I'm sorry."

Rory looked up at him. "You are so sweet," he whispered. "Make love to me."

Bellis dragged Rory on top of him and kissed him hotly. Rory closed his eyes, trying to get lost in the feeling of Bellis' hands on his flesh, his hard cock pressed against his thigh, but all he saw in his mind was Carden. *Baby, oh, baby, don't do this. Don't leave me. I love you. I love you, Carden.*

CHAPTER FOUR

Carden had decided that he wasn't going to hide in some cemetery like in an old Dracula movie. The best way to do this was to return to Eclipse. There he could watch over Rory at least, make sure he was safe, and do what he had to do. Yes, he knew it would be difficult to be around Rory, to re-learn how to relate to him, but he had no choice.

That said, he wasn't ready yet to go back to Eclipse. He wasn't ready to see Rory with another man, or face the others, others who knew what he'd done there in that place. He had considered hunting down Shawn and just killing him, but Shawn wouldn't make it that easy, and he needed to know more before he did that. This thing went far deeper than Shawn. There were those eccentrics like Alan Spencer, who believed he'd grant them eternal life, and there was Curse, with his vampire cronies, who now strutted around the streets of Los Angeles, as if they owned it. Mortals

had lost control of their city. He intended to give it back to them.

* * * *

The young detective on duty that night was Tanner Montgomery, an, attractive blond with a body he worked hard at perfecting. When he spotted the vision standing at the front desk talking to the desk sergeant, he did a double take. *Holy Christ*. His heart thundered in his chest and he realized that he had come closer, drawn like a magnet, and was just gawking.

The officer said, "This is Carden Adair, he wants to talk to you."

Montgomery met the gaze of the other, thinking maybe he was in heaven. He'd only managed to get out of the bloody closet two years ago. Since then he'd had a string of lovers, but nothing, no one like this. "Of course," he managed, "come with me." He didn't turn around as he walked to his office. He could feel the other man's presence behind him, yet his footsteps made no sound and he didn't seem to be breathing. When he turned around, the other man closed the door.

"That's because I'm not mortal," he said.

Tanner stiffened. A vampire. Damn. They'd had enough trouble with those fiends. They were

practically controlling the city, but he'd be damned if they controlled him.

"That's why I came to you. I came to give you back your city."

Tanner sank down in his chair. He stared at him. "What?"

"You heard me."

Carden leaned forward on his desk. "I'm not like the others. I can get your city back for you, control the vampires."

For some reason, he didn't doubt that he could. "And why would you want to do that?"

Carden smiled at him. "Maybe I want redemption."

It sent an electric charge through his body. "What do you want me to do?"

"Nothing. But I need someone to take the credit."

"Sounds like you're giving me a gift." He was suddenly annoyed at the tone of his own voice, definitely flirting, definitely unprofessional.

"Don't worry about it," the vampire said, "it's not your fault."

Tanner gave him a confused look. "What's not my fault?"

"That your cock is hard." Carden smiled. "You don't want me, believe me. You might not survive it."

Tanner let his gaze move over the sensuous curve of his mouth, the square jaw. He wanted to kiss him. He didn't care if he survived.

"You won't feel that way in the morning."

"You're actually teasing me, aren't you?"

"A little bit."

"Carden, your name intrigues me." *It sounds like music.* "Why are you different from the others?"

"I was born that way," he said and turned around. Suddenly, just like that, he was gone.

* * * *

"Oh-my-God." Dennis sounded like some teenage girl in a locker room. "You didn't."

"I didn't what?"

"You didn't fuck Bellis."

"What if I did?"

Dennis laughed. "You slut! Was he good?"

Rory nodded, sobering. "Aren't they all?"

Dennis walked into the office and shut the door. "What's wrong?"

"It's Carden. I'm so sad, so depressed. I think he contacted me somehow."

"What did he say?"

"Goodbye."

Dennis pulled Rory into his arms. "You love him still, don't you?"

"I'll love him forever. Do you think he knows?" Rory broke away from Dennis, searching his friend's face. "Oh God, do you think he knows I did it with Bellis?"

"I don't know. Maybe. But he can't expect you to wait forever. He just left you and..."

Just then the door opened and Bellis stood there. "Sorry, am I interrupting something?"

"Nope." Dennis grinned. "Nothing. I'll, ah, be at the bar."

"Hey," Rory said, pretending to be distracted by some papers on his desk. "Something wrong?"

"There was a phone call for you earlier, but you were out for supper. I thought I'd better give it to you. It sounded important."

"Thanks." Rory took the slip of paper from his hand and looked away.

"Is it going to be like this between us now?" Bellis asked.

"I'm sorry. I'm just..."

Bellis moved around the desk. He placed a hand on his shoulder. "I want you. I want to be with you, Rory. I'll wait forever. Time isn't important to me. If you want to just be friends now, that's okay."

Rory nodded. "Thanks."

Bellis smiled and moved away. "See you later."

Rory sunk down in his chair as the door closed. He stared at the note. He picked up the phone.

It picked up on the second ring. "Hello."

"Hi. It's the Eclipse. Someone from this number called me and..."

"Rory?"

"Ah, yeah."

"It's Lionel Chapman from Chapman laboratories."

"Yes, Mr. Chapman." He sat up straight.

"You need some blood supplies?"

"Yes. Desperately. But I thought that Chapman was under control of the vampires and it was..."

"I can get you what you need, but you mustn't tell anyone I've contacted you, is that clear?"

"I won't."

"I'll call you in a few days and tell you where the pickup point will be. But when I do, you have to come alone. I have a stash, and since it will be considered black market goods, the price will be a little higher than necessary. I hope you understand. I'm taking a risk here."

"Of course?"

"I'll call you soon."

"Thank you, Mr. Chapman. You've saved my life."

"My pleasure."

* * * *

Curse watched the young mortal woman stumble to her feet again, terrified as several salivating vampires leered at her. "Take off your clothes, bitch, or we'll tear 'em off ya."

They all laughed as she shrieked with terror. Talons tore at her dress and she fell again, the blood running from her wounds inciting the hungry vampires.

Curse lifted his feet off the floor and slung them up onto the expensive oak table. The former mayor's mansion was the perfect party place, and this was his favorite entertainment. "Get those clothes off her!" he bellowed, not prepared as his legs went flying off the desk and his chair tipped over backward.

The only sound in the room was the one coming from the half-naked woman, crying in hysterics, huddled in the corner of the grand salon.

Carden walked over to the young woman and held out his hand. He smiled at her, encouraging her to take it.

She hesitated.

"If you want to go on breathing, woman, take it."

She reached out.

He pulled her to her feet just as Curse came to stand in front of him.

"You aren't taking my dinner anywhere."

Carden glanced around him, considering his options. Seven of them, easy enough, but he had to find a way to get the mortal out before or she'd end up as collateral damage.

"What in hell are you doing back here, Pure Blood? I would have thought you'd have eaten your way across Europe by now." Curse's comment was met with laughter.

"I came back for you actually." His arm tightened around the girl's waist. There were two ways out, through the door behind Curse, or through the balcony, which had a drop of about six feet. It also meant he would have to go through seven of them. Alone, no problem, but with the girl, it would be a challenge.

He looked up. Above him was a huge chandelier, probably very expensive. He tightened his hold around the girl again. "Hold on," he told her and leaped upward, catching the chandelier, swinging over the other vampires' heads, leaping through the open balcony door and down to the ground. "Run!" he told the terrified girl. "And don't look back."

Curse and the others were on the ground.

Carden grinned at them. "Hey," he said.

"You're over, Adair!" Curse growled.

"Never say over until the end of the show," Carden told him, and the battle was on.

City of Blood

* * * *

Shawn studied his mirror several times, sure that something wasn't right. Dominick stood over his shoulder, insisting on knowing what was going on. He was enraged over the death of Alan Spencer, demanding that Shawn bring Simeon to him so that he could kill him. "We need him," Shawn told the vampire absently. "He could be useful."

"For what? Lionel already has Carden's mortal boy hooked. He will come to us. What I don't understand is what we're waiting for. You said that Carden was back in the city, unless you're wrong."

"I'm never wrong. He's here. In fact, we may have some trouble."

"What?"

"It's Curse," he turned around and stared at Dominick. "He's dead."

* * * *

Simeon slipped into Eclipse, angry when the security personnel shunted him away from the dance floor, saying a private party was in progress. He had to see Thiago...had to glimpse the man destined to be his lover.

He kept a smile on his face even though the guy on the door acted like he didn't know him. He had sure been a lot friendlier when Simeon handed him a twenty the night before in exchange for Thiago's real name.

Allowing himself to be directed toward the bar, he perused the drinks menu and ordered Blood on the Rocks. The bartender was a different one from the previous night. Maybe the guy had the night off. Funny, but he thought vampires were different from humans. They wouldn't need time off work. He hoped this wasn't a bad sign, especially when it came to keeping Thiago as his sex slave. Vampires were supposed to want it all day long. Not like the guys he'd been keeping company with. *Weird thing about these guys who answer ads. They say they want to be enslaved and the second things get a little rough, they whimper for their mommies.*

The bartender gave him an odd look when Simeon passed over his credit card. Simeon kept a benign look on his face. He kept a few cards in his possession and rotated them until he knew they'd been reported lost or stolen. This card was new to him.

When the bartender took too long running it through the scanning machine, Simeon handed him cash.

“You sure?” the bartender asked. “Sorry, but my computer seems to be down. Tell you what, have the drink on the house.”

Simeon smiled, relieved. The bartender passed the card back to him and Simeon sipped, glancing around the room.

Others were grumbling about the dance floor being off limits and Simeon’s head stopped pounding. He had been paranoid. Nobody was keeping him from Thiago, his lucky Number Six. Nobody *could* keep him away from Thiago. Nobody.

* * * *

Rory watched the scene in the bar from his closed-circuit monitor and felt a sick chill run through his body. He should have known something was up with this guy when he splashed around huge tips on his granite American Express card the previous night. He checked his records. He’d used the name and credit card of Larry Hendry during his sex visit. “Are you sure? That’s the name on the card?” he asked Wen, the bartender on duty.

As he dialed the police and begged for a fast dispatch, he watched Wen pour the customer a second drink. He’d felt a momentary panic when Wen first called him. After all, Bellis and Wen

were supposed to be lovers, even though Bellis assured him they were merely fuck buddies.

Wen had been clever enough to launch a trace on the credit card without raising the customer's suspicion.

Rory froze the image of Simeon drinking at the bar.

How in the world had this guy gotten hold of Jack Thornton's credit card? Last time Rory had seen Jack, his one-time lover and the former manager of Eclipse, he'd been smashing into his windshield at the hands of crazed demonoid lunatics. What if he was alive somewhere? His desk phone rang.

"He's gone," Wen said. "I tried to keep him here, I tell you, something's real off with this guy."

"Yeah, I know," Rory responded. "Thanks for the sharp eye, Wen."

"No problem. And hey, thanks for babysitting my boyfriend's cock for me."

He ended the call and Rory sat in his desk chair, stunned.

* * * *

Carden disposed of what was left of the seven vampires, but Curse's head, he preserved. He was now the leader of the Los Angeles vampires, and it was time for some reintegration. He walked back

into the mayor's mansion and closed the door. He put down Curse's head on a small table in the hall, and looked for a phone.

Tanner Montgomery answered his phone, groggy with sleep. "How did you get this number?"

"I read it in your mind. I have Curse's head."

"Oh, my God."

"Don't despair, Detective. It's a good thing, believe me. It means the control of this city will once again be in your hands. I have only to send out the word to the vampire nation, and find out who's been controlling them, and for what reason. Unfortunately, my inquisition tonight got cut short when my prime witness lost his head."

"Is that supposed to be funny?"

"Yeah. But never mind. I can see you don't appreciate my sense of humor."

"Where are you? We should talk."

"Just talk? Is it official police business, Detective, or do you just want to fuck?"

"Not fair."

Carden laughed. "It never is. I'm at the mayor's mansion. Feel free." He hung up. He stood now in the middle of the room and lifted his hands. He closed his eyes, images speeding through his brain cells. Every immortal being would hear his words. *I am your master. You will obey. You will return this city to the mortals, return to the accepted diet and live*

among them. They are not your prey. Stray, and you will answer to me. My wrath will be swift and painful. Be at peace.

My son, entasy.

Fuck you, Father, and your entasy.

You are fulfilling your birthright.

I have made amends. That's all I'm prepared to do. I will find the evil, root it out and destroy it. After that, whatever you do, accept me or not, it's over. I'm no one's deity.

And love?

Has nothing to do with you, Father. I lost it. I threw it away. Now I must let him live his life.

You cannot live without love, Carden. It will harden you. The love your mother and I shared was...

She's gone. You're alone. Love is not eternal, except in some poet's head. It ends. So must mine.

You are not that strong. You will go back to him, to protect him and deny your heart.

Yes! Now, get out of my head!

* * * *

When Tanner Montgomery walked into the mayor's mansion, the first thing he saw was the vampire's head, a pulp of dripping gore with wide, unseeing eyes. "Oh Gawd!"

"He wasn't the handsomest of dudes, was he?" Carden joked, walking slowly down the hallway toward him.

"No, he wasn't. He was one of the cruelest however." Tanner's pulse raced.

"Won't argue with that. Now, what are you doing here?"

"I told you that..."

"Yes, but what are you doing here? It's dangerous."

Carden was standing close to him. He could hardly breathe. "Maybe I get off on danger. Maybe I think you'd be worth it."

"Really?"

"Are you going to bite me?"

"I might. Would you like that, Detective?"

"Maybe."

Carden smiled. "All right then. Close the door."

* * * *

Simeon watched the club emptying and felt his stomach muscles relax. The police had come and he'd been surprised when they didn't leave. *Guess cops like to get off on some vampire sex, too.* He had been afraid they'd come looking for him. He wiped the sweat from his face on the sleeve of his jacket. He'd forgotten it was leather. He'd stolen it from the donor in his storage unit.

He rubbed at the greasy stain and glanced at the cop car heading down the hill toward the city. He'd have to get rid of the donor's body. *Where to*

dump it? I can't keep leaving them in the Lancaster landfill...well, why not? Better do it now before the donor starts stinkin' up my trunk.

Simeon didn't know whether to be relieved or angry that Dennis and Thiago had not made an appearance all night. *No, I think I'm angry. Yes, I'm angry. I'm itching to kill again. Oh look, that nice bartender who gave me the free drinks.* He started up the car and drove toward Wen who climbed into a silver Corvette and took off before Wen even saw him.

Shit. What if he did see me? He acted real funny about the credit card. No, he didn't, Good Simeon shrieked in his head. *He gave us drinks. Simeon clutched the wheel, idling beside the empty space that Wen had occupied.*

I wonder if he's a vampire? Bet he is. All the guys in there are vampires. I'll cruise the streets, see if I can find him. Man, all the vampire patrols...aw...maybe I'd better move on...can't get stopped. Not with the donor's body in the trunk. Best get rid of it. Aw...but I wanna kill someone so much.

He spied a vampire booze patrol up ahead. He'd had only two drinks, but still didn't want any problems. The silver Corvette was there. Simeon could see Wen's animated conversation with one of the vampire cops.

Sheesh, these guys are worse than the regular cops. He was about to inch forward when another vehicle swooped in front of him. Enraged, Simeon

picked up the Beretta beside him. He checked behind him, no cars coming. He was about to pull off a shot, but the Corvette did a U-turn and passed him, coming the other way.

Simeon quickly turned his car around and followed. The corvette kept up a fast speed all the way to the corner of La Cienega. It was a long red light, he knew. The Corvette perched on the decline, waiting for the green light. Simeon got out of the car on Olive and left it idling. He walked to the corner, loading a silver bullet into the chamber. He didn't care who saw him. He wanted Wen's attention.

The Corvette was the only car waiting for the green. He approached the vehicle and Wen turned and saw him, a look of horror on his face. Simeon was aware of the rush of cars swishing by in the opposite direction. He lifted his hand and popped off a shot. It sliced through the passenger window, shattering it as Wen let out a long scream.

Simeon walked quickly back to his car as he heard the sickening thud of cars crashing and the long, forlorn sound of a car's horn. He stole a look over his shoulder. *Hee hee...the impact made him take his foot off the brake...a bunch of cars crossing the other way smashed into him. But he was nice, Good* Simeon said again. *He gave us free drinks...*

* * * *

Rory went home with Bellis and he really couldn't say it was a disappointment. He had planned on going home, but Bellis came into the office and one thing had led to another.

"Wen and I are fuck buddies...okay, maybe he wants a little more, but he knows how things are. We haven't fucked in weeks," Bellis assured him.

