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A Cure for Hunger

TOP SHELF

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Prologue

Benjamin Carpenter winced in pain as he climbed the stairwell to get to the roof. His left hand held on to the railing. His right hand cradled the side of his neck as blood trickled across his fingers. His neck hurt where the two puncture wounds were, and he felt nauseated, possibly from the loss of blood. All through this, one thought raced around in his mind...

I can't believe Thomas bit me!

All Benjamin had wanted to do was help cure his boyfriend. Thomas Nighthawk was a vampire who had lost his mortality in 1699, and he had spent more than three hundred years living in the darkness, hoping to find someone to spend eternity with. However, Thomas had wished, more than anything, to eventually find a way to regain his mortality. In the last eight years, it was the one thing Benjamin had heard more than anything else, aside from "I love you."

Benjamin thought he had found the cure. It was supposed to be a simple potion that drove the demon out of Thomas and let his human side resurface. The professor who developed it had promised it would work. What went wrong?

As he reached the roof, Benjamin looked toward the road. He knew he did not have a lot of time to figure out his next move. He wasn't sure if he had enough strength to make it back to the Jeep. The blood loss was taking its toll. If Benjamin could not get it under control, he was going to die. Unfortunately, the one person who could help him was gone.

Benjamin sat down on the roof, partially to conceal himself but mostly to conserve his strength. He had to get himself in order, and fast. Thomas had completely lost his mind. Besides having Thomas to contend with, a cadre of vampires was hunting for Benjamin to keep him from telling the secret of the cure to anyone else. The news of a cure for vampirism was not the sort of thing you wanted to hear while you were having someone for dinner. It gave the dark princes a reason to break out in a cold sweat that didn't involve threats of a natural tan or getting a dead redwood shoved through the heart.

A sharp pain in the abdomen caused Benjamin to double over as it took everything he had not to cry out. He pulled up his shirt and saw a deep, purple bruise on the left side near his rib cage. *Damn, I must have broken a couple*, he thought. Benjamin figured it happened when one of the vampires threw him against a wall. It must have been the adrenaline rush that kept him from feeling the pain before.

Benjamin looked at his watch. It read 2:05. The sun would not be up for over four hours. There was no way he could fend off a bunch of vampires on his own, although he had a significant advantage over most people. A practicing witch among a magical family dating back centuries, Benjamin had certain powers he could draw from. He had the ability to conjure up fireballs, which came in handy during the battle with the cadre. He used it to take out four of those bloodsuckers, including the one who broke his ribs. However, there were at least thirty vampires looking for him. It was unlikely he could roast all of them.

Reaching into the inside pocket of his jacket, Benjamin pulled out a wooden stake. *One stake and a few orbs of flame. Things are looking up*, he thought. He stood up, knowing it would be

better to stand than sit, should he be ambushed. Benjamin stared at the sharp piece of wood he held in his hands. He wasn't so worried about using it on an evil creature. His concern was whether he had the courage to use it on the man he loved.

Something had gone awry back at the laboratory. Benjamin and Thomas were just supposed to find the cure and leave, but the best laid plans of mice and men had been shattered when the vampires attacked. One moment, the two of them had been fighting the vampires off, and then suddenly, Thomas' eyes had gone red, and he grabbed Benjamin, plunging his fangs deep into Benjamin's neck.

Benjamin wasn't going to turn into a vampire; he knew that much. In order for a vampire to turn someone, the victim had to be drained of almost all of his blood, save for a small amount that would have to intermingle with the vampire's own plasma. Benjamin had managed enough strength, even as he had felt the life draining out of him, to punch Thomas. This had dazed him long enough for Benjamin to get out of the room.

Even though his side hurt and he was feeling lightheaded from the blood loss, Benjamin knew he had to start moving again. Staying in one place would make it easier for him to get caught, and there were limited places to hide on the roof. He just needed to make it to the parking garage, and then he could get in the Jeep and make his escape. The trick was getting there without being spotted.

Benjamin walked to the edge and looked at the ladder he would have to use to climb down. All of a sudden, he felt dizzy, and his vision blurred.

"No!" he said aloud, trying to prop himself up again. "You are not going to die and let yourself be used for some monster's pleasure. Benjamin Carpenter is not a quitter. Never has been. Never will be."

Summoning up more strength than he ever thought possible, Benjamin slowly started to climb down the ladder, with the stake still in his hand just in case. He wished Kenda were here right now. She'd be able to take care of his injuries with no problem. Kenda wasn't here, though. In fact, Kenda was more than an hour away right now. He could only depend on himself to get away. If he could get to the Jeep, he thought he might be able to drive to the hospital and get the help he needed.

As Benjamin reached the bottom of the ladder, he heard a fierce growling that was all too familiar to him. He spun around.

"Oh, my God."

Chapter 1

A few weeks earlier, life had been normal -- or as normal as it could be with a young male witch and a vampire who was a few years past celebrating his tri-centennial. Benjamin worked by day as an independent professional photographer. Thomas, obviously a night owl, ran a nightclub called Eclipse. They shared a condominium on the outskirts of Sedona. In many ways, the two were as normal as anyone else.

Benjamin was doing some research on where he could find a rare herb for one of his spells when his laptop computer beeped to indicate he had e-mail. It was from his friend, Ivan Salazar. Ivan owned a comic book shop in downtown Sedona. He didn't have any supernatural roots or abilities, but he enjoyed delving into the dark side of things, being the lovechild of two Goth freaks. In fact, the e-mail was about something otherworldly.

Benjamin, you will never guess what I found out. Turlock, a vampire from Phoenix, came into my shop today and asked if I'd heard anything about a scientist trying to reverse vampirism. He didn't seem to think it was just another rumor. I've seen people soil themselves when they see vampires, but this was the first time I had seen a creature of the night turn into a screaming girl. He seemed concerned that he could lose his power and prestige if a cure was found. I don't know who this scientist is or exactly where he is, but Turlock heard he works somewhere in Tucson. I know it seems like a long shot, but this could be what you and Thomas have been looking for.

Benjamin read the e-mail three times to make sure he wasn't misinterpreting what Ivan had written. He couldn't believe it. Could it be possible to cure a vampire in some way that didn't end his existence? There were a few ways to destroy the demon -- stakes to the heart, holy water, sunlight, fire, lopping off the head with a sword, etc. -- but it appeared that now there was a way to remove the monster while retaining the man.

For as long as Benjamin and Thomas had been together, the vampire had expressed a desire to be mortal again. His rationale was that he would live on long after Benjamin grew old and died. For more than three hundred years, Thomas had looked like he was twenty-seven, the age when he was turned. He wanted to live out his life with Benjamin and no one else, to celebrate the crow's feet and the wrinkles.

The question was whether Turlock's fears were warranted. For all Benjamin knew, this was just a horror story akin to the boogeyman. Drink all your blood, or the scientist will come during the day and turn you back into a mortal.

Benjamin stood up and started to pace. He knew Thomas would want to get his hands on the cure if there was one, but all there was to go on were the vague ramblings of a paranoid undead American. He had no idea who this Turlock was, but Ivan's word had always been good.

Benjamin looked at his watch. It was 9:30 PM. Right now, things were just getting underway at Eclipse. It was a Wednesday night, not the busiest of the week. If Benjamin were to drive to the club, he might be able to catch Thomas and chat before the club really started hopping.

Climbing into his Jeep Rubicon, thoughts of what life would be like for Thomas as a mortal kept flashing through Benjamin's mind. Thomas would be able to come out into the sunlight for the

first time in more than three centuries. He would no longer need to order large quantities of animal blood to satiate his hunger. Finally, he would not have to keep himself under strict control when he and Benjamin made love.

Benjamin turned the key in the ignition and started to back out of the driveway. A light wind sent warm air across his face. He slid in a Reba McEntire CD and listened as the redheaded country superstar's voice broke through the night stillness. Benjamin liked her music, but Thomas was the true fan. He had once said that her voice was the most angelic he'd ever heard. Considering how long Thomas had been alive, that was quite a compliment.

As Benjamin drove through downtown Sedona, he noticed how the usually vibrant red rocks the area was famous for were muted in the night atmosphere. He realized that Thomas had never seen the red rocks in the daytime, except through photographs. If there really were a way to reverse vampirism, a whole new world would open up for Thomas. Even though Benjamin and Thomas had been together for eight years, there was a whole other part of Benjamin's life that Thomas could not be part of. That would change if the cure existed.

Before long, Eclipse came into view. It was a two-story building with an odd cylindrical shape. The building had sat vacant for many years before Thomas purchased it and nursed it back to health. Over the last nine years, the club had gone from virtual unknown to the premier place for all varieties of night crawlers. It was a haven for humans and monsters alike.

After parking the Jeep, Benjamin walked into Eclipse, waving to the doorman as he strode past. He looked around the room to try and find Thomas. It was fairly crowded, so it was hard to spot him. Benjamin started up the stairs to the catwalk in the hopes that a higher vantage point would help him locate Thomas.

As he scanned the dance floor carefully, he saw plenty of people he knew. Holding court in one corner was Lord Draca, a key figure among the Hessicans, a demon cult that believed humans and demons should coexist, but that demons were still the superior race. Down in the middle of the dance floor were Millicent Weathers and Hank Jonas, a pair of vampires who, like Thomas, tried to avoid killing humans by consuming animal blood. Near the bar was Kit, an androgynous explorer from the Parmelius dimension who had become quite addicted to this world's preoccupations with dining and dancing.

No sign of Thomas, though. Where could he be?

Then Benjamin felt a pair of hands touch his shoulders and move up to his neck, massaging it gently. He smiled.

"Hello, you twisted, bloodsucking fiend." Benjamin turned around and gazed up into the dazzling green eyes of his lover. Even without the catwalk, Thomas towered over most of his clientele, standing at six foot four. His hair was bleached-blond, tied in a ponytail that ended at his neck. His black suit was accented with a burgundy red shirt and a white tie.

"How did you know it was me?"

"Because you twisted the head off the last otherworldly creature that tried to make the moves on me, sending a clear message to all the patrons of Eclipse that, although this is a haven for all

creatures, human and non, the owner reserves the right to decapitate anyone who gets too close to the man he loves."

"It was a Marvek demon. His head grew back in a few hours. Besides, no one could stop laughing as he wandered around the dance floor and kept running into the walls."

"No one can ever accuse you of copying any other nightclub's style of entertainment. Then again, not many clubs accept demons as paying customers."

Thomas chuckled a deep, impish chuckle. "I'm always glad to see you, my sweet man, but I thought you were going to be hip-deep in photo proofs and herb research tonight. What brings you down here?"

"I was, but Ivan found a possible lead to the..." Benjamin paused and glanced around, "...to the you-know-what."

Thomas motioned for Benjamin to go back down the stairs, where his office was. Benjamin nodded and led the way to the office. Thomas closed the door and locked the deadbolt.

"How sure is he?" Thomas asked.

"Ivan heard it from a vampire named Turlock. Have you ever heard of this guy?"

"It doesn't ring a bell. Then again, it's not like there's a vampire Yellow Pages. Is this vamp a local?"

"He's from Phoenix. Supposedly some scientist from Tucson has stumbled on to something."

Thomas sighed. "Damn."

"What? What's wrong?"

"A scientist, Benjamin? Why would a scientist even be looking for a cure to vampirism, much less actually find one? Scientists don't even have a consensus on whether we exist, even though you have the evidence sleeping next to you each night."

"I know it sounds like a long shot, but we don't even know for sure that this guy is a scientist. Present company excluded, vampires aren't the most detail-oriented creatures around. Besides, why would Turlock even bring this up to some guy he barely knows? For all we know, the guy who developed the cure is an alchemist."

"Baby, you know I love you and your incurable optimism, but this sounds like someone's idea of bad gossip."

Benjamin turned toward the door. "I'm sorry to have bothered you."

Before he could undo the deadbolt, he was pulled back into Thomas' muscular arms. A hand reached inside Benjamin's shirt and played with his left nipple. A moan escaped his lips.

"You never bother me, Benjamin. Never. I know you're trying to help, and I would love nothing more than to be as mortal as you, but I need proof before I believe this latest 'cure' tale. I've been led down the garden path one too many times to take this story at face value. If it turns out to be true, then everything we've ever wanted will come to be. Regardless of that, I love you, Benjamin Carpenter. Whether I'm a vampire or a human, I will always love you."

Benjamin smiled. In spite of the fact that Thomas was a creature born out of the fires of Hell, he possessed more nobility, compassion and love than most humans. That's why it didn't matter to Benjamin whether he was a vampire or not, as long as he was there.

Benjamin turned to Thomas and smiled. "I'll see you when you get home."

"It means a lot that you came down here and told me."

Unlocking the deadbolt, Benjamin blew Thomas a kiss and quietly left the office. As he wove his way through the throng of dancers and partiers, he considered going to see Ivan. If he could get more proof that someone had found a cure, it might help bolster Thomas' spirits.

Benjamin looked at his watch. It read 10:07. By now, Ivan would have already closed up his shop, but Benjamin knew where he lived. Ivan had a small home on Art Barn Road, which he had inherited from his grandmother. It would only be ten minutes to drive there.

With a squeal from the tires, Benjamin sped out of the parking lot and into the dark Sedona night. He wasn't sure why he believed that someone had discovered a way to reverse vampirism, but he knew he had to find out the truth.

Before long, Ivan's house came into view. The lights were on, so Benjamin knew Ivan was home. He parked his Jeep behind Ivan's old Chevy pickup. Even before he reached the front door, he could feel the house vibrate as the Def Leppard song "Love Bites" rang out. Ivan loved to come home and play this song as loud as he could. It was his way of unwinding from a world made up of other people's fantasies and diving into one created by his own.

Benjamin rang the doorbell, then knocked firmly on the door after realizing Ivan wouldn't be able to hear the doorbell over the music. After a few seconds, Benjamin could hear the creaking sound of the floorboards indicating that Ivan was coming to the door. The music became softer, and then the door opened. Ivan stood there, shirtless, with a big grin on his face.

"Benjamin! Well, this is a nice surprise. Come on in. I was just working on a painting."

Benjamin stepped inside. The smell of acrylic paints mixed with burning incense and jasmine. He sat on a milk crate near the door. Ivan preferred to spend his money on art supplies instead of furniture.

"Hey, Ivan. I got your e-mail. Is there anything you can tell me about this Turlock character?"

"Not a whole lot. He comes up on the overnight Greyhound bus from Phoenix to purchase crystals from a nearby shop. One night the shop was closed, and he just cruised into my store and started chatting with me. He must have liked my personality or something, because he keeps coming back, even though he never buys any comic books. I think he's probably lonely or..."

"Um, Ivan. Do you know anything about where this guy is staying in Sedona, or where he lives in Phoenix? If he has information about what the cure could be and who has it, it might be a good idea for me to make contact with him."

Ivan's eyes widened. "Make contact with him? Benjamin, sweetie, that's a good way to get yourself killed. He's a vampire, and not a domesticated one like your hunk-a-licious boyfriend."

"Are you forgetting my built-in vampire defense system?" Benjamin waved his hand, and a ball of fire appeared out of nowhere. He let it linger for a few seconds before waving his hand again and snuffing it out.

"I was thinking I could just call you the next time he pops into my shop."

"And how long do you think that will be? Ivan, this is important to me...and to Thomas. If you know where he is, just tell me."

Ivan sighed. "I still think this is a bad idea, but if you're determined to find Turlock, I have a sales receipt."

"I thought you said he never bought anything."

"He didn't, but he was in such a rush tonight that he left the receipt from the crystal shop, and it has his address on it." Ivan pulled the receipt out of the front pocket of his jeans and handed it to Benjamin. "You would think creatures of the night would be more careful about leaving stuff like this behind for people to find."

Benjamin scanned the receipt. "Not all vampires are brilliant," he said. The address on the receipt was in southern Phoenix in an especially unpleasant neighborhood. It would be nice if he didn't have to actually go to Phoenix to track this guy down.

"I don't suppose you know where he is staying tonight."

"Not really. I don't even know if he sleeps. More than likely, he just roams around town and picks off unsuspecting souls foolish enough to be out on the streets alone after dark."

"There's got to be a way to find him before he goes back to Phoenix." Benjamin rubbed his chin. "You said he comes up on the Greyhound, right?"

"Yeah. Why?"

"Can I use your phone?"

Ivan picked up the phone from the counter and tossed it to Benjamin. Benjamin dialed the number for the bus station and waited for someone to pick up.

A raspy female voice on the other end said, "Red Rock Greyhound."

"Hi. I was wondering whether you had any buses traveling to Phoenix overnight."

"Let me see. I think we only have two buses leaving for the Valley tonight. One's leaving at 10:45. The next one doesn't leave until 4:45 in the morning. Would you like to get a ticket?"

"Uh, not at the moment. I'll call if we decide to catch the bus."

Benjamin turned the phone off and tossed it back to Ivan. Ivan leaned against the counter. Benjamin took a look at an almanac on the kitchen counter. He surmised that, if Turlock were leaving Sedona tonight, he would be on the 10:45 bus. Taking the late bus would be pure suicide. Sunrise tomorrow morning was at 5:58, which would put the vamp near Black Canyon City when the sun turned him into a crispy critter.

Benjamin looked at his watch. It was 10:23 now. He had to hurry.

Crooking a finger, Benjamin said, "Come on. Let's go."

"Where?"

"The bus station. The next bus is leaving in about twenty minutes, and I need you to point him out."

Ivan put his hands up. "Whoa! I never said I would go on this suicide mission with you. I just told you what I heard."

"Ivan, I don't know what this guy looks like, and it's not like vampires carry badges that say 'I'm a vampire. Ask me how!' You just have to point him out to me, and I'll take care of the rest."

"You know, it's never that simple with you. It starts with 'You just have to point him out,' but it usually ends with both of us fleeing for our lives."

Benjamin's gaze ascended to the ceiling. "Okay. Do what you feel is right, and don't let the fact that I saved you that one time from a rabid ani-morph factor into your decision about whether you'll help me or not."

Ivan scowled. "You're a prick."

Benjamin grinned wickedly. "Grab your shirt."

Less than thirty seconds had passed before the Jeep was on the road again, and Benjamin and Ivan were bound for the bus station. Benjamin wanted to catch Turlock before he went back to Phoenix, as it would be much harder to track down a vampire in a city of two million than it would in one with twenty thousand inhabitants.

"Benjamin, what if we don't find Turlock at the bus station?"

"Then we drive around town and see if you can spot this guy."

"I was kind of hoping to make some headway on my latest masterpiece tonight, and I can't do that if I'm chasing monsters with you."

"Then you never should have told me about Turlock and his rumors."

"Has it occurred to you that this cure might not actually exist?" Ivan asked. "It's not like night crawlers like Turlock are famous for having positive traits like honesty."

"Ivan, if there's any chance that a vampire cure exists, I owe it to Thomas to turn over every rock to find it."

"Just as long as your turning over rocks doesn't result in us getting buried under one."

Benjamin sighed. "No one forced you to come along."

Ivan pointed his finger at Benjamin. "Yes, you did! You guilt-tripped me, you conniving witch."

"Thanks for the compliment."

Bump! The Jeep rolled over a stray rock that ended up in the road. Benjamin felt fingernails dig into his forearm as Ivan grabbed it to keep his balance.

"Benjamin, I know I said I didn't want to die when we found Turlock. However, I'm also fond of living through this Jeep ride."

"Ivan, you can be such a wimp sometimes."

Benjamin turned left into the bus station. He parked near the terminal and jumped out, practically running toward the idling bus. He looked back, expecting to see Ivan keeping pace, but his Hispanic buddy was putting on a ball cap and sunglasses, undoubtedly to conceal his identity as wearing sunglasses at night was usually a stupid idea.

Benjamin stopped and folded his arms. "Hey, Ivan! Vamonos!"

Ivan ran up to him. "Great, Benjamin. Why don't you just paint 'stool pigeon' on my forehead while you're at it?"

"Next time, we're bringing your gag so I don't have to listen to your whining."

Pointing behind Benjamin, Ivan said, "There he is."

Benjamin spun around. A guy with a purple waistcoat and a faded Metallica T-shirt was lurking near the rear of the bus. He wore a fisherman's hat and black eyeliner.

Benjamin's face scrunched. "Geez, Ivan. If you had told me this guy was a total fashion victim, I could have found him myself."

"I'll keep that in mind next time. Can I retreat to the Jeep?"

"Yeah. I've got this."

Benjamin walked toward Turlock. He wasn't sure what to expect. A lot of supernatural beings preferred not to be exposed, but if this Turlock was as scared as Ivan claimed, he might do something kind of crazy. Benjamin needed to be prepared for anything.

"Turlock!"

The vampire turned toward Benjamin. His eyes glowed red, and there was a trickle of blood near his mouth. Benjamin knew from experience that meant Turlock had just fed.

"Who are you?" Turlock growled.

"I understand you've heard rumblings about..." Benjamin paused, knowing the wrong phrase could send Turlock fleeing, "...the cure."

Turlock turned toward the bus terminal and leaped twenty feet onto the roof. Benjamin groaned. *Wrong thing to say*, he thought.

Benjamin ran toward the rear of the terminal, surmising that the vampire would try to disappear into the hills of Sedona. As he reached the back, he saw Turlock disappearing into some of the underbrush. After pausing for a moment, he knew he couldn't catch up to Turlock on his own, so he'd have to use magic. There was no one around this part of the terminal, so there was little chance regular folks would see him using his powers.

One of Benjamin's root powers was astral projection. He could send an image of himself a short distance, and that would hopefully distract Turlock long enough for Benjamin to catch him. Closing his eyes, a glow emanated from Benjamin that shot into the hills as the witch searched for his target. He looked around, but he couldn't locate Turlock. Where was he?

Then the astral projection came upon a deep footprint near a mud pond. While staring at the print, the real Benjamin could hear the 10:45 bus leaving the terminal. That's when he realized the deep print was the result of Turlock leaping somewhere. He quickly brought his astral self back and hurried to the front of the terminal. Gazing toward the roof of the bus, he saw there was a figure on top.

It was Turlock. He was gone.

Chapter 2

The drive back to Ivan's house was quiet for the most part. Benjamin was fuming inside. It was annoying enough to be duped by a vampire, but when that vampire possessed the key to finding the greatest gift Benjamin could give his lover, the act was inexcusable.

"There should be a law against vampires using public transportation."

Benjamin did a double take. He did not expect that kind of statement to come out of Ivan's mouth.

"What did you say?"

"Vampires using public transportation. All those people in an enclosed space -- it's like Supermarket Sweep for bloodsuckers."

"I should have been more attentive. While my astral self was staring at muddy footprints, I let Turlock double back and get away. For God's sake, that goofy ensemble he was wearing should have made him stand out like a traffic cone. I could have sighted him without a flashlight."

"Anybody told you that you're sexy when you're angry?"

Even though Benjamin was still frustrated, he couldn't help but smile at Ivan's comment. Ivan had always been attracted to Benjamin, but the redheaded witch never saw the nerdy comic book storeowner as anything more than a close friend. Ivan usually respected that, but he still liked to flirt every once in a while.

Ivan gazed toward the stars. "So what are you going to do now?"

"I'm going to go home and prepare for my trip."

"Trip? What trip?"

"I have the sales receipt that tells me Turlock lives in south Phoenix, so I'm going to pay the fiend a little house call."

Ivan put his hand gently on Benjamin's shoulder. "I'm going to tell you this, even though you're probably going to ignore me and do whatever you want to do. Turlock probably could have killed you if he hadn't been so preoccupied with catching his bus. I think going down to this guy's home turf will guarantee your demise."

"You're forgetting two things, chico. First, I'm going down there during the day, so he's going to have limited escape routes. Second, I have the ability to toast him like a marshmallow if he gives me any crap. I think that gives me an advantage."

"What if he's not alone? What if Turlock's part of some cadre? There could be a couple dozen bloodsuckers down there when you walk through his door."

Benjamin laughed. "I hope not. A couple dozen vampires with no sense of style -- I'd be embarrassed to get eaten by that kind of cadre."

"What makes you think he knows any more than what he told me earlier today? I mean, he was the one pumping me for information, so it's unlikely that he's hiding anything."

"You might be right, but I still want to be sure. If there's any clue to tracking down this professor who supposedly has the cure, I want to find it."

"Would it do me any good to tell you to be careful?"

"It might."

"Then be careful going down there. As much as I want you to help Thomas become mortal, I'd hate for your own mortality to come to an end. You're a good friend, and those are hard to come by."

At that moment, Benjamin pulled up next to Ivan's house. He put the Jeep in park and threw his arms around Ivan. It felt good knowing he had friends who cared about him.

Releasing his grip, Benjamin said, "Hey, you told me you were working on a painting. Is it all right if I check it out?"

Ivan grinned. "Sure. Come on in."

Stepping back inside Ivan's home, Benjamin caught a whiff of the acrylic-incense-jasmine aroma again. He'd have to consider making his home smell similar. As long as he didn't use garlic, he was sure Thomas wouldn't mind.

Ivan walked over to his canvas, took it off the easel, and turned it so Benjamin could see. The painting was of Coffeepot Rock. Ivan had painted the natural red rock appearance on the top of the rock, which then gradually faded into a metal coffeepot at the bottom, kind of like the ones seen on camping trips. Although he had plenty of paintings that appeared true to life, Ivan also liked to toy with surrealism at times.

Benjamin stared intently at the painting for a minute or so before turning to Ivan and asking, "So, if I turn the canvas on its side, will it pour out black coffee or red?"

"Cute. I was in the mood to redesign Mother Nature."

"I like it. It takes a regular image and shows it in another way. Chances are, whoever named the rock probably saw it in a similar way."

"Or maybe he just lost his coffeepot there."

Benjamin sat down on Ivan's sofa. Although he didn't mention it to his friend, he could detect parallels between Ivan's interpretation of Coffeepot Rock and what would likely happen to vampires if there were indeed a cure. Vampires would be transformed. They would no longer be

the immortal super-warriors they were now. Turlock would not be able to leap over the bus terminal like he did. No super strength, and no fangs to drain blood from hapless victims.

"Benjamin, are you still with me?"

Benjamin flinched, not realizing he had become so lost in thought. He stood up.

"I should probably head home and get some sleep. I have a big day tomorrow."

"Are you sure there's no way I can convince you not to go on this fool's errand? I could strip naked and put out like a broken candy machine."

Benjamin smiled. "I know you worry for me, my compadre, but I'm doing this for the man I love. Thomas needs to be happy, and the only way he can truly be that is if he can shed his vampire skin and be human again."

"I envy you, Benjamin -- having a man who is devoted to you. I hope you realize that, even if you don't find a cure, you're still damn luckier than most folks in the world."

"I do. I have a man who worships me, friends who care about me, and I'm one sexy witch. What more could I ask for?"

Benjamin and Ivan hugged. Benjamin waved goodbye and got into his Jeep. What had started out to be a quiet evening was now growing into an adventure of epic proportions. One thing was certain for Benjamin -- he was going to find the cure or figure out why there wasn't one. Anything else was immaterial.

Benjamin's eyes were growing heavy. He had spent the last several hours researching attempts throughout history to find a cure for vampirism. Most of his books had only chronicled crackpot attempts to find a cure that usually ended with the vampires being stronger than ever. Now, he was looking in the *Teuromenici*, the ancient tome of his magical clan, the Itzhak. So far, no luck.

The front door opened and closed. Benjamin looked at the alarm clock on the nightstand. It read "3:32." That meant Thomas was home from another night of entertaining Sedona's partiers, both alive and undead.

Thomas walked into the bedroom, unbuttoning his shirt cuffs. "Well, someone's up late. I figured you would have gone to sleep."

"Just doing a little research. I thought I'd see if there had been other attempts to find a cure for vampirism."

Thomas sat on the bed as he slipped off his shoes. "Find anything?"

"Nothing useful. The closest someone came to a cure was in Romania in 1804. However, the concoction had the exact opposite effect. It not only quadrupled the vampire's strength and senses, but it also drove him mad. The vampire laid waste to several villages, but he was so

insane with his new powers, he didn't even notice the sun was rising, so he went up like a batch of cheap fireworks."

"I think I remember that. The vampire's name was Jean-Paul, right?"

Benjamin nodded. Thomas started to undress as he continued his story.

"I was traveling with some friends through Athens, Greece, when rumors started spreading about a lone vampire being consumed by his hunger. They said he moved like the wind, attacked like a bear, and left no one alive, whether they be man, woman or child. I had thought it was only a tall tale, but a few months later, we made it to Romania, and you could see the broken remains of the villages that Jean-Paul had destroyed. I knew he'd been killed by sunlight, but I had no idea someone had tried to purge his demon side."

"My ancestors kept detailed journals of Jean-Paul's rampage in the *Teuromenici*, but there's no information on what was used to make up this supposed cure."