He followed Bellis to his apartment on Fountain Avenue, not certain he was going to go in, even when Bellis instructed him to park in the space beside him.

"This is the garage where Sal Mineo was knifed," Bellis said. "The landlord says it happened over there."

As Rory locked his car, he glanced to where Bellis pointed, by the entrance.

Actor Sal Mineo's murder was part of Hollywood legend. The old Hollywood was something of an obsession for people who longed for gentler times. Mineo's murder was a harsh reminder that those times weren't always so rosy.

Bellis led him through the green, leafy courtyard dotted with fruit trees and a couple of gigantic cats.

"Are they bobcats?" Rory asked, giving them a second glance.

"Yes, they belong to my neighbor, Bob. They're hybrids of wild and domestic cats, more violent

than sweet, so mind how you pet them. They'll take your fingers off."

"I'll bear that in mind," Rory muttered, keeping his hands in his pockets.

Bellis had a spacious apartment with an uncomfortable modern sofa and huge, black and white photos of naked vampires mounted across the walls. The only splash of color was the blood decorating the sexy men's teeth.

"Is that you?" Rory eyed a picture of a skinny male vamp with long, black hair and kohl rimming his eyes. His mouth, pulled open in either a scream or a yawn, revealed two beautiful, elongated canine teeth, the tips bloodied.

"My modeling days." Bellis slipped his arms around him.

Rory felt a shimmer of pleasure as Bellis' mouth roamed his throat. "I've never seen your vampire teeth."

Bellis chuckled. "If you see them, run. It means I'm about to feed on you, turn you. Are you ready for that?"

Rory gave him a frank look. "No, I'm not."

"You ready for this?" Bellis' hand moved to Rory's cock, which stiffened at the vampire's touch.

"Oh, I think so."

The two men smiled, their mouths meeting in a kiss. Arousal had brought out Bellis' killer teeth,

in spite of his words. Rory allowed his tongue to flicker over them. It was thrilling and frightening at the same time. Carden had a lot more control. *Oh man, stop thinking about him.*

As they broke off their kiss, Bellis' teeth receded and Rory almost convinced himself he'd imagined seeing and feeling them. Bellis undressed him, took him to his bedroom and underneath a picture of two men sucking each other's cocks, he and Bellis slipped into a fast and frantic sixty-nine.

Bellis came easily, but Rory's head punished him. He kept thinking about Carden, in spite of his best efforts. Bellis frowned when Rory didn't come. He slipped around so he was between Rory's thighs. He stroked on Rory's cock for a moment and licked the tip. Rory watched him, enthralled and soon, Bellis worked up a good pace. Rory felt himself responding to the pressure of the vampire's hand. Bellis shifted Rory's ass so his hole was right at Bellis' mouth.

Oh man, he is so good at this. Rory felt himself sinking into pleasure. He got off on watching Bellis lick him, but the sensations were too strong. Rory came with a cry, Bellis sucking his ass, jerking on his cock and stroking his belly in rhythmic circles. It felt like a rocket went off in his head.

He came over and over again, Bellis not relinquishing his hold on Rory's cock until he was

satisfied he'd fulfilled Rory's carnal desires. They lay side by side, looking at each other.

Bellis was handsome and sexy...uncomplicated. He fell asleep with a smile on his face. *Damn it, I am so weak.* Rory shifted a little in the strange bed and studied the vamp who was quickly stealing his heart. *But why shouldn't I be? Carden is not coming back to me.*

He didn't stay long. He had to get out of here, he needed to breathe. Bellis didn't argue. He kissed him and went back to sleep. Outside, the moon was a weird, burnt orange. His city was changing. He was changing.

He thought about it all as he drove back home. He thought about what it had been like to touch Carden. It was like nothing else. And although Bellis was great, and loving and kind, he wasn't Carden.

"Damn you, vampire, get out of my head," he said aloud. His cell phone rang and he took the call on through his radio loudspeaker. It was Bellis.

"Wen's been shot. Some frickin' lunatic walked up to him at a red light and just blasted him."

Rory was so tired, he couldn't compute the words at first. "Is he okay?"

"I don't know. I'm on my way."

"Where is he? Cedars?"

"No, that's a human hospital, Rory."

“Okay, tell me where he is. I’ll be right there.”

Bellis seemed hesitant, but finally gave him an address on Pico, near Western. A very bad neighborhood

“What is that place?” Rory asked, scribbling the address.

“It’s a free clinic for vampires.”

“A free clinic?”

“Yeah. Blane didn’t exactly provide us with health insurance and we’re poor vampires. We’re not rich vamps....like Carden.”

Rory let the comment pass. “I’m on my way,” Rory said, but Bellis had already ended the call.

Rory had never seen anything like it. As he stood and surveyed the non-human mass, his first thought was *My God, they’re like refugees*. Mothers with crying babies, old men, young men, all in various stages of illness. A couple of younger women glared at him and as if all of the vampires sensed Rory’s human status, he caught the flash of resentment. He glimpsed Bellis sitting slumped in the corner. At the same moment Bellis saw him, got up and came over to him.

“This isn’t a good place for you to be,” Bellis told him.

“What’s the matter with them all?”

Bellis led him outside. “They’re all hungry.”

Hungry?

Bellis licked his lips. "Welcome to reality, pal. Vampires live on blood and most of the vampires in the city have been living on welfare blood, you know, the synthetic stuff, only it's too expensive now and a lot of supplies vanished in the riot. They come here and they get their fix, but it's a long wait."

Rory wanted to offer blood, but knew that Eclipse's supplies were short. "I have enough if Wen needs it. Any word on how he's doing?"

"He's...okay. He's a new vampire, don't know if you knew that. Silver bullet went through his head. He's going to survive...lucky the shooter didn't aim for his heart. Maybe he thought shooting him in the head was enough. Rory, do you mean it about giving some of the club's supplies to Wen?"

"Absolutely." Rory watched a young mother trying to nurse her baby, both of them crying. "I had no idea, Bellis."

"Yeah, I know. Go home...right now, you're food to some poor folk. Get off the streets, okay?"

"If you need blood, let me know."

"I will." Bellis kissed his mouth hard. "And thanks."

At home, Rory noted the fine dusting of gray ash covering everything in his apartment. He hadn't been here at all during the riot curfew. It

felt oddly alien to be here now and he was a guy who loved his apartment. He could detect the acrid odor of smoke. From his windows, he could see the glow of the wildfires in the San Gabriel Mountains. He wondered how many lives and homes had been lost. In the shower, he felt so desolate and lost, he shed a few tears, cursing Carden's name. He paced his apartment, wondering how the whole world could be so messed up. Jack, Carden...he needed sleep. He fell asleep watching Vamp TV and had to admit, the ads for everything from blood-colored sodas to custom-made fangs that grew from human teeth, were amusing...and disquieting.

His eyes drifted shut as he tried to remember the last moment he'd spent in Carden's arms.

* * * *

The baby in the waiting room bawled incessantly. It was a distressing sound and it agitated Bellis who found it hard to concentrate on what the clinic doctor told him. "I don't understand," Bellis said again. He studied the medical form and his brow furrowed as the words swam on the page. He always got like this when he was stressed out. Wen was his best friend, his familiar. He couldn't let him down now.

"You're offering Wen some blood in exchange for...military work?"

"Well, peace-keeping work. There's a new city order starting, we need men. You are both able-bodied." The doctor gestured at Bellis. "Well, *you* are...and your friend needs the blood. Without it, I can't guarantee he'll last the night. Tell you what, I'll give you five minutes to think about it. Be right back."

The young doctor, a human, strode briskly out of the room and Bellis tried to take in the fine print. What was a *City of Blood*? He heard a loud crash and was stunned to see Carden, the pureblood vampire flying into the room through smashed windows that magically righted themselves with a flick of his wrist. Bellis stared, impressed. "Your powers are so strong."

"How is he?" Carden's gaze shifted to Wen, who lay pale and prone on the pillow.

"He's bad."

Carden's index finger nail elongated and he flicked a slash across his wrist, holding it to Wen's mouth.

Wen fixed on the gaping wound like a voracious baby starved for the maternal breast.

Carden winced, but allowed Wen to feed until the color, the life force returned to him. Carden removed his wrist and Bellis stared at the blood

dripping from it. He salivated, knowing the special powers of this vampire's pure blood.

"You want some?" Carden's voice was soft, silky....hypnotic. He extracted the document in Bellis' hand as Bellis snatched at his wrist.

"Yes, oh yes, please, Carden."

"Once I give you...sustenance, you know you are under my protection. You are bound to my...command."

"Yes, yes." Bellis was frantic now. He attacked the bleeding cut like a starving man. He couldn't believe the taste, the sensation of Carden's blood. It beat synthetic blood by miles. Miles and miles. He felt it coursing through his system and he realized a persistent haze he'd had behind his eyes since the wild fires began had evaporated.

Carden removed his wrist and slicked the cut closed with his tongue. He reached across the hospital bed and unhooked the intravenous drip in Wen's arm. "Take him home now. This is poison they're giving him."

"Poison?" Wen asked, yanking out the needle port in his arm.

"Yes...humans call it chemotherapy...it's an old cancer treatment still used in some places, but it's deadly for vampires."

"Why are they giving it to him?" Bellis' protective hackles rose.

Carden paused and his eyes look troubled. He glanced away when Bellis sought answers in their hidden depths. "It's a way of controlling us. Soon, very soon in fact, Wen would crave it. He would be a wreck without it, then when he takes in blood, it will hurt him, create pain and anguish on a devastating scale. It's a form of control."

"How come I haven't heard about this before?" Bellis asked.

Carden's hunted eyes flickered between the two men. "You're hearing about it now." He held up the contract. "You'll find out about a lot more of these. They're going to make synthetic blood so hard to find, they'll turn us all into slave assassins."

"I...I can't believe it," Wen whispered.

"How are you feeling?" Bellis asked him.

"I feel like my strength comes and goes. I feel weird."

"Give yourself a few minutes and you'll feel better," Carden insisted. "Bellis, get him out of here."

Bellis pulled at Wen, grabbing him from the sheets. When he turned to thank Carden, the supreme vampire being had vanished. He realized in the same instant that the baby in the waiting room had stopped screaming.

* * * *

Rory slept for a few hours, waking up at three AM with a raging hard on. The sound of raucous music on TV tore him from unconsciousness. It was an old *Gong Show* episode. Rory wasn't much of a TV guy, but he did enjoy watching old Hollywood shows and this one from the 1970s was hilarious.

The Unknown Comic jabbed the host, Chuck Barris.

"Hey, Chuckie, have you ever made love to your wife in the shower?"

"No."

"Well, you should, she loves it!"

Rory found himself laughing out loud. It felt great to laugh...there hadn't been much reason for it in recent days. He watched a few more minutes of the show, grinning, but felt shaky from the weird dream he'd been having. He dreamed Carden came in and woke him with a first class blowjob.

*Oh, man...*he roused himself, went into the kitchen and found enough coffee at the bottom of three bags to make one pot. Sometimes these mixtures made the best-tasting coffee he was never able to reproduce. He didn't have to wait long for the water to boil. He poured it into a French press, taking a cup outside on the porch.

Just as suspected, it was delicious. He stared at the flickering images as he channel-surfed. He should listen to the news. Instead, he found himself laughing once again at the silly antics on TV. He could see it from where he was sitting.

"I don't know why the judges gonged you," Chuck Barris was saying to one unhappy couple. "I enjoyed your act, but then again, I enjoy getting a tick bath, too."

Rory realized he needed to get back to the club, get it ready for day two. It sure had been nice coming home again...

On the way back to Eclipse, he switched on the radio, and actually had to pull over to the side of the road to make sure he was hearing what he was hearing.

"The vampires are returning to the city in record numbers. The mayor is now safely installed in his home and the government is in place at city hall. Apparently there is no clear explanation for this. A spokesperson for the vampire nation said today that, "We want to live among mortals, be their friends and neighbors. We seek peace."

He felt a shudder shoot through him, an inexplicable tremor of fear.

Eclipse buzzed with the news as he walked in. The sex staff seemed nervous, except for Thiago, who was on stage rehearsing *These Boots Were*

Made For Walking. He was dressed in a tiny white thing and white, platform boots.

Dennis stared at him lovingly.

Rory was pleased that his pal wasn't freaking out about the provocative outfit. He felt a prickle at the back of his neck.

"Hello, Rory."

He knew that voice. He didn't turn around. He just stared at Dennis, who stared straight ahead. He reached out and clutched Dennis' shirt.

Bellis stepped out from behind the bar, prepared to say something.

Rory suddenly placed his hand on Bellis' arm.

"Carden saved Wen's life," Bellis said, his emotion palpable.

It surprised Rory. He suspected the ties between Wen and Bellis went deeper than Bellis had led him to believe. Maybe Wen's brush with fate had shown Bellis what Wen really meant to him.

"Rory...the guy who shot him was the same wacko who came in here with Jack Thornton's credit card."

"I see." Rory could hardly think straight. His own nerves were a mess. Where was Carden? Furtive glances revealed nothing. Maybe he was dreaming. He'd just convinced himself of this when Bellis leaned forward.

“Carden showed up and gave everyone at the clinic blood. His blood. He...he’s amazing.”

“His blood?”

Bellis nodded. “He told me shocking things...that the vampire chiefs want to turn the rest of us into hired killers.”

Rory felt Carden’s presence now and it frightened him. His love...his desire for the man only slightly outweighed his anger toward him. “Wen will be okay?”

Bellis nodded.

Rory almost managed a genuine smile, for a guy who was in complete shock. “If you need time off—”

“No, I want to work,” Bellis said quickly.

Dennis looked at Rory with a mixture of pity and encouragement. *Go on, talk to Carden*, the look seemed to say.

Rory took a deep breath and turned around. Oh yeah, it was painful. It shot right through him and pierced into his heart. He couldn’t speak. Instead, he just walked by him into the office. His entire body trembled.

“Look at me,” Carden demanded.

Rory turned around, his chin up. He let the sight of him wash over him. God, he’d missed him so much. *Beautiful*. There was no one who could hold a candle to that beauty. “Hello, Carden.” It didn’t even sound like his voice.

"Can I have my job back?"

That just about floored him. "What?"

"I need a job."

"Why in the hell would you...?"

"Just yes or no, will do. I won't bother you. I'll just serve the clients, no special favors. I'll do whatever the others do."

"You'll dance, do live sex acts." Rory's voice was stiff. He wasn't asking. "If you want to work here, you'll fucking do as you're told."

He shrugged.

"That's it?" Rory felt the tears sting his eyes.

Carden looked away.

"Nothing else? No, where you've been, no, I'm sorry I just ran out on you and...nothing, Carden? Not a fucking, god damned thing?"

"You're screaming."

"And you're so fucking calm, the bloodless, unfeeling, fucking fiend. I'm so angry at you. Don't you know?" And yet he'd fall at his feet if Carden said the word. He didn't.

"Forgive me if I misled you. So can I have a job or not?"

"Why here? Why not some other vamp sex joint? They're everywhere."

"It's the first place I thought of."

Rory nodded miserably. He sat down in his chair, turned his back. "Fine. It will be good for

business, and I couldn't stop you if I tried. Prepare to work hard, you'll be in demand."

"Thanks," he said.

Rory turned around to say something else, but Carden was gone.

Thiago was the one who found Rory with his head on the desk, sobbing his heart out. Wrapped in a white silk kimono, he was like a guardian vamp-angel as he placed a hand on Rory's head, stroking his hair.

"I don't get it." He handed Rory a tissue when he lifted his head.

"Why did he have to come back here, if he doesn't want me anymore?"

"He came back here to protect you," another voice said.

It was Bellis, standing at the door.

"How do you know that?" Thiago asked.

"I read his thoughts."

"No one can read a Pure Blood," Thiago argued.

"You're right, usually, but his emotions are at the surface...and I am bonded to him by loyalty since I fed from him. It's what I read when he came out of the office. He thinks you're in danger."

"From who?" Rory asked. "And how God damned benevolent of him. I'm going to let him

know that I don't need his fucking protection. He can stick it up his ass." Rory stood.

"Ah, he's a little busy right now," Bellis said. "He's dancing. I have to get back to the bar, not that I've had anyone come up to the bar since he took the stage. No one's moved from their seats."

Rory stood, uncertain of what to do next.

Thiago placed a hand on Rory's shoulder. "Don't go out there. Don't torture yourself."

Rory nodded, but as soon as Thiago left, he found himself walking out of his office. How could he not? He longed to look at him, naked or dressed, it didn't matter really, but to see him now swaying to the music, some slow, sultry tune with a low whining saxophone guiding each movement, was more than he was prepared for. He felt for the wall, his eyes riveted to him.

"Oh, Carden," he moaned, as Carden slowly removed his shirt. There wasn't a sound in the room, and when he slowly took down his pants, a low collective moan vibrated up above the music, and someone said "God, I got to have him."

All hell had broken out by the end of the evening. There was a lineup of men all wanting to book time with Carden, which was impossible, of course. In the other line were the other sex workers who were complaining about how Carden had stolen all their clients.

Out of frustration, Rory finally threw up his hands. "You know what, the office is closed!" He slammed and locked the door of the office, and sank down in his chair with his head in his hands once again. He should have anticipated this. What had possessed him to allow Carden to join the others?

He did the cowardly thing, he waited it out until the club closed, then rose out of his chair and unlocked the door. Bellis walked in a few minutes after he'd done that. Rory put up a hand. "I don't want to hear it, so don't say it. Where is Carden? I want to talk to him."

"He's at the bar. Rory, I hope you're not thinking of--"

"Don't tell me what to think," he snapped, pushing past him and heading to the bar. He was all worked up for a variety of reasons, and seeing Carden sitting there at the bar, sipping artificial blood suddenly enraged him. "What do you think you're doing?" he demanded.

Carden turned to look at him. "Well, hello, Rory."

"Fuck you. Do you know what kind of chaos you caused for me tonight? Did you do it on purpose?"

"I thought it was manageable."

"The others are pissed, the clients are complaining. No more dancing!"

He shrugged. "Good, I'm not much of a dancer."

"You don't have to be, do you?" Rory glared at him.

He sighed. "What do you want me to do?" Carden met his eyes.

"Just make yourself available for special clients, the rich ones. I don't even want you in the God damned bar. Stay upstairs."

"If you like, although I'm not sure that's such a good business move. I'm a desirable product, your biggest seller so to speak, and you hide me away?"

"You're laughing at me, aren't you?" Rory demanded.

Bellis had come out now and was drying glasses behind the bar. He appeared to be watching the exchange carefully.

"No, Rory, I'm not laughing at you."

"You were always laughing at me," Rory heard his own voice tremble as he spoke. "Nothing we shared ever meant anything to you."

Carden didn't answer. He stood up suddenly, slammed down the half-drunk glass of synthetic blood. "Nothing beats the real thing straight from the source." He looked at Rory and grinned. "Care to donate?"

Rory shook his head. "I don't believe you. I should throw you out of here."

"Then why don't you?" he asked, meeting his gaze.

Rory bit his lip. He looked at Bellis. "I'm not staying tonight. I'm going home."

Bellis nodded.

Carden laughed. "Guess you'll have to beat off instead."

Rory walked back to the office. He collected his jacket and his keys and walked out the front. Bellis would have to lock up. He didn't have anything more to say. He was suddenly in so much pain, he wasn't sure what to do with it all. He should have never agreed to let Carden back in the club. Why in the hell had he? He knew why, and so did Carden. It didn't matter how painful it was, he wanted Carden near him.

"Ready?"

Rory glanced up to see Carden standing beside his car. "Ready? Ready for what?"

"You're going home, aren't you?"

"Yeah, and where in the hell do you think you're going?"

"With you." He placed a hand casually on top of the car. "Let's go."

"You are not going anywhere with me. Do you think I'd let you--"

"I'm not trying to get laid, Rory, but there still a danger out there and you're not going anywhere without me."

"So you did come back here to protect me. Why? You obviously don't give a damn."

"I don't want to fight. Let's go."

"You are not coming with me. And what's out there that we need to be so afraid of? The city is surrendered to mortals again, the vamps--"

"Vamps are a great threat. Not the ordinary ones...many of those...well, I own their asses now. It's complicated. Rory, I'm losing patience with you." He moved closer and snatched the keys out of his hand.

Rory grumbled, but climbed into the passenger seat. "Is it dangerous for me to drive my own fucking car, too?"

Carden started the engine. "You were taking too long."

They drove in silence for a while. Rory resisted looking at him. It hurt. It hurt so badly. "Why did you make me fall in love with you? Was it a joke?"

"It suited me at the time. I was different then."

"I understand why you did what you did. But I don't understand why you toy with people."

There was no answer.

"What is this danger you're talking about?"

"You're having trouble finding synthetic blood, aren't you?"

Rory was surprised, but finally nodded.

"The new government is deliberately making it impossible to find. They want to turn ordinary

vamps into killers. I've spent the last two days converting many potential bad guys into good guys."

"And then what? Will you move on to the next unsuspecting mortal?" Tears ran down Rory's face.

Carden drove fast. He arrived in front of Rory's door in record time. "Get out," he said.

"This is my car."

He reached over and touched one of the tears with his finger. "Don't cry over me, Rory."

Rory met his gaze. "I could have helped you," he whispered.

"No." He looked straight ahead, then got out of the car. He came around and opened Rory's door. "I'll walk you to the door."

"Are you going to sit outside all night as well?" The question turned into a sneer.

"For a little while."

"Then..." he paused, turned to look at him, "come inside."

"No."

"You know I want you. You know that it doesn't even matter to me how much of a fool I make of myself. It's not like you can't read me."

"Rory, don't."

"Are you going to tell me to go on with my life?"

* * * *

Carden really wanted Rory to go inside. His heart couldn't take much more of this. Why in the hell couldn't Rory just leave it alone? They stood on Rory's porch, the trees swaying around them, a gentle breeze playing with his hair. He sniffed the air, alert for any sign of danger. "Looks like you've already done that," he managed. Bellis. Rory had taken Bellis as a lover, and as far as vampires went, he supposed he was as good a choice as any.

"Yes," Rory muttered. "And he really cares about me, and in bed, he--"

"I really don't want to hear about that," he said stiffly and stepped off the porch. "Night, Rory. Sleep well." He stood watching until he was inside, then as soon as the door closed, all of Rory's misery covered him like a shroud. *Ah, Rory, I love you, but I don't deserve you.*

He waited. It was okay tonight. Rory was safe. He walked for what seemed like hours, feeling sorry for himself, pondering his fate. He didn't want to end up some reclusive crusader, but maybe that was what was meant to be all along. At least my father will be proud, he thought. "Shawn, where are you, you little fuck?" The question had been nagging him all night. He called to Shawn now in his mind, with a warning.

He held out his hand, squeezing his fingers around what might have been Shawn's throat. *I know you can hear me. I'm coming for you, you and your warped circle of rich old men. You want immortality, you'll get it, but it won't be on this plane. Hell, Shawn, I'll give you nothing except for a one-way ticket to hell.*

* * * *

Shawn woke up in a cold sweat. He was hyperventilating. He saw Carden, felt his anger, felt the air choking in his lungs. *Hell...Shawn...I'll give you nothing except for a one-way ticket to hell...* He sat up in bed. He couldn't stop coughing. He held onto his throat, gasping for breath. Fear. He'd never felt fear like this before. *Carden. We can work together. We can compromise.*

Silence. That silence chilled him. He glanced at the window, relieved to see the sun coming up, but that wouldn't stop Carden. If he wanted him in the daylight, he'd get him. Carden was relatively unaffected by the daylight. Underground. That's where he'd go, underground with Dominick. At least there, Carden would never find him.

He scrambled off the bed, flicking on every light switch. He picked up the phone. Lionel Chapman was none too happy to be awoken at

dawn, but that was immaterial. "Chapman, call Rory, get him to come for the blood. Tonight. It's got to be tonight."

"I need to think."

"Think about what? God damn it, Chapman, it was decided. You want fucking immortality, don't you?"

"Yes, but...what if it backfires? Carden could kill us all. I...I don't know."

"You miserable little fucking coward."

The line went dead.

"Fuck you," he screamed at the dial tone. "Fine. We'll do it without you. Where in hell is that number? He threw the phone down and hunted his drawers for the number that psycho had given him. He'd bring Carden to him one way or another.

CHAPTER FIVE

Tanner Montgomery couldn't get Carden out of his mind. He thought about him night and day, and ever since the other night when Carden had fucked him at the mayor's mansion, he was totally obsessed. It didn't matter that Carden had drunk his blood, all he could think about was his beautiful hard body, the way his hands moved over his flesh, bringing him to life, and his eyes. His eyes were magnificent. In fact, there was something almost god-like about him. He was like nothing he'd ever known.

It wasn't in his nature to visit places like Eclipse, but he knew he'd find him there. When he walked into the place, he was surprised at how packed it was. There was a lineup in front of a door, just off from the entrance, and he took a second to ask the doorman, a huge guy, who didn't smile, what that was for.

"First time here?" he barked, checking someone's ID.

"Yeah, kind of."

"That's the place you go sign the papers, pass the tests, you need to do that if you want to hire a vamp whore."

"I'm here to see Carden. Do you know where--"

"Carden?" he scoffed. "Take a number."

Tanner moved passed the lineup and entered the bar. He didn't recognize the music that was playing, some of that new vampire stuff. He didn't like it much. He scanned the room, not a seat in the house, and the standing room only section was packed to the brim.

On stage, a well-hung vampire was rubbing his naked body with some sort of shiny stuff, and customers were waiting in line to take turns licking him clean.

"Whoa," he whispered. The air smelled of sex and sweat, and he almost turned around and ran off. If he hadn't so desperately wanted to see Carden again, he would have done just that. But then a half-naked waiter stopped in front of him and asked him what he wanted to drink. Tanner's attention was focused on the naked hottie on stage. He mumbled, "Vodka, and make it a double," and moved closer for a better view.

"You want a crack at Carden?" a guy asked him.

He had a weird way of standing in a man's personal space and Tanner felt instant revulsion.

The guy had on an ugly, checkered suit and he handed Tanner a business card.

"If you decide you want first crack at him, I'll be waiting."

Yeah, right, Tanner thought and returned to his drink. He watched the stage, heard the chatter. Carden, Carden, Carden. Everyone wanted him. *But he's mine. Mine!* He started to sweat and the heat got to him. *Phew. I need air.* He felt really strange. He blinked a couple of times...*man, they need to get the A/C going in here.* He licked his lips, his mouth very dry, and downed his drink. He'd speak to somebody about the heat. Man, it was hot in here.

Tanner was shocked when his legs almost gave way under him. He felt like a Gumby man, all rubbery and bendy. The weird guy in the checkered suit appeared beside him.

"Easy, easy now." He had Tanner's arm, was helping him. Tanner should have been grateful, but he felt afraid. The man's strange leer was sick. *Oh, help!* But his mouth wouldn't work.

"Step aside please," the weirdo yelled.

Tanner's head lolled in front of him. His head was spinning as they got outside.

"Is he all right?" somebody asked from a million miles away.

"Oh, he's fine...little lightheaded."

No, no. Help! He tried to fight when he saw a tan-colored car pull up and the valet guy helped push Tanner into the backseat. He resisted as well as he could, but he was beyond much self-defense.

The car screamed away and Tanner raised his head. "Uggherr..."

The guy driving the car reached back, a look of rage on his face. "I don't want to spoil your face, but if you don't shut up, I'll punch you."

"Hagghhyyllpp!" The man at the wheel reached back and slugged him. Tanner felt a tooth shatter in his mouth, piercing his lip. And slipped into unconsciousness.

* * * *

Rohypnol was one of Simeon's favorite date rape drugs. It was small and dissolved nicely in liquid. It made the victim look drunk. He'd be sleepy, have trouble talking, and if he was lucky, he'd lose consciousness.

Simeon watched Tanner from the rearview mirror. He was a cute donor, that's for sure. He drove haphazardly along Sunset and down Crescent Heights. As soon as he could, he pulled over and rifled the donor's pockets. He tossed the black wig from his head onto the street, shucking off the jacket he'd taken from the last donor's closet.

He rifled through the wallet he extracted from the unconscious man's pants pocket. *Mmm...a fine collection of credit cards, even some cash. Mmmm...what do we have here? A badge.* He examined it. *Shit. He's a cop.* The badge had a red seal and he studied it for a moment. He wouldn't be able to keep this donor long since he was a cop. He'd have some fun with his ass, then cap him. He wondered if he could use his credit cards.

Sure. He could buy some time with Carden since everyone said he was the bomb. He rummaged in the darkened gutter for his abandoned wig and slipped it back on his head. He'd have enough time to park his donor in the storage unit and head back to Eclipse for fun with the pureblood. *Who cares about medicals? I'll pay 'em off. I'll pay anything.*

The man on the backseat groaned.

Simeon leaned forward and spat in his face.

* * * *

"I don't know how many times I have to tell you," Rory said, trying to remain patient, "that vampire is no longer available. He is special reserve and the price is higher."

"Fine," the man barked. "Price is not important. I came here for him, and I'm not leaving until he's mine. Name the price, I'll pay it."

Rory scribbled a price on a piece of paper and showed it to him. "Are you prepared to pay that?"

The man's eyes widened. "Whoa. Okay, for how long?"

"One hour."

He appeared to think about it then nodded. "Okay. You take credit cards?"

"Yeah," Rory muttered.

"Hey, you don't seem happy. At those prices, I thought you'd be elated."

"Right," Rory said, but he was far from elated. He was sure no one would shell out ten thousand dollars for an hour with Carden, he'd been wrong. Damn it, it should have made it fifty grand.

* * * *

Thiago tried to pry Dennis' hands off him. It was not that he didn't like it, but he was supposed to be out on stage in five minutes. It seemed that Dennis was prone to do this just before he had to work. "Baby, stop."

"Come on, just one more kiss and--"

"You are bloody insatiable." He laughed, leaning down to kiss him.

"Why can't you be like Bellis? He doesn't do this stuff, he makes drinks."

"I'm not Bellis."

Dennis slipped his hand down between Thiago's thigh. "You have great thighs."

"Yeah?" He grinned and pushed his hand away.

"You think Rory and Bellis are going to get together?"

Thiago gave him an ironic look. "With Carden back?"

"I don't get Carden. He either loves Rory or he doesn't."

"You're not supposed to get Carden. I'm just happy he doesn't want to rip my throat out."

"Has he spoken to you at you?"

"Not a word. He doesn't say much. I know he's here to keep an eye on Rory, but what I don't know, is why. I'm sure he had something to do with Curse's disappearance."

"You think he killed him? It wouldn't be any loss."

Thiago nodded. "No, it wouldn't. Anyway, he hasn't confided in me so..."

Dennis wrapped his arms around him. "Fuck me."

"I can't. I have to..." Dennis was rubbing his dick and damn it, he was so hard.

"Fuck me," Dennis urged, pulling down his pants and tugging on the string that was holding Thiago's cock in place. "Damn, you're hot."

Thiago moaned. Dennis had his cock in his hand and he was playing with it quite deviously.

"Big, thick, fucking beautiful. I want to suck it," Dennis kissed down his chest and paused at his navel. He licked the circumference, cupped his balls and then licked the length of his shaft.

Shit," Thiago breathed. The music ended. "I got to...oh God, Dennis," he moaned, "you...shit!" Thiago sunk to his knees. "Get on all fours, I'm going to fuck that sweet ass of yours, and no mercy."

"Ah, punishment for..." Dennis squealed, laughing.

Thiago grabbed him and positioned him doggie style in front of him. "Yeah," he said gruffly, "punishment." He grabbed Dennis' ass and opened it up, licking in between his ass cheeks until Dennis began to plead, then he drilled his cock up inside of him and began to pump, while the applause died down in the other room. He heard someone announce his name.

* * * *

Rory decided to send half the men in line away. There were too many, they'd never all be serviced tonight. "Okay, one more," he said, "that's it."

The doorman made sure the others wandered back into the bar.

The last applicant said his name was Tanner Montgomery. He looked nervous and unsure of himself. He closed the door when he came in.

Rory looked up at him from his desk. "You didn't need to close the door."

"This is my first time, and I'm not really looking to...I mean, I'm here to meet a friend. We've already been together. He works here and I..."

I don't believe it! It's the nut case! The loon that wanted Thiago and shot Wen! Rory started to freak out. He pressed the panic button, hoping his best customer service smile remained in place. "This isn't a dating service. The workers charge for their services. Whatever you got going outside with one of the workers, well that--"

"Is Carden here?"

Rory felt that like a punch in the gut. "You've...been with Carden? Recently?"

"We worked together. It just happened."

"Worked together?"

"Police business. Look, could you just tell him I'm here. I need to see him."

Rory stood. "I'll be right back."

"Are you all right?" the man asked.

Rory pressed the panic button again. Where the hell was security when you needed them? "No, does it show?" Rory asked him and then left him sitting there in the office.

* * * *

"This is nice," Bellis said, poking his head into the dressing room. "Thiago, your worshippers await."

Thiago rubbed his nose against Dennis', who sat straddling his hips now, moving his hands over his back. "I'm coming."