"Does it matter? Considering it didn't work on Jean-Paul, the ingredients are probably things one should avoid in the next attempt to develop a cure."

"Possibly, but whoever tried to come up with it must have had a good reason to use the substances he did, so it's feasible that some of the ingredients could be used in whatever is being developed now. I might ask Kenda about this and see if she might know anything about it. Her gypsy clan originates from Romania."

Thomas slid into the bed next to Benjamin. "If you like, I have tomorrow night off. We could meet up with Ivan and see how much he knows about the vampire who told him there's a cure out there. I still think it might be hogwash, but it doesn't hurt to ask a few questions."

Benjamin smiled sheepishly. "I'm way ahead of you. I found Turlock."

Thomas raised an eyebrow. "You what?"

Benjamin grabbed the sales receipt he'd taken from Ivan and showed it to Thomas. "I probably could have found out more while he was here, but he jumped on a bus-- literally."

Thomas set his jaw. "I take it from the fact that there's no puncture wounds on your neck and you still have your appendages that this Turlock didn't try to hurt you."

"Quite the opposite. He just bolted like a gazelle when I mentioned I wanted to talk to him about the cure. I've never known vampires to run unless you're chasing after them with crosses, swords, fireballs, or wooden stakes."

"Benjamin, the thought of a cure scares most vampires. The existence of such a thing means the power we all enjoy can be taken away. You're fortunate enough to not be damned, so you don't feel the energy surging through your body from consuming blood. It's a hunger that can be blinding, like most drugs do with humans. Drinking plasma gives us amazing feelings and vigor."

"But you're not like that."

"I learned long ago that power can corrupt, and when you're transformed into a vampire, you get really juiced. I don't know why I have more of a conscience than other vamps, but at some point, I realized that I didn't want all this power that has been thrust upon me."

Benjamin snuggled close to Thomas. "Yes, but as someone who possesses a fair share of power, I can tell you that it can corrupt only as much as you let it. It's vital that the power be used only to fulfill needs instead of wants. Once you start giving in to your desires, that's where you cross the line from good to evil."

"That's why I want the power removed so badly. When you and I make love, we allow our desires to take over, but I still have to show restraint. If I don't, I might bite you accidentally and drink you dry. You mean more to me than anything, Benjamin, and I don't know what I'd do if I did anything to hurt you."

"Well, let's not find out. I'll track down Turlock in the morning, and we'll see if we can't find a cure."

"Benjamin, are you sure that's a good idea? Maybe we should go down together, just in case Turlock is really bad news."

"I wanted to catch him during the day, when he's a little more confined. If you came along, we'd have to travel at night, unless you like the idea of being a living torch."

"I know from experience that I'm not going to be able to change your mind, but I want you to be careful."

"I will. I'll have Turlock trapped like an animal."

"Yeah. The problem is most animals tend to bite when they're trapped."

Touched by Thomas' concern, Benjamin wrapped his arms around his lover and kissed around Thomas' neck. Thomas gently pulled Benjamin's T-shirt off and threw it on the floor. Before long, the two of them were completely naked and groping each other with feverish passion.

Benjamin pulled Thomas in close, looking into his eyes with a gaze of lust. He never grew tired of being held by this man who walked the line between humanity and eternal damnation. Thomas ran his tongue down the side of Benjamin's neck to his shoulder. Benjamin shivered at the sensation.

Then Thomas went down. Way down.

He dropped to where Benjamin's scrotum met the edge of his butt. Thomas' tongue went to work pleasuring that tiny area, leaving his lover gasping for breath while letting out yelps of ecstasy in between. Benjamin's arms flailed as he reached for objects to hold onto. He loved when Thomas gratified him, and all he wanted was to be pleased by his dark lover over and over again. His eyes were about to jump out of his head -- Thomas' tongue felt so good.

Thomas knelt on the bed as he undid the tie that held his ponytail together. It was a thin brown leather strip. He handed it to Benjamin, who took it in his mouth, and laid it on the nightstand. Benjamin stared at his sweetheart with determination and flew with Thomas off the bed, landing with a thud on the hardwood floor. Without pausing, Benjamin locked his lips on Thomas' neck and sucked hard until a deep red spot appeared. Thomas might be over three centuries old, but he was not too old for hickeys.

However, the neck was not the only body part Benjamin wanted to suck on. He dropped down to where Thomas' cock was waiting for some attention, and Benjamin delivered. His lips pursed tightly around the cock, Benjamin went up and down, the tip of his tongue delivering good vibrations to Thomas. The vampire laughed a hearty laugh, like he had just seduced the last virgin on Earth. Benjamin smiled in the midst of the fellatio; Thomas' laugh was always a sign that he was hitting the right spots.

Thomas sat upright and scooped up his lover in his arms. He dropped Benjamin roughly on the bed, sideways, and hoisted his legs up in the air. Benjamin reached with his left arm to the foot of the bed and grabbed a tube of lubricant. Thomas snatched it away and vigorously saturated his cock with the liquid. Then he took another dollop and flooded the entrance to Benjamin's butt hole.

Ever so cautiously, Thomas moved into Benjamin. Benjamin closed his eyes, first wincing in pain, followed by a wave of ecstasy as his ass adjusted to Thomas' cock. Thomas moved deeper inside, and then he pulled back. The thrusts started to increase both in intensity and the distance they traveled. Benjamin could not help but moan as Thomas pounded him with careless abandon. Thomas himself let out a couple of warbles that indicated he was feeling terrific right now.

Thomas lifted Benjamin off the bed, his cock still planted inside, and pushed his lover against the wall. Now the hard thrusts were bouncing Benjamin up and down. This felt even better to Benjamin than it did on the bed. His cries were getting louder and more ravenous. He grabbed clumps of Thomas' blond hair and gave his boyfriend a hungry look. Thomas reciprocated. Looking into Thomas' eyes was like staring at emerald pools.

Suddenly, the emerald pools went away and were replaced with red flames. Benjamin gasped. He knew what this meant.

"Thomas! Red eyes!"

Thomas stopped his thrusting and closed his eyes tightly for a moment. When he opened them again, the fiery red was gone, replaced with the luminescent green eyes that had caused Benjamin to fall in love with him eight years ago. It was a good thing, too. Whenever vampires prepared to feed or kill, their eyes glowed red to indicate the demon within was taking over. Most vampires got in this state following an adrenaline rush, such as chasing after a victim. For Thomas, the adrenaline rush seemed to hit whenever he and Benjamin were deep in sexual bliss.

Thomas lowered Benjamin to the floor and pulled out of him. "Sweetheart, I am so sorry."

Benjamin took Thomas' head in his hands, kissed him on the cheek, and pulled him into a gentle embrace. "Don't stress about it. The beast didn't escape. You contained it."

"This is why I want to be mortal again. The vampire in me can't resist the urge to bite you and drain you dry."

"You can, Thomas. You have. We've been together for eight years, and you've never given in to the temptation. You've had plenty of opportunity to consume me and toss me away, but you've never done it."

"I love you, Benjamin."

"I know. I love you, too."

"I would never forgive myself if I did anything to you."

"You won't, Thomas. You're much stronger than you think."

Thomas sat on the floor, his back leaning against the wall. Benjamin sat in front of him, leaning against the bed.

"Benjamin, you're the only person I've made love to that I didn't just chew up and spit out afterward. Whenever I had my way with other men, I somehow felt justified in biting them, as a lot of them were royal dignitaries, rich misers, or rotten con artists. None of them would admit they were gay -- or a deviant, as we were called in those days. Of course, once I bent them over the stools in their bedchambers, they were singing a different tune."

"Soprano, I'm guessing."

"But you're none of those things. You're kind, giving, and can admit that you like dick. So why do I still have this urge to bite you?"

Benjamin put his hands on top of his head. "No matter how noble you become, you're still a vampire. There's a darkness inside you fighting to emerge. For eight years, you've pounded that darkness into submission. It's not easy -- I know it. It's still inside you, though, and presently, nothing short of some pointy wooden object or something chock full of sunshine will purge the demon away."

"I know. I just wish I could satisfy you without letting my id pop his head out and see if there's going to be six more weeks of winter."

"If I find there's actually a cure, it could happen. I'm going to find it for you, Tommy. I promise."

Benjamin usually referred to Thomas as Tommy during intimate moments, periods of loving closeness or other times of vulnerability. Right now, Benjamin's heart was breaking, knowing Thomas had so much self-hatred because of something beyond his control.

"Tommy?"

"Yes, my love?"

"We should probably get to bed. The sun's going to be up soon. You'll need your rest, and I should get some sleep so I won't be dozing off while I'm tracking down Turlock."

Thomas nodded. He stood up and offered a helping hand to Benjamin. The two climbed into the bed and brought the covers up to their waists. Benjamin rolled to his side to face Thomas.

"I know you're scared of the vampire within, but that is only one part of you. I've been fortunate enough to see the kind man who has seen me through good times and bad. You may be a vampire, but that is not what defines you as a person."

"I'm the one who's ancient, so how come you're so wise?"

Benjamin didn't answer. Instead, he kissed Thomas on the forehead and lay on his lover's chest. If he'd had any doubt before about going after the cure, it was gone now. He knew he had to find Turlock and follow the clues to the man who could help Thomas become human again. Thomas deserved a better existence, and his loving partner was determined to help him get it.

Chapter 3

Bathed in morning sunlight, Benjamin looked across the kitchen into his bedroom, where Thomas lay sleeping. Thomas looked so peaceful resting in the dark of the room now, but Benjamin was having a hard time erasing the image of his boyfriend's eyes blood red. He'd seen it many times before, but it was still scary every time it happened. While it certainly added a little spice to the sex life, Benjamin knew Thomas walked a fine line between civility and savagery.

Grabbing his backpack that held his supplies, Benjamin walked out the front door to the Jeep. He had a long drive ahead of him, and he had to make one stop before he hit the interstate. Kenda Ravenwood, a dear friend of his, owned a New Age herb shop. Benjamin needs to get wolf's bane before he confronted Turlock. Wolf's bane had the ability to paralyze the limbs of anything natural or supernatural. Benjamin hoped to use it to incapacitate the vampire so he could question Turlock without risk of being attacked.

Five minutes later, Benjamin pulled up to Crystal Blue Persuasion, Kenda's shop. A light breeze brushed against several wind chimes, making music in the air. He stood and listened to the chimes for a moment before he walked into the shop.

Toward the rear of the shop was Kenda, stocking shelves with an assortment of glass jars. She was wearing her trademark patchwork skirt, comprised of leftover fabric samples that were mostly dark colors -- maroons, navy blues, and browns. She also had on a blazer with an assortment of patches on them. Her head was wrapped in a light blue silk kerchief that had once belonged to her mother.

Coming up behind her, Benjamin asked, "Can you tell me where you keep the nuclear reactors?"

Kenda, without missing a beat, stood up and said, "You're an ass."

"According to Thomas, I'm a hot piece of ass."

"I'll have to take his word for it. So, what brings you here? If you're wanting that Dagon root, it's still on backorder. It might take another week to arrive."

"Actually, I'm here to buy some wolf's bane."

Kenda's eyebrows rose so high they looked like they were about to jump off her face. "Wolf's bane? You're wearing big sister's clothes now. What are you trying to do? Create a life-size stiffy?"

"Very funny. I'm tracking down a vampire who might know of someone who has found a cure for vampirism."

"Is that so? Exactly how do you plan to get said vampire to swallow the wolf's bane?"

"I'm hoping to catch him while he's sleeping."

"Mm-hmm. You'll excuse me if I ask for cash this time."

"Oh ye of little faith. I have always managed to get myself out of supernatural scrapes. This is no different."

"There *is* a difference. In those other instances, trouble came after you. In this case, you're knocking on death's door like a Jehovah's Witness on acid."

Benjamin folded his arms, indicating he was not going to back off. Kenda sighed and walked behind the front counter, where she kept her most hazardous substances. She pulled out a wooden box labeled "Wolf's bane." She opened it and took out a dried, leafy substance that was fluorescent blue in color. Normally, the flowers themselves were white in nature, but after the flowers were picked, and oracles placed a blessing on the petals, it turned the wolf's bane into a blue and brittle substance.

Holding up the wolf's bane and shaking it as she enunciated her words, Kenda said, "Be careful with this stuff. If you use too much at once, you might paralyze this vampire for days."

"I think I can live with that."

"And whatever you do, do not let this vampire get hold of the wolf's bane and use it on you. This much bane can be fatal to humans."

"Yes, Mother," Benjamin said, rolling his eyes.

"You're just wanting this cure so you can bow-chicka-wow-wow like porn stars instead of like horror-movie scream queens."

"Yeah, nothing kills an erection like seeing your boyfriend's eyes turn into erupting volcanoes. He just wants to be a normal person. I mean, who can blame him? He can't get a tan. His diet consists of animal blood. He can't be left alone in a church."

Kenda gave Benjamin a weird look as she put the wolf's bane back in the box. Benjamin shrugged.

"I'll tell you some other time." He gave Kenda a twenty-dollar bill.

"I hope Thomas realizes what a loving and devoted man he has. Not too many people are willing to chase down the undead on the slim chance of finding a cure for a condition."

Benjamin looked down, moved by Kenda's words. "I know he does."

"I hope you have a backup plan in case you can't zap this vamp with the wolf's bane."

"I do." Benjamin pointed upward, and a lance of fire shot out like a flamethrower. Kenda jumped back slightly, more from the heat than surprise.

"For the life of me, I'll never be able to figure out how you've made it all these years without flambéing Thomas. You're, like, on the top of Smokey the Bear's 'most wanted' list."

"Hopefully I won't need to turn Turlock into ash. I'd like to be able to find out about this scientist who has developed a cure."

Kenda did a double take. "A scientist? This vampire must be on meth or something if he believes a scientist has developed a cure."

"Thomas thought it was kind of nutty, too. It might be, but I owe it to him to follow up on this. If it does turn out to be bogus, the two of you can tag-team me in saying, 'I told you so.'"

"Gee, being part of a three-way with a pair of gay men. It's like a dream come true."

"Yeah, get it all out of your system now. For all you know, Turlock may slit my throat and drink me dry, and you may never get another chance to slice me with your razor sarcasm."

Kenda didn't say anything in reply. She just stood there, biting her lower lip. He noticed the uncomfortable silence and cleared his throat.

"Sorry. I guess that was a poor choice of words."

Kenda handed the box with the wolf's bane to Benjamin. With a scowl on her face, she said, "You'd better not get yourself killed. If you do, I'll put a curse on your grave and make you roam the earth forever as a zombie."

"I love you, too, Kenda." Benjamin had turned to leave when he remembered what he'd researched the night before. Turning back, he asked, "Have you heard of someone in Romania trying to develop a cure over two hundred years ago?"

Kenda thought for a moment. "I think I remember reading something about it. This supposed cure actually turned a vampire into an über-vamp. Why do you ask?"

"I think whoever tried to create the cure might have used some ingredient that could make up the real cure."

"I'll see what I can find out. Didn't you find anything in the *Teuromenici*?"

"Nothing about how the cure was made. I'm guessing the ancient Itzhak clansmen were more concerned about getting out of Jean-Paul's way than they were in swapping recipes with the Romanians."

"From the accounts I've read, I don't blame them. I'll do a little reading, and when you get back -- assuming you're not dead or undead -- I can tell you what I've found out. Take care, Benjamin."

Benjamin walked out to his Jeep and looked back toward the shop. Kenda had gone back to stocking herbs. The two had been friends for years, long before Benjamin met Thomas. They both attended Sedona Red Rock High School. The two shared a deep friendship due to both of them being magic workers. Since both of them were already considered freaks, Benjamin had no qualms about telling Kenda he was gay. Kenda herself was bisexual, although she adopted the

gypsy mentality of not staying with a lover too long. She was very cautious when it came to commitment.

Jumping into his vehicle, Benjamin prepared himself for a lengthy drive. He figured he'd make it into Phoenix right around lunchtime. He hoped Turlock would have already eaten by the time he caught up.

Benjamin popped a CD into the player, and for the next hour, he listened to the latest performance of "A Prairie Home Companion." He had recorded it, since he had been unable to listen to it live last weekend due to the program coinciding with a photo shoot he had been on.

The dulcet tones of Garrison Keillor's voice helped to while away the time as the Jeep jetted down Interstate 17. Aside from a few gas stations and roadside hotels, there was not much to see on the journey from Sedona to the edge of Phoenix. The red rocks of Sedona were well behind Benjamin, and saguaro cacti and prairie grass comprised most of the landscape. Benjamin was used to making long trips like this on his own. Thomas usually did not accompany him unless they traveled at night, for obvious reasons. If a cure could be found, the first thing Benjamin planned to do with his newly mortal boyfriend would be to go on a road trip.

Soon enough, the simple gas stations and aging buildings gave way to towering skyscrapers. Phoenix was a completely different world from Sedona. One could find fresh air and tranquility in Sedona. In Phoenix, one was greeted by a hideous, brown smog cloud and freeway gridlock. You couldn't pay Benjamin enough money to live in Phoenix. Since he was in a long-term relationship, he didn't need to do the gay-bar circuit, and he had plenty of friends -- gay, straight and undecided -- in Sedona.

Upon arriving in Phoenix, Benjamin pulled off at freeway exit 197 and looked for 24th Avenue, the street listed on the sales receipt he obtained from Ivan. He was looking for 1711 S. 24th Avenue, the address Turlock had listed as his home address. He expected to find a condemned tenement with boarded-up windows and the stench of death. Instead, he found a townhouse painted green with jasmine growing in the front yard.

Stepping out of his Jeep and hoisting his backpack on, Benjamin hesitated.

"This can't be right," he said aloud. He looked at the receipt again. He was at the right address. However, the neighborhood did not look like a place where a vampire would hang out. Instead of a freakish ghetto, it looked like the kind of place most folks wanted to raise their children. The place had changed from the last time he was in this area about ten years ago.

Benjamin looked at the nearby homes to see if maybe Turlock covered his tracks by living at another place on the street. No such luck. All the homes were in prime condition, with manicured lawns and new cars. It wasn't the seedy neighborhood he had heard about. It definitely didn't look like the sort of place an evil, soulless creature would live.

Walking up to the front door, Benjamin tried to turn the knob. It was locked. Benjamin had figured as much. He stepped onto the sidewalk and meandered to the backyard, looking for open windows or some other way to get inside. He strolled to the back door, certain in the belief that Turlock had locked this door as well. He tried it anyway, and to his utter astonishment, it opened with a quiet squeak. Cautiously, Benjamin stepped inside.

Fishing a wooden stake out of his pack, Benjamin crept through the laundry room into the kitchen. It looked like a regular person lived here, although the heavy curtains made the house really dark. Benjamin was starting to get the spooky feeling the address really was fake, and he was trespassing in someone's home. He was about ready to turn around and leave in embarrassment when he noticed something hanging in the hall. It was a purple waistcoat, the same one that Turlock had worn last night.

Benjamin stood in the hallway and listened to the silence of the house. He was hoping for some indication of where Turlock was. Straining to hear something, the eerie monosyllabic tone of air circulating in the house gave way to the unpleasant reverberation of snoring. It sounded like Turlock was sleeping.

Benjamin reached into his pack and pulled out the box holding the wolf's bane. He removed a small amount, saving the rest in case his first attempt to incapacitate Turlock failed. Besides that, he remembered Kenda's warning that too much of the bane would paralyze the vampire indefinitely. Even though the monster probably deserved it, Benjamin did not think it was right to be so cruel.

Walking into the bedroom, Benjamin saw Turlock hanging over the side of the bed, wearing only a pair of jeans with a hole on the back of the thigh. Like the other rooms in the house, the bedroom looked well kept and not like the lair of an evil fiend. However, Turlock looked like someone who had drunk too much and had been left in that position by another alkie who dumped him there after a bender.

While it was funny to look at, it left Benjamin with a dilemma. He'd expected to find Turlock lying on his side or his back, making it easy to cram the wolf's bane in his mouth. However, Turlock was lying on his stomach, which meant the bane would have to be crammed upward.

So what was Benjamin to do? Should he wait until the vampire shifted position and then strike? That could be hours, not to mention the risk that Turlock might wake up before then, making him much more dangerous. Benjamin had only one weapon in his arsenal -- he needed to cast a spell.

Benjamin set the wooden stake next to his feet, putting it within easy reach in case Turlock tried to attack. Holding the wolf's bane in his left hand, Benjamin formed a claw shape with his right hand, retracted it, and then repeated the motion. As he did this, he chanted, "Powers of the earth, create a gale and send these herbs in that sinister male."

It was the hokiest rhyme Benjamin had ever come up with, but it worked. The blue leaves flew from his hand and into the gullet of the snoring vampire. The action shook Turlock awake and caused him to cough and convulse slightly. As he struggled to his feet in between hacks, Turlock turned and saw Benjamin standing in the doorway. He growled, and his eyes turned blood red.

"You!"

Benjamin scooped up the stake, wondering why the wolf's bane wasn't working. Turlock leaped toward Benjamin, who hurried backward and held the stake up, ready to drive it in the attacking vampire. It was unnecessary. Turlock tried to lunge at Benjamin again, but tripped over his own

feet and fell flat on his face. Despite how scary the situation was, a giggle escaped Benjamin's lips. Turlock rolled on his back, but he could move no more.

"What have you done to me, mortal?"

That's when Benjamin realized the wolf's bane had finally taken effect. The vampire was paralyzed, which meant Benjamin could interrogate him without any problems.

Benjamin knelt down over Turlock. "You have some information that I want. You can't run away this time, so it would be in your best interest to talk."

"And if I don't, then what? You're going to jab me with that little toothpick you're packing?"

Benjamin laughed and brushed back a lock of Turlock's hair. "Oh, no, darling. I'm not going to waste this stake on a neutered vamp that couldn't bite me right now if his life depended on it. I will, however, cook you up extra crispy."

Benjamin held up his left hand, and a sphere of fire formed with orange and red lances of flame leaping around. Turlock's eyes widened in horror.

"You wouldn't dare."

"If I figure you're not going to cooperate, I might as well. I don't plan on sticking around until the wolf's bane wears off."

Turlock looked disgusted. "Wolf's bane? You dropped me to the floor with wolf's bane? God, if that ain't embarrassing."

"*That* embarrasses you? Have you not seen the clothes you wear? If I didn't need information from you, I might stake you just for having poor taste."

"Are you planning to interrogate me, or are you actually trying to bore me to death?"

"Look, you Debarge wannabe, I've been told that you know who's developed a cure for vampirism. I want to know who this person is and how to reach him."

"Why do you care? You're not a vamp."

"No, but I have a boyfriend who has a really hard time keeping from turning into a demon every time he gets horny, so we'd like to find a way for him to be mortal. You got a problem with that?"

Turlock laughed. "So I'm supposed to care that your boyfriend has some sort of supernatural impotence?"

Bam! Benjamin punched Turlock squarely in the nose. Blood seeped out of one of the nostrils.

"Listen, Turlock, as much as I'm enjoying this pointless banter with you, why don't you do both of us a favor and just tell me about our little miracle worker and where I might be able to find him."

"The guy's name is Samuel Mortimer. I found out that he works as a research scientist at Northern Arizona University, but he is also an alchemist."

Turlock stuck out his tongue and lapped up some of the blood. Benjamin's face felt like it was going to turn itself inside out with repulsion. Turlock looked at the expression and grinned a sinister smile, his fangs bared.

"Tastes like peppermint."

"That was gross!"

"Oh, come now. If you can't stand the sight of a little blood, then you probably shouldn't be messing around with vampires."

"All right! Where exactly can I find Dr. Mortimer?"

"If I knew that, I'd have sucked the little bastard dry by now. Seems he's not very popular with the undead community, so he's kind of in hiding."

"Do you have any idea what this cure is?"

"It's some kind of an elixir or potion or something. I haven't done much research on it, considering I'm happy with myself the way I am. If you want to know more about the cure, then you'll have to track down the good doctor yourself."

"I intend to. Now, I hope you're not lying to me, because if you are, I will be back -- with stakes, fireballs, holy water, and a bad case of garlic breath. I trust this is sinking in."

"And what advantage would there be for me to lie to you?"

"You're an evil, soulless vamp, Turlock. There's no advantage for you to tell me the truth."

"True, and that might be the reason why improving my fashion sense really isn't very high on the list of important things to do. Oh, by the way. Could you do something for me before you go?"

"What?"

"Since I can't help myself at the moment, on account of the wolf's bane, would you be kind enough to give me a blowjob?"

Benjamin balled up his fist and pulled his arm back to punch Turlock again, but he never got the chance. A huge swath of sunlight poured in from the roof, hitting Turlock. With his limbs still paralyzed from the wolf's bane, all the vampire could do was scream in agony as his body disintegrated into a mound of ash.

Benjamin looked up and saw a skylight. Part of a cover could be seen on the roof, most likely put there by Turlock to prevent what had just happened. The question was, who had removed the cover?

Racing into the front yard, Benjamin looked up toward the roof just in time to see a figure jumping off into the rear. Benjamin ran to the backyard and stopped short when he saw Turlock, standing near the back gate, very much alive. But how? Vampires couldn't survive in sunlight.

Turlock's eyes glowed yellow as his lips curled up into an evil smile, and then he jumped over the gate and disappeared. That's when Benjamin realized he wasn't dealing with Turlock at all. He wasn't even dealing with a vampire.

Benjamin ran to the gate and unlatched it. He looked down the alley on both sides, but the creature was gone. He leaned against the gate and sighed.

"A mimic," he said.

Chapter 4

The drive back to Sedona was longer than the one down. At least it felt that way to Benjamin. He had made the trip to Phoenix with a bushel of questions and a resolve to find answers. He'd found answers all right, but they just led to a bunch of new questions and an underlying dread that he could be getting himself into something too big for him to handle.

Not only did Benjamin have to deal with vampires, but now there was a mimic in the mix. Mimics were shape-shifters with the ability to look like other people. To regular folks, there was no way to pick them out in a crowd, but demons and anyone who practiced magic could see mimics by their glowing yellow eyes. Normally, mimics were pacifists that tried to blend in with the mortal world. However, it was clear the mimic he'd encountered had come to kill Turlock. The question was why, since the vampire had already spilled the beans. If the mimic had wanted to keep Benjamin from finding out about Dr. Mortimer, then it should have acted faster.

The thing that especially baffled Benjamin was why the mimic cared one way or the other about the cure. It was supposed to drive out the demon part of vampires, not other supernatural creatures. Still, what if this cure turned out to be a threat for other things that go bump in the night? Could mimics have as much to fear from Dr. Mortimer's research?

All Benjamin wanted to do at the moment was crawl into bed and have Thomas hold him. Even though he hadn't gone through anything strenuous, the bizarre way the day had turned out was emotionally draining. Besides, there was no bad day that couldn't be remedied with an affectionate nuzzling from a good vampire.

He only had one chore to accomplish when he got home -- call Ivan and let him know about the mimic. With Turlock dead, Ivan needed to know that the vampire would no longer be a repeat visitor. Benjamin didn't know for certain if Ivan was in any real danger, but since he and Turlock had had a connection, it was best not to leave anything to chance.

Benjamin was relieved when he saw the condo come into view. It was going to be nice to curl up with Thomas and relax. However, as he pulled into the driveway, he noticed Ivan's truck and Kenda's Dodge Neon were there. What were his friends doing there? Did they want to make sure he'd made it home in one piece?

Before exiting the Jeep, Benjamin sat and watched the sun set behind Mingus Mountain. Some storm clouds were looming on the horizon, and the sun turned them brilliant shades of pink and purple. Benjamin never tired of seeing Arizona sunsets. It was like the evening beauty served as compensation for living in a state that was so hot in the summer.

Benjamin walked into the house and saw Ivan sitting on a stool at the kitchen counter. He was shirtless and had a gaping wound on his left arm. Kenda was holding her hands up near the wound and using her healing powers to try and close it. Thomas was at the sink filling a glass with water. He handed it to Ivan.

"Thanks, Thomas."

Stepping into the kitchen, Benjamin asked, "What happened here?"

As Thomas gave his sweetheart a welcoming hug, Ivan explained, "Turlock showed up in my store a little while ago, and he was not happy. He tore up the place, and then he attacked me. He didn't say a word, just went on a rampage. I was lucky to get out of there in one piece!"

Thomas rubbed his chin. "What I don't understand is how Turlock showed up during the day."

Benjamin cleared his throat. "He didn't. Turlock is dead. He had a nasty encounter with nature's tanning booth."

Ivan raised an eyebrow. "Then what the Hell was in my store?"

"I'm guessing a mimic. Most likely, it's the same mimic who showed up at Turlock's house and decided to let the sun shine in."

"That doesn't make any sense," Kenda said. "Mimics are usually gentle souls. Why would one fry a vampire and try to kill Ivan?"

"I have no clue, unless this cure is supposed to eradicate all supernatural beings. If that's the case, who knows what else we'll run into."

Kenda's hands stopped glowing. "There you go, Ivan. Good as new."

Ivan stood up and grabbed his shirt off the counter. "Thanks, Kenda. If I'd gone to the hospital, I probably would have bled to death in the waiting room."

"No, we wouldn't want that. I have a friend who works as a custodian at the hospital, and she says it's a pain in the ass to clean up bodily fluids."

Ivan rolled his eyes. "Your bedside manner needs some serious work."

"By the way, Kenda," Benjamin said, "I seem to remember somebody predicting gloom and doom if I went down to Phoenix and confronted Turlock. Now, I really don't want to say 'I told you so,' but..."

"But you're alive and well, all because a mimic decided to turn your vampire into a pile of ashes. Forgive me. I had no idea that mimics were roaming about spreading good deeds. I just assumed you'd be alone and screaming for your mommy when you died. By the way, where did you get that bruise on your head there?"

Benjamin felt his forehead and immediately felt a dull, throbbing sensation. He winced at the feeling.

"I'll be damned. I didn't even feel that until now. I must have hit my head after Turlock tried to lunge at me."

Kenda beckoned to Benjamin. "Come here and let me kiss the owie."

Benjamin sat down where Ivan had sat, and Kenda went to work healing the bruise.

"So, Kenda, did you find out anything new about that Romanian cure?"

"Only that some of the elders from my clan think you're crazy for wanting to repeat their mistakes. I did find out that someone mixed Bebel petals into the mix, and that's probably what drove the vampire insane."

Ivan raised an eyebrow. "I thought Bebel petals were relatively harmless."

"To humans, yes," Thomas said. "The petals cause a light euphoria for people, kind of like a good dose of pot. For vampires, however, it's like injecting someone with steroids. It increases their strength while blocking their control. Granted, most vamps aren't too selective about who they drink from, but Bebel petals can make you ravenous, where you feel like you can't get enough."

"Does it wear off?"

"Eventually. However, most of the time, vampires get to the point where they want to stake themselves before it fades away."

Benjamin grimaced. "I'll make sure not to bring any Bebel petals home, since I'm guessing there's not a twelve-step program you can go to should you become addicted."

"Yeah, vampires really aren't into therapy."

Kenda's hands stopped glowing as she walked in front of Benjamin. "Sorry I couldn't find out more. That last attempt at a cure by my gypsy ancestors is seen by the clan as a sign that there are some forces of nature you just don't mess with."

Benjamin stood up. "You're right. There are some forces of nature you shouldn't toy with, and one of them is love. I love Thomas, and I want him to be happy. If there's a cure out there, and it makes him happy, that's all I care about."

Kenda put a hand on Benjamin's shoulder. "Just keep one thing in mind about the forces of nature. If you don't keep them in check, they'll rock you like a hurricane. I have to get going, but make sure you think carefully before you make your next move."

"I will, Kenda, and thanks for the wolf's bane. It really came in handy."

Kenda smiled and hugged Benjamin. Then she hugged Thomas. After walking to the front door and blowing a kiss, she left.

Ivan folded his arms. "Do you have any ideas about what I could do to keep that mimic from patronizing my business again?"

Benjamin scratched his head. "Let me check in the *Teuromenici*. If garlic can keep away vampires, maybe turmeric can fend off mimics."

Thomas made a face. "I'm keeping you away from the spice aisle at the grocery store."

"We should probably have you stay here tonight, Ivan, just in case the mimic decides to pay a visit to your house," Benjamin said.

Ivan looked worried. "You think the mimic was after me?"

"Somehow I don't think he was there to get the latest issue of *Superman*. We'll put you in the spare bedroom. Thomas, can you make up the bed?"

Thomas nodded and walked down the hall. Benjamin walked to the refrigerator and pulled out an apple. Benjamin turned back to Ivan and saw he hadn't moved from where he stood before.

"Ivan, do you want something to eat? I could heat you up a Hot Pocket."

"Nah, I'm not that hungry."

"Are you okay, buddy? This isn't freaking you out or anything, is it?"

"Maybe a little. I don't like the idea of some otherworldly being trying to kill me."

"We're just taking precautions. I like you, Ivan, and I'd like to have you around for a good, long time."

Benjamin hugged Ivan. Ivan shivered.

"You're a good friend, Benjamin. I hope, when I find the man of my dreams, he is just like you."

"You'll find your soul mate, Ivan. I did. With your artistry and your looks, I'm surprised you haven't bagged a man already."

"I think the whole comic book store thing might be a turnoff for some adults."

"I don't see why. Most gay men would love someone who appreciates bulging muscle men in tights or anatomically correct rubber suits. What kind of people do you hang out with?"

"Well, let's see. My best buddy is a witch, and he's getting banged by a vampire who owns a nightclub I frequent, along with demons, aliens and all kinds of other creatures. In other words, freaks and superfreaks."

Benjamin laughed and then took a bite out of the apple. "Want to help me check out the *Teuromenici*?"

"Sure. Even if I can't do all the cool stuff you do, I can still check it out and act all smart if people ask me if I know anything about magic."

"You'd better not be blabbing anything about what you see in the *Teuromenici*! If the stuff in the book got into the wrong hands, we'd have to learn how to play harps really quick."

Benjamin walked into the living room and pulled the false panel out of the wall next to the bookcase. There sat the *Teuromenici*, a hefty tome with Benjamin's clan symbol embossed on the cover, an owl that stood for wisdom. Many of Benjamin's ancestors had been sages or other wise men. It wasn't until his great-great-grandfather had mated with a member of the Moonbeam clan that magic was introduced into the Itzhak bloodline.

Grabbing the book, Benjamin replaced the panel and walked back into the kitchen. He set it on the kitchen island and grabbed the stool. Ivan walked behind him and watched as he thumbed through the first few pages.

"Ivan, can I tell you something without you telling anyone else?"

"My lips are sealed, homey. What's up?"

Benjamin took a deep breath. "I know you all have been wondering why I'm so hell-bent on finding this cure. There's a reason for it. I believe in an afterlife -- Heaven and Hell, if you will -- and I think I'm going to a wonderful place when I die. I'm a good person, so I think I'll be well taken care of by God or whoever's running eternity. When you turn into a vampire, you're basically damned in perpetuity. Even though Thomas has done all these wonderful things and is working so hard to be a good person, in the end he's still going to burn. He and I are meant to be together, Ivan, but it won't be forever if he remains a vampire. I don't think I can rest until I know that, when I finally push up daisies, Thomas will be reunited with me someday, and we can hold hands as we walk off into our happily ever after. Does that sound crazy?"

Ivan exhaled, his eyes wide. "Crazy? Not at all. I think it sounds wonderful and romantic and a sign that you two belong with each other."

"I agree."

Benjamin and Ivan turned toward the hallway. Thomas was leaning on the arch, his arms folded. Benjamin noticed a tear sliding down Thomas' cheek.

Speaking of cheeks, Benjamin felt his burning with embarrassment. He rubbed the bridge of his nose, wondering if he could learn to use his magic to disappear someday.

"How long have you been standing there?" he asked.

"Long enough to know that I love you so much."

"Yeah, yeah. My soliloquy was so syrupy that I think I gave poor Ivan here diabetes."

Thomas walked over to Benjamin and embraced him. "Nonsense. It's that kind of beautiful talking that made me fall in love with you. You're my everything, Benjamin. You're the first thing I think about when I wake up, and the last when my head hits the pillow."

Benjamin kissed his boyfriend's forehead. "I love you, Thomas Nighthawk. No one can fathom how deep my love goes."

Ivan raised his hand to indicate he wanted to speak. "Should I go into another room?"

Benjamin laughed. "Very chivalrous, but unnecessary."

Thomas glanced over at Ivan. "I've got your bed all ready. I was about to make dinner."

Ivan looked confused. "I thought you only consumed blood."

"Most of the time I do, but I can eat other stuff, especially when I try to have a quiet evening with my honey. It just doesn't provide me with the essential nourishment blood does."

"That's a phrase you don't hear in the mortal world-- 'essential nourishment' in the same sentence as 'blood.'"

"Still," Benjamin said, "for not requiring food, he can make Emeril look like he cooks hash in a seedy diner. Just wait until you try his chicken Marsala, Ivan."

Thomas walked to the freezer and grabbed some chicken. "Well, I have my dinner order."

After Thomas started to fix dinner, Benjamin's attention returned to the *Teuromenici*. He wasn't sure if there was any clear method of eradicating a mimic, but it didn't hurt to have an ace in the hole. Of course, the mimic was only one problem. The other was finding Samuel Mortimer, the man who supposedly had developed the vampire cure. If the good doctor was in hiding, it could be difficult to find him, since supernatural forces were at work to stop any efforts of depriving vampires of their fangs.

Benjamin spent the better part of an hour, with Ivan peering over his shoulder, looking through the *Teuromenici* for a way to stop mimics, but it was slow going. The book was handwritten, and a lot of it was written in the ancient Itzhak tongue. While Benjamin had a fair knowledge of the spoken language, it sometimes took him a while to translate the written words. It also didn't help that the *Teuromenici* had almost fifteen hundred pages in it.

The search was put on hold when Thomas finished making dinner. Benjamin loved Thomas' cooking. He always took such care to make sure everything was prepared to perfection. On their last anniversary, Thomas had made a Yankee pot roast with potatoes and carrots that was so delicious, Benjamin actually cried. Tonight's chicken Marsala was also extremely tasty.

It was almost eleven when Ivan finally crashed for the night. Benjamin was continuing to comb the *Teuromenici* for the spell or potion he needed. Suddenly, out of the corner of his eye, he noticed someone move into the room. He looked up and saw Thomas pull a sword out of the closet. As Thomas held it up in the air, the light glistened on the blade and highlighted the Chinese symbols emblazoned on it.

Benjamin jumped to his feet. "Thomas, what is it?"

"I heard a noise outside."

A soft whistle grew louder, and then a gust of wind brushed into the bedroom. Benjamin looked at the concern in his lover's eyes and knew it meant trouble. In the next second, he realized that Ivan's room was at the other end of the house. There was only one thing to do -- cast a spell.

"Powers of Itzhak, hear my call and protect my friend behind an energy wall."

Amber shimmers flew from Benjamin's hands down the hall. Thomas and Benjamin ran to the spare room and saw Ivan sitting on the bed, holding his knees while a shimmering wall surrounded him.

"Benjamin, what's going on? I was in here minding my own business, and now it looks like I'm trapped on the inside of a beer bottle."

Thomas lowered his sword. "I don't get it. I could have sworn..."

That was all Thomas could say before a crash came from the main bedroom. Benjamin's eyes widened.

"The book!"

Thomas hurried back toward his bedroom, but Benjamin decided to take a faster route via astral projection. Benjamin's ghostly double appeared in the bedroom right in front of the mimic impersonating Turlock. The mimic looked surprised at first, but the shock faded as it dove for the *Teuromenici*.

Thomas had made it to the bedroom at that point and took a swing at the mimic with the sword. The mimic dodged the attack and countered with a kick to Thomas' stomach. The force sent Thomas flying into the wall, and the mimic grabbed the *Teuromenici* and fled for the arcadia door that it had broken through to get inside.

Benjamin knew he could not keep up with the mimic, but he was prepared this time. He raised his hands and began to chant.

"Wall of protection, heed my plea... Leave my friend and trap my enemy."

With lightning speed, the energy barrier that had surrounded Ivan flew away from the spare room and illuminated an area almost a hundred yards from the house. Benjamin recalled his astral self and ran for his bedroom, where Thomas was just getting to his feet.

"Are you all right, Tommy?"

"Dandy," Thomas replied sarcastically. "I've never known mimics to be so aggressive."

"If you'd like to take another swing at it, I've got the bugger behind an energy barrier."

Thomas snarled with excitement as he recovered his sword and leaped through the arcadia door. Benjamin was less eager to reunite with the mimic and instead sauntered out the front door. As he approached the energy barrier, Thomas was standing next to it, sword at the ready as though he expected the mimic to charge at him through the barrier. The mimic had switched appearances, now looking like Ivan.

"The next time you want to borrow a book..." Benjamin paused as he held up his left hand in a fist and threw his fingers open, which ripped the *Teuromenici* out of the mimic's hands and levitated it back to Benjamin. "...try going to a library."

"I owe them some hefty late charges," the mimic said, sounding exactly like Ivan.

"I guess my hefty tome has a way to eliminate you after all, since you went to all the trouble of coming here to snatch it."

"You're out of your league, boy. What's coming is beyond your ken."

"Oh, I'm sure it's beyond my ken, my Barbie, and all the other dolls you can imitate. So why don't you give me an idea of what I'm dealing with."

"Or what? You're going to let your bloodsucking pimp slice and dice me?"

Benjamin's eyes narrowed. "No, but I will do this."

He held up his right hand, this time with his fingers open, and he closed them into a fist, causing lightning bolts to snake out from the barrier and electrocute the mimic, who cried out in pain.

Benjamin lowered his hand, ending the shock treatment. "I know this won't kill you, but it will hurt like a son of a bitch. Unless you're into S&M, it would be in your best interest to answer my questions... truthfully."

With sweat dripping down its face, the mimic glowered at Benjamin and asked, "What did you want to know?"

Clutching the *Teuromenici* tightly with both hands, Benjamin replied, "Well, why don't we start with why you, a mimic who by nature is a pacifist, just turned a vampire into a pile of ash a few hours ago?"

"It's the cure."

Benjamin wasn't expecting that answer. "What do you mean, the cure?"

"Dr. Mortimer had me scooped up while I was impersonating a vampire a few days ago. He needed some guinea pigs to test the cure. I was one of them, but since I'm not really a vampire, the stuff is causing me to do some freaky things that I would not normally do."

Benjamin's mind was racing. The mimic had been in contact with Dr. Mortimer, which meant it might know where the elusive cure-master was hiding. If Benjamin could get that answer from the mimic, he might have the cure in his hands as early as tomorrow.

However, he never got the chance to answer the question, as the mimic started to scream in agony and transformed into a bunch of different people -- including Turlock and Benjamin -- before exploding into a mass of goo, which was fortunately contained within the energy barrier.

Benjamin stared in disbelief at the remains of the mimic, which were sliding down the barrier's walls, and Thomas, without missing a beat, turned to Benjamin and said, "Well, at least you can stop looking for a way to destroy the mimic."

Chapter 5

Benjamin stared at Thomas as he turned over in bed for the third time in forty-five minutes. The vampire was thoroughly exhausted, and it was all Benjamin's doing.

After collecting the remains of the mimic, boarding up the arcadia door, and making sure Ivan was able to sleep, Benjamin and Thomas had retired to the bedroom with the intention of resting, but Benjamin was strangely aroused after the adrenaline rush he'd just been through. The two had sat on the bed, and Thomas flashed Benjamin an innocent smile. That was all it took.

Benjamin had shoved Thomas on the bed and ripped all his clothes off. As a shocked Thomas looked up at Benjamin, the witch had stripped his own garments off and climbed onto the vampire's attentive cock. Benjamin had ridden Thomas hard, bouncing him so fervently that he gasped for air a couple of times. After feeling the volcanic surge of come erupt inside his ass, Benjamin had climbed off Thomas and flipped him over like a pancake. Benjamin had plunged his own cock into his lover's hole and started to pound him like a pile driver. The subsequent orgasm had caused Benjamin to let out a triumphant roar as he slowly pulled out.

Benjamin looked over at Thomas, still fairly shocked at what had just happened, and brushed his boyfriend's ponytail away from his face.

"I love you, baby."

Thomas had drifted off to sleep, and Benjamin had been watching him ever since. With the first rays of daylight illuminating the crack under the bedroom door, Benjamin was exhausted, but he couldn't sleep. All he could think about was how much he loved Thomas and wanted to spend the rest of his life with him. Whether it was just with a simple declaration, a gold ring, or loving kids, Benjamin wanted Thomas to be in his life forever.

"I love you, baby."

Benjamin slipped quietly out of bed, taking great care not to wake Thomas. He put on his robe and tiptoed out to the kitchen, where Ivan was munching on a bowl of corn flakes. Ivan turned to Benjamin and grinned wickedly.

"Someone answered the call of the wild last night," Ivan said in a singsong voice.

Benjamin could feel his face flush with embarrassment. He didn't realize he had been so loud.

"Oh my God. I cannot believe you heard us. Did I at least sound like I was the dominant one?"

"You sounded like you were banging a dozen guys. With those whale songs coming out of you, I thought about calling Greenpeace."

"I am so sorry, Ivan. Did we keep you awake?"

"A little, but I'd rather be kept awake by the sound of wild lovers kertanging than the fear a mimic might slip in and cut my throat. So, was it as good as it sounded?"

"I'm not going to answer that, you perv."

Ivan pointed to the clear, plastic container holding the mimic remains that sat nearby. "So, did Thomas blow his nose too hard or something?"

"Actually, that's what's left of the mimic."

Ivan stuck his tongue out and dropped his spoon. "Yuck! And I was having breakfast next to it? Gross!"

"I was thinking of taking it to Kenda and seeing if she could find out what killed it. Well, I know what killed it -- the cure -- but if we could figure out what the ingredients are for the cure, we might be able to recreate it without having to search every corner of Arizona for Dr. Mortimer."

"Are you sure you want to recreate that concoction? If it had that kind of effect on a mimic, imagine the horrible stuff it could do to Thomas' system."

"Dr. Mortimer thought the mimic was a vamp at the time he gave it the cure. It might not have the same effect on a bloodsucker. After all, sunlight is toxic to them, while mortals like you and me can go out and get a tan from it."

"I still think you should track down this doctor and find out straight from him. If you miscalculate the ingredients you scoop away from this mimic goo, you could risk killing Thomas."

Benjamin shook his finger. "Good point. Still, it couldn't hurt to have some of the legwork finished ahead of time."

Ivan snickered. "God, I can just see Kenda's face when you bring that into her shop."

"For the love of Aphrodite, please tell me that is not all of Thomas' come that you siphoned out of your ass."

Benjamin couldn't help but laugh at Kenda's grossed-out expression after he brought in the container with the mimic and firmly plopped it on her front counter. Ivan was right about Kenda not being happy about how the urn looked.

"Actually, it's a fabulous new recipe I like to call scrambled mimic."

Kenda's eyes grew even wider than before, and she almost fell off the stool she was sitting on. "Holy crap! Did you find a tidbit from your ancestors to kill the mimic?"

"I didn't need to. The little scamp busted in to steal the *Teuromenici*, and then he just exploded. Before he did, though, he told me that he'd been the recipient of Dr. Mortimer's vampire cure. I was wondering if there was a way to analyze the remains and see if there was a clue as to the ingredients for the cure."

"Do I look a demon coroner to you? Does the sign outside say 'CSI: Bermuda Triangle'? I sell magical herbs and crystals. I don't put supernatural goo in a centrifuge and take it for a spin."

"Any ideas where I could get it analyzed?"

Kenda rubbed her chin for a moment. "We could take it to Lord Draca. The Hessicans might have some clue how to separate the elements."

Benjamin rolled his eyes. "Just what I need today: A demonic bigot telling me I'm a complete moron for not being able to figure this out for myself. I might as well go on safari for werewolves."

"Oo! I just got a shipment of silver bullets in, just in case you go with the safari idea."

"What I still can't figure out is why the mimic killed Turlock. Unless it was being driven insane by the cure, I don't see why it would want to kill anyone."

"Speaking of the cure, we don't know how it could have metabolized in the mimic's system," Kenda said. "It could have been transformed into something completely different, and we would not know the difference."

Then an idea popped into Benjamin's head. "Is there any way you can use your crystal ball to see Dr. Mortimer making the cure? At the very least, we could figure out where he is hiding."

"That's not going to be easy without having something of his to tap into."

Benjamin and Kenda looked at the remains of the mimic before their eyes met each other's. Benjamin grinned. Kenda grimaced.

"Benjamin, I am not touching that slime. That is just wrong."

"Kenda, quit being such a girl. I had to scoop it all up off the ground."

Kenda looked at Benjamin's hands and winced. "Please tell me you washed up before you came over."

Benjamin reached behind his head and scratched. "We've got to figure out how to find this doctor. Right now, all we know is that he's on the faculty at NAU."

"I think I have an idea," Kenda said, coming out from behind the counter. "I might be able to tap into the energies of one of the natural vortexes in the hills. If I can, we might be able to locate your cure-master."

"Darn. I really had my heart set on you being elbow-deep in mimic remnants."

"Well, that's because you're a sick and demented whore. Give me a few minutes to gather up some supplies, and we'll head on out."

Benjamin heard a ringing from his pants. He pulled out his cell phone, and the caller ID said "Home." Ivan had already departed for the comic book store by the time Benjamin was leaving to see Kenda, so that meant Thomas was calling him.

Benjamin excused himself, stepped outside and flipped open the cell phone. "Hello?"

"My ass is so sore."

Benjamin giggled. "I did give you a thorough pounding, didn't I?"

"Man, what got into you last night? Usually you're so submissive when we make love, but the way you were acting, I was half expecting you to break out the whips and chains."

"Was it all right? I just wanted you so bad, but if I hurt you, I..."

"Do I sound like I'm complaining?" Thomas asked. "Benjamin, all that matters is that we're together. Whether you're inside me or I'm inside you, it doesn't matter. Only one thing is relevant -- I love you."

A tear slipped out of Benjamin's eye and slowly crawled down his cheek. He loved Thomas, too. Whenever the two of them were apart, Benjamin's thoughts always drifted to him. What was he doing? Was he having a good day -- or in Thomas' case, night? Was he thinking about Benjamin the way Benjamin was thinking about him? What would the two of them do when they reunited later on?

"Benjamin, are you still there? Hello?"

Benjamin gasped as he shook himself out of his reverie. "I'm sorry, Thomas. I was just so touched by what you just said."

"What? That I love you? Sweetie, that's nothing new."

"I know. It just caught me at an interesting moment. It reminds me of why I'm doing this, working to make you mortal again. You are such a wonderful man, and the fact that you have to suffer through this eternal damnation because some other creature of the night decided to have you for dinner just breaks my heart."

"That's in the distant past, Benjamin. It happened centuries before you were even born, so there's nothing you could have done. Have I told you how much it means to me that you're putting in all this effort?"

"No, but I will gladly accept any and all compliments. You know I would do anything for you, Tommy. When I look at you, I don't see a predator in need of blood to survive. I see a person who has walked beside me on the path of life for the last eight years, who has watched over me during the night, who has made me want to be a better person."

"If you were here right now, I'd give you the biggest hug for what you just said. By the way, where are you? I woke up, and you were gone."

"I wanted to let you rest," Benjamin said as he sat on the stair railing. "I came over to Crystal Blue Persuasion to talk to Kenda and see if we could get a bead on where Dr. Mortimer is."

"Made any progress?"

"Kenda and I are about to head into the hills and use one of the vortexes to enhance her abilities with the crystal ball."

"I see you took our nighttime visitor with you."

Benjamin chuckled. "My original plan was to use the mimic remains as a catalyst for Kenda's second sight, but she found the idea rather icky. It's funny, the woman sells eye of newt, but she won't touch mimic goo."

"After you two conduct your little experiment, you might want to dispose of it. While mimics are pacifists -- most of them, anyway -- I don't think they'll be too keen on you carting one of their dead brethren hither and yon."

"I will. Hopefully this will only take a couple of hours, and then I'll come home and make lunch."

"All I need to sustain me is your radiant beauty."

"Okay, now you're just getting hokey. Get some more rest. I'll be home before you know it."

"I love you, Benjamin."

"I love you, too, Tommy."

Benjamin closed his cell phone and held it close to him, like he was holding a piece of Thomas. The wind chimes were making beautiful sounds as a breeze blew through. If Benjamin had ever felt any doubt he and Thomas were meant to be together, the previous conversation erased it.

Kenda strolled out the front door just then, carrying a backpack. "Are you ready to do this?"

Benjamin nodded. He opened the passenger door to the Jeep and helped Kenda inside. He climbed in the other side and started out onto the highway.

"So, Kenda, where are we going?"

"Head for Bell Rock. It has the most balanced energy vortex. If I were doing this alone, I probably would go to Cathedral Rock and use the feminine energies from the vortex there, but since you're coming along, I figure we can use our combined energies to tap into Bell Rock's vortex."

"Is there anything special I have to do?"

"I'll need you to hold onto the crystal ball while I levitate over the vortex and summon its power."

"This sounds kind of trippy."

"It's fairly harmless if you know how to channel the energies properly. We should be all right."

"I've never really dealt with Sedona's vortexes. How exactly do they work?"

"Well, the energy from vortexes covers the whole area. I'm sure you've noticed that your powers are a little stronger here than they would be, say, in Phoenix."

Benjamin nodded.

"While the forces can be felt anywhere, especially by those imbued with mystic energies to begin with, the energies of the vortexes are strongest at their origin centers. It is a subtle energy emanating from the surface of the ground, swirling like a whirlwind."

"Do you think it would be possible to use the energies from a vortex to enhance my powers?"

"It's possible, but it could be very dangerous if you're not prepared for the level of power you'd receive. There's a lot that people don't know about the vortexes. If it's not channeled right, it could cause all kinds of havoc. You could even lose your powers if you're not careful."

"As I recall, there's a spell in the *Teuromenici* for enhancing powers. If I were to use it with the vortex, it should be safe."

"You have to love Itzhak ingenuity," Kenda said as she nodded in agreement with Benjamin's claim that the spell would be safe. "Just out of curiosity, why do you want to increase your powers?"

"Having that mimic show up last night made me realize that this quest for a vampire cure is taking me into some unknown territory. I think having a little extra power reserve couldn't hurt."

"If you actually decide to do it, there are two possible places to go. There's a vortex near Sedona's airport that specifically channels male energies. Also, Boynton Canyon has a vortex that channels a combination of masculine and feminine energies. Boynton might be your best bet, as your personality has aspects from both sides."

"What about the one we're going to now? Didn't you say it was a balanced energy vortex?"

"Yes, but it's a combination of the three energies -- male, female and a male-female hybrid. Using that vortex for a permanent power boost could overload you. It's safe enough in a small dose, but too much juice could cause you to burn out, and possibly burn up."

Just then, a sign for Bell Rock came into view. Kenda pointed to a pull-off on the highway.

"Park over there. We'll have to hike the rest of the way, but it's not far," she said.

Benjamin parked the Jeep and pulled out his camera. He figured it couldn't hurt to snap a few photos while he was here. Kenda hoisted her backpack and started onto the trail, with Benjamin close behind.

Kenda was right. She and Benjamin had only been walking for five minutes when she held up her hand and said, "This is it."

Benjamin looked around. All he saw was red rock and some sagebrush. "It is? Are you sure of that?"

"Can't you feel the energy?"

Benjamin closed his eyes. Now that Kenda had mentioned it, he *did* feel stronger.

"Wow, Kenda. This is kind of freaky."

"Test it out. Shoot a fireball into the air."

Benjamin set his camera on the ground nearby. He pointed both his hands upward and channeling his strength, shot two fireballs into the clear blue sky. They were the largest fireballs he had ever conjured, one that looked to be almost ten feet in diameter and the other twelve feet. For a moment, they lingered in the air before Benjamin waved his hand to extinguish them.

Benjamin exhaled and turned to Kenda, who was grinning wildly.

"Kenda, that was absolutely amazing! I've never created fireballs like those before. They were so bright, so strong."

"Good stuff, huh?" Kenda said before flying into the air. In the course of two seconds, Kenda ascended one hundred feet. Normally, Kenda's levitation was a slow, gradual process, but Benjamin almost got whiplash from keeping his eyes on her as she rocketed into the sky.

"See, Benjamin?" Kenda called out. "It's amazing natural power that makes this place an awesome locale for practicing magic. Channeled correctly, it can do amazing things."

Kenda returned to the ground, slowly this time. Benjamin couldn't believe how powerful she had become in a short span of time. For that matter, he was feeling pretty juiced himself.

"This is wild, Kenda. I can't see the energy from the vortex, but I can definitely feel its presence."

Kenda reached into her backpack. "I have a way for us to see the vortex. Reveal!"

With that command, she threw some purple powder into the air. It quickly attached itself to the energy swirls in the area and illuminated them. In a matter of moments, Benjamin could see the vortex as clear as day. It was swirling and churning, but at a very slow pace. Energy spikes occasionally shot from the vortex into parts unknown. Some settled a few feet away, while some darted out of view.

Kenda pulled out her crystal ball and handed it to Benjamin.

"Sit somewhere near the vortex," she commanded. "I'll start the spell, and we should be getting some kind of response in a few moments."