Bellis smirked. "Or you came."

"Oh, to be young and adored and admired," Thiago joked, fastening his G-string.

"Anything hanging out, lover?" he asked Dennis.

"No, unfortunately. Bring my toys back in one piece, please."

"Your wish is my command." Thiago shook his ass in Dennis' face, then left the room.

* * * *

Carden was lying on his old bed in his old room when Bellis busted in like some kind of super cop who'd just found his suspect.

"There's a guy in Rory's office, claims he's someone called Tanner Montgomery. Rory pressed the panic button, but none of us can get in there."

Carden rose from the bed, pushing his way past Bellis who jabbered in his ear like an incessant

gnat. Two security guys looked petrified as Carden approached them.

“Door won’t open. None of the keys work,” said the first guy.

Carden wanted to bang their heads together. He said nothing, focusing his efforts on the office. He could smell panic and fear. He could feel Rory’s panic and the desperation of the other man. Not Tanner Montgomery.

“Yeah, I fucked Carden but good,” the man said.

Carden listened outside the door. “It’s sealed. I can see ectoplasm,” Carden said as he stood back. Indeed, the door oozed red psychic gel.

“Holy shit,” Bellis said. He was starting to see it now.

“Whoever this meathead is, he has no idea what he’s dealing with,” Carden said.

“He hit Rory already, I heard it,” Bellis whispered.

Carden’s stomach muscles clenched. “Start escorting people out quickly, quietly...don’t let them panic or start rushing the doors. Tell them that we are having computer problems...anything,” Carden told the security guys. “Tell them they all get a free visit next week.”

Rory was pacing the office now, Carden could hear him.

"Oh, and one more thing," Carden called to the security guards. "Get the dancers off the stage, put some crappy music on. That'll make 'em want to leave."

"Crappy music? Like what?"

"I don't know. Anything you don't like."

The guards looked at each other. "I hate country," one of 'em said.

"I love country," the other one said.

"Fuck," Carden fumed.

"How about *She Bangs*? I don't know anyone who likes that," the first guard said.

"Fine." Carden tuned back to the conversation on the other side of the door.

"I still need to access your medical files, Mr. Tanner," Rory said. "The State Medical Director's office would have your latest blood work on file and I can access their computers easily, with your permission."

Atta boy, buy time, baby. Don't panic. I'm here.

* * * *

Rory opened a filing cabinet and was surprised to feel a flush of warmth spread from his chest through his body. *Paradise*. The thought stopped his flood of terror. Carden was outside the door, he was certain of it.

"I'll pay you five thousand dollars to forget about my medical records for a fuck with Carden. And...if you throw Thiago...er...Number Six into the bargain."

Rory turned around, a file folder in hand and felt a little more confident as he approached the desk again. He took his seat. "I'll see what I can do," Rory said and swung his laptop toward him.

"Now, that's more like it."

The weirdo with the bad breath and multiple names leered at him. He tapped his foot to *She Bangs*, which had started playing on the song roster.

"I love this song! Sorry I had to punch you before, but I'm a man who likes to get my way."

"No problem," Rory replied, fighting off a wave of nausea. *God help me. Somebody, help me!* His desk phone rang and he reached over a hand to pick it up.

"No," said the weirdo. "Don't."

"But I have to. If I don't answer the phone, security will come running."

The weirdo's eyes moved about independently of each other. "All right...but I'm watching and listening. I will know if you try and screw me."

Screw you? I can feel the bile rising in my throat. He took the call.

"Put it on loudspeaker," the weirdo instructed.

Rory hesitated a fraction too long and the weirdo hauled off to slug him again. "Okay, okay," he screamed, lifting his hands to fend off the blow. It connected with his elbow, the pain radiating straight up to his neck. He was afraid it had broken his arm, so savage was the punch. He put the call on loudspeaker.

"Hi, Rory, this is Lionel Chapman. We spoke a couple of days ago about the shipment of blood you requested."

Oh God, why now? No...wait, this is a good time. I can talk blood all night long. He pressed the panic button one more time and put a smile in his voice. "Yes, Mr. Chapman, thanks for calling me back so soon."

"We have a difficulty here," Chapman said. "Supplies are running out and with the riots, the city borders have only just been reopened to residents returning. Medical and food supplies are only now trickling in. I'm still not able to assemble some of the ingredients I need to produce the quantities I need to satisfy my clients. However, I like your club and since you have some pretty persuasive friends, I am going to give you a break. I'll give you some blood, but you'll need to come to my warehouse."

"Absolutely. And thank you, Mr. Chapman. Where is your warehouse?"

“San Pedro shipping yards. I’m in warehouse number five. Be there at midnight, or it goes to the next buyer.”

“How much is —”

Chapman ended the call.

That was weird. Why wouldn't Chapman wait to give him a price?

“You buy blood?” the weirdo asked.

Before Rory could respond, the door blew back with a sickening crack, like the bowels being lifted from a body and the weirdo screamed as Carden flew at him, grabbing him by the throat.

The attack was over in seconds, Rory astonished as Carden sliced the weirdo’s jugular vein, blood spilling from him as the man fell to the floor. Carden rifled the body and removed a badge that glowed red and hot.

“What the hell is that?” Rory asked.

“It’s for the City of Blood.” Carden pocketed the badge. He stepped toward Rory, a look of real menace in his eyes.

* * * *

Carden took a few steps closer. He only wanted to breathe the scent of him, but somehow his hand reached out and caressed his cheek. “I am good,” he whispered. “Was it better with Bellis?” What was wrong with him? He didn’t need to ask this

question, but yet, right now, he needed to know the answer.

Rory just looked at him.

“Tell me,” he insisted. It came out like a hiss, it sounded like anger. Maybe it was. “Does he fuck you like I do? Does he make you--”

Rory was in his arms. He couldn't remember if he'd taken the initiative and dragged the man to his old room, but once there, he pulled him closer. Rory pressed his body against Carden's. They were kissing as if the kisses were saving them from drowning, as if it was giving them the very air they breathed. Rory's kisses were so hard suddenly they hurt and Carden allowed himself to be propelled backward, just like he allowed Rory to push him on the bed and open up the robe he wore.

Rory's breath came now in huge gulps. He bit his nipples and squeezed his cock until it was painful. He tore at his own clothes and straddled his cock, desperately trying to work his hips down onto his lap and swallow every inch of him.

Carden sucked in some air, his head going back. He squeezed his eyes shut and let Rory use his cock as the room filled with sounds which varied between laughing and crying, and he tried not to let the love he felt for this mortal consume his very soul.

"I hate you, you bastard," Rory shouted at him, punching his chest as he rode his cock furiously.

Carden arched his back, crying out as he came inside him, and felt the spray of Rory's own come on his belly and his chest.

Rory lowered his body onto his. He placed his head on his chest, touched his hair, whispered some words that didn't quite make sense, and Carden knew that there wasn't much he could do about his heart.

"Why do you fight me?" Rory asked him suddenly. "Why do you push me away?"

"As you can see--"

"Don't be glib. You know what I mean. If you'd have confided in me, told me--"

"Nothing would have changed. Rory, listen to me," he propelled him off him, rolled onto his side, "I am who I am. I've been drawn to mortals for as long as I can remember, but I'm not a mortal. You seem to forget that, my love. And there are instincts inside of me which--"

"Are human, are good, are..." Rory touched his face. "You didn't kill Thiago."

"Yes, but I wanted to. I had to restrain myself."

"But you knew that he had saved you. You--"

"I caused a lot of death and destruction. I upset the balance. I never asked to..." He sat up, ran a hand through his hair, "I don't want this. But I have to accept it. My father, he's disowned me."

"Your father? I thought--"

"I revived him. They walled him up alive, left him there."

"Oh my God."

"I brought him back, but he's disappointed in me. I've betrayed my heritage, my lineage. I've committed evil, drank from mortals. I have the thirst now. That fake blood doesn't satisfy me anymore, Rory."

"You can try."

"I'll ruin your life. You're in danger being close to me. There will always be those who want my blood, who hunt me because they think I can give them immortality."

"Can you? Can you give them what they want, these people?"

He nodded. "Eternal youth and eternal life. There are those who know. The witch, Shawn, he wants me, and he will not stop at anything to get me. He'll hurt you if he thinks I..."

Rory pulled him closer. He kissed his forehead. "That's why you're here."

"Yes. And I never meant...if you want Bellis, then--"

"I want you, only you. And you know that. We can do this together, Carden. Say you love me."

"Rory, I..." he began, trying to pull away.

"Say it, say that you love me," Rory insisted.

"God help me," he whispered against his hair, "I do. I do."

* * * *

Simeon woke up on the floor of the office. That stupid manager was gone and the place looked like shit. Hell, *he* felt like shit. He clutched his throat, his whole body seemingly covered in blood, his life force oozing from his fingers. He got to his feet. Years of taking vamp vitamins had kept him in good stead. The room swam. He looked out onto the dance floor and watched as one vamp sucked another vamp's cock. A security guard urged the men to disperse. The room was otherwise empty. He remembered now, the vampire Carden had attacked him. Sick fuck! He lurched down the corridor and saw a bunch of guys arguing about leaving.

"I don't wanna go," one guy whined.

Simeon stumbled along a wall...man the wound in his throat was bad. He fell against a door and it opened. A stunned nurse jumped from her seat, blinking at him.

"What happened to you?" she asked. "Did one of our performers do this to you?"

"Carden," he whimpered as she came toward him.

Simeon allowed her to lead him to a comfy-looking hospital bed. She applied a thick bundle of gauze to the wound. "I'm going to have to call for an ambulance," she said, her voice shaking.

She was a nice nurse. When his mom played nurse and did bad things to him, making him bleed, she never once suggested an ambulance.

"Mommy?" The word came out of his soul and he saw the look of shock in the nurse's eyes.

"Just relax," she said. "I'll get help."

* * * *

Carden paced his room. "I *am* trying to explain. The City of Blood...it's a new city, kind of like Silicon Valley was to the computer industry in the eighties. Only this one makes blood and the people behind it have a lot of paranormal power. That sick fuck in your office had no idea of the power he had in Tanner's badge."

"You enjoyed fucking Tanner?" Rory asked, putting on his clothes again.

"I always enjoy my work," Carden responded. He ran a hand through his hair. "Let's not do this. I'm trying to explain that this Lionel guy may be legitimate, but he may not."

"Yeah, that occurred to me, too, but why would he lure me out there if he wasn't. I don't have power or money. I just get to run this club."

"He might be connected to Shawn. Shawn knows I love you."

"That's great. I didn't know you love me until a few minutes ago," Rory snapped.

"Yes, you knew. You're my...weakness, as well as my strength. I'm begging you not to go to this meeting."

"Then come with me."

"Honey, I can't. I need to be here...we need to be here. Things are happening fast. We should stick together."

"There's nothing I want more, but I need to go. I have to take the risk. We went through four tanks of blood in two nights. I'm worried. I have no choice. I need that stuff. We have a lot of humans making the vamp change who want the blood, too. I hadn't counted on so many...of...those."

Carden stared at him. "If we are going to be together, you're going to have to make that change. And be...*one of those*. How do you feel about that?"

Rory stared at him, defiant. "I feel fine about it. How do you feel?"

"Like I wanna fuck you all over again."

"You should kiss me when you talk dirty to me, Carden. You know, just to be polite."

* * * *

The nurse looked worriedly at the huge incision she'd sewed up with every last piece of sterile string in her medicine cabinet. She'd never seen a wound like it, but the customer had been a very good sport about the injury that she was amazed he'd survived. She'd hooked him up to an intravenous blood transfusion and given him a shot of antibiotics. He moved around, restless as she finished the stitches, which didn't look very strong, in spite of her best efforts. Oozing skin glue over the stitches, she let the client look at her handiwork in a small handheld mirror, then put a dressing wadded with antibacterial cream on it.

"Thank you," Simeon said. "It looks real good."

She sat back, snipping the edges off the sticky pad holding the dressing in place. "This bag is almost done. You're going to need at least three more."

Simeon sighed, glancing at his cell phone.

"You're amazing," she said, genuinely awed. "You've lost half your body weight in blood and you're checking phone calls."

"Fella's gotta keep working," Simeon mumbled.

She removed the first bag and hooked him up to another. "What do you do for a living?"

Simeon didn't look at her when he mumbled, "I kill people."

She decided he was joking, or he was delirious. She checked that the blood flowed into his arm. There was something weird about this guy, but a client was a client. What on earth had gotten under Carden's skin to make him attack the man this way?

* * * *

Simeon felt a bit better now the stitches were done. Two more bags of blood to go. He had three phone calls from the witch. Maybe he had a solution to his problem, a suggestion to how he could mellow out his well-hung beauty and take him off where they could be alone. *Thiago, Thiago baby, I want to tie you down, stretch you out naked and play with you...live out my wildest fantasies. You're mine. I want to rape your ass until you plead for more and then you can drink...drink from my throat and my cock. I'm yours, forever.* He waved off the nurse's suggestion of painkillers and a Tetanus shot.

"I'm going to give you an immune booster shot," the nurse said. "Turn over for me."

The shot hurt like hell, but suddenly he felt a whole lot better. He smiled at her. He almost wished he liked fucking women. He'd love to fuck this one to death. He wondered if women lasted longer, then decided that he couldn't handle pussy. He'd spent his entire teenage years

servicing his mom. That was plenty. Fucking a man in the ass kept his engine going. Simeon held the phone to his ear, waiting for that witch to pick up.

“Hello, Simeon?” It was Shawn. “Where in fuck have you been? Don’t you ever pick up your phone?”

“The signal sounds weak. Where are you?” Simeon griped back.

“Never mind that. I know a way to solve both our problems. You’ll have what you want and I’ll have mine.”

“Go ahead.”

“This is what I want you to do.”

* * * *

Rory didn’t want to go back downstairs. He wanted to stay in bed with Carden, but they had no choice. It was after midnight and he was afraid that he’d made a mistake not going to San Pedro to meet Lionel Chapman. Carden had insisted he stay. In truth, he trusted Carden’s instincts.

They walked downstairs together and Rory returned to the office, his emotional state still fragile, but at least now, he knew. Carden loved him. They loved each other. Whatever they had to face, at least they’d face it together.

Carden said he'd meet him there, that he wanted to check on the guards, make sure the building was secure.

"Don't drive anywhere without me," Carden said.

"I won't."

Rory walked into his shambles of an office and stared at the floor. The body of the weirdo was gone. All the better. Security must have removed him.

Thiago walked in. "Wow, who's your decorator? Rory, have you seen Dennis?"

"No. He's not here."

"I'm starting to worry. Normally my man is all over me...this feels a little...freaky."

Rory was about to tell him not to worry when Carden walked in.

Thiago chewed his lip a moment, then asked, "Have you seen Dennis?"

"No, I haven't." Carden looked at Rory. "Problems have been dealt with."

Rory smiled. He got up and hugged Carden, kissing him gently on the mouth. "Thanks."

"My pleasure."

"Okay," Thiago lifted an eyebrow, "I guess all is right with the world in Rory and Carden land?"

"We hope," Carden said and kissed Rory's head.

Rory reluctantly released Carden.

"I'm going to look for Dennis," Thiago said. "It's not like him to wander off."

"He thought you were going to be with the client," Rory said. "That upsets him. Maybe he decided to..."

Thiago didn't seem to be buying it.

"I'll go with you," Carden volunteered, "if you want."

Thiago looked surprised, then nodded. "Thanks, I appreciate your help."

"We won't be long, wait for me," Carden said, kissing his fingertips at Rory.

* * * *

Simeon had followed Shawn's instructions and found that stupid Dennis in the piano room, playing chopsticks with the animated ghost and shoved the needle filled with valium into the guy's shoulder. It hadn't been easy carrying him out of the club. One security guard asked him what was going on and Simeon played it cool.

"Drunk. I'm giving him a ride home." He shoved the guy into his backseat and drove off to meet the witch, as arranged. Thiago's guy was out like a light, slumped over in the backseat of his car. He wasn't much of a prize. To Simeon, he was a nuisance. He would have loved to have gotten rid of him instead of bringing him to that witch.

But Shawn guaranteed him that Thiago would come after his little lover, and that of course would bring Rory and Carden after him. Man, he wanted to hurt Carden in the worst way...

At the destination place in a darkened alley, he waited. The witch walked toward him in the alley, accompanied by three vampires.

"Now what?" Simeon demanded. "I want my Thiago. And I want his whore dead."

The witch instructed his two vampires to take the unconscious mortal out of the car. The vampires threw him into the back of the van parked at the end of the alleyway.

"Where are you taking him?" he demanded. "Do you have any idea what that prick Carden did to me? Not that you asked, but look at my fucking neck! He tried to kill me."