Benjamin sat down a few feet away from the vortex. It was kind of neat to watch it move, like a miniaturized purple tornado in slow motion. He held up the crystal ball in front of him, and the sight of the vortex behind the crystal made things feel even more surreal than they already were.

Kenda stood mere inches from the vortex. She plunged her hands into it, and a purple glow surrounded her.

"I call upon the spirits of my gypsy ancestors. Hear your daughter's cry! Give me the strength to find who we seek, to see what is unseen, to pierce the veil and untangle the secrets we quest for. Gypsy ancestors, imbue me with your power. Aid my journey! Shine into the darkness!"

With that, a ray of energy shot from the vortex and into the crystal ball. It startled Benjamin so much that he almost dropped it. He looked toward Bell Rock and noticed the juniper trees. They were not growing straight like most trees. Instead, their branches and even their trunks twisted like helixes, and they were moving in reaction to the energy emanating from the vortex. This was a powerful place, indeed.

"Benjamin, I'm seeing something."

Benjamin turned his gaze back to the crystal ball. A man's face had appeared inside the sphere. He was pouring assorted liquids into a glass beaker.

"Kenda, is that him? Is that Dr. Mortimer?"

"It is. Now I need to figure out where he is, and if this is even taking place in the present."

"You mean it could be something from the past?"

"That, or even the future. I'll just need a moment to focus the energies."

A rumble of thunder cut through the din at that moment. Benjamin looked up. Where a clear blue sky had been just minutes ago, dark storm clouds were blotting out the sun, and lightning flashed angrily into the air.

"Kenda, I think something's wrong."

"You're right. We should probably stop before..."

Just then, a bolt of lightning connected with the vortex and bounced to the ground near Benjamin. The force caused the crystal ball to shatter and threw Benjamin toward a rock face. He slammed into it and fell to the ground. He struggled to rise, but the last thing he saw was everything going black.

Chapter 6

Benjamin's eyes opened and closed a few times as he slowly regained consciousness. He was back home, and next to his bed sat Thomas. Thomas was smiling, but Benjamin could tell he was concerned.

"Hey there, sweetie. Welcome back."

"Thomas? How did I... How long has..." Benjamin gasped. "Kenda! Is she..."

Benjamin tried to sit up sharply, but Thomas gently held him down. "Take it easy. You've been hurt pretty bad. Kenda's all right. She's in the kitchen making some herbal tea."

"The last thing I remember is the crystal ball exploding, and I suddenly flew away from the vortex. After that, everything went dark."

"Kenda thinks the lightning bolt that struck near you was supercharged after it bounced off the vortex's energy swirls. She managed to heal your injuries, and it's a good thing she was there, too. Without her healing powers, you might be in a coma, or even..."

Thomas looked away. Benjamin could tell he was upset. He might have even been crying.

Benjamin put his hand on top of Thomas'. "Hey, Tommy. It's all right. I didn't die. I'm right here, looking at the most gorgeous man put on this earth."

Thomas turned back to Benjamin, biting his lip in an attempt to hide his emotions. "I know. It just scared the shit out of me when Kenda came back with your unconscious body. I mean, you were just supposed to be using her second sight to track down this doctor, and all of a sudden a storm appears out of nowhere and wreaks havoc on you."

The bedroom door opened, and Kenda walked in with a tray and two cups of tea.

"Hey! Look who's back with us. Here I am trying to find this doctor for you, and you up and decide to take a nap on me. How inconsiderate!"

Benjamin chuckled at Kenda's sarcastic humor. "Nice to see you, too, freak."

"How do you feel?"

"Like someone shot me out of a cannon. What exactly happened out there?"

"Well, a lightning bolt from the storm threw you into this rock face and knocked you out. You had some pretty bad injuries, but the vortex allowed me to heal you fairly quickly. After that, I levitated back to the Jeep with you in my arms and drove you back here. By the way, I think you need to lay off the Twinkies. If it hadn't been for the vortex energy, I don't know if I could have carried you."

"I'll keep that in mind. Do you have any idea where that storm came from? It couldn't have had anything to do with the spell we cast."

Kenda nodded. "I agree, but I couldn't tell you how it appeared or why it disappeared in the blink of an eye. All I know is, it wasn't a natural occurrence."

"I figured that. Was it caused by someone's magic?"

"If so, we're dealing with a pretty powerful sorcerer. You have to be extremely advanced in order to manipulate weather patterns."

Benjamin sat for a moment, pursing his lips while he was thinking. Then he looked back at Kenda. "What if it was Dr. Mortimer?"

"I don't see how."

"Well, think about it. He has vampires and possibly other creatures of darkness coming after him in an effort to keep him from curing the undead. Thomas, as a vampire your senses are incredibly heightened, right?"

Thomas nodded. "Vampires can see clearly in darkness, smell things up to a mile away, and the taste of anything is almost orgasmic. That's part of the reason why we crave blood so much."

"To mask himself from the vampires, Dr. Mortimer would have to be incredibly powerful. Considering how much power we were channeling in the vortex, it probably rang out some paranormal alarm to him indicating someone was using magic to track him down. He might have raised that storm to stop us. Come to think of it, if he has that kind of power, he might have been able to manipulate that mimic and have it go to Phoenix for the purpose of killing Turlock before he could reveal any more about where Dr. Mortimer he was."

Kenda rubbed her chin. "Interesting bit of reasoning, but that doesn't explain why the mimic broke into your house last night and tried to snatch the *Teuromenici*."

Benjamin chewed on that for a moment, and out of nowhere, the solution appeared. "Maybe there's a spell in the book to show me where he is. I was originally looking for a way to kill the mimic, but it's possible there is a spell to locate someone. It's possible the mimic might have been searching for a way to find Dr. Mortimer and exact its revenge. Another possibility is that Dr. Mortimer might have sent the mimic here to keep me from finding him."

"If you're right, Dr. Mortimer might have achieved the level of a supreme wizard. In order for him to be able to sense the thoughts and intentions of any random magician, he'd have to be at that level."

Thomas looked confused. "Wait a sec. I thought this Dr. Mortimer was just an alchemist."

Benjamin propped himself up. "That's what Turlock told me, but considering he was an evil, bloodsucking fiend with horrible fashion sense, I don't think we can take what he said as absolute truth."

"If this guy is as powerful as you two think, why is he even working on a cure for vampirism? Why doesn't he just kill us all instead of hiding in some dark hole?"

"He can't," Kenda said. "Vampires can only be killed certain ways. I could zap you with enough energy to blow up a four-story building, but regular energy can't kill you. It'll hurt you like Hell and most likely immobilize you for a long while, but the natural order of things states you can only be killed by sunlight, by fire, by your heart being pierced by wood, etc. Dr. Mortimer would still have to kill vampires one by one, and considering how most vamps like to hang out in cadres, it's likely he'd only be able to kill a dozen or so before the rest of the pack got the upper hand and drank him dry."

"Okay," Benjamin said. "We're dealing with a guy who can thwart any mystical or supernatural attempts to locate him. How exactly do we find him?"

Kenda handed a cup of tea to Benjamin. "By using deduction and reasoning. That's pretty much all we have. If we try to tap into one of the vortexes again, it could kill us."

Benjamin sighed. "You weren't able to gain *any* insight as to where he might be?"

"I was able to see trees in the crystal ball, but half of Flagstaff is pine forest. We could spend days, even weeks searching out there and not be able to find him."

"So, what's our next move?"

"For you, nothing," Thomas said firmly. "You need to rest for a day or two before you even think about chasing after Dr. Mortimer again. I called Eclipse and told them I wouldn't be in. I'm going to be your nursemaid tonight."

"Thomas, be serious! It's Friday night, so the club's going to be packed. You go on ahead. I'll be all right."

"Benjamin, it's no bother. The club will still be there tomorrow night or even Sunday, if need be."

"You love that club, Tommy. Next to basking in my radiant glory, it's what you love doing. I'm not comfortable with keeping you from it just to be my extremely sexy man-slave."

"But..."

"No buts. Just make me a couple of sandwiches and hand me the remote for the TV. I can manage."

Thomas sighed and stood up. "Ham or turkey?"

Benjamin grinned. "Surprise me."

Thomas walked out of the bedroom. Benjamin started to get up, but he only stood for a second before feeling dizzy and collapsing onto the bed.

"So, are you convinced yet that you need to take it easy for a while and gain your strength back?" Kenda asked.

"I hate being so dependent on others. I've been able to take care of myself for years."

"Benjamin, honey, I love you, but you can be a self-centered, stubborn pinhead some days."

"I beg your pardon?"

"All of this that you've been doing the last couple of days has been because you love Thomas, and you would sacrifice anything for him."

"Okay, I'm keeping up with you so far."

"The problem is, you can't see that he wants to do the same for you, that he is willing to sacrifice things for your benefit. Love is a two-way street. It's fine to give until it hurts, but there's nothing wrong with taking every once in a while."

Benjamin sighed. He hated it when Kenda was right.

"If I'm understanding correctly, you're saying I should stop being a macho asshole and let Thomas don the maid persona."

Kenda put up her hands. "Hey, what perversions you two conduct in your own bedroom are none of my business."

Benjamin shot Kenda a dirty look. She laughed and started toward the bedroom door.

Benjamin put his hand up. "Hey! Where are you running off to?"

"Someone has to dispose of those mimic remains. I'll come by tomorrow."

"Kenda, before you go, can I ask you something?"

"Sure. What?"

"If we're right about Dr. Mortimer, then he should be able to sense my thoughts, right?"

"Possibly. Why?"

"Well, he's been in hiding because he knows the vampires would kill him to keep him from getting the secret of the cure out to the world. If we could use the energy of a vortex to enhance the link, wouldn't it be possible to enhance my thoughts and possibly convince him I only want the cure for Thomas, and that I don't mean him any harm?"

"It's possible, but even so, you'd need to be at full strength for us to even try that. It's going to take a day or two for you to gain it all back."

"But it's possible, at least?"

Kenda nodded. "Tell you what. If you're back to normal on Sunday afternoon, we'll go to Boynton Canyon and try. Right now, the energies from the vortex at Bell Rock are too erratic from that storm. It'll take a lot more time for things to get back to normal there, and the vortex near the airport only enhances masculine energy. I wouldn't be able to help you with the spell if we went to that one."

"Boynton Canyon it is. I guess I'll see you on Sunday."

Kenda smiled and left the bedroom. A moment later, Thomas returned, carrying a plate with two turkey sandwiches.

"I'd better get dressed for work," Thomas said as he set the plate on the nightstand.

"Like Hell you will." Benjamin moved over and patted the spot on the bed where he had just been. "Get your sexy ass in this bed."

Thomas looked confused, but he slipped off his shoes and slowly crawled next to Benjamin. He kissed Benjamin and held him in his arms.

"May I ask what has changed your mind?"

"Kenda convinced me to stop being such a bitch and let you be the good shepherd caring for his little lamb."

"I can think of a couple ways that could be misinterpreted."

"I'm sure you can, but instead of grossing me out with those images, let's just watch movies and fall asleep in each other's arms."

Thomas brushed a strand of Benjamin's red hair aside. "I'm down with that."

Benjamin saw Kenda's Neon parked near the entrance to Boynton Canyon. Kenda was leaning against the hood with her arms folded. It was Sunday afternoon, and as promised, the two of them were about to try and use the vortex in an attempt to send a message to Dr. Mortimer.

As Benjamin stopped his Jeep and turned off the engine, Kenda said, "It's about time. We were supposed to meet at three, and it's almost four."

Benjamin blushed. "Sorry. I made the mistake of letting Thomas shower with me, and he... well..."

"TMI! Let's just get going and see if we can reach out and touch someone."

Benjamin bit his lip, eager to say he already had. Kenda pointed a finger at him and said, "Don't even think about it."

"Too late!" Benjamin put a hand to his mouth.

As they started hiking, Kenda said, "I swear! I've never heard of two guys having as much sex as you and Thomas do. You'd do it in a church if the crosses didn't burn Thomas."

"Who says we haven't?"

Kenda groaned. Benjamin was getting a kick from grossing Kenda out. After being bedridden for almost two whole days, he needed to get his thrills somehow.

"Hey, Kenda, I've been wondering something."

"What's that?"

"When the storm came up and blew me away, why didn't anything happen to you?"

"I've been thinking about that, and my best guess is that Dr. Mortimer was trying to destroy the crystal ball so I couldn't locate him. Because you were in direct contact with the crystal, the lightning bolt's force swept you up. Another possibility is that Dr. Mortimer was actually aiming at me, but since I was in direct contact with the vortex, the lightning bolt was deflected."

"Great. The next time we decide to do a spell together, remind me what a bad idea it is."

"You mean like what we're doing right now."

Benjamin stopped dead in his tracks. "I flew right into that one, didn't I?"

"Like a sparrow into a window."

Before long, the vortex area came into view. Benjamin could feel his power supercharging again. The energy made it feel like he'd never been injured at all. It felt so good, although he felt a tinge of regret that Thomas couldn't be out there with him right now.

"We're here," Benjamin said.

"We are. Now set up some of these branches in a circle."

Kenda gave Benjamin a dozen juniper branches. Like the trees around Bell Rock, these branches were twisted in line with the vortex's energy swirls. He proceeded to set up the branches as Kenda instructed.

"Okay," Benjamin said as he finished. "Now what do we do?"

Kenda took off her jacket and tossed it near where she had set her backpack. "What we're trying to do is enhance the parts of your mind that focus on Thomas. In order for Dr. Mortimer to understand that we mean him no harm, you need to think of something that's in line with your ultimate goal. Now, do you have any special recurring fantasy about you and Thomas if he were to become mortal again?"

"I'm guessing it should be something romantic and not pornographic."

Kenda sighed. "Sit inside the circle and start fantasizing. I'm going to start saying the spell, and I swear, if I hear you moaning like a dog in heat, I'll kick you in the head."

Benjamin laughed as he sat amongst the juniper branches. Kenda floated about thirty feet into the air. Benjamin closed his eyes as Kenda started to chant.

"Powers of the clan, hear my command. Take from Benjamin's mind a thought so grand. Give it strength; give it flight. Send it to Dr. Mortimer this night."

"Kenda, it's mid-afternoon."

"Concentrate, Benjamin! It's just an expression. Now keep thinking that fantasy. If we've done it right, a ball of energy should leave your head soon and go to Dr. Mortimer."

Benjamin focused on his ultimate fantasy of Thomas. In it, Thomas was standing on a cliff near the Clifftop Nature Trail as Benjamin was slowly ascending. The red rocks shone more brightly than ever, and the normally quiet river that ran through Slide Rock State Park sounded like Niagara Falls. The sunlight illuminated Thomas, who was wearing a white shirt and tan pants. The wind blew through Thomas' hair, which flew wildly since it was not in a ponytail.

As Benjamin reached Thomas, he said, "I've always wanted to share this beautiful place with you."

Smiling, Thomas said, "And now you can. I'm mortal again because you helped to free me. We can spend every day in the light, and we can share the beauty that before I could not enter."

Embracing Thomas, Benjamin said, "I love you, Tommy."

"And I love you, Benjamin."

Benjamin's lips met Thomas' in a kiss. He could feel Thomas' tongue slowly start to penetrate his mouth and connect with his own tongue. Thomas' arms held Benjamin tightly as they moved around his body. Benjamin, still in a lip-lock, unbuttoned Thomas' shirt and pulled it off his muscular body. The sunlight enhanced every detail.

"Benjamin?"

"Yes, Tommy?"

"Would you marry me? You've already made me the happiest man on earth. I would consider it a high honor if you would let me proclaim that before everyone."

Benjamin gasped. "Yes. Yes, I will marry you."

Thomas grabbed Benjamin and ran with him down the trail to an apple tree. Thomas picked one of the beautiful red bulbs of fruit and handed it to Benjamin. Looking at it, Benjamin was about to take a bite when he heard a voice in the distance.

"Benjamin? Benjamin, can you hear me? Come back to me."

It was Kenda's voice. Realizing he was still in the fantasy, Benjamin willed himself back into the real world. He opened his eyes and saw Kenda kneeling in front of him, holding his shoulders.

"Boy, Benjamin, when you go into a trance, you don't leave a forwarding address, do you?"

Benjamin looked around. The sun had gone down, and a few stars were appearing in the sky. Things felt different somehow.

"Kenda, how long was I in that trance?"

As Kenda started gathering the juniper branches, she replied, "Almost three hours. If you don't mind me asking, where were you?"

Benjamin stood up and dusted himself off. "I was at Slide Rock, near that one trail that overlooks the park. Thomas asked me to marry him."

"Wow. That's beautiful. I hope you get to live that fantasy someday."

Kenda put the branches in her backpack. She pulled on her jacket and said, "Let's go home."

"Wait a sec. What happens now? I thought we were supposed to be contacting Dr. Mortimer."

"No. We were just sending a message. If Dr. Mortimer got it, he should be contacting you soon."

"Hopefully it's not to send another mimic or otherworldly creature to kill me or my friends."

Benjamin and Kenda walked back to their vehicles. They said goodbye to each other, and Benjamin started to drive for home. As he was waiting at a stoplight, he glanced over toward the passenger seat and noticed an apple sitting there. He picked it up, and it fell into two halves. Inside was a slip of paper. Uncurling it, Benjamin read, "I got your message."

Benjamin held his breath. The spell had worked! Now the question was when Dr. Mortimer would contact him to arrange a meeting. For the last couple of days, there had been nagging doubt in his mind as to whether he could ever find Dr. Mortimer, but that doubt was gone now that there was proof he had made contact.

A honking horn behind Benjamin made him realize the light had turned green, and he quickly drove ahead, eager to get home. As he pulled into the driveway, he looked at the slip of paper again, just to be sure he wasn't imagining things. It said the same thing.

Benjamin walked into the house and turned on a light. Thomas had left for Eclipse already. Benjamin debated whether he should go to the club and give Thomas the good news, but he decided against it, considering how protective Thomas had been the last time he went to the club. Benjamin walked into the kitchen and set his keys on the counter. He looked over at the answering machine and saw it was blinking. He pushed the playback button and heard the digitized voice say, "You have two new messages."

After hearing the beep, Thomas' voice came up, saying, "Hey, baby. I just wanted to let you know that I baked an apple pie for you. I hope you enjoy it."

Benjamin smiled. "I am one lucky man."

Then the second message came up. "Mr. Carpenter. I'm Samuel Mortimer. I want to talk to you about my latest discovery. I shall meet with you sometime tomorrow. Please be sure to enjoy your apple."

Chapter 7

"You know, Tommy, you don't have to sit up with me. I know you need to get some rest before work tonight."

Benjamin sat on the kitchen counter as Thomas perched on a stool. They were waiting for the long-sought arrival of Dr. Mortimer. It was now after two o'clock in the afternoon, and Benjamin was really getting nervous.

"Don't worry about it, sweetie. The truth is, I can't sleep. I'm just as eager to meet this supernatural medicine man as you are."

Thomas put a hand on Benjamin's thigh. Benjamin closed his eyes and moaned. He couldn't help it. He was still a little hypersensitive to the fantasy he had entered into at the vortex yesterday, and it was like he hadn't reached his climax.

"So," Thomas said, obviously aware that his honey was horny, "what did we do after I gave you that apple?"

Benjamin felt his cheeks burning. Thomas had needled him for more than an hour last night about the fantasy he'd created, and now he couldn't shut up about it.

"How many times do I have to tell you that I don't know? It was at that point Kenda pulled me out."

"But you said you've had this fantasy before. I want to know how it continued previously."

"Why do you want to know so bad?"

"Because my Sunday just plain sucked. The club was almost empty, and the most excitement I had was when a couple of intoxicated Hessicans threw up on each other simultaneously, and Lord Draca threatened to banish them to Erb. Where is Erb, anyway?"

"I think it's the Hessican version of Purgatory. Or Hell. I'd have to research it."

There was a knock on the front door. Benjamin gasped. He couldn't move for a moment. Behind that door was the answer to a prayer, but he was still having difficulty willing his legs to move.

Thomas looked at Benjamin. "Sweetie, only one of us can answer that door in the middle of the afternoon. If I open it, Dr. Mortimer's long and dangerous journey will have been for nothing."

Benjamin stood up, determined, and marched to the front door. As he opened it, he said, "Dr. Mortimer, I..."

It wasn't Dr. Mortimer. Ivan and Kenda stood on the stoop, both with wide grins.

"Hey, Benjamin," Kenda said. "We were having a hard time focusing on work, so we thought we'd come over and wait for Dr. Mortimer with you."

Ivan rolled his eyes. "The only reason I couldn't focus on my work was because Kenda kept calling me every two minutes asking if I had heard from you. I'm seriously glad I'm not into girls, if this is how they are."

Benjamin slapped his forehead. "Would you two hurry up and get in here? If Dr. Mortimer were to see you guys, he'd probably spook and never come back."

Kenda and Ivan hurried inside as Benjamin slammed the door. The three of them walked into the kitchen.

"Hey, Thomas. Look who came to get our hopes up only to dash them into a million pieces?"

Thomas folded his arms. "How do you two make a living? You're always over here."

Kenda and Ivan looked at each other, and then back at Thomas. Then they both said in unison, "Nuh-uh!"

Benjamin sighed. As much as he loved his friends, their untimely appearance complicated things.

Kenda took an apple out of her pocket and handed it to Benjamin. "By the way, you left this in your Jeep. Figured I'd better bring it in before it started to rot."

Benjamin looked the apple over. "That's funny. I ate the apple Dr. Mortimer left in my Jeep last night. Where could this one have..."

That's when it hit him. Like the last apple, it separated into two pieces, and a slip of paper fell out. Benjamin picked it up and read it.

"It says, 'Meet me in your fantasy.' What could that mean?"

Kenda rubbed her chin. "It might mean we have to put you under a trance again."

"That means heading back to the vortex in Boynton Canyon."

Thomas stood up. "Wait, we might be taking this too literally. What if he means meeting him where the fantasy takes place? He's probably at Slide Rock State Park right now."

"Then I'd better get going." Benjamin kissed Thomas on the cheek. "I'll be back soon, maybe with the cure."

"We're coming with you," Kenda said.

"That's a bad idea. If he sees you guys with me, he might take off."

"And if you're dealing with a supreme wizard like we think, he might try to kill you if he's not convinced you're on the up-and-up. You might need someone to pull you out of there."

Thomas snickered. "Kenda, no offense, but it's going to take more than a gypsy curse to stop a supreme wizard, and as for Ivan, what's he going to do? Stuff a comic book down his throat?"

Thomas, Kenda and Ivan all started to talk at once. Rubbing his temple, Benjamin bellowed, "Enough!" That put an end to the noise. "Kenda, Ivan, you're coming with me, but you're staying in the Jeep when we get there. Now, let's go before this guy dies of boredom."

Benjamin looked up the path leading to the Clifftop Nature Trail. Most days, Slide Rock State Park was one of Sedona's most beautiful features and most popular tourist attractions. Today, the tourists were visiting in droves like always, but it felt like the scariest place on earth to Benjamin.

He sat on the hood of his Jeep, pondering whether he should go. Kenda and Ivan were sitting inside.

"Benjamin, you do realize that Dr. Mortimer is probably not going to come to you," Kenda said.

"I was just thinking about what you said about him using his powers. What should I do if that happens?"

Ivan stood up in the Jeep and leaned on the windshield. "Why don't you just send up one of those doppelganger duplicates you can create?"

"I can't have my astral projection wander the whole park. My powers wouldn't hold out that long."

Just then, a squirrel jumped onto the hood of the Jeep with a nut in its paws. That's when Benjamin got an idea.

Besides the astral projecting and the ability to conjure fireballs, Benjamin had the power to communicate with animals. If he could make contact with the squirrel, he might be able to pinpoint where Dr. Mortimer was.

Benjamin slowly leaned toward the squirrel, hoping not to startle it. "Hey there, gentle squirrel," he said aloud. "I need your help. I'm looking for someone. Would you know where he is?"

The squirrel looked at Benjamin for a moment, then nodded.

"He's a stranger to these parts. He is probably keeping to the shadows, and he is very powerful, so be careful, my furry friend."

With that, the squirrel leaped off the Jeep and scrambled toward a grove of apple trees. Benjamin folded his arms and closed his eyes.

"Now what are you doing?" Ivan asked.

"I'm trying to keep connected to the squirrel. That way, once he finds the doctor, I can head up there."

"I can't get over how you can do stuff like that. It's kind of freaky."

"It's family tradition. If I have any heirs, they will be able to practice magic, too."

"Will they still have the same active powers as you?"

"They usually inherit one power from each magical parent and then develop a couple of others on their own. I got the fireballs from my dad and the astral projection from my mother. My mother could also freeze things with a wave of her hand, which might be why my dad referred to her as the ice queen."

Ivan turned to Kenda. "Is it the same way with the gypsies?"

"Not quite," Kenda said. "You inherit one active power from your parents, usually from the mother. That's how I inherited my healing power. You usually receive another power when you hit puberty and one more through a ceremony once you become an adult."

"So, how is it determined what additional powers you get? Is there like some magical overseers in the heavens that say, 'Benjamin Carpenter, thou shalt share gossip with Rocky and Bullwinkle'?"

Benjamin heard a chime go off in his mind. He opened his eyes and jumped off the hood.

"Hold that thought, Ivan, because 'Rocky' just found our mad scientist. He's up near the apple barn."

Benjamin grabbed his backpack and started for the trail.

"Benjamin, do you want us to come along?" Kenda asked.

Benjamin stopped and turned back. "You'd better stay here, since he doesn't know you guys. I'll let you know if I need backup."

"How?"

"Look for the fireball in the air."

Benjamin started to run up the trail, passing the park store and heading into the grove of trees. He didn't have any idea when Dr. Mortimer had left that last apple, and he didn't want to take the chance that the doctor might give up and leave. After scrambling up a rock face, the old apple barn was in sight. He stopped near the barn door and looked around.

Since Dr. Mortimer was on the lam, calling out his name didn't seem prudent, so Benjamin just said, "I'm here."

An apple fell and bounced off Benjamin's head before rolling to the ground. Benjamin rubbed his head. Then he noticed it had split into two pieces. Dr. Mortimer was sure taking this apple thing to the extreme. Benjamin picked up the apple. There was no slip of paper, but carved on one piece was the word "INSIDE."

Dropping the apple, Benjamin opened the barn door. He took three steps inside before the door slammed shut behind him. It was fairly dark, so Benjamin conjured a fireball to illuminate the barn, but a gust of wind blew the flame out.

Benjamin was about to conjure another one when a voice echoed through the barn. "Please don't do that again."

"So, we're just going to stand here in the dark."

There was a long pause, then the voice said, "I don't want you to see me just yet. I'm not sure if I can trust you."

"You must have some trust in me. Otherwise you wouldn't have come to Sedona and asked me to meet with you. Why are you afraid?"

"Because the name Dr. Mortimer is not very popular in undead society right now. For all I know, you could be under someone else's control."

"If that were true, Dr. Mortimer, you would be in a bad position right now. I could conjure up enough fire to burn this barn to the ground, and you would be trapped inside."

"As would you. Are you willing to take the chance that you would perish as well?"

"I'm willing to do whatever it takes to make my beloved mortal again," Benjamin said firmly. "If I have to die to make it happen, so be it. You've been in my head. You know I'm telling the truth."

"Indeed." Then there was silence.

Benjamin was worried. Had he angered Dr. Mortimer? Truth be known, Benjamin was tired of the cat-and-mouse game they were playing. If Dr. Mortimer had the cure, it would seem like he'd want it to be used.

"Dr. Mortimer?" No response. "Dr. Mortimer, are you still here?"

There was only one way to find out. Benjamin conjured up a fireball, and this time, there was no gust of wind to blow it out. He looked around the barn, but he was the only person there. He sighed. This whole trip seemed to have been a waste of time.

Benjamin walked out of the barn and sat down on the ground near the door. Even with everything that had happened, the feeling that he would find the cure had never wavered. Now that he'd been face to face -- albeit in a darkened barn -- with the man who had devised the greatest mystical cure ever, and come up with nothing to show for it, Benjamin began to wonder if he would ever find a way to make Thomas' wish come true.

After a minute, he saw someone on the Clifftop Nature Trail heading his way. Benjamin squinted his eyes to try and make out who it was. He was wearing a white shirt, untucked, and white pants. Benjamin gasped when he saw who it was.

It was Thomas!

But it couldn't be.

"Hey there, baby," Thomas said as he stood above Benjamin. "Have an apple?"

Thomas pulled out an apple from behind his back and handed it to Benjamin. Benjamin smiled, but it was a superficial smile. It was time to end this game. He stood up, opened his backpack, and pulled out the box containing the wolf's bane. He pulled a couple of small leaves out and started to chant.

"Bane of wolf, hear my cries, enter this man and paralyze."