"Don't whine, Simeon, it's annoying. In fact," Shawn said as the vampires came back and stood beside him, "we don't need you anymore. Boys," he looked at the vampires, "why don't you take your supper break?"

Simeon attempted to scream, but the teeth clamped down on his throat silenced it. Then blackness.

* * * *

Carden placed his hand on Thiago's forearm as the nurse lifted her hands.

"I'm sorry, I had no idea he was a crazed killer. He survived a huge loss of blood. I was afraid of a lawsuit."

"Oh my God...he's got my baby," Thiago whispered. "I just know it."

"I saw him leaving with Dennis over his shoulder. He said he was drunk," a security guard said. "Sorry."

* * * *

Rory stared at the phone. He was in shock. The voice which spoke was cold, without emotion. "We have Dennis. Tell anyone and he's dead. Get in your car now, and drive to the place I tell you. Do you understand?"

He didn't say anything. The line went dead. *My God, they've taken Dennis.* He jumped out of his seat and raced out the front door.

* * * *

Carden and Thiago returned to the hallway. Carden watched Rory blow past him. "Hey!" he shouted as Rory ran out front. Carden went after him, Thiago hot on his heels. "You're leaving here? On your own?" Carden was incredulous.

"They have Dennis," Rory wailed. "They said I had to come...I told you I should have gone to that meeting."

"Calm down." Carden's voice was soothing, unruffled. "Tell me what they said."

"They told me to get in my car and drive. They have my cell phone number and they will tell me where to go."

"Carden, what in hell is going on?" Thiago demanded.

"I'll tell you on the way. We've got to find them. We've got to find them, now."

"Where are we going?" Rory asked.

"Where else? The City of Blood."

* * * *

Rory drove in one car, Thiago and Carden in the other. He was terrified, but felt assured that they were behind him, keeping a safe distance. He was surprised to receive the first call telling him to drive toward Palm Springs. *Palm Springs!*

He reported each message via text to Carden and Thiago. Thiago would text back *okay*. He took the Ten freeway interchange and braced himself when two men jumped out of the car beside him with guns and ordered him out of the car.

Rory lifted his hands and saw the punch coming, too late to stop it from connecting.

* * * *

“Shit!” Thiago screamed.

Carden’s hands clenched the wheel. “Go,” he urged. “Go!”

Thiago jumped out of the passenger seat.

Carden watched as the vampire raced toward the white van containing his lover and he was certain, Dennis. Thiago was fast and Carden saw him jackrabbit in and out of lanes, then slap the tracer on the bumper. He checked his dashboard computer. It worked! Carden picked up the grinning vampire on the shoulder.

“So where is the City of Blood?” Thiago asked.

Carden glanced at the computer and back at Thiago. “Las Vegas,” he replied.

CHAPTER SIX

Rory's throbbing head bounced in the back of the van. He awoke, tied up, something revolting wedged in his mouth, tape over it. He found it almost impossible to breathe as his eyes came into focus. He saw Dennis beside him. The two men stared at each other and Dennis' face screwed up. He started to cry.

Oh no...Rory's fingers reached for Dennis and the two old friends lay facing one another, bound and gagged. Dennis had survived a lunatic father, only to wind up in the hands of an unknown, dangerous psychotic. Their fingers touched and entwined. *If I have to die, I'm glad I'm dying with Dennis.* "It's all right Dennis, it's all right." He shouted the words into the gag.

"Shut up in there," came a voice from the front.

He smelled something awful. Gas. Rory felt his body go slack and screamed when he felt Dennis' fingers slipping from his...

Rory awoke some time later. He tried to see if Dennis was all right, but couldn't turn his head around enough. He could hear Dennis moan once in a while, which at least let him know that his best friend was still alive.

His eyes adjusted to the darkness and he saw now they were in some sort of cave, chained to the wall. Directly in front of him was a painting of Carden, as well as what seemed to be an altar. The huge knife was scary, as was the image in the painting. It was almost Christ like. He felt as if he was in a church. There were voices all around them, but no one had come to tell him anything.

His whole body ached and he felt like he'd been kicked and punched to hell and back. Man, his head throbbed. When he saw a shadow moving along the wall, he swallowed, fear creeping up his throat. The shadow materialized into an image, horrifying, a man who resembled a walking corpse with blood rimming his eyes. He wanted to scream. Then the corpse spoke.

"Hello, Rory, I'm Dominick, and you are my prisoner."

* * * *

"Are you going to tell me what in the hell is going on now," Thiago demanded, "or do you plan to keep it all to yourself?"

Carden stood in the clearing. He had been leaning on that lone cactus for the last hour and hadn't said a word. He glanced at him now, his eyes glowing fiercely in the darkness.

Thiago had never quite seen Carden look so much like a vampire before. But he did now. The look held no malice, but it did hold a warning, a warning to him to stay quiet. Thiago didn't dare push it, but he was growing restless. He had no sense of Dennis, and it made no sense. Dennis was in his blood, in his soul. He knew when he was near, when he was gone, but now, nothing. And that terrified him.

"He's not dead," Carden said suddenly.

Thiago swallowed. "Have you read all my thoughts?"

"No. Your thoughts are the furthest thing from my mind, but that last one screamed at me. I'd know if they were dead."

"How in fuck would you know more about Dennis than I? I'm the one who's been fucking him and--"

"I just do. It's not a competition. I have no interest in your Dennis. You can relax."

Thiago made a face. "You know you really sound like an arrogant asshole sometimes, but really, I don't think you mean to."

Carden stiffened.

For a moment Thiago thought he wouldn't be around to regret that comment. Then suddenly, Carden started to laugh. "You found that funny?"

"I'd have to, or risk that you'd accuse me of being an uptight asshole, as well as an arrogant one. Couldn't have that."

Carden could be strange, that was for sure. But his evasive silence was what was killing him right now. "Why don't we just go in there?"

"We could, but that's what they want, which means they're prepared for us."

"But you're a Pure Blood," Thiago protested, looking across the sand. "You could take them all down, couldn't you?"

"But they know my weakness now."

"I didn't think you had any weakness."

"No one knows except our own kind."

"So we're safe. You're the only one."

"No, I'm not."

Thiago narrowed his eyes. "Carden. Can you speak some fucking language I understand? We are standing here staring at nothing, and all this time, Dennis and Rory could be dead."

"They won't harm them. I'd know if they did and then I wouldn't come. And we're not staring at nothing," he said. He began to move forward.

Thiago followed, watching him carefully.

"You do know," Carden said without slowing his pace, "we are in the Great Basin National Park.

Close by are the Lehman Caves, a single cavern despite the name. The cave is thought to extend a quarter-mile into the limestone and marble that flanks the base of the Snake Range.”

“This is all fascinating Carden, but why are you telling me all this?”

Carden paused, looked at him. “The cave is what the tourists see, but there is much more beneath the desert than just that. Rory and Dennis are under us.”

“Well, let’s go and get them then.”

Carden put a hand on his arm. “A long time ago, my father and his brother fell in love with the same woman. The woman chose my father, and there was an irreparable rift that occurred between the two brothers. My father’s brother, Colman, detested his own blood so much after he and my father separated, he tried everything to rid himself of it. He did things to himself that...” he paused, appeared to shudder, “unspeakable things to bring about the transformation. My father has always believed that Colman was no longer among the creatures of this earth because he could no longer sense him. But I know why he couldn’t sense him.”

“Why?” Thiago insisted, his breath catching in his throat.

“Because Colman is gradually becoming mortal.”

"How can that be?"

"I don't know," Carden muttered, "I just know it to be true. I can smell his fear. He's dying a little bit each day, and he's desperate to survive. He uses Shawn. He has tried to block communication between myself and some vampires. He seeks to starve them and make them his slaves, his army."

"For what purpose? To fight who?"

Carden met Thiago's gaze in the still night sky. "He wants power and he wants his immortality back. And there's something else...something to do with vengeance, but it's not clear. He needs me. And he knows I have revived my father."

"Carden...we—"

Carden held up his hand. "Quiet. I need to listen."

Thiago was too impatient to give him that chance. "If this Colman is turning into a human, what's the problem? We can simply kill him and--"

"He knows my weakness, remember?"

"What is it? What is this weakness?"

"Don't you know? You have it, too, although with your kind, it is not the only one, with us, it is. When we love, we love with our whole hearts. We stop at nothing, even sacrificing ourselves for the one we love. He knows that. He knows I love Rory."

"What about your father? Can't he help us?"

"He is silent right now. Perhaps he knew this all along, and this is some kind of a test, or...I must do this alone. If I don't stop them, everything is lost."

"I'm ready."

"Thiago," Carden placed a hand on his shoulder, "you can't come with me."

Thiago's mouth fell open.

* * * *

Rory tried not to show his fear, but his appearance, the horror of it. It was difficult to hide his revulsion.

"Would you believe me if I told you that I was once very beautiful?" The corpse came closer, peering at him. He reached out a wrinkled hand and ran a sharp crooked nail over his cheek.

Rory forced himself to make words. "I...probably. I guess."

"You don't believe me."

"Dennis, is he..."

"Fine. Dennis will be fine, and so shall you. I have no reason to kill you. Soon you will have served your purpose and I will release you." He moved away.

Rory took a breath. He didn't believe a word of it. There's no way he'd let them out of here alive. "Where are we?"

"Underground."

Damn. Would Carden and Thiago be able to sense them underground?

"Did you know that the desert hides many things underneath it?"

"No, I mean...yes, I know there are tunnels and...what is all this? Why do you have a painting of Carden on the wall? He looks like he's about to be some kind of a sacrifice."

"That's because he is."

Rory shuddered. Somewhere he could hear water running down in between rocks. "Please, don't hurt him. Don't hurt Carden, kill me, but--"

"How noble." He laughed a hideous laugh.

"Well," a voice boomed suddenly, "look who we have here, the lover."

Rory looked into the face of a man he thought he'd seen before, but it didn't click right away.

"I'm Shawn," he said with a smile, "a good friend of Carden's. We're all waiting for the guest of honor so that we can start the party."

At one time, he might have been a handsome man, but he'd not aged well, and now he looked weathered and hard. Rory sensed his malice and selfishness. Rory heard a moan suddenly. He craned his neck, but couldn't see anything. "Dennis? Are you alright?"

"He's fine," Shawn said, "just waking up, that's all. Don't worry about him, Rory. I'd be far more

worried about myself if I were you. I really don't like you. It would be my pleasure to get rid of you."

Rory ignored the pain pounding in his head. "I don't care what you do to me. You don't want to hurt Carden. You're in love with him."

The smile that was plastered across his thin lips disappeared. "What would give you that impression?"

"It was just a guess, but from your reaction--"

"Shut up. Keep your guesses to yourself," he growled and walked away.

The one who looked like a walking corpse glanced over at him suddenly from where he hovered in the corner.

"You're perceptive. That was a good call. But don't worry, Rory, as soon as Carden restores me, I'll dispose of Shawn and all the others. He won't hurt you. And if Carden does the right thing, he will survive this, and so will you. You will have the world at your feet. So relax." He grinned, sharp pointed teeth exposed. "If our boy makes the right move, you'll get to walk out of here."

* * * *

Carden wondered if he should communicate with his father, let him know that his brother was about to bring on the end to human society. His father

couldn't have sensed Colman in the state he was now in, hovering somewhere between distorted vampire and rapidly aging mortal, could he?

Shawn had been a pawn in Colman's game from the beginning. He'd led Shawn to the group of immortality seekers, and set him up to help him in his plan. He manipulated every step, and now he expected that he would restore him to his former glory. And if he did, would Colman challenge his father and get his revenge for stealing the only woman he'd ever loved from him? Was that the plan? If that happened, all would be lost. Colman would rule the human race, possibly destroy the both him and Declen, and control the vampire race. *Father, did you know about this all along?*

No answer.

His only goal right now was to get Rory and Dennis to safety. Once he was sure they were safe, he could take Colman on. They were close now to where Carden knew he'd find Rory and Dennis. Colman knew he near as well. Narrowing the distance between them had increased Colman's radar, and he now spoke to him.

I'm waiting for you, my son.

Son? Pure Bloods never referred to anyone as son, unless they were actually their progeny.

If you want Rory and his friend, come now, before I eat them.

That startled Carden and he stopped dead in his tracks, sand drifting over his boots.

“What?” Thiago demanded. “Why are we stopping?”

“You must go now.”

“I’m not going anywhere until I have Dennis. Kill me if you like--”

“Listen to me,” Carden snapped. “I have no time for this. I will protect Dennis, I promise you. But the sun will soon be up. You can’t stay out here in the open. It will kill you. You must go and round up those vampires who have heard my call. I will tell them to follow you. Gather them and wait for me to contact you.”

Thiago nodded. “Dennis’ life is in your hands, Carden. If I lose him, I’ll hunt you down and I swear...”

Carden smiled faintly. “I’ll take that under advisement.” He glanced up into the sky. “Now go.”

* * * *

There was chanting coming from somewhere. It echoed throughout the limestone structure causing Rory to raise his head. He’d dozed off and the chanting woke him up. “Dennis,” he said. “Dennis, are you all right?”

No answer.

His question came back to him. "Dennis?"

He was alone. He couldn't even hear Dennis breathing. My God, was he dead. *Carden. Don't come here. They mean to sacrifice you, drain you of your blood. They're insane.*

Carden's voice answered in his head as clear as if he was in the same room. *I'm coming for you. I know what they mean to do. There is no other choice. I love you.*

Tears streamed down Rory's face. *I love you. I won't be able to bear watching you die. Just do as they ask and maybe...*

No, my love. I can't do that. You don't understand the consequences. This has been foretold. I should have paid more attention to my father's lessons. I was not a good student.

Where are you?

Shush. Don't speak, just listen. There is someone with you. He calls himself Dominick now, but it's not his name. You must tell him exactly what I tell you to. Do you understand?

Yes.

Then listen.

* * * *

There are around three hundred and fifty miles of flood channels running under Las Vegas, and as Thiago came back up to the surface after his sleep, he couldn't believe how many people he saw

living down there. Most inhabitants lived in the area under the city's strip, and worked in the casinos at night. Wet, damp, filled with the possibility of disease, Thiago couldn't help but feel pity for those mortals. But the tunnels were the ideal place for a vampire to sleep, and to feed. But of course he didn't feed, and he was ravenous.

As he walked through the circus that was Fremont Street, each person he passed smelled especially compelling. He had to find some nourishment soon or he'd lose control. As he approached Las Vegas Boulevard South, he stopped, wondering what had led him here to Neonopolis. Neonopolis was a pedestrian mall, with theaters and shops, and a million dollar open-air restaurant. The lights were blinding, and there were people everywhere. His heart ached, and the artificial lights hurt his eyes. *Dennis. What am I doing here when I should be saving you? Speak to me, baby. Tell me you're all right. At one time, you told me you could see inside my mind. Talk to me. Please?*

Then he saw them. There were hundreds of them, walking side by side, shoulder to shoulder, heading in his direction from Las Vegas Boulevard. The mortals noticed, too. They parted, made room. Thiago stood there in awe at the power of Carden Adair. He was exactly where he was supposed to be, and so were the vampires who'd come to find him.

Wait for my call.

Thiago could do nothing now, but bow to this power. Carden was far more than anything he could have imagined. Thiago fell to his knees. *We will wait.*

* * * *

Carden moved his hands over the slimy rock. It was here, the passage, but he wasn't sure how he was supposed to open it. Was there a particular rock he needed to press on? Were there some magic words to say? He'd been studying it for at least twenty minutes and he was growing impatient. *Is this a game? If you want me, then lead me there.*

You've gotten this far, my beautiful boy. You will have no problem getting the rest of the way. Besides, I want to have time to visit with your Rory.

"Damn you!" Carden slammed his fists against the wall of the cave. A huge vibration boomed around him. "You hurt him and I swear, you will get none of my blood. I'll make sure of it!"

* * * *

Rory heard the walls of the cave vibrate. It sounded as if someone was blasting the rock. The chanting continued around him, low and melodic.

It was driving him crazy. But that banging. It was disconcerting.

“Don’t worry,” a voice said, “it’s only Carden. It’s taking out his frustrations on the cave.”

Rory looked up to see his abductor. He looked even worse now. Skin was beginning to fall away from his bones. It was quite revolting. “Are you...a vampire?”

“Of sorts,” he said. “A vampire who tried to restore me left the job unfinished, and I’m afraid our blood didn’t mingle very well. You don’t put cheap gas into a Rolls Royce.”

“I don’t understand. What are you then?” He was wasting some time, desperately trying to put together what Carden had told him to say, in his mind.

“Maybe you don’t want to know.”

“Maybe not. There are a lot of things sometimes we’d prefer not to know,” Rory said, clearing his throat. He was thirsty. When Dominick didn’t comment, Rory forged on. “Love does many things to a man, and some immortals who have no weaknesses except love, find unrequited love especially poignant.”

Dominick’s face changed. His eyes widened, filled with rage. He loomed closer, teeth exposed.

Rory tried not to flinch but it was a horrifying sight.

“What are you saying? Whose words do you spit from your filthy mouth?”

“Marshrella.”

He let out a cry, doubled up his fists. “How dare you speak her name, you are not worthy.”

Rory tried to swallow his fear, but he faltered. Carden spoke in his head.

That’s it, my Rory. Keep it up. He won’t kill you. He needs you to get to me. Go on, say what I told you.

“Marshrella loved Declen, not you. Why can’t you just accept that?”

“Because it’s a lie,” he roared. “It’s a lie! He stole her from me. He tricked her. He gave her no choice. He stole my love, and he stole my son!”

Rory’s eyes widened. “Your...your son? Carden is your son?”

Dominick turned his back. He appeared to whimper. “My son,” he whispered. “And I must sacrifice my own son to survive, to get strong enough again to destroy Declen, and enslave these mongrel vampires who killed my love.” He turned around. “I shall rule the world, the only Blue Blood left, mortals and mongrel blood suckers at my feet. They’ll all pay.”

“Don’t, Dominick. Don’t,” Rory pleaded.

* * * *

Carden put a hole through the cave with his fist, then he put another, but it still wasn't big enough to crawl through. Finally, with a gigantic shout, he lifted his foot and kicked out. A huge crack appeared. He rammed his body against it with all his force and landed on his side on the other side.

Dennis was dying. He had known that even when he stood with Thiago, telling him to leave, but there was no point letting Thiago know that. His heart was still beating, but faintly. He'd lost a lot of blood. Rory was in good shape physically, but he was terrified and his body needed hydrating. He had no time to waste.

He walked steadily down the narrow tunnel and then down a flight of stairs, manmade and crumbling badly. Carden knew that Colman had already amassed a sizeable vampire army, and he wasn't sure if he even had half of the vampires he did.

Well Declen, if you plan on helping me, there's no time like the present. Thiago, get as many mortals off the street as possible.

How in the hell do you want me to do that? The streets are packed.

Black out!

* * * *

The vampires were waiting. He silently told them the plan. *We're going to black out Las Vegas. If there are any mortals left on the street, do what you must to scare them off.* Thiago glanced up at the sky and suddenly there was a swarm of vampires overhead. "Holy," he cried, "this is surely Armageddon. Okay, hit the transformers. Take them out."

Within minutes, the street was in darkness. People fled, screaming, not sure what was happening, as Vampires swooped down and tried to pick up terrified mortals one after another, and were fought off by Carden's army. Thiago had no time to think about anything. He was immediately engaged in battle as the night skies filled up with more and more vampires.

* * * *

Shawn screamed when he saw Carden. He tried to run. "He's here. Dominick! Dominick!"

A hand reached out for him, picked him up by the back of the neck. He went flying through the air and landed hard on the floor of the cave. He thought he was dead but Carden kept on, mercifully passing him by.

Shawn tried to get to his feet, but his leg was broken and he was bleeding from the head. It was all right because soon he'd have what he wanted,

Carden's blood. He'd be young and beautiful forever.

* * * *

Carden followed the sound of the chants. He rounded the corner of the winding cave and entered another section. He stopped as he felt a hand grab his ankle. He looked down to see several men slithering across the floor of the cave like serpents. Some were sobbing, pleading. They began to chant his name over and over. Several hands moved up over his legs. "Take your hands off me. How dare you touch me!"

There were some whimpers, moans, the snakes slithered back, fell silent. Carden looked around him. In the distance he could see something else, another section where an altar of some kind stood. He narrowed his eyes, stepped over the men and walked toward it cautiously. The chanting of his name began again. He closed his mind to it. "Rory?"

"Yes," a voice whispered, "he's here. You want him?"

Carden gasped as he ran his hand over the velvet lining of the altar. Right above it was a painting of him lying there naked like a lamb being prepared for sacrifice. He turned around. Rory was chained to the wall. He couldn't see

Dennis, but he knew he was nearby. He took a step, then he saw the figure, a pitiful figure, not vampire, not mortal. It was decomposing, fading away painfully bit by bit. The two eyes that looked at him were rimmed with blood.

He was crying. "Carden."

"Colman, let the mortals go. You don't need them. I'll help you."

"You're lying to me." He held up the knife he had in his hand. He placed it at Rory's throat.

"No," Carden said.

"Get up on the table, Carden, or I'll cut his throat."

Carden heard a sound. He looked to his right and saw those men who had been chanting a while ago. They surrounded him on their knees.

"No," Rory cried out. "Don't, Carden! Don't do it."

Carden began to shake. It wasn't fear. It was the dawning realisation that this thing in front of him wasn't his uncle. It was his father. "Why didn't you...how? How can it be?"

"We were in love," he whispered, "lovers. But Declen wanted her. He always wanted everything I had. He used our weakness to keep us apart. I had to reject her, for if I didn't, he would have killed her."

"But they loved each other. I saw it. I..."

“He loved her, and I had to make her hate me, or Declen would have killed her. Eventually she came to care for him, but in her heart, she was always mine. And you, you are mine, Carden. You are the dead image of me...or you were.”

“What have you done to yourself?” Carden whispered. “You’ve become hideous, inside and out. And because Declen stole your love, you want to kill mine?”

One thick, bloody tear dropped on his cheek. He pressed the knife harder against Rory’s skin. “I have no choice. You could kill me. I can’t let you do that. You must restore me, restore me to my former self.”

“No.”

“Then I will kill him, Carden. Make your choice. You may survive it. You’re strong. Give us your immortality and I will set Rory and his friend free. The other one is dying. You can feel it, can’t you? He has no more than an hour or so left in this world.”

Rory whimpered.

Carden looked at Rory. He could hardly bare the sight of the tears streaming down his face.

Shawn hobbled into sight now, glaring at him. “Finally, you’re ours. Dominick, kill those mortals. Let us get on with it.”

Dominick looked at Carden.

Carden nodded. He smiled at Shawn. "You want immortality?"

Shawn nodded. "And you will give it to me."

"Yes, I'll give it to you. Come here," he motioned.

"Just like that," he seemed uncertain. He looked at Dominick.

"Go on," Dominick urged.

"I want more than just your blood," Shawn demanded, limping closer. "I want you to fuck me, right in front of your little boyfriend, unless you want Dominick to slit his throat."

Carden reached out, pulled him near. He lowered his head and licked the blood off his forehead. The wound healed instantly.

Shawn reached up and touched Carden's face. "You're all I've ever wanted. All of this has been for you."

The others moaned plaintively, waiting.

"And now I'm going to thank you," Carden said. He pushed Shawn's head to the side and bit down into his jugular. The luscious, rich, red blood filled his mouth and flooded over his teeth. He continued to drink, feeling Shawn's body grow weak. The blood would sustain him, perhaps save him from what he knew he must do. *This is for Danny, you bastard!* Shawn dropped at his feet, dead. Carden wiped the blood off his mouth with the back of his hand.

“Now the others,” Dominick demanded. The knife was still positioned at Rory’s throat.

“No,” he shook his head. “You let them go.”

“They won’t go. You’re their god. They worship you. You may kill them if you want, their life is yours. They are your slaves.”

Carden looked down at them, then he stared at Colman. With all the power he had, he focused on that knife and broke it in two. It clattered to the floor. Simultaneously, he sprang at Dominick through the air and shouted. “If you love me, save the mortals. Take them out of here now!”

CHAPTER SEVEN

The hospital wing was lit with a generator, but most of the beds had been evacuated, except for a few who were too sick to move. The National Guard had been called in and there was a curfew in effect. No one was allowed on the streets. Sin City was in darkness, and the streets and skies had erupted into a battle, the likes of which none had ever seen. No war in history could compare to the carnage. Religious fanatics were preaching the end of the world, the broadcasters were silent. All television and radio signals had been wiped out or deliberately silenced by the powers that be.

Rory hovered over Dennis as the doctors worked on him. He was hooked up to tubes and bags of fluids. A monitor announced the slow beating of his heart. Over in the corner, the seven men stood vigil, all men of wealth and influence, one a manufacturer of synthetic blood, Lionel Chapman.

None of those men had said a word since he and Dennis had been whisked out of that cave and half-carried across the desert sand. A van had stood nearby, as if waiting, and they sped away, avoiding the city core where the sky was obscured with hoards or vampires ripping one another to shreds.

Rory sank down onto a chair in the room a few feet from Dennis' stretcher and put his face in his hands. *Carden*. Carden had seized hold of Dominick or Colman, or whoever he was, and they'd gone hurling around the room. He'd had no time to see anything else. He'd been carried out of there so fast it had seemed like a dream. And now the entire city was crumbling around them, the city of sin had become the city of blood. Where would it end? Would Dennis survive? Where was Thiago? And Carden, his Carden, who had risked everything to save them, to save them all. *Please be careful, my love*. When there was no response, he walked out into the hallway. He spoke to Chapman. "Please tell me, is he all right?"

"I don't know," Chapman said. He sounded almost like a zombie, his eyes glassy, unfocussed.

"It's like you're all under some kind of a spell," Rory muttered.

"We answer only to him," Chapman replied and then the chanting began again. "Carden, Carden, Carden."

Rory sighed, shook his head and went back in to be with Dennis.

* * * *

Thiago wiped the blood off his chest and retracted his teeth. He'd gone down below to rest, thankful that the sun was now rising in the sky. They'd have silence now for a little while, but tonight it would begin again.

"We're losing this battle," a vampire whispered in the darkness.

It smelt musty down here, and the dampness bit into his bones, in spite of his immunity to the elements. He closed his eyes. He was right, whoever he was. They couldn't win this. Their numbers were in decline. "Carden, do something."

"Carden?" someone said. "Carden is dead."

Thiago stiffened. Now he was afraid.

* * * *

"How can I kill my own father?"

"Then you believe me?"

Carden was sitting on the altar, the one created for him, the one where he was supposed to be drained of blood. He was weary, but not physically. His struggle with Colman hadn't

lasted long. Colman was too weak. It was like fighting with a baby. He had had ample opportunity to kill him, but it wasn't that easy. The sun had risen. The battle was on hold for now. It bought him time. He'd tried reasoning with him. It wasn't working.

"I won't call them off," Colman told him. "Either kill me or restore me. Make up your mind, Carden."

He couldn't kill him. There was no use trying to convince himself that he could. Carden slipped off the altar and stood looking at him. "I will do neither. You chose to butcher yourself in this way. You gave yourself countless blood transfusions, polluting your own blood, then experimented with letting vampires bite you. You have to live with what you did."

"And you would deny your own father a few drops of your blood to restore him?"

"It would take more than a few drops. We both know that. You are no father to me. You deserted me. I didn't even know you were my father."

"Declen left me no choice. If you knew how I suffered."

"He tricked you. He would have never killed his own heart. You should have fought for her, like I'm going to fight to save this world for Rory. You're a coward. And for a Pure Blood, that is the lowest you can sink."

"Don't leave me, Carden."

"If you were really my father, if you cared for me, you'd stop this insanity. And you would have never set me up the way you did, using these pathetic humans, preparing to sacrifice your own son."

"And would you save me, Carden, if I agreed to your demands?"

"First you need to save yourself."

"He's coming."

"Isn't that what you want, to fight with your brother over a dead woman? He'll kill you, you know?"

He lowered his head.

"Fine. I no longer care. I'll do what I have to do. I'll fight those soldiers of yours. You won't win."

"Carden, please, before you go, I want you to have something."

"I want nothing from you."

"It was given to me by your mother." He reached up around his neck and lifted a gold chain over his head. He held it out in the palm of his hand. "It's a gold band with a heart, it's her heart. She gave it to me, but I can no longer wear it on my finger due to the deterioration. Please, take it. Marshrella would want you to have it."

Carden hesitated.

"Please, son."

Carden reached over and took it.

“Wear it, it will protect you.”

Carden hastily put it around his neck as he fled the cave. He walked quickly, trying to hold back the tears. He heard his mother singing that lullaby to him. All this time, Declen had lied to him. Colman was his father, a father who gave up, wallowed in his own defeat, and didn't even fight for love. He wouldn't be like his father. He planned to fight.

* * * *

Dennis opened his eyes.,

Rory let out a sob of relief. He took his hand. “Hey.”

“Hey,” Dennis said. “Where's Thiago?”

“I don't know,” Rory muttered, shaking his head, tears rolling out of his eyes. “I don't know anything anymore. It's all going to shit, Dennis. Everything. There's a battle. I don't know who is fighting who. Vampires. And the army is in the streets, too, and....there are no lights and...”

“It's okay,” Dennis whispered, “Carden will save us.”

Suddenly a voice behind them said, “Carden is dead.”

Rory turned around, his eyes widening. He gasped when he saw Thiago. He had wrapped

himself in a thick blanket. There were burns on his face and gashes.

Dennis started to sob when Thiago lowered the blanket and went over to him. Thiago lowered his head onto Dennis' chest, and Dennis reached up weakly and touched his hair.

"What do you mean Carden is dead?" Rory demanded. He grabbed Thiago's arm and dragged him away from the bed.

"Someone told me he's dead. And now it's over. I can't win this without him, Rory." His eyes were rimmed with pink.

Rory shook his head. "They're wrong. I'd feel it if he was. They're wrong."

Thiago nodded. He reached out and patted his shoulder. "Let's hope so." He turned back to Dennis and spoke gently to him. "Hey, baby."

"You came out in the daylight to see me."

"I had to, the moment I realised you were here, I had to see you with my own eyes, make sure you were all right. Thank you, Carden, thank you," he whispered, looking at the ceiling. "He promised me he'd save you. He kept his word."

"Your face. I've never seen you so battered. And you're crying."

"I've lost a lot of blood. My wounds aren't healing fast. And I'm fine." He sniffed. Dennis turned his neck to the side. "Drink from me."

"No," Thiago said, backing away. "I can't. You're too weak."

Suddenly, Lionel Chapman walked into the room. He instantly held out his arm. "You are to drink from me. It is his will."

"His will," Rory said anxiously, "his will? Carden's will?"

"Of course," he said. "Soon," he looked at Thiago, "he will be with you. He asks you to keep the faith."

Rory started to cry with relief.

Thiago took a breath, closed his eyes. He grabbed Chapman and sank his teeth into his wrist.

* * * *

Everything stood still. Carden looked around him at the silent casinos with the non-functioning neon signs. There was a military helicopter above his head frozen in midair, two tanks on Fremont Street. It had once been the site of a high-tech show called *The Fremont Street Experience*. This was a whole new and surreal experience for the one-time pride of the Vegas strip. Pieces of vampire corpses littered the streets. There were dented cars with broken windshields and equally shattered store windows. If there was a hell, they were in it.

Declen strolled toward him casually as if he was out for an early morning stroll. "It's decadent, isn't it? What has the human world come to?"

"Don't preach to me," Carden snapped. "It's a little late now."

He nodded. "So you'll fight then?"

"Isn't that what you want me to do, to restore the family name?"

"Sarcasm is the tool of a man who lacks wit, Carden. It doesn't become you." He sounded angry. He sounded like a father.

"Bite me."

"A joke? I'm glad to see you've kept your sense of humour. If you'd destroyed Colman, it would all be over now."

"And do your job for you? No thanks. And don't you think I don't know that you plan to take his place?"

"You've always been smart. It's a little hard to pass up this much power when it's so close."

"Didn't you teach me that power corrupts?"

"So it does. Your pity stood in the way of your common sense, Carden. You made a serious tactical error in not getting rid of him."

"Don't think he has my sympathy. Personally, I find both of you pathetic. Which one of you did she really love?"

He shrugged. "You know the answer already. He gave you the ring."

"And you felt no guilt keeping her from him, even if that's where she really wanted to be?"

"None at all. And neither would you. Would you let Rory go to the bed of another man?"

"Yes, I would, if he truly loved him."

"You're a fool."

"Perhaps, but I love Rory enough not to want to make him miserable. If that meant losing him, I'd swallow it."

"Big man."

"Now who's being sarcastic?"

"Do you want my help, or not?" Declen sounded impatient.

"Not."

Declen stared at him with disbelief. "I'm here to help you."

"You're here to finish off your brother and assume control. You don't care about me. So go ahead, do what you must."

"Would you stop me, Carden, stop me from killing him? I'm the only father you've ever known."