The wolf's bane flew from Benjamin's hand and entered Thomas' nostrils. He coughed and hacked, falling to the ground. After Thomas stopped moving, he changed into a human. The man was dark-haired, with a few flecks of gray interspersed. He wore a green sweater and a checkered shirt with brown pants and black loafers. He definitely looked like a university professor.

Benjamin knelt down and looked at his paralyzed quarry. "Dr. Mortimer, I presume?"

"You've paralyzed me! How could you best me?"

"Wolf's bane. It'll keep you paralyzed for a short time. Of course, I'm not quite sure if it will wear off by the time it gets dark, so it might be in your best interest to start talking and quit yanking my chain."

"What do you mean?"

"Is there actually a cure for vampirism, or were you just trying to conduct a little experiment to see how many vampires you could get to soil themselves when they heard about it?"

"There is a cure. Do you seriously think I would say something like that knowing the bloodsuckers would come out in force?"

"So, why all the secrecy? Why all the efforts to try and stop me?"

"You wouldn't understand."

Benjamin lowered himself until his face was inches from Dr. Mortimer's. "Look, Doc. I've had a mimic break into my house, I've been thrown into rock faces, and I've been chasing one supernatural freak after another. I'm getting tired of all these games. Now, either you be straight up with me, or I'll just leave you out here like a three-course buffet for the vamps to dine on."

Benjamin sat up straight again. Dr. Mortimer grunted like he was trying to move, but only slight vibrations occurred. This kept on for almost three minutes before Dr. Mortimer finally said, "What would you like to know?"

"Will you help me cure Thomas?"

Dr. Mortimer sighed. "I guess I have little choice. It's going to take some time to put it all together, though."

"Why is that?"

"There's an ingredient in the cure that's not from this dimension. I have to go through a portal to get it, but you can only access it when there's a full moon."

Benjamin's face dropped. "You're not talking about the Phobos dimension, are you? That place is like the corporate headquarters of Evil, Incorporated."

"I see you're familiar with it. There's a rare plant called vim wood that is the key ingredient to driving out the demon side of vampires. They actually have an allergic reaction of sorts."

"Would it have an adverse effect on mimics, too?"

"Yes, especially if they're impersonating vampires. When mimics change into other creatures, it's right down to the DNA. If a mimic turned into a werewolf, you could kill it with a silver bullet just as if it were the real thing."

Dr. Mortimer grunted. Benjamin surmised that the wolf's bane must have been spreading to paralyze the vocal cords. He lifted Dr. Mortimer up.

"Hang on, doctor. We'll head back to my place, and you should be safe there."

Benjamin was about to raise his hand to shoot a fireball and signal Kenda and Ivan, but Dr. Mortimer began to chant.

"Portal now open... open wide... Send us to a... a place where we... can hide."

The air around Benjamin and Dr. Mortimer began to ripple. The apple barn and everything around it disappeared, replaced by the tight quarters of Benjamin's kitchen. The sensation of transporting to a new location so suddenly was too much for Benjamin's nervous system. His legs buckled, and he and Dr. Mortimer fell to the floor.

Thomas, who had been standing at the refrigerator holding a glass with animal blood in it, stared in disbelief at what had just happened. He turned his attention to the glass in his hand, eyeing it suspiciously like it was drugged.

Turning back to Benjamin, he said, "Sweetie, what just happened?"

Benjamin took a moment to catch his breath, then replied, "Dr. Mortimer just teleported us here from the park."

Thomas set the blood down and helped Benjamin to stand again. "Are you going to be all right?"

"I feel a little dizzy, but everything is starting to feel normal again."

Thomas looked down at Dr. Mortimer. "We should probably put him on the couch or something. What did you do to him?"

"Nailed him with some wolf's bane. It'll wear off in a few hours."

Thomas and Benjamin carried Dr. Mortimer to the couch and set him in the middle. He tipped over on his side, and Benjamin positioned him so he was looking up, to avoid the risk of suffocation.

"I should find a way to get back to Slide Rock and let Kenda and Ivan know what happened."

Just then, the front door slammed, and Kenda and Ivan walked into the living room.

"Who the Hell just teleported us back here?" Kenda asked, her eyes blazing.

Benjamin pointed to Dr. Mortimer. "Meet our new best friend."

Kenda tilted her head to the side. "He looks kind of catatonic."

"Mister Wizard was playing mind games with me, so I zapped him with some wolf's bane."

Kenda rolled her eyes. "Benjamin, you'd better be careful with that stuff. You could kill a human if you use too much, remember?"

"I'm not an idiot, Kenda."

Ivan waved his hands. "Forget about the foxglove, or whatever you call it. Is this guy going to help?"

Benjamin smiled. "Yeah, he is. If we're lucky, in a few days, Thomas can go outside and get himself a tan."

Chapter 8

Benjamin slathered some butter onto a piece of toast. He picked up his mug and drank some incredibly strong coffee. He'd had some trouble sleeping last night. Being so close to curing Thomas without completing the act was maddening.

Dr. Mortimer had recovered from the effects of the wolf's bane, and he was placed in the spare bedroom. At the moment, Benjamin couldn't think of a safer place for the professor to be. Of course, with the powers Dr. Mortimer had, it was hard for Benjamin to fathom why he needed to hide. Then again, he was still trying to figure out why Dr. Mortimer even wanted to come up with a cure for vampirism. All this thinking was hurting his brain.

"Good morning, beautiful."

Benjamin turned toward the entryway and saw Thomas standing there, wearing track pants and nothing else. Thomas' hair was tied back in its usual ponytail.

"Hey, cutie. I thought you'd be deep in Dreamland by now."

"I just sensed you had some stuff on your mind. When I came home from work, you were really tossing and turning. Do you want to talk about it?"

Benjamin sighed. "I don't know. Part of me is frustrated because we're so close to the cure, but until it actually happens, it doesn't seem real. Part of me is worried that the cure doesn't really exist, and this guy is just jerking us around. And then..."

Benjamin looked away from Thomas, turning his gaze to the coffee pot.

"And then what? Come on, Benjamin. You know you can tell me anything."

"I sometimes wonder if curing you would do more harm than good. I mean, you have heightened skills and abilities as a vampire, which you've been for more than three hundred years. It's an aspect of your identity, of your being. Even though I know vampire usually equals bad, I feel like we'd be taking a lot of your goodness away if we cured you." Benjamin bit his lip and shook his head as he turned back to Thomas. "I guess I can't fully comprehend what you go through because I'm not a vamp."

Thomas sat down on a stool next to the kitchen island. "It's true. You don't know, and I pray every day you never have the misfortune to find out. Sure, I'm good, but it takes a lot of energy and concentration. I can feel the demon inside me... all the time. I know what it's like to have the monster rear its ugly head. When I was first damned, I did some awful, horrific things. In the early seventeen-hundreds, I traveled to London, and it was at that time when a lot of young men in their early twenties started disappearing. They disappeared because I killed them."

Benjamin lowered his head, feeling slightly queasy at Thomas' revelation.

"I would stalk them, catch them unaware, violate them, and then sink my teeth into them," Thomas continued. "I turned a few into vampires like me, but I just drained most of the men dry."

Being a vampire means having this persistent hunger, a never-ending cry for blood that can be deafening at times. Even when I have it under control, I hear it; I feel it. When you and I make love, I let my guard down, and that's why I'm sometimes on the verge of biting you."

Benjamin walked over to the counter as Thomas continued to speak, taking his hand and stroking it.

"Benjamin, I want to stop hiding in the shadows because the light of day could flambé me. When I make love to you, I want to lose myself in the moment without becoming a danger to your life. I want to make love to you on a beach during a hot summer day, in a meadow as a spring rain starts to fall, but I can't because of what I am. As useful as my immortality is, it keeps me from being close to the only man I've ever truly loved. It keeps you from ever truly being mine. Does that make any sense at all?"

Benjamin smiled. "It does. I just needed some assurance that I was doing the right thing."

"I've always trusted your judgment. You are wise beyond your years and capable of so much."

"I just got to thinking about all these mystical and paranormal abilities I have, and I know I'd be afraid to have them taken away."

"That's because you're still human. I lost my humanity in 1699, and when I see how you use yours every day, I want that part of me back."

"Having that desire makes you a lot more human than you think. Letting your love for me overcome your carnal desires makes you better than many of your undead brethren. If you ever doubt that, always remember that I love you, no matter what you are."

Thomas stood up and leaned over the counter. He pulled Benjamin's face to his and kissed his warm, moist lips. Benjamin crawled on top of the counter as Thomas sat back on the stool, both of their mouths still passionately exploring each other.

Benjamin climbed onto Thomas' lap. "After eight years together, it still feels brand new when I'm with you."

Thomas raised an eyebrow. "Are you saying that I make love like I'm inexperienced?"

Benjamin kissed Thomas on the nose. "You know that's not what I mean. I just mean the sex has never seemed routine, normal, stale. You always take me to different places."

"Well, sometimes you do the driving. Take that night the mimic broke in, for example. You did everything to me except make me say who my daddy was. I couldn't believe how supercharged you were."

"I really did go to town on you. You were so exhausted when we finished, I thought you'd sleep for a couple of days. I couldn't help myself. You just looked so luscious."

"We are an interesting pair, aren't we?" Thomas licked the nape of Benjamin's neck. "I can't think of a human-vampire relationship that has lasted as long as ours."

"That's because most human-vampire relationships end with either the human being dinner or the vampire wearing a permanent wooden brooch."

"True. I guess I just have the patience of a saint."

"Either that, or it's the knowledge that I could fry you with a mere whim."

Thomas brought Benjamin closer to his bosom. "I'm just glad we never have to test that."

A knock came from the archway. Dr. Mortimer was awake. Benjamin got off Thomas' lap.

"Dr. Mortimer, how did you sleep?"

"It's been a while since I've been put under the effects of wolf's bane. That reminds me..." Dr. Mortimer waved his hand, and the box containing the wolf's bane appeared in midair. As suddenly as it appeared, the box imploded on itself, folding like a collapsing deck of cards. "If you ever hit me with wolf's bane or any other magical object or spell, that will be you next time, Mr. Carpenter. Do we understand each other?"

Benjamin blinked, and then replied, "Got it, so long as you don't knock me into any more rock faces or imitate my boyfriend."

Dr. Mortimer bowed his head once to indicate he was in agreement.

Thomas stood up and moved next to Benjamin. "I'm curious, Dr. Mortimer. With that kind of power, why do you need to hide? Vampires wouldn't stand a chance against you."

"Not every vampire is the free-thinking, independent spirit you are, Mr. Nighthawk. Some of them are minions for very powerful beings -- beings who could squash me as easily as I destroyed that box just now."

"So why even try to come up with a cure for vampirism? It seems like you'd want to avoid pissing those kinds of individuals off."

"I'm simply trying to restore a little balance to the universe. Most paranormal beings are that way naturally. Your boyfriend's mystical powers come from a family lineage. You, on the other hand, were just an ordinary person until a predatory monster came along and sucked out the being you used to be, replacing it with something different. Mr. Nighthawk, it was not your destiny to become an immortal bloodsucker to roam the world for all eternity. I can't give you back the life you would have had in the seventeenth century, had you lived. However, I can let your life come to a natural conclusion by giving you back your humanity."

Benjamin put an arm around Thomas. "So, let's make it happen, Doc. As much as I love this man, he needs a tan badly."

"Most of the ingredients are relatively simple," Dr. Mortimer replied. "We'll need some various herbs, but there are a couple of items that are rare and difficult to come by. Are you familiar with the liquid known as the essence of midnight?"

Benjamin and Thomas both gasped. Both were very familiar with what essence of midnight was. The dark liquid had the ability to enhance the senses, but it could also be very volatile when mixed with other mystical herbs and chemicals.

"What on earth would possess you to toy with essence of midnight?" Thomas asked. "That stuff is like tossing a hand grenade into a henhouse if you use it wrong."

"Yes, but mixed with the powdered version of hawk's claw and a few other ingredients, it can cure you of your immortal hunger."

Benjamin picked up a piece of paper from the counter and handed it to Dr. Mortimer. "Write down the herbs you'll need, and I'll see if Kenda has them stocked."

"That works. You can collect the herbs while I go through a portal to get the vim wood, and we'll meet back here in a few hours."

"I thought you couldn't open a portal to the Phobos dimension until the full moon," Benjamin said. "The moon doesn't rise until 6:24 PM."

"Not here, but it is after six in Paris. I think after I get the vim wood, I'll stop off somewhere and get some fries."

Benjamin raised an eyebrow. There was something about all this that seemed odd, but he couldn't put his finger on it.

Kenda's eyes looked like they were about to jump out of her head and run screaming into the hot Arizona desert. Benjamin knew that she was going to lose it when she saw a couple of the ingredients on Dr. Mortimer's list, but her expression at the moment was extreme, even for her.

"Benjamin, honey, you know I love you as much as a gypsy can love a flaming queen, but are you trying to get us all killed?"

"I realize this isn't your run-of-the-mill concoction, but if these ingredients were commonly put together, everyone would have the cure for vampirism."

"Come on, Benjamin. Even you realize how dangerous essence of midnight can be. There's something I don't trust about this guy."

"Kenda, I don't completely trust him, either. Still, he's the closest thing we've got to a cure for Thomas."

Kenda folded her arms. "Says who? Have you seen any of the cured vampires Dr. Mortimer has tested his magical elixir on? So Turlock thought this guy had a cure. I can spread a rumor that you're really a werewolf, but that doesn't make it true. There are way too many loose threads for this to be anything but suspicious."

"I know you think I'm letting my personal feelings blind me to this, but what sense does it make to say you have a cure when you don't? It's pure suicide."

"Benjamin, this guy warped you, me, and Ivan back to your house in the blink of an eye. He created a storm through sheer will and shoved a lightning bolt up your..."

"Okay, I get your point. If this guy is a quack, we need some proof. The question is: How do we get it?"

"We enlist a nerd. I'll bet Ivan could find out some information about this guy."

"That's one avenue. I was also thinking that Thomas could talk to Lord Draca. Even though the Hessicans look down on humans, a supreme wizard like Dr. Mortimer would probably still make an impression."

"Well, we should probably make our calls while we're on the road." Kenda held up the list. "I have everything on this list except for Mormon tea."

Benjamin chuckled. "So what do we do? Drive to a Mormon temple and see if they have any in stock?"

Kenda rolled her eyes. "No, you loon! Mormon tea is..."

"I know what it is. It's a plant that grows in deserts. It has a lot of healing properties. I was just messing with you."

"It also can be used to make ephedrine, which is almost like a substitute for adrenaline. I also read that it helps to treat venereal diseases, thus its nickname 'whorehouse tea.'"

Benjamin did a double take. "Really? Do the Mormons know that?"

"I don't know. I've never asked."

"So where do we find the plants?"

"They grow all over Arizona, but the purest Mormon tea I've ever found is in a secluded meadow on the Navajo reservation. It'll take about two hours to get there, but it's a beautiful day to go."

"Just as long as we don't have to perform another spell at a vortex."

"Doubt it. I just have to woo a Navajo medicine man." Kenda pulled out her backpack from behind the counter and started to fill it with herbal bottles. "We'll drop these other ingredients off at your house before we leave for the rez."

Before long, Benjamin and Kenda were on their way to Benjamin's house. During the drive, Benjamin called Ivan to see if he could surf the Web to find out what he could about Dr. Mortimer. Ivan said his store was relatively quiet, so he figured he had plenty of time to search.

The moment Benjamin got off the phone with Ivan, he and Kenda arrived at his house. Benjamin briefed Thomas on where they were going and asked if he could get in contact with Lord Draca. Thomas said he would try, but it was not easy to reach the Hessicans outside of the club.

After grabbing several bottles of water, Benjamin and Kenda got back on the road, destined for the reservation. Kenda told Benjamin they were bound for Ganado, where the Hubbell Trading Post was located. Near the post was where Kenda usually gathered her supply of Mormon tea.

Little was said during the two-hour drive from Sedona to Ganado, which gave Benjamin plenty of time to think. He knew there was a strong possibility that Kenda was right about Dr. Mortimer, but there was still the chance that Thomas' dream of being mortal again was in sight. He was torn between making the ultimate sacrifice for the man he loved and possibly plunging his lover further into darkness. Right now, he would have loved to have something fall out of the sky labeled "The Answer" and tell him whether he was doing the right thing.

Kenda broke the silence. "You know, if I'd known you were going to be this dull a traveling companion, Benjamin, I would have taken this trip alone."

Benjamin sighed. "Sorry. I'm just wondering what my life has come to. This guy might not even really have a cure, but here I am fetching herbs and spices for him. I should just tell this guy to fuck off."

"It's not a total waste, Benjamin. I needed to replenish my supply of Mormon tea anyway, and it's better to do this with someone else in tow, in case something happens to me. Besides, I'd probably do the same thing, if it was someone I loved as much as you love Thomas."

"I do love him, Kenda. He has this effect on me. If I didn't love him so much, I never would have taken things this far."

Kenda pointed ahead as the Hubbell Trading Post came into view. "Okay, we just have to drive along Highway 264 for two miles until we see a metal gate. After I talk to the Navajo man who owns the land, we'll drive another quarter mile to the meadow where the Mormon tea grows most abundantly."

Benjamin nodded. It felt strange to be in a place that was so desolate. The Navajo reservation couldn't be beat for wide-open spaces, but it also felt incredibly lonely. As much fun as Kenda was, Benjamin wished Thomas were here right now to take away the feeling of being cut off from the rest of the world.

As the Jeep pulled onto a dirt road, Benjamin could see a round structure in the distance. Upon closer inspection, it appeared to be a hybrid of wood and adobe bricks. The front door faced eastward. A man with dark brown skin and a haggard face stepped outside the structure and watched as the vehicle approached. He wore a light blue shirt with tan pants. An assortment of beads adorned his neck, and a white bandana covered some of the man's gray hair, which was done up in a bun.

"That's Kenny Whitehorse," Kenda said. "He owns this land, but he's pretty good about letting me collect Mormon tea and some of the other herbs that grow wild on the reservation. I'll just be a moment."

Kenda stepped out of the Jeep the moment Benjamin brought it to a stop. She walked up to Mr. Whitehorse and spoke in a language Benjamin couldn't understand. Kenny nodded and responded in the same language. After a few minutes of talking, intertwined with the occasional laugh, Kenda waved farewell and returned to the Jeep.

"We're good to go," she said. "Just follow that path to the left."

Putting the Jeep back in gear, Benjamin carefully drove along the path, which was dry and full of ruts. A distance that would normally require thirty seconds to traverse turned into a five-minute trek. However, the view at the end of the path made the annoying bumps worth it.

Many of the Mormon tea shrubs were as tall as Benjamin, although several looked like they were fifteen feet high. Some of the shrubs had small, yellow flowers that appeared midway through the process of blooming. It looked like Kenda was right when she said this area appeared to have the best Mormon tea.

Benjamin and Kenda climbed out of the Jeep, and Kenda handed Benjamin several plastic bags from her backpack.

"You're looking for the greenest stems. They are the most potent," Kenda instructed. "It shouldn't take us too long to stock up, and then it's back to Sedona."

As Benjamin began to pull stems from some of the smaller shrubs, he asked, "What was that language you were speaking to the old man in? It didn't sound familiar to me."

"It's the traditional Diné language. I learned it a few years ago when I set up an herbal shop near Lake Powell."

"What is Diné?"

"That's a Navajo word meaning 'the people.' A lot of the Native American tribes call themselves by a 'people' term instead of by race or by color. Take the word 'Caucasian.' It's used to describe 'white,' but it's not a term that fully describes our people. I tend to see myself as Romanian or gypsy. You identify yourself as a member of the Itzhak clan."

"How did you learn the language?"

"I don't know a lot of Navajo, but I can squeak by in conversations. Diné is an extremely complex language, with different dialects depending on which part of the reservation you're at. Still, it's an incredibly beautiful language."

Benjamin chuckled. "So, you were living next to Lake Powell. What was that like?"

"Very strange. Beautiful scenery, but bizarre people."

"More bizarre than Sedona?"

Kenda clucked her tongue. "The sad thing is, folks up there don't need crystals and vortexes to make them crazy. They manage to be bonkers all on their own. I was considered the black sheep of the town because I was selling herbs instead of jet skis."

Benjamin laughed out loud, but his mirth stopped when he noticed everything was getting darker. The hillside had been bathed in brilliant sunlight just a few minutes ago, but it was almost as though something were covering the area. Benjamin glanced up toward the sun and saw a large circular shadow covering it.

Kenda put a hand on Benjamin's shoulder. "We're not due for a solar eclipse for another year and a half. Where could this be coming from?"

"Do you think this is being naturally caused?"

Kenda's expression was one of fear and apprehension. "We should probably wrap this up pretty quick. If there's an abnormal eclipse happening, then who knows what else is going on?"

Just then, a wild rabbit burst through one of the Mormon tea shrubs and bounded past Benjamin. As it did so, he was able to sense the rabbit's thoughts. He gasped.

"What's wrong?" Kenda asked.

Benjamin did not turn to face Kenda. With his eyes fixed forward on where the rabbit had been a moment ago, he said forcefully, "We have to leave... now!"

Kenda started putting the plastic bags with the Mormon tea in her backpack. "Benjamin, what is it? What did that rabbit tell you?"

"There's about a dozen vampires heading this way. Let's go."

Benjamin and Kenda turned toward the Jeep, ready to make a run for it. Both of them froze before taking a step, however, as they saw a dark, menacing figure crawling over the hood of the Jeep, fangs bared and eyes redder than blood.

Chapter 9

The vampire shrieked in agony as it staggered back toward the hills, enveloped in the flame that emanated from Benjamin's hand. He and Kenda were not about to wait around to see the vampire dissolve into a pile of ash, however. Both leaped into the Jeep, and Benjamin hastily turned the vehicle around to get back to the highway.

"I don't understand," Kenda said as she held on for dear life while Benjamin was traversing the rutty reservation road with a little more speed than most folks would dare. "It's only three o'clock in the afternoon. How can vampires be out here at this time of day?"

"It's the eclipse. With the sun covered by the moon's shadow, there's no light to fry the bloodsuckers."

"But we're not supposed to be having an eclipse now. How is it possible?"

"Oh, it's possible if you're a powerful wizard who can create storms out of thin air and shoot lightning bolts at people."

Kenda's eyes looked like they were about to bug out of their head. "Dr. Mortimer?"

"Seems a tad suspicious that he's not around as this unnatural phenomenon is taking place, don't you think?"

"But why would he do it?"

"That's one of the questions I plan to ask him once we get back to Sedona, assuming he hasn't pulled an abracadabra and gone back into hiding."

"Anything I can do to help?"

Benjamin sighed. "Unless you know how to reverse an eclipse, I'd say just hold on tight."

Kenda thought for a moment. "Let me try something." She cleared her throat and continued, "Lunar sphere, leave from here. Bring what is night back into light."

Both she and Benjamin held their breath as they waited for sunlight to pour back into the valley. Nothing happened.

Kenda shrugged and turned to face Benjamin. "It was worth a shot."

"I think I know of something else you could do."

"What's that?"

"Take the wheel. The vampires have caught up with us."

Kenda looked forward again and yelped. Seven vampires were blocking the path to the highway. Sounds of a struggle turned Kenda and Benjamin's attention to the adobe building. There was another vampire wrestling with Mr. Whitehorse, and the medicine man was losing.

Benjamin brought the Jeep to a halt. He conjured up an astral projection of himself and made it appear behind the vampire. The projection tapped the vampire on the shoulder.

"Hey, fang boy! Your mother likes to shtup Frankenstein!"

The vampire let go of Mr. Whitehorse and turned toward Benjamin's astral self. With a growl, he leaped at the projection, which disappeared. The vampire crashed to the ground.

As the monster got his second wind and stood to face the Jeep, Benjamin was sitting in his seat with a smile on his face and a sphere of flame in his hand. He flung it at the vampire, hitting the creature squarely in the chest. An inhuman shriek escaped the vampire's lips before he disintegrated before Benjamin's eyes.

Kenda hurried over to Mr. Whitehorse, who had been bitten by the vampire. Using her healing powers, she closed up the bleeding bite marks. She helped the Navajo elder to his feet.

"Hey, Benjamin. Do you have a plan to get us out of this?"

Benjamin turned from Kenda to the gang of vampires -- who were moving closer -- and then back to Kenda again as he tried to think of an escape. Ramming the vampires with the Jeep would do little good, as it would only stun them for a moment. Retreating to the hills would surely get him and Kenda killed, as they'd be boxed in. He might be able to take out three, possibly four vampires with fireballs, but the other ones would overtake him in a matter of seconds. Kenda did not have any special powers that could be used as an offense.

Then he figured out how to stop all the vampires. Standing up in his Jeep, he began to chant.

"Branches of the pinion trees, pierce the hearts of my enemies."

The crackle of snapping branches on a pinion tree next to Mr. Whitehorse's home echoed across the land. Several of the branches shot toward the vampires, hitting them squarely in the heart. All seven vampires fell to the ground and lay motionless.

Kenda bit her lip. "Nice spell, chief. I don't think I could have come up with a better one."

Benjamin plopped back into his seat with a resounding thud. For a brief moment, he had been unsure of his ability to pull it off.

Looking around, he asked, "Do you think there's any more?"

As she helped Mr. Whitehorse to a nearby bench, Kenda replied, "I hope not. I think we've exhausted our bags of tricks."

"I wonder how far this eclipse reaches. Are we going to have to fight off bloodsuckers all the way back to Sedona?"

Kenda groaned. "If we do, we might want to whittle some wooden stakes before we start back."

Benjamin climbed out of the Jeep and leaned against the hood. He was exhausted. That last spell had sapped a lot of strength from him.

Mr. Whitehorse stood up slowly, still looking a little weak from the attack. His frail legs carried him over to Benjamin. He put his hand on Benjamin's shoulder.

"I am truly grateful for your help. You are welcome in my hogan anytime."

Benjamin smiled to express his appreciation, and then he raised an eyebrow. "Hogan?"

Kenda tapped on the adobe building. "That's what this is. It's his home."

"I just wish I knew how we were going to deal with Dr. Mortimer," Benjamin said, changing the subject. "Obviously, he is not playing with a full deck."

"Maybe we should call Ivan and Thomas and see if they've found out anything. Do you have your cell phone with you?"

Benjamin took the phone out of the left pocket of his jeans. He looked at the display. It was flashing "No signal."

Kenda snarled. "There are very few cell towers on the reservation, so coverage is spotty at best."

Benjamin folded his arms. "We have no choice then. We have to head back."

"Are you sure it's safe, Benjamin? We've got a two-hour drive under normal circumstances, but if there's more vampires or other creepy crawlers out there, we could be in a running firefight all the way back, no pun intended."

"Better to be a moving target than a sitting duck. Besides, I have this bad feeling in my gut. Thomas is in the house all alone, and while he could easily handle most demons and monsters, I'm not so sure of his safety when it comes to Dr. Mortimer. Really, I don't think any of us are safe right now."

Kenda looked squarely at Benjamin. Benjamin knew they were both thinking the same thing.

"Ivan!" They both said at the same time.

"He's not a vampire, and he doesn't have powers," Kenda said. "We should definitely be heading back."

Mr. Whitehorse pulled out a tiny bottle from the pocket of his shirt. "Take this," he said to Benjamin.

Benjamin took the bottle from Mr. Whitehorse's hand. He opened the top and sniffed it. There was some Mormon tea mixed in, as he recognized the scent from when he and Kenda were collecting the plant near the hillside.

"What is it?" Benjamin asked.

Mr. Whitehorse smiled and said, "You'll know what to do when the time is right. Go find your friends." Then he walked into the hogan and closed the door.

Benjamin turned to Kenda and scowled. "Have I mentioned that I'm incredibly sick and tired of people being all cryptic?"

Kenda giggled. "Kenny Whitehorse might be a little odd, but the Navajo culture is very different from ours."

Benjamin tossed his keys to Kenda. "Here. You're driving."

Kenda looked down at the keys. "Me? Wouldn't you rather drive?"

"If we run into any more vampires, I can't very well drive and shoot fireballs at the same time. Besides, I have a spell I want to try -- see if I can communicate with Thomas."

Kenda jumped into the driver's seat. Benjamin climbed into the back, sitting with his legs folded beneath him. As soon as Kenda turned onto the highway, Benjamin began to chant.

"Ancient Itzhak masters, hear my plea. Send my voice soaring into the heavens. Then bring it back down to him whom I seek. Let me commune with him so I may carry out my task with a lightened heart and a renewed spirit."

Benjamin waited to hear if he was connected with his mate. The only sound he heard was a gusting wind crossing the highway.

"Damn!"

Kenda glanced back. "Something wrong?"

"I must still be too weak from casting that last spell. Maybe the eclipse is having some funky effect on my powers."

"That's entirely possible. God knows throwing tree branches at vamps isn't the hugest cosmic event you've caused."