"I have no father. Now, remove your juvenile spell, and let the chips fall where they may. I'm going to see Rory."

The helicopter over his head began to move. Carden walked on quickly, leaving Declen far behind. He fingered the ring around his neck, squeezed his eyes shut for a second.

It's alright, my beautiful baby. He's coming to me now. He's suffered so long. Don't hate him. You don't understand...you don't understand.

Carden stopped. He turned around. He almost went back, went to save him, but something held him in place.

Don't.

And that lullaby started to play in his head.

* * * *

Rory had fallen asleep in the chair. He was woken by those men in the corridor who had started their chanting again. *Carden...Carden...Carden...* He checked the clock on the wall. It was almost two in the afternoon.

Thiago had left a while ago, and he and Dennis had talked a few minutes, then the drugs carried Dennis away. Rory had settled back into that chair and drifted off. He stood now, stretched, and looked curiously at those men in the corridor. For some reason, they were suddenly very agitated. He was about to go out and tell them to stop chanting when Carden looked in at him through the window.

Rory's heart almost burst. He raced to the door. Carden hissed at the men to be quiet and the chanting stopped immediately. Rory flung himself into Carden's arms, hugging him tightly. They

held each other for a long time before either of them spoke. "My God, I thought you were dead," Rory touched his cheek.

"Not yet," he murmured, abruptly releasing him.

Rory patted him in a few places to make sure he was intact.

"I'm all right." He was obvious distressed about something. "And Dennis?"

"He's going to make it. Thiago was here."

He nodded solemnly as he wrapped his arm around Rory's waist and steered him out into the hallway to the quiet waiting room at the end of the hall.

"What's going to happen now, Carden?" Rory asked him urgently. "What about Dominick, or Colman...I mean, can't he stop this? Is he still...did you..."

"I couldn't."

Rory narrowed his eyes. "You let him go?"

"He's not going anywhere. He's dying." Carden separated himself from Rory and went to lean against the wall. "And Declen will hasten the process."

"I don't understand any of this. And the army of vampires fighting, Thiago and other vampires...who...who in the hell is fighting who anyway?"

"Colman's vampires are fighting mine."

"And when he dies, it will end right?"

"I doubt it. Declen will assume control of Colman's vampires."

"But Declen is your father right, or is it Colman? Damn it, it's so confusing. Anyway, why don't they just fight it out themselves? Why do all this?"

"Rory, don't try and figure it out." He opened his arms.

Rory went into them.

"Just know that I love you. And I'll protect you for as long as I can. But I won't get in between their war. Now, can we go somewhere and be alone for a little while? I really need to hold you."

Rory dragged Carden's mouth onto his and kissed him deeply. "Yeah, let's go."

* * * *

"I was always more powerful than you," Declen told his brother. "This is almost too easy. You're weak, just like your son."

"But my son will defeat you in the end. You know that. That's why I see fear in your eyes."

"And in yours, brother, I see only death." Declen brought down the knife and severed Colman's head from his body. His headless corpse lay on the velvet altar, which had been destined for Carden. He picked up the head. All he needed

to do was keep the head, put it in a place no one would ever find it. "Behold," he said, holding up the head, "your father, Carden." He watched as the face in front of him began to transform, restored to his former youth and beauty. "Ah yes, now I can tell whose father you are. Carden is your dead image. A little joke. Anyway, if your precious son doesn't behave himself, I could have a matched set of these."

Declen?

He froze. It was a ghostly voice calling to him. It sent shivers up his spine. But he knew that voice.

Thank you, Declen. You have reunited us finally.

"Marshrella?" He looked around him.

You have finally given back what you took from me, my Colman, my beautiful Colman. We're together now. Take heed. And if you harm my son, I will come for you, Declen. I will come for you beyond the grave. You have been warned.

"Marshrella!" he cried out. His hands balled into two fists as he fell to his knees. "No, no, don't leave me. My darling. Don't leave me."

* * * *

Carden arched his back, his hips rising in invitation to Rory's warm mouth. He closed his eyes, moaned his pleasure as Rory wet his lips and

then wrapped them around his hard cock. He reached out and touched his hair as Rory sucked his flesh and entwined their fingers. He didn't think about the fact that maybe this could be the last time. He didn't want to think at all. He only wanted to feel Rory's passion, his need, his intense, scalding love. His cock convulsed, spraying into Rory's mouth, driving him back onto his knees, laughing, swiping at his mouth with his hand.

"Wow," Rory grinned. "That's what I call ejaculation."

"You make me so hot," Carden whispered as he dragged Rory on top of him. "I want to fuck you."

"Think you're ready for it?"

Rory laughed as Carden rolled him over and growled, "Want to see?"

The laughter died as Carden made love to Rory with his mouth and his hands and then his cock, staring down into his eyes as he filled him, uniting their bodies, their souls. "I love you," he said. "Always know that."

Tears lit Rory's eyes.

"Don't ever cry over me. Promise me that."

"I'm crying because I'm happy. I'm never happier than when you're inside me. I love you more than life. Carden, oh God, I love you more than life."

Carden buried his head in his neck as he thrust, the power of it lifting them off the bed. Rory cried out and Carden waited for him to come and then came with him. It was explosive, skin on skin, lips on lips, and Rory's hands clutching onto him for dear life. He had to win this battle. He had to go on so that he'd be around to hold him like this again and again. It was the only thing that made sense.

* * * *

For the longest time, they lay there together on Rory's bed. When the sun began to sink in the sky and Carden got up. The fear grew in Rory, fear that Carden wouldn't come back, that this was the end.

"Don't think that," Carden told him, buttoning his shirt.

"I'll fight with you," Rory said, but even as he said it, he knew that was impossible. He couldn't fight vampires.

Carden glanced at him. "I'll take you to Dennis. Stay there inside the hospital until someone comes for you."

"Take care of Thiago. Dennis would die if anything happened to him."

"I will. Come on. The sun will be down soon."

Rory kissed him a half dozen times at the hospital, not caring who saw them.

Carden reached up and took the chain off his neck. He placed it into Rory's palm and folded his fingers around it. "This will protect you."

Rory opened his hand and stared at it. "It's beautiful. What is it?"

"My mother gave this to...to my father," he said. He lowered his head. "I let him die. I let Declen finish him. God, Rory, I could have saved him."

Rory blinked. He didn't understand, but he felt his pain. He held him. "It's okay, baby, it's okay."

"She loved my father. He left her to protect her, I couldn't understand that when he told me. I think I do now. If anything ever happened to you...I...listen to me, wear it around your neck. It's a symbol of our love. I wanted to...I wanted to marry you, Rory." He lowered his forehead against his. "But now, we'll never be able to, not with them taking away our rights. But in our hearts, I'm yours." He met his eyes, kissed him again passionately.

Rory watched him go, tears on his face. "I would have said yes," he whispered after Carden was gone. "I would have said yes."

Dennis was sitting up when Rory walked into the room. Rory blotted his tears and put on a happy face. Seeing Dennis alert cheered Rory

considerably. They held onto each other, speaking words of comfort, and as the night settled in outside the hospital window, they held on even tighter.

* * * *

Thiago had never been so glad to see Carden in all of his existence.

Carden glanced at him and sniffed the air in the tunnel as he walked in. "Disgusting," he exclaimed.

Thiago laughed. "You're so bourgeois. So can we win this?"

Carden shook his head, pursed his lips and then said, "I doubt it."

"So, what's the point?"

"The point is, we don't give up. We go down fighting. We take as many of them with us as we can, and we protect Rory and Dennis."

Thiago considered that for a moment, then nodded. "And how about Dennis, and Rory? What if..."

"The chanters are to take them out of the city the minute I give the word."

Thiago wrinkled his nose. "Chanters?"

"Don't ask. Bring the vampires together. I want to talk to them before we go out there. I have something important to say."

"You got it."

"And, Thiago," he put a hand his shoulder, "you're probably the closest I've come to calling anyone a friend. I appreciate everything you've done. And if you want to slip away and see Dennis, to say...ah...goodbye, go ahead."

Thiago swallowed. "I've been around a long time, and for some reason, I'm not looking forward to giving it all up."

Carden glanced at him. "I know. We have two very good reasons for wanting to stick around."

"Promise me something, Carden."

"If I can."

"If you survive this and I don't, you'll take care of Dennis for me."

"You have my word. He will always be under my protection."

"That's good enough for me," he said. "I'll gather them up and meet you on the strip in twenty minutes. Why don't you come with me, see Rory one last time?"

"We've already said our goodbyes. Go now. There's no time to waste."

Thiago nodded and left. No, he didn't want to say goodbye. He didn't want to leave this world, even though he'd never been concerned about it before. He didn't want to leave Dennis.

He stood outside the room for a long time, watching him sleep through the window. He

almost walked away. He would have if Rory hadn't of come down the hall suddenly. "Thiago?"

"Hello, Rory."

"Is Carden with you?"

"No. He's talking to the...he's busy. I've got to go. I just wanted to say hello...or goodbye I guess."

"Dennis is just dozing. You can go in. Thiago, take care of Carden, okay? Please. Don't let anything happen to him."

Thiago gave Rory a faint smile. "I'll try." But they both knew it was more the other way around. He walked into Dennis' room and Rory stayed outside.

Dennis opened his eyes as he walked in.

"Thiago?"

He smiled. He didn't want to cry, but the tears were threatening, highly unusual for him. When had he turned into such a sentimental lush?

"Are you all right?"

He nodded. "Sure. And how are you?"

"You look so...sad," Dennis said suddenly.

"I don't want to leave you," he whispered, moving close to his cheek. He kissed it softly and moved away.

"You're trembling."

"Am I?"

"Yeah."

“You gave me so much, Dennis. You brought me to life, taught me to love. I’ll never forget that. I’ll carry you in my heart for always, even in ...” He paused, cleared his throat.

Dennis said nothing but silent tears ran down his face.

“Promise me if anything happens to me, you’ll love again.”

“Don’t.”

“Please. I want to know you’ll be happy. Say it.”

“Okay,” Dennis managed.

Thiago knew he wasn’t being sincere. “That wasn’t very convincing.”

“Come here and kiss me. And come back to me.”

Thiago bent his head. Dennis’ hands clutched his face on both sides. He kissed him long and hard, his body shaking with silent tears. Thiago could feel the tears on his skin. He didn’t bother wiping them off his face as he forced himself to move away, and he didn’t say goodbye. He couldn’t. He just turned and walked slowly out of the room and then he began to run.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The army was his to command. He could give the order to kill and those vampires Colman controlled would wipe out the rest of them. And he could make others. He could make an entire nation of vampires if he wanted. But he'd still be alone. There was no one to share it with. "Carden, I don't want to destroy you. I love you."

He'd tried to communicate with him several times in the last hour, but Carden was either closing off his mind, or choosing not to respond. *You are still my son. Even though you were sired by him, I am still your father. I raised you as my own. Why are you fighting me on this? We can rule together.* Finally, Carden's words came back to him. One sentence.

I don't want to rule.

Declen surveyed his vampires who spanned across the desert like a swarm of locusts. He picked up his ears, listening, but Carden didn't

elaborate. *It doesn't have to be this way.* After what seemed like eternity, Carden spoke to him again.

What has happened to you? You killed your own brother. And now you want to rule the world? What happened to all those things you taught me, about how we had a responsibility to preserve good, fight evil? You made me feel so low for what I'd done, and now the very evil you make me fight, is you?

The world is at your feet. We control the blood. We control the world. Stand by my side, Carden. I don't want to destroy you.

I will do as you taught me to do, fight evil until the end. Bring it on, uncle. This is entasy!

Declen sighed. The conversation was over. The vampires awaited his command silently. He had no idea of the power his brother had in the palm of his hand until now. How could he turn his back on that power? The world had wronged him. His beloved had been murdered by these moronic blood suckers, and mortals, they'd polluted their own universe, become cut-throat and self serving. Carden had brought him back to life and he'd discovered that the world had changed, and not for the better. No one would ever wall him up alive again. "Kill!" he called out. "Find Carden, and his vampire robots, and kill them all."

The vampires took to the skies. It would all be over soon. He closed his eyes. Carden. He did love him, even though he knew Colman was his father. He was her child, so like her in many ways,

although he physically resembled Colman, and since he and his brother looked alike, no one would have ever suspected that Carden wasn't his. Marshrella would hate him for this. He sighed. But she wasn't here, was she?

* * * *

Thiago searched the streets for Carden. He was somewhere close by, but Thiago couldn't sense him through the thong of vampires. The attack was swift and concentrated. Three of them swooped down at him out of the skies. One wasn't even a vampire. It was some kind of a demon with emerald eyes and spiked hair. As one vampire sliced into his calf with his fangs, another grabbed him around the throat and made a gash across over his windpipe with his long talons. A female held a sharp pointed stake over his heart and was aiming to kill. He went to his knees.

Carden struck so fast, Thiago never saw him coming. He tackled one, snapping its neck while Thiago struggled to his feet. He dodged the stake and managed to get away. The move left a good sized hole in his calf. He was immediately attacked by another while Carden killed off the female. Thiago was dragged upward into the air. He pushed the attacker back into a lamppost and smashed his head against it a few times. The

vampire fell. It was endless and exhausting, and he dare not give in to what he was thinking. They weren't going to make it.

After fighting off two more, Thiago landed on the ground and turned around just in time to come face to face with Carden. Carden's eyes blazed red and his face looked as he'd seen it look once before, like a true vampire, not what a mortal would call pretty. But to Thiago, Carden was beautiful in the most savage kind of way. Only another vampire could have ever appreciated that. Thiago noticed that the attackers seemed to be avoiding Carden. They passed him over, jumped the weaker ones.

"Are you all right?" Carden asked, wiping some blood off his lips.

"For now. Thanks back there."

Carden nodded. There were sounds of death all around them. "I gave the word to the chanters. Rory and Dennis are now on their way out of here."

Thiago dodged a flying attacker. "Does that mean we're doomed?"

Carden didn't answer. He just flew up in the air and killed two vampires who were about to attack.

Thiago fought his way through several more, weary, feeling his strength waning in spite of the blood he'd been consuming on the way. It felt like

the end of the world, but at least Dennis and Rory were safe.

When the tanks rolled in, Thiago was fighting in midair. Distracted for a moment, the vampire he fought with almost sliced off his head. Thiago drove his fist through his chest and he fell away, dropping like a bag of cement on top of one of the casino roofs. For a moment, he had hope that the appearance of the tanks might be a good thing, but then they started shooting randomly. Several of their own vampire soldiers went down. "No, no!" Thiago cried out. "Shit! What in fuck are they doing?"

Carden was calling the soldiers back, like a good army general, telling them to retreat, trying to save as many of them as he could. The other vampires hovered in the skies and fell one after another. Those that were left on Carden's team huddled together in one of the tunnels.

Carden was fuming. "It isn't right. They're shooting them down like cattle. They don't care which ones are trying to save their asses. It really makes me wonder why I try to save these mortals at all."

"But if they're killing off the other side, that's a good thing, right?" Thiago asked doubtfully.

"No, it's not a good thing," Carden shook his head. "All the progress we've made has come undone. They'll never allow us to live among

them again. All vampires are now fugitives. We have to stop them, make them see what they're doing."

"Carden, no," Thiago said. "There's nothing you can do. They'll shoot you down, too."

"They can't kill me."

"They're killing the others. The bullets are probably silver."

"Silver won't kill me."

"What will kill you?"

"Nothing, really."

"Severing your head and--"

"That wouldn't kill me." He grinned suddenly. "But it might give me one hell of a headache."

* * * *

Rory was worried about Dennis. The ride in the back of the car had been very bumpy, and he seemed to be in a lot of pain still. Rory sat close to him, holding his hand as the car sped away from the hospital. He didn't want to leave the city. He didn't want to leave Carden. He'd fought them when they came to take him, or at least he tried to, but the chanters would have none of it. They were hell-bent on following Carden's orders, and they carried both of them out of the hospital and right into vehicle whose motor was running. What Rory saw from out of the window was terrifying. There

were vampires in the sky, locked together in battle, in hate, bodies littered everywhere. Army helicopters hovered all around in the skies, watching, waiting. There were no lights, except for giant spotlights constantly spanning the active skies.

Their safe house was deep in the woods, somewhere between Nevada and California, some chanter told him. After they were ushered inside, the men left the house and stood vigil outside, making a circle around the house. There was a radio in the house, but no television, and amazingly enough, here in this desolate place, he was able to get a radio signal. Rory sat listening to the broadcaster with a renewed sense of fear as she spoke.