Kenda chuckled to herself, which prompted Benjamin to tilt his head slightly to the left and ask, "Care to share the joke with me, or are you going to start being all cloak and dagger on me, too?"

With a big grin on her face, Kenda replied, "I was just remembering back to when we got out of high school. You didn't know about my powers yet, and you were still at an apprentice level trying to master yours. This vampire biker gang rolled into town one night and came to the shop while you were purchasing some eye of newt. They started tearing up the shop next door, and

you, being the headstrong queen that you are, told me, 'Don't worry. I can stop them. I'm a witch.'"

Benjamin had to smile at that point, because he knew what was coming next.

"Anyway," Kenda continued. "You marched right out front, and the vamps were coming out of the shop next door, and you stood before them all by yourself and chanted something... I can't quite remember the words. Regardless, it was in the same vein as that spell you cast back at the hogan, except instead of tree branches flying at the vampires, you ripped out this old oak tree and flung it toward them, pinning all of them and their bikes on the ground. A few pointy branches found their mark, but for the most part, they were just lying there crying for help like some damsels in distress out of a lame B-movie."

Benjamin had to wrap his arms around his stomach because he was laughing so hard. "I had no freakin' idea what I was doing! I had meant to take off the branches like I did a short while ago, but my spell misinterpreted my intention and used the whole tree."

Kenda looked off into the distance. "I remember how pissed I was at you for killing an innocent tree, especially one as old as that one. It looked like it was almost a century old. I also remember how amazed I was at your bravery. You were one scrawny guy who looked like he hadn't been practicing magic but a few weeks, and yet you marched right out there and fought off those vampires without any concern for your own well being. I realized that day that you have the most noble heart of anyone I know, and that you were destined to do great things."

Benjamin had stopped laughing by now, and he looked down at the floor of the Jeep. "Thanks, Kenda," he whispered.

The two of them sat in silence for a few minutes, not wanting to interrupt the moment they had just shared. The peaceful quiet would not last, however, as Benjamin's cell phone rang. It took him by surprise, since he hadn't been able to get a signal a short while ago at Mr. Whitehorse's residence. He pulled the phone out of his pocket and looked at the caller ID. It was Ivan.

"Hey, Ivan? Glad you called. I need you to find Thomas for me and..."

In a hushed tone, Ivan interrupted, "I'm afraid I'm not anywhere near Thomas, or Sedona, for that matter. About how far are you from Flagstaff right now?"

Flagstaff? What was Ivan doing in Flagstaff? Benjamin wondered. "We're about to get on I-40 right now. It should be another hour before we hit Flag."

"I need you to come get me ASAP."

"Ivan, why are you whispering? What's wrong?"

"I'm trying to hide from a pair of werewolves."

Benjamin's jaw dropped. "Beg pardon?"

"I came to the university to find out what I could about Dr. Mortimer, since my Web search was going nowhere fast. I found his office, and I started looking around. Then I noticed things were getting darker outside. There's a freakin' solar eclipse here, can you believe that?"

"Yeah, we got caught in it, too. Are you okay?"

"So far. Once I stepped outside Dr. Mortimer's office, I saw a pair of yellow eyes down the hall, and it was a freakin' werewolf! I managed to escape from it when another one tried to come after me. They're roaming all over the campus looking for me, and they're being pretty thorough."

"Can you get back to your truck?"

"Funny thing about that. Someone stole it."

Benjamin heard a low growl on Ivan's end, followed by a panicked yell from Ivan. Then the phone went dead.

"Ivan? Are you there? Ivan!"

As Benjamin climbed into the front seat, Kenda asked, "What's going on?"

"Drive faster. Ivan's up to his neck in werewolves."

The Jeep pulled into the main entrance at Northern Arizona University. Kenda had managed to get herself and Benjamin to the university in about forty minutes. However, they didn't know where on the campus Ivan was, so it seemed like they were searching for a needle in a haystack.

Kenda looked at Benjamin. "I don't suppose you have a clue where to start looking?"

"Dr. Mortimer is a science professor, so his office is probably in the science building. Still, Ivan had left there by the time he crossed paths with the werewolves."

"He might have doubled back to try and throw them off. Let's start there."

It took about five minutes to get to the science building. After Kenda parked, Benjamin turned on his vehicle alarm. Kenda scrunched her eyebrows.

"Expecting the werewolves to drive away with your ride?"

"Someone or something swiped Ivan's rickety old truck, so I don't think we should take any chances."

Kenda and Benjamin hurried into the science building. They stopped to look at the directory. Dr. Mortimer's office was Room 235. At a lope, Benjamin and Kenda hurried to the stairs.

"Should we try to call Ivan and see if he answers?" Kenda asked.

"I'm kind of afraid to. What if Ivan found a place to hide, but the ringing phone gives away his position?"

"I'd like to think that little geek has enough sense to turn his phone to 'vibrate' since he's hiding from paranormal carnivores."

"Assuming he was able to find a few moments to do so while fleeing for his life."

Reaching the second floor, Benjamin and Kenda looked down both sides of the hallway. No one was around.

"Am I the only one concerned that there's nobody here? No one at all?" Kenda asked.

"If I saw something big and hairy wreaking havoc, I don't think I'd stick around in a boring class listening to a lecture about Fermat's Last Theorem."

"Benjamin, sweetie, Fermat's Last Theorem is mathematics, not science."

Benjamin rolled his eyes. He was less concerned about his collegiate faux pas and more worried about whether Ivan was all right. It had now been fifty-two minutes since the call was cut off. A lot could have happened in that time.

Benjamin and Kenda found Room 235. The door was ajar, presumably left that way by Ivan when he ran into the first werewolf. Benjamin pushed the door open and looked around.

Kenda whistled. "Wow! It's like we're getting a glimpse of the inside of your brain."

Benjamin shot Kenda a dirty look. The office was littered with papers. There were papers all over the floor. File folders were stacked awkwardly on Dr. Mortimer's desk, and another stack sat on the chair next to the desk. A bulletin board on the wall was buried under slips of paper and sticky notes.

Kenda flipped a folder off one of the stacks on the desk. "This guy is a pig."

"Yeah, well, when I see Dr. Mortimer again, his ass is going to be bacon. I don't like having a pleasant afternoon of picking herbs interrupted by an errant eclipse that rings the dinner bell for bloodsuckers a few hours too early."

"Ivan could have found plenty of places to hide in this rat's nest. He should have stayed put instead of leaving the office."

"Obviously he's not here, so we should probably get back out there and see if we can locate him."

Stepping back outside the office, Benjamin looked down the hall again. Still no one in sight. Just then, a low, growling sound penetrated his eardrums. That was followed by the sound of hurried footsteps.

Benjamin sprinted to the stairwell, heading up for the third floor, where the footsteps and growling were coming from. As he ascended to the top, he looked down the hallway and saw

Ivan at the end, looking like a trapped animal. Speaking of animals, one of the werewolves was only a few feet away, a stalactite of drool hanging from its mouth. Benjamin knew he had to distract the werewolf to allow Ivan a way to escape. The only problem after that was getting the werewolf to leave him alone once Ivan got away.

Benjamin wondered if his power that allowed him to communicate with animals would work. A wolf was an animal, but werewolves were here by supernatural means. He wasn't sure if he could penetrate the werewolf's mind. Benjamin closed his eyes and tried to reach the creature. No luck.

That left Plan B.

Benjamin conjured up a fireball and flung it toward the werewolf, intentionally aiming it so it would land next to the beast instead of scoring a direct hit. That got the werewolf's attention and it turned toward Benjamin, its eyes glowing yellow like burning amber.

Despite his inner fear, Benjamin stood tall and shot the werewolf a defiant look. "That's right! I threw a fireball at you. Whatcha gonna do about it, Cujo?"

Benjamin soon had his answer as the werewolf barreled at him, snarling at him like a real wolf attacking a rabbit. However, like a rabbit, Benjamin jumped out of the way. The werewolf could not stop in time and careened down the stairs, howling as it rolled into each side of the stairwell like a pinball.

Ivan ran over to Benjamin and threw his arms around him. "Man, I always enjoy looking at your beautiful body, but I've never been this happy to see you."

Benjamin smiled sheepishly at Ivan's flirtation in the face of fear, but his face fell when he realized how quiet it had gotten. Why wasn't the werewolf coming back up for another shot at them?

With one arm around Ivan, Benjamin crept toward the stairwell and looked down. There was no sign of the werewolf and no sound that indicated it was coming back this way.

"Do you think it's safe?" Ivan asked.

"Only one way to find out." Benjamin removed Ivan's hands from around his waist as he started down the stairs. He was starting to realize how frightening silence could be. The fact that the werewolf and possibly another one were lurking about, and Benjamin could not see or hear them approaching, caused more dread than if one of the monsters were right in front of him right now.

Stepping onto the marble tile of the second floor, Benjamin looked down the hallway to the left and saw the werewolf lying flat on its face. Next to it was Kenda with a gun in her hand.

"Hello, boys. I was wondering where you'd vanished to, Benjamin."

Benjamin pointed to the gun. "Silver bullets, I take it?"

"Nope. Just enough tranquilizer to knock out a rhinoceros. I found this in Dr. Mortimer's desk. It seems vampires are not the only night creatures he's had to contend with."

Benjamin shook his head. "I'm not entirely convinced that he didn't send these werewolves here on purpose."

Ivan raised his hand. "Aren't werewolves only supposed to come out on the full moon? That's not until night."

Kenda had a theory. "It's possible that the moon's shadow covering the sun created an effect similar to when the full moon rises, and triggered the transformation. That's how the vamps could come after us outside during the day."

Just then, Benjamin noticed the silence again.

"Ivan, you said there were two of these things."

"That's right."

Benjamin raised an eyebrow. "So, where is Shaggy's girlfriend?"

Chapter 10

Kenda waltzed into Dr. Mortimer's office and locked the door behind her. Benjamin and Ivan were already inside looking through the professor's files.

"Are you sure we're safe in here?" Ivan asked.

"Can't be any worse than racing through the halls," Kenda replied. "Besides, if werewolf number two tries to burst through that door, I'll shove a dart up its evil ass."

"I can see why you're freaked, Ivan," Benjamin added. "I half expect a pair of giant green hands to materialize from beneath the floor and squash me like a bug."

"Do you guys really think Dr. Mortimer wasn't responsible for sending those werewolves after me?" Ivan asked.

"I doubt it," Benjamin replied. "I'm the bigger threat to whatever he's doing because I have powers. He sent a bunch of vampires after me. Don't take this the wrong way, Ivan, but you're about as dangerous as vanilla pudding."

"Gee, thanks."

"Besides, there's probably lots of other paranormal freak shows going on all over. Eclipses don't overshadow a small part of the earth. I wouldn't be surprised if most of the state was in the shadow of the moon right now."

"But why go to all this manipulation just to get you?" Kenda asked. "Why doesn't he summon up a crazy electric storm like he did when we went to Bell Rock?"

Benjamin shook his head. "I don't know. I just want to find what we're looking for and get out of here."

"What *are* we looking for? A piece of paper that says, 'The Cure'?"

"That would be so easy, it would make me suspicious."

A loud howl echoed through the halls of the science building, and it could be heard even through the office door. Benjamin, Kenda, and Ivan looked at each other with dread. Kenda moved her right hand to the tranquilizer gun, sitting it on the desk in anticipation that it might be needed again.

With his gaze toward the door, Benjamin said, "It sounds like he's outside... The building, I mean."

"All the more reason for us to stay in here," Ivan said.

"Yeah, until the sun goes down, the full moon comes up, and *all* the creepy crawlies come out to play. I don't know about you, but I think it's time to head back to Sedona."

Kenda picked up a stack of papers. "I think these might be interesting. I'm going to take them with me."

Benjamin raised an eyebrow. "Why? They're not even in English."

"There's something familiar about this language. I'll have to consult my books."

Benjamin inched to the door and opened it, looking outside to see if the werewolf was nearby. His assumption that it was outside seemed to hold true. He turned back to Kenda and Ivan, who were both scooping up papers and stuffing them into Kenda's backpack.

"Okay, guys," Benjamin said. "If we run into the werewolf, I'll lead him away while you two make a break for the Jeep. Ivan, is your cell phone still working?"

Ivan pulled out a mangled mess of plastic and computer chips. "One of the werewolves thought my cell phone might be tasty."

Benjamin grimaced. "So much for my idea to have you call me when you're safely at the Jeep. Okay, I'll keep the werewolf occupied for about five minutes, and then I'll double back and meet up with you."

Kenda nodded to show she understood. Benjamin, Kenda and Ivan slipped out of the office and down the stairs. Another howl echoed through the air.

"He sounds hungry," Ivan said.

"On the bright side, he probably won't eat you because you don't have any meat on your bones," Kenda quipped.

"I can't believe this is happening. A few days ago, I was just a shopkeeper selling comic books to youngsters eager to go on an adventure, and now I'm hiding from werewolves, vampires, and other things that go bump in the night. When exactly did my life stray off course?"

Benjamin understood what Ivan was saying. It was barely more than a week ago that he'd been snapping photos of people and places, and the toughest decision he had to make was who looked sexier in a red Speedo. Now he was spending half his time chasing supernatural creatures and the other half being chased by them. Benjamin would do anything for Thomas, but this situation needed to end, whether it was by curing his beloved or taking Dr. Mortimer's head and mounting it in a trophy case.

The commons area outside the science building was deserted. Benjamin felt like he was in some kind of sci-fi movie where the world ends and only a few people survive the apocalypse. Some leaves rustled in the wind, but the silence filled the air more than anything.

"Okay," Benjamin said as he turned toward the Jeep. "Let's get out of..."

Benjamin stopped short when he saw a gray mass on the hood of his vehicle. The werewolf crouched on the edge, some dried blood on its mouth indicating it had recently had a meal.

Kenda and Ivan started to back up, but Benjamin stood firm. The werewolf shifted its weight, looking like it was ready to pounce.

It never had the chance, though, as rays of sunlight bathed the commons area. Benjamin looked up and saw the shadow of the moon disappear from the path of the sun. When his gaze returned to the Jeep, the werewolf was gone, reverted back to its original form, a young male college student, stark naked and appearing very scared about the current state he was in.

Benjamin hurried to the rear of the Jeep, pulling out a blanket he kept back there for the times he went out into the wilderness and camped out. He wrapped the blanket around the young man, who was slowly coming out of his daze.

"It's okay," Benjamin said. "No one's going to hurt you. I imagine you didn't expect to find yourself here like this."

The man nodded. He opened his mouth to speak, but no words came out.

"My name is Benjamin, and these are my friends, Ivan and Kenda. Can we take you somewhere, a place where you can change out of your birthday suit?"

"Todd."

"What?"

"My name... my name is Todd. I live at... at Hamilton Hall."

"Well, we can drive you there and help you with anything else you need."

Todd nodded and climbed off the hood. Benjamin helped him into the passenger seat while Ivan and Kenda climbed into the back. After climbing in the Jeep himself, Benjamin started it up and drove toward Hamilton Hall, which was located near the center of the university campus.

"Todd, do you know what happened to you a little while ago?" Benjamin asked.

Todd nodded. His gaze remained fixed on the glove compartment, although it looked like he was simply staring into space.

"You know what you are?"

Another nod from Todd.

"What's your game plan?" Kenda whispered, leaning toward Benjamin.

"We'll take Todd and the other wolf we left inside back to their places and make sure they're okay on their own, and then it's back to Sedona. I have a score to settle with Dr. Mortimer."

"Dr. Mortimer?" Todd craned his neck to look at Benjamin.

Benjamin raised an eyebrow. "Do you know him? Is he one of your instructors?"

Todd didn't nod this time. He only shivered before he spoke. "He's the bastard who did this to me."

Todd Kesseldorf was a graduate student at Northern Arizona University. He aspired to get his doctorate in chemistry and had been on the fast track to be somebody in the scientific community. Then he had the misfortune of getting hired as Dr. Mortimer's lab assistant. Todd was fully aware of the paranormal forces that existed in the world, but he didn't become something otherworldly until he became entangled with Dr. Mortimer.

The cure for vampirism was only one project the professor was involved in. Dr. Mortimer also wanted to find out how people were turned into werewolves. He knew the bite of a werewolf caused lycanthropism, but he didn't know if there was a particular enzyme that caused the transformation. Dr. Mortimer had caught a werewolf and taken samples of blood, tissue, and saliva to analyze.

One day, Todd had been working on one of the blood samples by running it through a centrifuge when he suddenly felt a sharp prick in the side of his neck. With a gasp, he pulled a syringe out and saw Dr. Mortimer standing beside him. The syringe had been filled with the werewolf enzyme, and Dr. Mortimer had told Todd that he wanted to see if the enzyme worked on its own or required direct transmission from werewolf to victim.

The hypothesis had been correct, as the dawning of the full moon two days later heralded the end of Todd as a regular human and the beginning of his life as a werewolf. That first night, Todd had attacked three students, turning two and mutilating one. One of the students he had turned was the first werewolf Benjamin and his friends had confronted.

After Todd had returned to his human form the next morning, he had taken steps to make sure he never unleashed his terror again. He set up some chains in the basement of the house he was renting, and he made sure he was chained up whenever there was a full moon.

Of course, the full moon in this cycle was not supposed to happen until 6:24 PM that night, but the eclipse had messed up the natural timetable. Todd had found himself toweling off after a shower when things turned dark outside, and he had started to notice his usually smooth body sprouting hair. Knowing he was about to undergo the change, Todd had raced toward the basement to shackle himself, but he only made it as far as the basement door before he succumbed to the werewolf's power.

When Benjamin and his friends brought Todd back to his place, the first thing they noticed was the front door had been smashed, most likely when Todd, in his werewolf state, tried to break free. There were a few broken knick-knacks in the front hallway, but the rest of the house appeared to have weathered the incident unscathed.

After making sure Todd was secure for the night and picking his brain for a few more tidbits on Dr. Mortimer, Benjamin and his friends got on the road, bound for Sedona. It was past sunset by the time they merged onto Interstate 17, and Benjamin wanted to make sure he got everyone

home safe and sound by the time the moon rose. Also, he had still been unable to reach Thomas, and that concerned him.

After a while, Benjamin noticed that Ivan seemed tense. He kept looking sharply in all directions, like he expected something to appear out of nowhere and eat everyone in the Jeep alive.

"Ivan, are you okay?"

"Sorry. I guess I'm a little jittery after being chased across the campus by a couple of werewolves. Vampires attacked you and Kenda. What's next? Is Dr. Mortimer going to send some banshees after us? Maybe a wendigo?"

"I don't intend to give him that chance. After I drop you and Kenda off, the good doctor and I are going to have a 'Come to Jesus' meeting. I've had enough of simple trips turning into fights for survival."

"Are you sure you don't want us along when you confront Dr. Mortimer?" Kenda asked.

"No! In fact, I've already put you two in harm's way more than is healthy. Besides, if he goes nuclear, the last thing I want him to have is an overabundance of targets."

"I appreciate you looking out for my safety, Benjamin, but I'm not sure you'll be able to take this guy on alone."

"Well, hopefully I'll have Thomas watching my back."

Without incident, Benjamin successfully drove Kenda and Ivan home, and then he continued toward his own abode. He'd left four messages on the answering machine, but Thomas had not called back. Benjamin was afraid to think about what might have happened to his beloved if Dr. Mortimer had tried to make a clean sweep of things by killing Thomas, too. If the doctor had killed his vampire paramour, no amount of magic would save him from Benjamin's wrath.

As the Jeep pulled up to the condo, the home sat completely dark, bathed only in the light of the full moon that had risen just a few minutes earlier. Normally, this would not have bothered Benjamin, but since he had not been able to communicate with Thomas, the darkened house could be taken as a bad omen.

Creeping up to the front door, Benjamin turned the knob. It was locked. *This could be a good sign*, he thought as he opened the door with his key. Still, he didn't want to take any chances. He held up his left hand and formed a small fireball so he could see inside. He flipped a light switch with his other hand. Nothing. Moving through the front hallway to the living room, Benjamin tried another switch. The room remained dark.

All right, he thought. *One's a burnt-out bulb. Two is kind of fishy.* He wondered if he should call out Thomas' name. He decided against it, logically surmising that if Thomas were in the house and conscious, he would have come to Benjamin already. The hairs on the back of Benjamin's neck were at full attention, and they were going to stay that way until he could see Thomas.

Walking into the kitchen, a pile of dust or something like dust caught Benjamin's eye. It was next to the refrigerator. Benjamin held his breath. From where he stood, it could be taken as a pile of ash, similar to what a vampire would turn into if consumed by fire. Benjamin crept closer, desperately trying to silence the voice in his head saying that pile was the remains of his beloved Thomas Nighthawk. Crouching before the pile, Benjamin took some off the top and rubbed it between his fingers. He felt cobwebs. This was probably a pile of dirt from the kitchen floor that Thomas had swept up and forgotten to discard for whatever reason.

Benjamin smiled for a moment and felt a little silly that he had even considered that pile of dirt could be Thomas. That relief returned to fear when he remembered that Thomas was very clean and meticulous. He would not have left a pile of dirt on the kitchen floor without a very good reason. Benjamin bit his lip. What if Thomas had been attacked, either killed or knocked unconscious, and then dragged away to God knows where?

Benjamin's cell phone started ringing, and the silence of the house amplified the sound. It caught Benjamin by surprise so much, he fell back on his ass. He fished the phone out of his pocket and looked at the caller ID. The call was coming from Eclipse.

Benjamin flipped the phone open. "Tommy?"

"Yeah, baby. It's me. You sound surprised."

Benjamin exhaled with relief. "I just got home and found the place completely dark. None of the light switches are working. I found a pile of dust in the kitchen and feared the worst had happened."

"Oh. Well, I was going to clean that up when I got a phone call from one of my bartenders saying there was a problem with a couple of the more demonic customers, so I came in early to keep Eclipse from turning into a slaughterhouse. Fortunately, the solar eclipse allowed me to go to the club without bursting into flames."

"Speaking of the eclipse, honey, is Dr. Mortimer there?"

"I haven't seen him. Why do you..." There was a pause, then Thomas spoke again. "Hey, Benjamin, Dr. Mortimer is right here with..." This time the phone went dead completely.

Benjamin scrambled to his feet and rushed back to his Jeep. Thomas was in danger. Dr. Mortimer was at the club, and considering what the supreme wizard had done already today, there was no reason to believe he and Thomas would be sipping margaritas at the bar.

The Jeep's tires squealed as Benjamin spun the vehicle around to drive to Eclipse. The driver of a Mercedes that Benjamin almost ran into honked the horn angrily. Right now, obeying traffic laws was the furthest thing from Benjamin's mind.

Normally, it took approximately seven minutes to drive from the condo to Eclipse. Benjamin made the trip in three minutes, pulling into a parking spot so quickly, it looked like he might run into another vehicle. Benjamin leaped out of the Jeep and raced to the entrance, waving his hand to indicate to the doorman to open the door and get out of his way.

Once inside, Benjamin started to look for Dr. Mortimer and Thomas. He saw the usual suspects - Lord Draca and his Hessican entourage, Kit of the Parmelius dimension, the vampire power couple of Millicent Weathers and Hank Jonas.

But no sign of Thomas. Or Dr. Mortimer.

Benjamin looked up toward the catwalk. It was pretty crowded, so walking up there to get a better vantage point was out. He saw one spot on the catwalk that wasn't occupied by a human or demon. Benjamin summoned his astral projection, which materialized in that spot. He looked around to see if he could locate Thomas.

Then he felt a hand on his shoulder -- his real shoulder. Recalling his astral projection, Benjamin spun around, expecting a fight. It was Thomas.

"Benjamin, are you all right?"

Benjamin threw his arms around his vampire paramour. It was such a relief to see Thomas standing there. Most of the tension he had felt over the last few minutes evaporated.

But not all.

"Where's the doctor?"

"In my office. He has the vim wood, along with a few scratches."

Benjamin took a step back. "You might want to evacuate the club."

Thomas looked confused. "What's going on, baby?"

"I have good reason to believe that Dr. Mortimer caused the eclipse, and then he sent a pack of vampires to kill me and Kenda. We also had to rescue Ivan from a couple of werewolves that I think Dr. Mortimer unleashed. Sweetie, I'll explain everything later, but Dr. Mortimer might resort to violence once I confront him."

"If that's the case, you might want to use your astral projecting abilities just in case he tries to attack you."

Benjamin's eyes narrowed. "Just in case?"

With that, Benjamin projected himself into Thomas' office. Dr. Mortimer was sitting on the vinyl couch by the door.

"Hi, Benjamin. What's with the virtual appearance?"

"I have the ingredients you told me to get. Do you have the vim wood?"

Dr. Mortimer smiled. "I do. Did you have any trouble getting the essence of midnight?"

"No. The Mormon tea was another story, though. Oh, by the way... Todd Kesseldorf sends his regards."

The smile on Dr. Mortimer's face vanished instantly. He waved his hand to the right. At that same instant, Benjamin's body flew forward as a result of some invisible force. He careened through the office door, rolled across the floor several times and finished with a crash against the far wall. Benjamin put a hand to the back of his head, which was throbbing in pain. He didn't have much time to ponder his head, however, as he was suddenly lifted off the ground. His windpipe felt like it was closing.

Dr. Mortimer stepped in front of Benjamin, his hand stretched out like it had a grip on Benjamin's neck. "Foolish boy! You're dealing with grand designs beyond your puny understanding. You should have just left well enough alone, but you had to stick your nose in where it did not belong. You've become too high a risk to remain alive. I'll just have to elimi..."

Thomas knocked Dr. Mortimer to the floor. His eyes were blood red, and his fangs were bared. He brought the doctor to his feet, gripping him by his shirt.

"Let him go, Doc," Thomas said, "or you'll be needing some of that miracle cure for yourself."

With a flash of light, Dr. Mortimer disappeared. At the same time, he relinquished his hold on Benjamin. Benjamin fell to the floor, coughing and gasping for air. Thomas rushed over to Benjamin and cradled him in his arms.

"Benjamin, are you all right? Did he hurt you?"

Benjamin tried to speak, but he couldn't form words. All he could do was shudder and hold Thomas' hand as he tried to regain his composure. Dr. Mortimer was definitely a force far greater than he had ever faced, and Benjamin did not have the power to cross paths with him again. The quest to find a cure for Thomas' vampirism was over.

Chapter 11

Benjamin rubbed his throat, which was still a little raw from Dr. Mortimer's telekinetic stranglehold. Lying in bed, he looked over at the bag of Mormon tea he'd collected on the Navajo reservation. It was difficult for him to believe that he'd combated numerous vampires and a pair of werewolves that day, only to come within a hair's breadth of death by getting whooped by a supreme wizard. If it hadn't been for Thomas' speed and vampire strength, he *would* be dead.

Thomas appeared in the bathroom doorway, wrapped in a powder blue towel. His body was glistening with beads of water from the shower he'd just taken. His long, blond hair -- normally kept tame by a ponytail tie -- was feral and undisciplined. Thomas was stroking his left nipple.

"Are you feeling better, my mystical muffin?"

Benjamin gave a weak smile. "I am, although I could probably live without you ever calling me a mystical muffin again."

"Agreed. How's your throat?"

"That tea you made is wonderful. I don't even feel like I've been choked."

Thomas slid into bed next to Benjamin. "I never should have let you go into the office alone, astral projection or no."

Benjamin put his hand up. "Stop right there, Tommy. The fault lies with me thinking it would be easy to get the cure. I went charging around like I thought I was some superhero, and I wound up almost getting friends and the one I love killed."

Thomas tossed away the towel he'd been wearing and snuggled next to Benjamin. "Superhero, huh? So what were you? Superman? Batman? Did I ever tell you a man in tights gets me hard?"

Benjamin knew Thomas was trying to be funny and lift his spirits, but he still burst into tears. "I'm so sorry, Tommy! I knew how much you wanted to be mortal again, that it meant more to you than anything. I don't know why I thought some two-bit trickster like me could even hope to make that happen."

Thomas pulled Benjamin closer to his chest. "Now, you listen to me. You are one of the strongest witches I know, and considering I've been around for more than three centuries, that's saying something. Second of all, *you* mean more to me than anything. Humanity means nothing to me if you're not around to share it with. I'm not going to let this come between us. I love you, and I would give up the dream of mortality if the cost were your death. I couldn't bear that."

Trying to compose himself, Benjamin said, "It's just we were so close to getting the cure. At least, it seemed that way. You were moments away from getting your first taste of sunlight since the seventeenth century. I know how much this scares you -- being intimate and almost losing yourself to the demon."

"Benjamin, there's no avoiding the reality. I'm damned, and my penance is to never know the sensation of full human intimacy. It doesn't change the fact that I love you -- completely, unconditionally, obsessively. If you're here, that's all that matters to me."

Thomas' embrace felt so good, so warm. He was right. All that mattered was they were together. The two of them had formed an unbreakable bond for eight years, and the fact that one of them was a vampire and the other a human did not change the fact that they loved each other. Nothing else had ever been able to drive them apart. What they had was truly immortal.

Benjamin kissed Thomas on the neck. "It's going to be nice to get back to a normal life after this. My camera has been seriously neglected. I must say, I much prefer conversations about our days not being riddled with tales of near-death experiences."

"Yeah. Those just depress me." Thomas kissed the top of Benjamin's head. "I'd rather hear about all the hunky guys you take pictures of."

"I'm going to have to work overtime to make up for you carrying us the last couple of weeks."

"There is no make up. You know that. We're not keeping score; we're not dividing things up fifty-fifty. We have plenty of money, so we don't need to worry."

Benjamin reached up and brought Thomas' lips to his. The kiss felt warm and wet. As they kissed with a renewed passion, Benjamin thought about how much he loved Thomas, a creature damned for eternity but determined to carry out a noble existence. He wanted so badly to put an end to Thomas' curse and to let life go where it may.

"Make love to me, Tommy," Benjamin said as he looked into Thomas' deep, penetrating eyes.

Thomas flipped Benjamin onto his stomach. He grabbed the bottle of lube and made sure there was an abundance near Benjamin's asshole and his cock. Benjamin's eyes widened as he felt Thomas penetrate him, and a forced gasp passed his lips. He grasped the headboard as his lover thrust into him. The feeling felt so good, but it could not take away the guilt he harbored inside. He had worked so hard to try and track down a cure that would let Thomas be mortal, and he had come within an inch of getting himself, his boyfriend and his closest chums killed. It felt good knowing that Thomas appeared okay with how things turned out, but he still wanted to be able to give his lover the gift of life.

"Oh, yeah, Tommy. Pound me. Pound your worthless, white-witch whore."

Thomas continued the fucking as he replied, "I hope that's role-playing and not you having a pity party."

"Give it to me, baby. Work my ass over. Let me be your hard-fought prize."

The thrusting intensified. Slowly, all other feelings washed away. As the ecstasy intensified, Benjamin's moans grew louder, which helped to hasten the orgasm growing inside him. All of a sudden, he heard a wild yell behind him as Thomas' long thrusts ceased and a few short thrusts indicated Thomas had come.

As Thomas pulled out of Benjamin, he kissed the small of Benjamin's back. Benjamin lay on the bed so he was facing Thomas. He watched as Thomas moved down toward his cock and put his lips around it. The wet feeling intensified his already-strong hard on. However, it also brought back the reality that he had failed. He had failed his lover in what seemed at the moment like a simple task. There seemed to be only one thing to do.

"Tommy?"

A muffled "Yes?" was Thomas' response.

"Take me." He looked away from Thomas but ran his fingers down his own neck, showing what he wanted his lover to do.

Thomas' blissful expression disappeared instantaneously as he saw what Benjamin was doing. He leaped out of the bed and backed up against the wall.

"What are you doing?"

Benjamin turned on his side, bowing his head in shame. "I know how much you want us to be together forever, so if I can't get you what you need to drive out the demon in you, perhaps you should make me immortal."

Thomas' look of horror and fear indicated he was not behind the idea at all. After a few moments of silence, he said, "Are you out of your fucking mind?"

"It'll only hurt me for a moment, won't it? Then we can be together the way you want."

"The way I... Do you seriously think I would ever consider doing something so awful to you? Why would you believe I would even fathom taking away your life, your innocence, and damning you for all eternity? That's not love! That's the very definition of evil!"

"Tommy, I know how much you want us to be together forever. There's no way we're going to get the cure from Dr. Mortimer. Since I can't help to get you into Heaven, I'm willing to make the sacrifice and join you in Hell."

"I can't let you do that. I won't! If I turn you, the man you are now will no longer exist. Becoming a vampire has the potential to obliterate all traces of humanity. You know that! There's a very rare chance that you'll survive with your soul intact."

Benjamin paused, and then replied, "If it makes you happy, I'm willing to accept that price."

"Benjamin, I couldn't live with myself if I took away everything that made you who you are. Your magical powers would be gone. Your soul would be gone! If I took away the life you'd had and made you a shell of your former self, I'd drive a stake through my own heart."

"What if I found a spell that allowed me..."

"Listen to yourself!" Thomas screamed. "Don't you think if there was something in the *Teuromenici* or some other book to keep a person's original soul intact when he becomes a

vampire, then we would have found something that would make me mortal again? Don't ask me to do this... ever again!"

Thomas slipped on a pair of shorts and stormed out of the room. Benjamin sat in bed, unable to move. What had he just asked Thomas to do? He never would have considered asking Thomas to turn him before. Had his despair driven him to this?

Benjamin stood up from the bed after a few minutes and put on his bathrobe. He opened up the bedroom door and heard something being pummeled. It sounded like the punching bag that hung in the basement. He knew he needed to apologize to Thomas, but he was concerned that his lover's anger might result in a bop to the snoot. That left the option of astral projection. Benjamin closed his eyes and sent his other self to the basement.

As he appeared, Thomas was whaling on the punching bag, both with his fists and feet. He was clearly frustrated.

"I am such an idiot," Benjamin said, surprising Thomas so much that he lost his balance and fell on his side. "Sorry. I didn't mean to spook you."

"God as my witness, you will learn how to use doors to enter a room," Thomas said as he stood up again.

"I just didn't want any of your flailing limbs to connect with me. I know I hurt you with what I suggested a moment ago."

Thomas started to unwrap his hands. "Do you know what made me fall in love with you all those years ago?"

"The fact that my ass looks hot in tight leather pants?"

"No. Do you remember the first night you came to Eclipse? It was the night I had the karaoke guy there."

"The one who got attacked by some vamps a couple of years ago?"

"The same. I was on the upper level speaking with Lord Draca, who seemed insistent that I ban humans from the club because the Hessicans considered them inferior. As I was making the point that his people could be just as drunk and stupid as any human, this voice rang out through the club. I looked toward the catwalk, and you had astral projected to the middle as you were singing that Coldplay song, 'Clocks.'"

Benjamin chuckled. "I was showing off. I had just learned how to master that power, and I wanted to make a flashy appearance."

"That you did. It was the first time I'd seen you in Eclipse, and I thought you had the most beautiful voice I'd ever heard. Of course, what really made me realize how special you were was later in the evening. True to form, a couple of Hessicans got trashed and started a fight. I went in to break it up, since I'd only had the club open a year and couldn't afford bouncers. One of the Hessicans sucker-punched me and knocked me to the ground. He broke off the leg of one of the

chairs and stood over me, ready to drive it through my chest. He never got the chance because you came out of nowhere and pounced on his back. You threw him toward the wall, and he was about to come back at you when you lit this fireball in your palm. He took one look at your hand, and I swear he tripped three times getting out of the club.

"After the Hessicans dispersed, with Lord Draca spouting his usual threats to send the drunks to Erb, you came over to me and helped me to my feet," Thomas continued. "I remember looking into your eyes as I gained my balance and seeing the confidence that flashed in them. Then you said, 'I hope you've learned a lesson from this and realize that a vampire owning a nightclub with wooden furniture is just a bad idea.'"

Benjamin shuffled his feet. "I remember you saying I was welcome in your club anytime and that if anyone ever gave me shit, you'd suck them dry." He giggled. "I never get tired of hearing you tell that story."

"What made me fall for you was your confidence in yourself. You leaped on that Hessican's back without a second thought. You helped a person you didn't even know, and you knew you were going to win. You realized what you wanted to do, and nobody was going to stand in your way." Thomas bit his lip as he turned away from Benjamin. "It scared me when you bared your neck to me tonight, not just because you would ever ask me such a thing, but because you looked like you had given up, like your confidence had vanished."

Benjamin brought his astral projection back and hurried down the stairs. He bumped into a couple of walls as tears filled his eyes and blinded him. He threw the basement door open and rushed at Thomas, squeezing him tightly.

"I'm so sorry, Tommy. I wasn't thinking. I just wanted to make you happy, and I almost drove you away instead."

"I want to be human, but not if it means losing you. You are the reason I want to be a better person. Being human is secondary to my love for you."

"It's going to take some time for me to be all right with this, with losing the cure, but I'll find a way to live with it."

"I realize that. Besides being incredibly brave, you're also incredibly stubborn."

"That's what turns you on."

Benjamin and Thomas held each other in the basement, not letting words get in the way of expressing their feelings. Win or lose, the two of them were still together, and Benjamin hoped that life would get back to normal the next day.

The rippling chest of the male model standing in front of Benjamin was awesome. Benjamin knew he'd have to tell Thomas about this man, whose torso could be used to scrub laundry. He was photographing models for a new brand of athletic cup, so his subjects had been flexing and grinning while wearing next to nothing.

Sometimes Benjamin loved his job.

"So, Shutterbug, how am I looking?" the model asked.

"Like you're going to sell a ton of jock straps with your rippling muscles and your tight ass." Benjamin smiled wickedly.

"I don't know why I ask. You always manage to get my good side. In fact, you make my bad sides look good."

"Simon, I believe you're trying to butter me up."

"I always see you working alone on these photo shoots, and I wondered if you would like to hook up sometime."

Benjamin looked skyward. "As enticing an offer as that is, I don't think my boyfriend would appreciate you trying to get into my pants."

Simon, the model, sighed. "It never fails. The cute ones are taken."

"Of course, if you're looking for a man, I have a Latino buddy who'd probably love to spend some time with you. Are you into comic books at all?"

With a smile, Simon replied, "When I was a kid, I had the most extensive collection of Batman comic books in my neighborhood."

"So, are you interested in meeting my friend?"

In just a few minutes, Benjamin had contacted Ivan, set up a date between him and Simon, and contacted an expensive restaurant to give the two a romantic place to go. Simon dressed and left to prepare for the date.

As Benjamin packed up his camera equipment, he thought about how nice it had been the last few days to live a normal life free of the paranormal. He had been so obsessed with Dr. Mortimer and his supposed cure that he'd blocked out all the other aspects of his life. There was something soothing about snapping pictures of a beautiful creature like Simon, exploring all the angles.

Benjamin was locking up the warehouse where he had been taking photos when he realized that it was quiet outside -- too quiet. Normally, he could subconsciously hear the thought whispers of the birds and wild rabbits that roamed around, especially after sunset, but the air was silent.

The silence was broken when an energy bolt shattered a boulder on a hill, sending fragments hurtling toward Benjamin. He dove for the side of the Jeep, and then he watched as the pieces of rock bounced off the ground. He peered over the hood to see who was shooting at him, but there was no one to be seen.

Another energy bolt rang out, this time going into the air. The clear sky quickly gave way to dark, foreboding clouds with red hues of energy echoing in random patterns. Benjamin had seen this happen once before.

"Dr. Mortimer," he said under his breath.

Part of him wanted to get out of there as quickly as possible, but the other half that was still fixated on the wizard and his mystical cure was not willing to let an easy opportunity pass by him. He had a safe option, and he immediately took it.

Closing his eyes, Benjamin's astral projection flew up to the top of the hill. When he materialized, he saw more than a dozen vampires surrounding Dr. Mortimer. They were having difficulty closing in on him, however, due to the lightning bolts that were raining down on them. While the lightning couldn't kill vampires, Benjamin knew from experience that it hurt like hell, even for immortal beings.

Benjamin knew he had to do something to help. In spite of the fact that Dr. Mortimer was a supreme wizard, Benjamin knew Dr. Mortimer couldn't fend off the vampires forever. Besides, there was a rustling in the nearby bushes that indicated more vampires were on their way.

The rub was that Benjamin couldn't use his other powers while he was using his projecting abilities. In order for him to physically lend Dr. Mortimer a hand, he would have to recall the astral projection and then climb up the hill. Dr. Mortimer could be in serious trouble by then.

Benjamin's internal debate instantly became moot when one of the vampires managed to dodge four or five lightning bolts and get behind Dr. Mortimer. With a flash of speed, he leaped forward and knocked his prey to the ground. The attack shook up Dr. Mortimer enough to cease the lightning strikes, and that's when the other vampires dove on him like a pack of jackals.

Benjamin turned his head away, horrified at the gruesome sight of multiple bloodsuckers taking their share of the luscious, red liquid prize. When Benjamin's gaze returned to the scene, he saw the life draining from Dr. Mortimer. The look in his eyes was one of combined surprise and mortification, like he had never imagined being defeated in such a manner. However, there was something else, too: a message. It was two words, pounded into Benjamin's mind with a whispering tone.

"Goren McRae."

Although the voice was a whisper, the force of the telepathic message struck Benjamin so hard that he couldn't maintain the astral projection. He crumpled to the ground, struggling to gain his breath. His mind was racing with images that were not of his creation. Besides the name, there were symbols and an image of a creature that appeared and disappeared.

Benjamin stood up, one hand pressed against the Jeep to help keep his balance. He knew he had to get out of there quickly. The telepathic message had weakened him physically with its force, but even if he were at full strength, Benjamin would never dream of taking on a swarm of vampires alone. He crawled into the driver's seat and raced into the night.

The one sliver of hope that had remained of getting a cure from Dr. Mortimer had left. There was no way the wizard could have survived that onslaught. However, Benjamin knew the danger was far from over. Dr. Mortimer's warning a few nights ago about Benjamin diving into matters beyond his ken rang in his head as the images and the name Goren McRae continued to swirl around. Benjamin knew he couldn't walk away from this, try as he might. Something that could slay a supreme wizard had more in mind, and it would only be a matter of time before those grand designs surfaced.

Chapter 12

"I thought you were going to stop chasing after Dr. Mortimer."

Thomas applied an ice pack to the back of Benjamin's neck, which had been scraped up when Benjamin dove behind his Jeep. Benjamin already had a glass of scotch whiskey pressed to his forehead to help quell the headache that developed following Dr. Mortimer's telepathic information transfer. The two of them were at Eclipse, sitting in Thomas' office.

"I wasn't chasing him. I was locking up the warehouse where I did the photo shoot with Simon, and out of nowhere, this energy bolt blows up a boulder on the hill. I astral-projected to the top, and there was Dr. Mortimer trying to fend off a dozen or so vamps. One of them managed to get too close and jumped him. As the bloodsuckers were dining, he sent me this telepathic message that knocked me on my ass. I got in the Jeep and came here."

"Why do I get the feeling that we've been pulled back into the nightmare?"

"Because three centuries of existence have made you very perceptive, sweetheart. I don't suppose you have any ibuprofen I could take to kill this headache?"

"Nope. Don't need it, as I don't get headaches."

Benjamin moaned. "That's not fair! You're damned until the end of time, and yet you can't suffer migraines. I'm fully alive and feel like my head was run over by a bulldozer."

"No one ever said the mystical world was fair. Of course, as your devoted mate, can I do anything else to help?"

"If this headache doesn't go away in short order, could you just knock me unconscious?"

"Tell you what. Why don't I call Kenda and see if she can come by? Even if her healing abilities can't help, she probably has some herbal remedy that could remove the pain or help you rest."

"I like that idea, unless you or one of your employees could run down to the drugstore and get me something in super-mega-ultra strength. Also, could you give me some paper? Maybe if I draw these images and symbols, it'll help."

Thomas walked to his desk and pulled out several blank sheets of white paper. He took a pencil from a caddy on top of the desk and handed it, along with the paper, to Benjamin.

"Thanks, Tommy. You should probably get back to your guests."

"It is bad manners to be away from your own party for too long."

Benjamin blew Thomas a kiss. "You're the hostess with the most-est."

Thomas left the office, and Benjamin started drawing. He let himself go without any thought as to form or neatness. Benjamin had never really taken up drawing, but he had a hunch at the

moment that if he let himself go into a trance, he would be able to recreate the images in his head.

A few minutes later, he looked at what he had created. It looked a four-year-old's crayon scribbles. *Okay, Benjamin, you need to figure out a way to draw these things properly.* That's when he wondered if a spell would help.

He thought for a moment, and then he began to chant. "Let my hand draw through my mind. The answers I seek please let me find."

With that, Benjamin started to draw with a fury. His drawings showed detail that regular artists took years to perfect. It was almost like Benjamin was watching someone else's hand sketch the images and symbols. When he was finished, he had a page with some odd hieroglyphs, a large bird-like symbol all alone, and a sketch of a scary-looking demon with three heads -- one human, one ram, one bull. He studied the images carefully, but he was baffled as to what they meant. It was likely he would be up late tonight consulting the *Teuromenici*.

The office door opened, and Kenda walked in holding a couple of vials with strange-looking liquids inside. "I see you can't be trusted to go anywhere on your own anymore."

"Yeah, it's funny. I thought maybe if I stayed away from you, strange shit would stop happening to me. Turns out you're not the jinx, after all." Benjamin flashed a wicked smile.

"So, I hear Dr. Mortimer is no longer with us. Does that mean we've lost all hope of finding a cure?"

"I don't know. I thought it was all over a few nights ago, after the solar eclipse. Now I'm not so sure."

"Let me take a look at your neck," Kenda commanded.

Benjamin unbuttoned two of the buttons on his shirt, loosening it enough to clearly show the bruise on his neck. Kenda went to work to heal the bruise.

"We don't have the vim wood that Dr. Mortimer went to the Phobos dimension to get," Benjamin said. "The full-moon cycle is over, so it'll be next month before we could even attempt to open a gateway there, and even if we could do that, it's highly unlikely someone at our level of magical proficiency would survive. To top it off, I have no idea how to mix it all together, and I don't want to take the chance that we'd blow ourselves into another galaxy. So, yeah, I'd say the cure train has officially been derailed."

"I'm sorry to hear that. I know how much the cure meant to you."

Benjamin stayed silent for a few seconds, and then he said, "I asked Thomas to turn me."

Kenda stopped the healing and slapped her hands on her legs. "You did what? Benjamin, are you crazy?"

"It seems insane now, but that night, I felt like I had failed my best friend by not finding a way to drive out the impure demon that had festered in his soul for more than three hundred years. Being with me, and only me, is more important to Thomas than anything, so I figured that if I couldn't make him mortal, I should take the plunge and become immortal."

Kenda rubbed the back of Benjamin's head. "How's your noggin? Thomas said you had a headache."

"It feels much better."

"Good." A moment later, Benjamin felt the back of Kenda's hand rap him on his head. As he winced and grabbed the area where Kenda struck him, she yelled, "Don't you ever try to get yourself bitten again, you big dummy! You of all people know what happens when a person is turned into a vampire!"

"I guess I let my despair get the better of me. I wasn't thinking. All I could think of was how to make him happy."

Kenda stepped around to face Benjamin and crouched so she was eye-level with him. "Listen, I know Thomas is one of the good guys, but most vampires out there are soulless, evil creatures with hearts of darkness and a hunger for death. You don't ever, EVER want to become that!"

"I know. I'm an idiot. On the bright side, it didn't happen, so yahoo for me."

"Vampires laid waste to my homeland ages ago, forcing us to pull up our roots and find another piece of the world to call ours. It's why so many Romanians are gypsies."

"It won't happen again. It was a momentary lapse in judgment."

Kenda looked at the drawings next to Benjamin. "What's all this?"

"When Dr. Mortimer died, he sent me a telepathic message. These were some of the things in my head. He also said a name -- Goren McRae. Does it sound familiar?"

Kenda shook her head as she looked at the page with the hieroglyphs. "Doesn't ring a bell. It almost sounds like a cheesy porn name."

Benjamin smiled for a moment. "Somehow I doubt Dr. Mortimer's deathbed confession was that he was addicted to pornography." He glanced at the hieroglyphs. "Are you able to read those?"

"No, and I haven't made much headway with the papers we snatched from Dr. Mortimer's office. This might sound crazy, but it seems like the papers were written in two different ancient languages."

Benjamin rubbed his chin. "Maybe they were. Remember, Dr. Mortimer was a man intent on protecting his secrets. It stands to reason that he crisscrossed two different languages to throw off anyone trying to steal his work."

"That makes sense. I'll see if I can translate it, and this as well, if you like."

"Sounds like a plan. It'll be one less thing I have to research in the *Teuromenici*. I don't suppose you know what this is." Benjamin picked up the paper with the bird symbol on it.

Kenda shook her head again. "I couldn't even venture a guess. It looks like it might be something that is tattooed on, maybe something to indicate a secret society."

"That's something. I'll keep it in mind as I do my research."

Kenda's vision wandered to the drawing of the demon with three heads. She screamed, stumbled backward, and fell on her behind. Benjamin helped her up.

"Kenda! What's wrong?"

Kenda pointed to the drawing. "Please tell me that is some twisted supernatural equivalent to a ceramic garden gnome!"

Benjamin picked up the drawing and looked at it for a moment. "Do you know what this is?"

Kenda shuddered. "If it's what I think it is, then we should all be packing our bags. That is one of the Lords of Hell. He's known through most of the world as Asmodeus. My people call him Asimodai."

Benjamin frowned. "Who is he? What is he?"

"He's a demon associated with lust and revenge. Some of the darker magical tomes say he commands seventy-two legions of the darkest creatures in existence."

"So, he's bad news?"

Kenda threw Benjamin a fearful glance. "They don't come any more bad."

"Dr. Mortimer gave me these images for a reason. Do you think he was hiding from Asmodeus because he'd found the cure for vampirism?"

"Vampires are one of the stronger creatures for evil, your honey being one of the exceptions. If vampires were eventually eradicated, the forces of darkness would really be in a world of hurt. It's certainly a plausible theory."

Benjamin set the drawing down. "At least we've got one piece of this puzzle in place. That's forward momentum."

Kenda put a hand on Benjamin's shoulder. "Benjamin, if Asmodeus is mixed up in all of this, we seriously need to put the brakes on this quest. He's a Lord of Hell, and he could turn us all into piles of ash if he wanted to."

"Look, I'm not out to destroy all the vampires or other creatures of darkness. I just want Thomas to get what he's always wanted -- a second chance at life. Losing one little soldier in his army of destruction is not going to kill Asmodeus."

"I hope you're right, because apparently he considered Dr. Mortimer enough of a threat. I'd personally like to live long enough to meet my own soul mate."

Benjamin smiled. "Maybe if you're able to translate those writings, we might be able to figure out what's really going on. We need all the information we can get. I'll research this bird thingy, and maybe we'll get lucky."

Thomas poked his head into the office just then. "I wanted to make sure everything was okay."

Kenda smiled and handed the two vials to Benjamin. "Take the blue one before you go to bed. It should keep any freaky images Dr. Mortimer stuffed into your cranium from affecting your dreams. The yellow one is just to relieve any lingering pain."

"Thanks, Kenda," Benjamin said. "I appreciate everything you're doing."

Kenda nodded, and then she turned to Thomas. "As for you, if he ever asks you to bite him again, kick him in the nuts. Also, if you ever actually do bite him, I'll drive a stake through your heart personally. Is that clear?"

Dazed, Thomas replied, "Yes, ma'am."

After Kenda left, Thomas said to Benjamin, "You told her about the other night?"

Benjamin grimaced. "It just kind of slipped out. If it makes you feel any better, she slapped me in the back of the head for it."

"Any luck with the drawings?"

"I've made some headway." Benjamin handed the drawing of Asmodeus to Thomas. Thomas looked at it and moaned.

"Of course. We couldn't be battling some overzealous cult leader. Oh, no. We have to worry about being incinerated by Asmodeus, Lucifer's toady."

"I don't suppose you have any idea what this means." Benjamin handed Thomas the bird symbol.

Thomas moaned again. "Well, this keeps getting better and better," he said sarcastically. "This is the marking for the Dark Phoenix. It's an elite cadre of vampires that have lived more than five hundred years. To become a member, you have to have narrowly escaped an attempt on your life. You usually have a scar like a burn mark or a rash from touching garlic."

"I think I saw that mark on a couple of the vampires that killed Dr. Mortimer."

"Okay, so we know how the Dark Phoenix connects with Dr. Mortimer's death, but what does Asmodeus have to do with it?"

"Kenda thinks the idea of a vampire cure is a huge threat to Asmodeus' power base."

Thomas nodded in agreement. "A sharp decline in the undead population would weaken the armies of darkness. Dr. Mortimer told us he was trying to restore a little balance in the universe, and that is the last thing evil wants."

"Great. I've got Kenda translating some hieroglyphs. Now all I have to do is figure out who Goren McRae is."

"Oh, he's only one of the meanest, most sadistic vampires you will ever meet. He used to douse his victims with animal blood before feeding on them. Afterwards, he would nail their dead carcasses to poles like they were trophies. How does Goren McRae tie into all this?"

"I don't know, but Dr. Mortimer told me that name for a reason. It looks like all we have to do to get the cure is to fight past a cadre of die-hard vampires, the Hannibal Lecter of bloodsuckers, and the archduke of badness himself. It could be worse; it could be raining."

Benjamin awoke to peaceful silence. He and Thomas had slept on the couch in Thomas' office. After closing Eclipse, Benjamin had helped Thomas to clean things up. However, after the work was done, Benjamin wound up getting his own pipes cleaned in the process!

Benjamin looked at his watch. It was after nine, which meant Ivan was opening up his shop at this very moment. He was curious how things had gone between Ivan and Simon last night. If it was anything like what had happened between Benjamin and Thomas, then Ivan was going to be walking funny.

As carefully as he could, Benjamin slowly crawled off Thomas, having slept on top of his vampire lover on the skinny couch. He looked for his clothes, which had hastily been scattered on the floor as he and Thomas had surrendered to their passion. After a few minutes, he was fully dressed and ready to see Ivan.

Benjamin had made it to the office door when Thomas turned his head and said, "Your payment's on the dresser."

Benjamin stuck out his tongue. "Blow me."

"Already did."

Benjamin kissed Thomas on top of the head. "Get some rest, sweetie. I'll be back with some juicy gossip about Ivan's date."

"That'll be a nice change from what we've been talking about lately."

"Amen to that. Love you lots. Bye."

Benjamin strolled out to his Jeep. The sun felt very warm today. It was a nice day to be outside, even if Thomas couldn't share in it.

A few minutes later, the Jeep was pulling up to the comic book store. As Benjamin walked in, he saw Ivan behind the counter working on a sketch. His clothes were wrinkled, indicating a hasty effort to get to work on time.

Benjamin grinned. "Someone didn't go home last night. Slut!"

Ivan took a glance at Benjamin's disheveled ensemble. "I wouldn't talk, you vapid whore."

Benjamin arrived at the counter and looked at Ivan's drawing. It looked similar to the photos Benjamin had taken the day before, only there was no athletic cup on Simon in the drawing.

Benjamin chuckled. "I see you had a good time with your model."

Ivan came around the counter and gave Benjamin a big hug followed by a kiss on the cheek. "Muchas gracias, compadre."

"Any time, my friend. Any time. So, are you two going to see each other again?"

"He has to do a modeling gig in Phoenix for a couple of days, but we're going to go out to Eclipse on Saturday."

"So, how was the date?"

"The man is so deep."

Benjamin grinned wryly to show he was thinking something dirtier than what Ivan had meant. Ivan saw the expression.

"I meant he is so intelligent. He's not at all like the dumb models you usually shoot."

"Thank you. I've tried to cut back on my sexy-but-stupid photos. They made my camera case look fat."

"Nicely done. How have you been otherwise?"

"Complicated question. I think I'm treading water all right for now, but I could wind up being killed by a contingent of Nazi vamps or possibly by Asmodeus."

Ivan whistled. "Maybe you should be a character in a comic book. Your life is definitely surreal."

At that moment, a customer came into the shop. Ivan nodded to indicate he would be right back. As Ivan and the customer chatted about comic books, Benjamin looked at the selection on a sales rack. He used to love reading comic books as a child. They had been a welcome distraction from some of the other things his parents made him read. Being the product of two magical parents, Benjamin was expected to study spells at the age of ten, and that, coupled with his regular school studies, rarely left much time for personal escapes.

He sat down and pulled out a copy of the latest Green Arrow comic. As he flipped through the pages, Ivan returned and said, "Hey, that guy over there says he knows you."

Benjamin glanced over at the man. He wore a red T-shirt and blue jeans. His jet-black hair was tousled. He didn't seem like anyone Benjamin had ever met.

"Who is he?"

"I didn't get the name, but he said he wants to talk with you."

Perplexed, Benjamin put the comic book he was reading back on the rack, stood up, and walked to the man. "Hi there, Ivan said you know me."

"Well, kind of. I had a passing acquaintance with your lover, Thomas Nighthawk."

"Really? How'd you come to know him?"

"I met him in Berlin in the nineteen-twenties. He and I were being chased by vampire hunters."

Benjamin raised an eyebrow. "So, you're a vampire?"

"I am, or at least I was. My name is Goren McRae."