“Vampires are attacking the city of Las Vegas. Experts say that they are trying to take over human society, which is what some say was the plan all along. This comes just weeks after the mysterious beheading of the notorious vampire leader, Curse, and the subsequent declaration that they wanted to live in peace, integrate with human society. Wayne Davenport is watching the action from our helicopter right now. Dave, are you there?”

“Yes, June, I’m here. ”

“And what are we looking at right now? Can you describe the scene from where you are? ”

"June, it's like nothing I've ever seen. Vampires everywhere killing each other, ripping each other limb from limb, feeding on each other."

"Wayne, experts are saying that this war between vampires is basically a struggle over who will come out on top and that we are next?"

"From what I'm hearing, June, that is correct. Some have said that the shortage of synthetic blood product started all of this. Others say that vampires have developed gangs, not unlike the human mafia, and rather than a drug war, we have a blood war."

"This is terrifying. And the curfew is still in effect?"

"Yes it is, June. And the latest word I received from Commander Matlock was that anyone caught on the streets would be arrested."

"Has the army interfered at all in the fighting?"

"Yes, they have, but they seemed to be holding back. I think they are waiting for the vampires to do the job themselves before they take action. And from what I'm seeing, they're doing a pretty good job of it. Personally, June, I don't think the military wants to take on these guys, and if you could see what I see, you wouldn't want to either. "

"So when this battle is over, does that mean that vampires will be considered criminals, no matter if they are involved with all this or not?"

"I heard that Congress is meeting as we speak to rescind the laws which were passed to give vampires equality. They will no longer be allowed to own business, to vote, to join associations, hold office and so on. I believe this will force vampires back into hiding."

"So we return to the past?"

"It looks like it. And I know for sure that Chapman's Laboratory has been closed down and all the equipment seized. Synthetic blood will be in the hands of the government."

"Is that a good idea? If vampires can't get this blood product, they will start attacking humans, won't they?"

"Exactly, June. Then I guess it becomes a self-fulfilling--"

Rory turned off the radio. He shuddered.

"It's a holocaust," Dennis said from where he lay on the sofa.

Rory didn't even realise that he was awake.

"Oh God, Rory, Thiago and Carden. They're out there fighting to protect humans and now they're..."

"Shush," Rory said coming over and perching on the sofa beside him. He lay his head down on his chest, closed his eyes. "It will be all right." But just because he said it, it didn't mean he believed it.

* * * *

The streets were quiet. The skies empty. Carden walked out into the middle of the deserted street, his hands in the air. "Stop, put your hands in the air, or we'll shoot!" The voice came over a loud speaker somewhere. They could have whispered it, he would have heard it. He kept walking, put up his hands, but he knew that wouldn't stop them. The first bullet ripped through him at lightning speed. It practically knocked him off his feet. He took a breath and pressed on. He needed to speak to someone, tell them what was happening, for their sakes as well as theirs.

The tank moved forward, guns scanned, focused on him. He braced himself. A series of bullets fired into him. The impact knocked him onto his knees. He got to his feet, fell again and then crawled to the tank.

When he reached the armoured vehicle, he levitated in midair, and tried Declen's trick. He froze everything. In his weakened state, he knew he couldn't do it for long. He wrenched open the tank and snatched one of the soldiers out of it. When the soldier was on top of the tank with him, he awakened him.

The soldier was startled and started to struggle, but Carden held him fast, the blood seeping from his wounds. "Listen to me, soldier. Tell your

commander to cease fire. Not all the vampires are at war with mortals. We want to help. We're fighting for you. Stop fucking killing us. I'll try and put an end to this. Do you understand?"

He nodded dumbly.

Carden opened up the tank and lowered the soldier back down. He couldn't hold on anymore. Suddenly everything started to move. "Shittttttttt," Carden called out, levitating off the tank just as the hatch flew open. A helicopter fired on him from overhead. Carden fell on a rooftop and got down on his belly. He'd lost more blood than he thought. He had to seek shelter, find nourishment. The helicopter was hovering overhead now. They had him in their sights. He scrambled to his feet and leaped of the roof, lowering himself in between two buildings. Sirens sounded in the distance and he began to run, but he was weakening, and in the daylight, suffering from blood loss, the sun would take its toll.

He hid down between two garbage containers, the smell noxious. A fat rat ran over his foot and he reached out for it. It squealed as he grabbed it around the neck and snapped it, sinking his teeth into it. God, what a taste, horrible, but at least it would get him back to the tunnels. If he made it.

* * * *

Thiago didn't know where Carden was and he was concerned. When he did a head count, he counted only sixteen vampires. Tonight would be the last night. Carden had told them all that they were no longer bound to him. If they fought, it was of their own free will. None of them had deserted.

Jensen was a young vampire. He'd been only seventeen when he'd been turned. But he was a fierce fighter and an idealist. He told Thiago not to worry. "Carden will come back to us. He wouldn't leave us."

"You have a crush," Thiago teased him.

He lowered his head. "He's so beautiful and proud. His power is like nothing I've ever seen. He could lead us. He could..."

"Jensen," Thiago told him, a hand on his shoulder, "nothing will be the same if we survive this. Our rights are being taken away as we speak. Vampires will be sought out, hunted down and destroyed. We must hide."

"We can prove ourselves to them and—"

"There is no proving ourselves," a voice said weakly.

Thiago's eyes widened as Carden appeared, his clothes full of bullet holes. He fell on his knees. "We will have to feed on humans or animals," he managed, "and that will only give them more ammunition, more evidence that we are savages."

Thiago went to help him up.

Jensen whimpered, "Oh, Carden."

"It's okay," he tried to smile. "I'll be okay. I may have bought us some time with the military. I need to drink."

Thiago offered his arm.

"No, I need far more than you can provide. It will weaken you for tonight."

"We'll all donate," another voice said.

"Just a little," some other voices echoed, "it won't affect any of us if we all give you just a little."

* * * *

It was time to pull back. The military was prepared to shoot down anything that moved. Declen was not prepared to lose all of them. When the sun set, he looked out at what was left of his army, and called out, "We leave this place now. We go where we are safe, gain our strength, build our numbers, and come back, ready for victory."

A cheer went up.

"We will rule these human cattle, take back what is ours." Declen gave the order for them to take to the skies, fly over the ocean to the land where he'd been born. They would turn one after another. He would have an army a hundred thousand strong, even if he had to eat his way

through half of Europe. And in the mean time, the vamps loyal to Carden would be on the run. Let the humans kill off all they could. It would be that much easier when they returned.

* * * *

There were no military tanks in the street tonight, nor were there any helicopters. Carden limped out into the street, prepared for battle, but no enemy darkened the sky. Thiago and Jensen stood by his side. The others gathered around him.

“What’s happening?” Thiago asked.

“It’s over, for now,” Carden said, “but you all need to get off the streets. Tomorrow things will return to normal for the humans, but not for us.” He turned to the others. “You are my brothers and my sisters. Your blood runs through my veins. Wherever you go, I will know. But you must separate and hide. If the humans find you, they will destroy you.”

“And Declen, is he no longer a threat?” Jensen asked.

“He is a bigger threat now than before. He has us all where he wants us. He will strengthen his number and then return to wipe out the humans.”

“The human race is done for,” Thiago said.

“No,” Carden replied, “I won’t let that happen. Go now, go in peace,” he said to the others. “Be careful.”

Carden began to walk through the street now, Thiago at his side.

A voice from somewhere suddenly said, “Carden, let me go with you. I have no one.”

He turned and nodded.

Jensen fell into step beside them.

* * * *

Dennis scrambled off the sofa when Thiago came through the door. He fell into his arms, clutching onto him tightly. “Are you all right?”

“I am now.”

* * * *

Rory heard the commotion and came out of the bedroom. He spotted Thiago and Dennis kissing in the middle of the room. “Carden?”

Suddenly the door opened and Carden came in. He was leaning heavily on a young man, obviously a vampire from the look of him. “God, are you hurt?” He rushed over to him.

“I just need to sit down,” Carden said, pushing away from the vampire at his side. “This is Jensen.”

Rory nodded at him, but his attention immediately returned to Carden. "What happened?"

"He walked out into the middle of the street, took several bullets," the one called Jensen began. "He got the military to cease fire. He's so brave."

Rory lifted an eyebrow. He looked at Carden who sunk onto the sofa.

Carden grinned.

"What are you grinning at, you ass? You almost got yourself killed, if you can be killed."

Thiago sat down on the sofa too, and pulled Dennis gently onto his knee. "He can't be killed, but apparently he can get a headache."

Jensen and Carden began to laugh hysterically.

Rory looked at Dennis, Dennis shrugged.

They all sobered when they realized that Dennis and Rory weren't laughing.

"It's a vampire joke," Carden said, then they all started laughing again.

Rory was growing impatient. "God damn it, Carden, are you hurt or not?"

"I'll let you check later." He winked.

Jensen walked across the floor and went outside suddenly, closing the door behind him.

"What's with him?" Carden asked.

Thiago shook his head. "He's got a crush. I forgot to tell him you were taken."

"Don't worry," Rory interjected, "I'll do it."

Carden looked at him. "Come here you, you jealous thing." He reached out and pulled Rory down onto his knee. He kissed him gently on the mouth.

"I am not jealous."

Thiago went, "Ha!"

Rory glared at him. "Traitor."

"We can't stay here long," Carden sobered. "We have to move. They'll be hunting for us. I'm sure that they've made a list of those of us directly involved in the battle. I'm sure Thiago and I are considered to be ring leaders."

"Great, I'm famous," Thiago laid his head back on the sofa.

"Do we have to leave tonight?" Rory asked.

Carden shook his head. "At dusk tomorrow."

Thiago and Dennis had already disappeared from the living room.

"That was fast," Rory said.

"They have a lot of catching up to do."

"So do we," Rory said softly.

Carden nodded. "Yes, but before that I need to deal with the chanters, and I have to talk to you about something important."

"Okay."

"Why don't you find us a nice soft bed and wait for me there. I'll be with you soon."

"But are you okay?"

"I've been better, but I'll be fine tomorrow. Go on." He slapped him on the butt playfully as Rory stood up.

Rory gave him his hand and pulled Carden to his feet. He kissed Rory on the mouth. "I'll be there soon. Go on, baby."

* * * *

Jensen looked up from where he sat on the doorstep when Carden came out. "Hey," he said.

Carden smiled down at him. "Hey, yourself."

"I'm sorry. I didn't know you...he's very handsome."

"So are you. If my heart wasn't taken, well..." He grinned. "That doesn't mean you can't come with us, Jensen. I'd like very much to be your friend. I'm just getting the hang of this friendship thing. It's ironic really."

"What is?"

"Just when the humans go and dehumanize us, I get more human." He laughed.

Jensen looked confused.

"It's okay, never mind. Go inside. Don't stay out here."

"I'm going to hunt for game. I'm starved."

"Okay. Go ahead. But don't be long."

"I won't, and, Carden, I'd love to be your friend. I'd love to be more, but I'll settle for friendship."

"Good." He stepped off the porch as Jensen disappeared into the woods. He called to the chanters. They came immediately. "You have served me well, but I won't need you anymore. I can't give you exactly what you want, but," he bit down into his wrist, "I am prepared to give you all one drop of my blood. It will ensure that you will never be sick, never age more than you already have, and your life will be longer than average. It is my thank you. Then it is done."

The chanters all murmured their gratitude then gathered round to drink.

It had weakened a little bit more than he was already but he considered his debt to them paid. He had no idea how to take care of his feeding. He was off the synthetic blood, but he was going to try again, for Rory's sake. But now, there would be none, or at least it would be in short supply and expensive on the black market.

When he crawled into bed beside Rory, the smell of him was intoxicating. He knew his eyes had changed. His fangs were exposed and as he took Rory into his arms, he had to fight not to taste him.

“What’s wrong?” Rory asked him as he released him and lay on his back, staring at the ceiling.

“I think we should sleep separately for a little while.”

“What? No.”

“Rory, I haven’t fed and I’ve lost a lot of blood. You’re hard to resist. We have a big problem. It’s what I need to speak to you about. When I went off the wagon, I tasted real blood and I still crave it. And now if the fake stuff is hard to obtain...”

“What about animals?”

“Yes, I can hunt when I’m stronger.”

“What can I do now?”

“Nothing, except, maybe keep your distance. I want so much to hold you, to make love to you, but I know if I’m erect, I’ll bite you. I can hardly control it now.” He swung his legs over the bed and tried to stand. It was an effort.

Rory sat up. He watched him in the darkness. “You can drink from me.”

“No. I won’t be able to stop.”

Suddenly a tap came on the window. Rory jumped out of bed and went to open the curtain. It was Jensen.

“I have something for Carden. He needs to feed.”

Rory looked at his lover. “He’s brought you food.” His heart sank. He wanted to be everything

for Carden, do everything for him. But the thing he needed most, Jensen provided.

Rory helped Carden to pull on his pants, then walked with him to the door. He was really weak, weaker than he had been upon his arrival.

"I'll be back," Carden told him, "then maybe..." he gave him a hopeful smile.

Rory nodded and closed the door behind him.

* * * *

Thiago moved his cock inside of him in the gentlest of ways. "I don't want to hurt you, Dennis. If I'm hurting you..."

"God no, go on, please. Oh, Thiago, you feel so good. I've missed you so much. You're all the medicine I need."

Dennis felt Thiago's body let go, his sweet cream filling him, and he closed his eyes, said a thank you to the powers that be. He turned around in his arms, traced his lips with his finger. "I never knew I could be this in love. It's frightening."

"These are dangerous times," he said softly. "Not only vampires, but those who love them will be targets. If you decide to--"

"Quiet. I'd never live without you, Thiago. I can hear your thoughts sometimes. We're connected. They can hunt us down if they like. I don't care

what they do to us, as long as I'm in your arms when it happens."

Thiago pulled him closer. "It's not easy to feel what mortals feel, not always a good feeling."

"I know."

"I'll have to feed on animals now. It will be hard to get the blood."

"I'm sure if we find a supplier. There's always the black market."

"Yeah. It will be strange."

"Do you know where we're going?"

"No, but Carden does. And I trust him completely. If anyone can ensure our survival, he can."

Dennis met his gaze. "I believe that, too."

"Go to sleep, baby," Thiago closed his eyes. "Dream of pleasant things."

"I don't need to dream," Dennis said, "all I have is right here in my arms."

* * * *

Rory lay on his side in the bed, waiting. When the bedroom door opened, he sat up. He saw Carden in the semi-darkness. He began to undo his pants. Rory got up and went help him. "Do you feel better?"

"Some. It took the edge off. At least we can sleep together and I don't have to worry that

"I'll...I hate this!" He pushed Rory's hands away and pulled down his pants. "I hate this weakness, this craving that nags at me. If I ever hurt you...I'd never forgive myself."

Rory pulled him close. "I don't care how hungry you were, you'd never hurt me."

Carden moaned against him, stroked his hair, then with a grunt, grabbed his buttock and lifted him off the floor.

"Don't exert too much," Rory cautioned, breathless.

"This is nothing," Carden said, "don't worry. I want you." He backed him against the wall and Rory wrapped his legs around his waist. "I don't know what is worse, my hunger for blood or my hunger for your body. I just know that both have to be satisfied."

Carden pinned Rory's arms back as his cock found his entrance. Rory sank down on his cock and they connected. It was explosive. Rory thrashed his body, banged his head against the wall as the pleasure took him. "Yes, yes, yes." Carden took him halfway across the room and then down on the bed on his shoulders, cock impaling him to the hilt.

Rory's hands clawed at the air, his legs shot out, widening as Carden fucked him hard and fast, making his teeth rattle. Rory saw his eyes glow. It was both exhilarating and frightening. His fangs

glittered in the murky light, and Carden let off a sound that sounded more animal than human.

Suddenly, Carden pulled out. He flipped him, pulled him up in his arms and went into him again, so hard and ferociously that the bed began to move across the room. Carden's hands pinched his nipples, stroked his cock, handled his balls, and Rory was on another plane. "Jesus!" he shouted. His entire body was on fire. His cock pumped out his joy, and then he felt Carden's teeth at his throat.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

A. J. Llewellyn lives in California, but dreams of living in Hawaii. Frequent trips to all the islands, bags of Kona coffee in his fridge and a healthy collection of Hawaiian records keep this writer refueled. A. J. loves male/male erotica, has a passion for all animals (especially the dog, the cat and the turtle). A. J. believes that love is a song best sung out loud.

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I write not only for my own pleasure, but for the pleasure of my readers. I can't remember a time in my life when I haven't written and told stories. When I'm not writing, I'm dreaming about writing, doing something wild and adventurous, or trying to make the world a better and more open minded place to live in. I adore beautiful men, and I know I'm not alone in this! Eroticism between consenting adults, in all its many forms is the icing on the cake of life!

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