Benjamin tensed up. "That's impossible. You just came in here out of broad daylight."

"That's right. I did. That either makes me a liar or..."

Benjamin's eyes widened as he realized what he was witnessing. Sunlight kills vampires instantly, so the fact that Goren had come from the outside during a bright, sunny day without bursting into flames indicated only one thing: Dr. Mortimer's cure was for real, and there was no trace of demon left inside Goren.

Chapter 13

Goren stepped outside the comic book store, raising his hands like he was welcoming the sunbeams on his body. Benajmin followed him, unsure whether or not he should be conjuring up a fireball. "So you're the infamous Goren McRae?"

"The one and only. Want to see my tattoo?"

Goren flipped his right wrist up so Benjamin could see. On the wrist was the symbol of the Dark Phoenix.

"I was sent to find you. I was told you were, shall we say, shacking up with my old buddy, Thomas. You still have some doubts about whether Samuel Mortimer really has the means to cure vampirism. Well, here's your proof."

"How did this happen?"

"Well, I didn't submit to it willingly, if that's what you're wondering. Dr. Mortimer managed to corner me while I was sleeping. He used a tranquilizer dart to keep me subdued, and when I woke up, I was chained to a table. I remember feeling very strange, like a part of me was missing. While I had been unconscious, he had injected me with his cure. The missing portion I was looking for was the devious bloodsucker that took perverse delight in stretching out the death of his victims. I no longer craved blood, but I remember feeling hungry for something else. I had a hankering for... hamburger."

"How long ago did this happen?"

"Three months ago. I've been living as a mortal ever since, and it's taken some adjustment to get used to not having heightened senses. You can smell more when you're a vampire, but when I smell flowers now, I only smell the perfume and not the stench of potential death."

Benjamin bit his lip. "Are there any other -- how should I put it -- success stories?"

"I was the first, but I know of at least three other former princes of darkness that are able to take morning strolls. I think Dr. Mortimer wanted to make sure the cure would work on any vampire, so he picked out one of the strongest and most sinister."

"While this is all well and good, Dr. Mortimer is not here anymore. Your former brethren made him into Lunchables last night. I'm guessing Asmodeus wasn't too thrilled the good doctor neutered one of his most powerful warriors."

"Surely he must have told you how to make it, though?"

"I have the list of ingredients, but he took off with one of the key items before he got himself killed. That ingredient can only be found in the Phobos dimension. Still, I don't know how to mix it all together, and some of these ingredients could blow us to bits if mixed incorrectly."

"What about his office?" Ivan asked. "Unless the university staff has cleaned it out already, all his paperwork should still be there. I could run back up and see if he had a recipe box or a folder marked 'Classified.' For all we know, the vim wood might be there, too."

"I'll make a drive up there later," Benjamin said. "I don't want to get you into any more trouble."

"Please! I'm the one who first brought up the cure by introducing you to Turlock. I put myself in the middle of all this."

"Tell you what. We'll go up together. Strength in numbers."

Ivan nodded. "Sounds like a plan. Benjamin, you must be excited that you're so close to giving Thomas a normal life again."

"I'll be happy in just a minute," Benjamin said. "There's just one thing I have to say... Powers of Itzhak, hear my call. Place this man behind an energy wall."

A yellow force field barrier surrounded Goren. He looked around with a fearful expression.

"What's this all about?" he asked.

"Unfortunately, Goren, this isn't the first time I've seen a vampire playing outside. I ran into a mimic not so long ago who was impersonating a vampire. This should tell me if you're really human or just another pretender."

Benjamin held up his right hand with the fingers open, and then he closed them into a fist. Lightning bolts struck Goren, who cried out in agonizing pain. He crumpled to the ground, but there were no transformations and no glowing yellow eyes to indicate he was a mimic.

"Let the energy return to the night," Benjamin chanted. "Release this quarry from the light."

With that, the energy barrier disappeared.

"Sorry," Benjamin said as he helped Goren off the ground. "I guess dealing with Dr. Mortimer has made me suspicious of everything."

"So, have I passed the test?" Goren asked.

"You have. I just wanted to be certain I was really dealing with an ex-vampire and not another of Dr. Mortimer's tricks. He might be dead, but I wouldn't put it past him to try and yank my chain from beyond the grave."

"Understandable. He wasn't exactly the most ethical person in the world. I understand he turned some people into werewolves without exposing them to the actual bite."

"Yeah. I'd call him Dr. Frankenstein, but it would be too cliché."

"You're probably wondering why I sought you out. Last night, I was cleaning the tables at this restaurant I work at when I was suddenly overcome with this telepathic image of you. I heard

your name whispered, and that's when I started looking for information about you. I found your name in the phone book under the photography studio you run. I went by there a little while ago, but it was locked. I thought I'd kill some time by coming here and buying a couple of comic books."

Ivan raised an eyebrow. "So, you really do like comic books?"

Goren scoffed. "I might have been a force for evil since the Middle Ages, but I still have an imagination. I even have a first edition Superman, which I bought. Okay, that's a lie. I didn't buy it. I bit the shopkeeper and took it, but it's still in mint condition."

Benjamin made a face. "Okay, you might not be the scariest thing that goes bump in the night anymore, but you're still wicked gross."

"Thank you. So, how is my old friend Thomas?"

"Doing well. He owns his own nightclub here in Sedona, and we have a nice little condo uptown."

"Well, I should probably say hello to him and show him my shiny new life. What's the name of the club?"

"Eclipse."

"I'll stop by there tonight, and I'll see you boys soon, too."

Goren McRae walked over to a beat-up Subaru station wagon, got in, and left. Benjamin and Ivan looked at each other and grimaced.

"That was strange," Ivan said.

"Really? These days, something like that is just another day at the office. I should probably call Thomas and warn him that the übervamp is in town."

Benjamin dialed his cell phone and waited for Thomas to answer.

"Hello?"

"Hi, honey. Guess who I ran into?"

"The zombified corpse of Dr. Mortimer?"

"No, but it definitely falls into the creepy category. Goren McRae's in town."

There was a silence on the other end of the phone, followed by Thomas speaking in a worried tone. "Benjamin, are you all right? What did he do?"

"He went to see the vet, and now he doesn't play with the other hellhounds anymore."

"Huh?"

"Goren McRae is human now."

"That's impossible. He's laid waste to three-fourths of the world in his seven hundred-plus years of existence."

"Tommy, I just spent the last few minutes talking with him in broad daylight. I even put him behind that energy barrier to see if it was just a mimic imitating Goren. This is the real deal."

"So, what's the plan now?"

"I'm going to go home and consult the *Teuromenici*, see if there's a counterattack for the Dark Phoenix or for Asmodeus in case we need it. Then I'm going to see Kenda later and see if she's made any headway translating the hieroglyphs. Goren said he was going to come to Eclipse tonight. I'll meet up with you guys later."

Benjamin sighed. He had just found a reference to the Dark Phoenix in the *Teuromenici*, but instead of a suitable countermeasure to some of the world's most wicked vampires, the book only carried a warning: Stay away from them!

Usually when those warnings were written, it was wise to heed them. However, it didn't seem possible to stay out of their way in this case. Benjamin was no longer looking for trouble; it was stalking him.

He closed the *Teuromenici* and clutched it to his chest. When he had started the search for the cure, he had no idea he would be this deep into uncharted territory. He never imagined he would fight wizards, get hit by lightning, or be chased by werewolves during eclipses. All he wanted was for Thomas to be happy. Benjamin figured it would have been a lot easier if his lover had wanted a puppy instead of being human.

Benjamin closed his eyes. He had been combing through the *Teuromenici* for hours, hoping to find a spell or something to fend off the forces of darkness that seemed to be coming. Being a weapon of good was exhausting.

Benjamin's mind started to wander from the real world into the realm of fantasy. He imagined himself standing outside the condo. He strolled down the front walkway toward his Jeep, which had the hood up. As he moved closer, Thomas appeared from behind the hood. He was shirtless, with rivulets of sweat highlighting his muscles. A couple of grease stains decorated Thomas' face and upper chest.

"I've changed the oil, but we'll need to get you a new air filter," Thomas said as he used an old rag to clean off his hands.

"Thank you for doing this, honey," Benjamin said.

"Now that I'm human again, I can do all kinds of things. We should take a drive up to Lake Powell tomorrow and walk along the beach."

"We can do whatever you want, Tommy. I did all this for you. It's time for you to live your life again."

Benjamin pulled Thomas toward him and kissed him on the lips. The two of them held each other for the longest time, simply being content with the other person's gentle touch. There was no sound, no change in the air. It was as though time had stopped, and Benjamin and Thomas were frozen in the moment.

That feeling would not last, however. Benjamin looked up toward the sky, and dark clouds were blocking out the sun. The sky was turning a deep red, with clouds racing like rapids on a river.

Thomas looked at Benjamin, and then he said, "I guess it's time to pay the price."

Benjamin raised an eyebrow. "What price?"

"Nothing's free. You made me human. Now we have to pay the price."

Gale-force winds came out of nowhere. Benjamin struggled to keep his footing as he was dragged out into the street by the winds. He looked toward the sky and saw a howling funnel appear, sucking everything around into its center. All of a sudden, Benjamin was lifted off the ground, and with a scream of pure panic, he was yanked into the funnel, spinning in the currents.

Benjamin awoke with a gasp, sitting straight up. Sweat poured from every gland. He looked around the bedroom, wondering if something else was going to happen. The dream had felt so real, almost as though it was foretelling some future event in the real world. Then he shook his head, realizing he'd been stressed ever since he first heard the possibility of a cure. *That's it*, he thought. *Things built up and now I'm just having a minor meltdown.*

He walked into the bathroom and splashed cold water on his face. *Get a hold of yourself, Benjamin. It's just a bad dream.* Benjamin looked at his watch. It was just before seven o'clock. In an hour or so, he'd go to Eclipse and be in the arms of his honey -- with no howling abysses in sight!

"Benjamin? Are you here?"

It was Kenda. Benjamin hurried to the kitchen, where Kenda was standing. She held some papers in her hand.

"I was able to translate those hieroglyphs you had in your head. It took me a while to translate them, since I had to first identify the two different languages these symbols represented. It turns out that it was a mix of early Mesopotamian and Sumerian."

"I didn't realize you could read those languages."

"It took a while. It was hard to find the points where one language ended and the other one began. The two languages changed thirteen different times. I've seen less flip-flopping in the halls of Congress."

"So, what is it? Dr. Mortimer's recipe for banana cream pie?"

Kenda folded her arms. "It's the recipe for the cure."

Benjamin stayed still for a full minute. He wasn't sure he'd heard Kenda right after all that he'd been through. Did she say she had the cure in the palm of her hands?

"The... the cure?"

"Not the response I expected. I figured you'd jump through the ceiling or give me a gigantic hug."

"If this actually works, I will do cartwheels and let you spank me with a huge paddle. After all the Hell we've endured, it's hard for me to fully come on board with this."

"Come on, Benjamin. You're one of the most optimistic bastards I know. If you give up hope, this rolling ball of dirt is truly doomed."

"Well, even if we have step-by-step instructions, there's still one problem. We don't have the vim wood, and it's more than three weeks before the next full moon would allow us to access the Phobos dimension. I don't have nearly enough power to open a gateway there."

"We might be able to use a vortex to enhance our magical abilities. Between the two of us, we should be able to open a gateway."

Benjamin rolled his eyes. "And which one of us has to leave the dental records with the other person so they can identify our charred skeletons when we don't come back? If simple tricksters were meant to survive in the Phobos dimension, there wouldn't be a huge ritual required to open the door."

"That's the only place where we can get the vim wood, so unless we find where Dr. Mortimer hid his latest stash, we might not have much of a choice, not if you want your beloved to become human again."

Benjamin sighed. Kenda was right, and he knew it. Even if he wanted to walk away from all this, he knew he couldn't. He had opened Pandora's Box with all his tenacious efforts, and simply willing it away was not an option.

"I know, Kenda. I'm sorry. I just don't like being set up for disappointment. Tell you what. I'm on my way to Eclipse to have a drink with Thomas, so why don't you come join us? That reminds me... Ivan and I found someone who'd been cured by Dr. Mortimer. He was one of the most vicious vampires on the face of the planet, and the cure just leeches the evil right out of him."

"Well, at least we know the cure works. That was one lingering doubt we did not want to contend with, especially if we want to avoid a repeat of what happened two hundred-plus years ago."

Benjamin extended his arm. "Shall we go then?"

Thomas and Goren were at the bar when Benjamin and Kenda walked into Eclipse. The club was full of activity. The Hessicans had some extended cousins from another dimension in town, so there were a lot of creatures with their noses turned up. There were so many, in fact, that Kenda and Benjamin had to squeeze their way past the Hessicans to reach the bar.

Benjamin whistled. "Wow, baby, this joint is really jumping tonight. What did you do? Offer free drinks?"

Thomas chuckled. "Come on, Benjamin. You know Arizona law prohibits me from doing that. Lord Draca told me that tonight is the celebration of Talenahk."

Benjamin looked at Thomas strangely, to which Thomas added, "It's like their version of Christmas, except they have to sacrifice a virgin at midnight."

Benjamin bit his lip. "You know, I don't think your business license covers that."

"They're not doing it here, goofy! Plus it's not really a sacrifice in the sense of throwing the person into a volcano or sticking them with a ceremonial dagger. The virgin gets to enjoy wild and crazy sex while the family watches."

Benjamin and Kenda looked at each other, and their faces puckered up with disgust.

"Boy, I'll bet that generates a lot of performance anxiety," Kenda said. "So, Thomas, are you going to introduce me to your friend?"

Thomas' eyes widened. "Guess I'm not being a very good host. Kenda, this is Goren McRae, one of Dr. Mortimer's success stories. Goren, this is Kenda, our favorite gypsy."

Goren took Kenda's hand and kissed it. "Thomas' description of you falls woefully short. You are, without a doubt, the most beautiful woman I have ever seen."

"Coming from someone who has lived for centuries, that's high praise," Kenda said.

"If I were still a vampire, I would whisk you to my castle and make you my bride."

Kenda laughed uneasily and replied, "If you were still a vampire, I'd stake you."

Goren's eyes widened as he smiled a fearful smile. "Well, that's a rejection if I ever heard one."

"Yeah, she's a spitfire," Benjamin said. "Could you two excuse us? I need to talk to Thomas in private."

As Benjamin led Thomas to his office, he could hear Kenda say, "So you were once the biggest badass in the world. How's recovery working for you?"

After tripping over a pair of intoxicated Hessicans, the lovers made it to Thomas' office. Benjamin closed the door.

"I have good news and bad news."

"You know, that is the most tired line in the world. It's the twenty-first century. Can we come up with something more hip, like "We got us a twisted scenario, dude"?"

Benjamin cleared his throat. "Are you quite done with your digression?"

Thomas chuckled. "Yes, sweetie. Lay it on me."

"The good news is that Kenda was able to translate those symbols Dr. Mortimer pile-drove into my head. They were instructions on how to make the cure."

"So, what's the bad news? You have to make it while wearing Spandex? Honestly, honey, I wouldn't mind."

"No! The bad news is that when Dr. Mortimer blew out of here that one night, he took the vim wood with him, and we're going to have to figure out a way to extract some more from the Phobos dimension."

Thomas looked thoughtful for a moment. Then he said, "Send me."

Benjamin did a double take. "Huh?"

"If you can open up a portal, I'll go to Phobos and get the vim wood."

"Tommy, you are aware of how dangerous that place is, aren't you?"

"Yes. I'm also aware that I am an otherworldly creature who can withstand more pain than regular humans -- no offense. I've let you carry the burden of this quest alone for far too long while I stood by and could do very little. You're doing this for me. Just let me do my share."

Benjamin smiled and took Thomas in his arms. As the two of them kissed, Benjamin could feel his lover's hands reaching underneath his shirt and caressing his back. Thomas gently maneuvered Benjamin to the floor, and then he unbuttoned Benjamin's shirt. Benjamin's eyes rolled back in his head as Thomas moved his lips and tongue from Benjamin's face to one of his nipples. Benjamin let out a gentle moan and turned his head to the right.

That's when he saw it.

"Tommy?"

"Yes, my diamond king?"

Benjamin grimaced at Thomas' goofy statement, and then he pointed underneath the chair they were next to. "That's the vim wood."

He reached under the chair and pulled out a purple log stuffed into a plastic sandwich bag. He opened the bag, and both he and Thomas wrinkled their noses.

"Phew!" Thomas said. "That's vim wood, all right. Anyone can recognize that smell."

As Benjamin sealed the bag, he looked at Thomas and said, "I guess when Dr. Mortimer went on his little supernatural snit fit, he forgot to take his hard-fought prize with him. You know what this means, don't you?"

Thomas smiled a warm, seductive smile. "It means we're just a short step away from me being human again."

Chapter 14

The constant parade of headlights kept coming down the hill toward the Jeep as it traveled in the other direction. Benjamin kept his left hand firmly on the wheel. Thomas sat next to him, holding the sword with the Chinese symbols in his lap. In the back seat lay a pack with all the ingredients for the cure -- the essence of midnight, the hawk's claw, the Mormon tea, the vim wood, and a bottle of nymph's tears. The last ingredient served as the absorbing catalyst, the item that combined all the others into a single mixture.

The last three hours had been a flurry of activity. Reading the translated instructions for the cure, Benjamin had discovered that the ingredients had to be mixed in a centrifuge. Not being a scientist, Benjamin wouldn't be able to mix everything up at home. That left one option: Dr. Mortimer's laboratory.

Benjamin had put a call in to Todd Kesseldorf. He revealed the location where Dr. Mortimer had been working on his non-scientific projects. It was in an old industrial complex near the Coconino National Forest, just outside of Flagstaff. That was where Benjamin and Thomas were heading now.

Before the end of the phone call, Todd had mentioned that Dr. Mortimer's office had been burned to the ground. The matter had been ruled by local police as an accident, but considering what Dr. Mortimer had been involved in, Todd had expressed his doubts that the fire was an accident. It seemed even more suspicious now that Dr. Mortimer was dead.

With a location secured to make the cure, Benjamin and Thomas had quickly moved to get everything together. They had returned to the condo and gathered up the other ingredients. Thomas had retrieved his sword, just as a precautionary measure, he had said. Considering his recent track record of encountering agents of darkness, Benjamin had been inclined to agree. That's why Benjamin also packed a wooden stake and a flask of holy water.

Now they were on their way to the lab, cutting their way through the night. Benjamin was feeling a mixture of excitement and fear. He was inches from vanquishing the dark monster that had rotted inside Thomas for more than three centuries, but nothing about this had been simple.

"Penny for your thoughts."

Benjamin glanced over at Thomas, who had broken the silence that gripped the Jeep for most of the drive. "It's nice to see you place such a cheap price on what's going on in my head."

Thomas smiled. "It's an old saying."

"I know that, silly. I might not be old enough to have my birthday cake declared as a wildfire, but I have a working knowledge of old things."

"Was that a slam on my age?"

"Not at all, but the next time we make love, you should ask who's my great, great, great, great..."

"All right!" Thomas exclaimed, holding up his hands. "I guess I'm going to have to get used to the fact that you're going to be the dominant one in this relationship."

Benjamin put his right hand on Thomas' thigh and squeezed. "You'll still be the top in our bed, baby. Of course, now that the subject has come up, how do you feel about losing all your supernatural abilities? You're not going to have enhanced senses, superior strength, that sort of thing. Are you comfortable with that?"

Thomas thought for a moment and replied, "I can live without having the odors of every dark creature invading my nose. As for the strength, I might not be able to get back to the level I am now, but like you and your powers, I can train my body and still be one man you don't want to cross."

"I just want to be sure you're ready for what's to come."

Thomas wrapped his fingers around Benjamin's. "What's to come is that I'll be able to make passionate love with you without any fear that the hunger inside me will burst through and try to make me bite you. I want to be able to give in to the moment -- no apprehensions, no consequences. I want to be able to sit with you on a porch swing in fifty years, counting your wrinkles while you count mine."

Benjamin scoffed. "You look wrinkly and gross if you want to. I plan to look young and beautiful forever, with the skills and talents of the greatest plastic surgeons in the world."

"I guess it's better to appear vain than to have veins showing."

"Boooooooooooooo! Lame line! I hope once we remove the vampire part of you, it turns you into a better poet."

"I'll leave the rhyming chants to you, Beautiful. Besides, you don't have to worry about me being a weakling. For all you know, I might have been meant to have magical powers myself before I was turned into a vampire."

"Wouldn't you have retained any magical powers once you had been turned?"

"No. When you're transformed, anything that was a part of your human form is obliterated. That includes any magical powers, special talents. You become a completely different individual. You might remember who you were after being turned, but you can never go back to being that person. From the day forward, you forge forward with a new identity, a new purpose. Whether it's for good or evil is a decision every vampire has to make."

"Well, once this is finished, and we've made love in the sunshine a few hundred times, maybe I'll teach you some magic."

Thomas squeezed Benjamin's hand, which was still entwined with his. "No matter what happens tonight, I want you to know I will always love you."

A tear slipped down Benjamin's face. "I know, Tommy. Nothing is more important to me than you."

For the rest of the drive, Benjamin and Thomas held hands. It reaffirmed they were in this relationship together, come what may. Even though Benjamin had been doing much of the legwork in this quest solo, the two of them were always together in spirit. There didn't appear to be anything that could drive them apart.

"I see the exit," Thomas said.

Benjamin drove the Jeep onto the exit ramp and turned toward the forest. According to Todd's instructions, it would be another ten minutes before Benjamin and Thomas arrived at the abandoned industrial complex. Normally, Benjamin loved driving through the woods at night. The shadows created such intriguing patterns. Tonight was different as the apprehension that hovered over Benjamin turned fascination into dread.

It wasn't long before the complex came into view. A locked gate awaited Benjamin and Thomas. As the two exited the vehicle, they looked around to make sure nothing was lurking in the shadows. They approached the gate.

"I don't suppose you packed a skeleton key?" Thomas asked.

"This is no problem. I'll just summon a fireball and melt that lock."

Benjamin raised his hand to conjure the fireball, but Thomas grabbed his wrist to stop him. "Hold up, Sparky. Look over there."

Thomas pointed to a spot where the fencing had been cut away. It looked like someone had been there before them.

"Tommy, are you sure we want to go into this place without the Jeep? If there's something bigger than we can handle, I'd rather drive away at ninety miles an hour instead of hoping the thing's a slow runner."

"I don't think we need to worry. If there were vampires here, they wouldn't need to cut away the fence. They probably would have just done this..."

Thomas leaped over the fence with as much ease as Benjamin would have going over a puddle. Thomas looked back and grinned at Benjamin.

"Showoff," Benjamin mumbled as he grabbed the backpack and Thomas' sword out of the Jeep. He walked to the hole in the fence and squeezed through.

"Sorry, honey," Thomas said, still grinning. "I couldn't help myself."

Benjamin handed Thomas his sword. "You do realize once we cure you, you're not going to be able to do that again."

"I know, but it was still fun."

Benjamin laughed as he put his arm around Thomas' shoulder, and the two of them walked toward the buildings. The only sound that could be heard was a cricket chirping in the woods nearby. Most of the outside lights were burned out, but there were still a couple that worked.

"All right," Benjamin said. "We need to go to the last building on the left. That's where Dr. Mortimer's lab is."

When Benjamin and Thomas arrived at the building, the door was ajar. Benjamin glanced at Thomas.

Thomas held up his sword. "Stay here. I'm going to look around inside, make sure we don't have any unwelcome visitors."

"Be careful."

Thomas nodded before he disappeared into the darkness. Benjamin paced around the door for a few minutes, wondering what paranormal soldier of darkness he and Thomas would have to face. While vampires seemed the likely possibility, and the bloodsuckers of the Dark Phoenix seemed the most viable suspects in that category, other creatures had been utilized to halt Benjamin's efforts to find the cure. It wouldn't surprise Benjamin in the slightest if he were facing mimics, werewolves, or something completely different.

Benjamin patted his right front pocket and heard the crackling of paper. *Good*, he thought. *The instructions for the cure are still there.* He then patted his left pocket and felt the wooden stake he had brought along. He rubbed his fingers nervously. It had been almost ten minutes since Thomas had gone inside. What if something had attacked him?

Benjamin was reaching for the doorknob when the door opened. He let out a gasp as Thomas reappeared.

"What did you find?" Benjamin asked.

"If anything was in there, it's long since left. The place looks like it's been ransacked. Probably the vamps trying to make sure there weren't any specimens of the cure left."

As Benjamin entered the building, he said, "Do you think the vampires would have known about this place?"

"It's possible. Maybe before the Dark Phoenix burned down Dr. Mortimer's office, they found something in there about this secret lab."

"I doubt it. Any written record Dr. Mortimer had about this place was probably written in the dual, intertwining languages that the cure instructions were written in. Even if the vamps could have read one of the languages, they would have been tripped up when the other language kicked in."

Benjamin entered a large room that looked like a science lab, even though a lot of the items were all askew, most of them broken. He scanned the room to see if he could locate the centrifuge. So far, he couldn't see it.

"Hey, Tommy. Can you use your super peepers and see if you can locate the centrifuge?"

Thomas looked around the room. "I don't see it."

He and Benjamin started to wander around the lab to see if it had been knocked off one of the tables, possibly obscured from the view of the doorway. The two of them spent almost fifteen minutes looking around the lab, opening cabinet doors and crawling under tables to sort through the mess. There was no centrifuge.

Benjamin pounded his fist on the table. "Damn!"

"Benjamin, do you think it's possible for you to cast a spell to simulate the effects of a centrifuge?"

"If I'd been able to think of a spell like that, do you think I would have had us come all the way up here? I'm afraid that's a little beyond my abilities."

"Well, let's search some of the other rooms. Maybe the centrifuge was put in another lab or perhaps a storage closet."

Benjamin nodded to indicate he agreed with the idea. Thomas exited the way the two of them had entered while Benjamin opened the door on the other side, which led to a hallway lined on both sides by shelves. There were all kinds of scientific equipment sitting on them -- microscopes, test tubes, beakers. There was no centrifuge to be found, however.

"Benjamin!" Thomas' voice called out.

Benjamin hurried back into the lab. Thomas had returned with a centrifuge. He set it up on one of the tables and plugged it in.

"Looks like our luck is changing," Thomas said.

Benjamin looked at Thomas. Something was different about him. He was perspiring, something vampires never do because their core body temperature remains constant.

"Tommy, are you all right?"

"I'm fine. This thing was just a little heavy, that's all."

Benjamin set the backpack on a table and started to pull the ingredients out. "You know, it seems kind of weird mixing up this magical cure in a science lab. I'm used to having a big old black pot in our kitchen."

"Well, this isn't a normal situation. How many witches are mixing up a cure for vampirism?"

"Good point." Benjamin pulled the instructions out of his pocket and read them. "Can you hand me a beaker? Preferably one that hasn't been broken."

Thomas looked in one of the higher cabinets and fished one out. "Got it."

Benjamin took the beaker from Thomas and set it on the table. He poured in the nymph's tears, followed by crumpled up leaves from the Mormon tea.

"Is there anything I can do?" Thomas asked.

"As a matter of fact, there is." Benjamin pushed the plastic bag with the vim wood toward Thomas. "Can you use your vampire strength one last time and crush this into small chips?"

While Thomas went to crushing the vim wood, Benjamin mixed in the hawk's claw, then put the cap on the beaker and shook it vigorously for a minute to mix the ingredients together.

"Benjamin, why are you shaking it? Isn't that what the centrifuge is for?"

"We only need it once we add the essence of midnight. In order for the essence to be absorbed into the mixture and not be like oil on water, the mixing has to be done at an extremely fast rate."

"I see." Thomas handed Benjamin the crushed vim wood.

"Okay, be ready for a small flash."

Benjamin poured the vim wood into the beaker. A bright flash lit up the room. It took a moment for Benjamin's eyes to adjust again. Benjamin picked up the last ingredient -- the essence of midnight.

"Once I open this bottle, there's going to be an unpleasant smell like someone stuffed some limburger cheese into a pair of rotting sneakers. Be ready."

Benjamin removed the cap, and the rancid smell immediately filled the room. Thomas made a face and covered his nose. Benjamin quickly poured the essence of midnight into the beaker and closed it.

Thomas put his hands back down. "That was the most vile substance I've ever smelled, and considering how enhanced my sense of smell is, that's saying something."

Benjamin grimaced as he poured the mixture into the centrifuge. "It kind of makes me wonder how the cure is going to taste."

"Maybe we can share a drink."

"Thanks, but I'm not a vampire, so I think I'll let you enjoy it all." Benjamin turned on the centrifuge. "This should only take a minute."

Thomas rubbed his chin. "Now, I'm no scientist, but I thought that a centrifuge helped to separate basic elements, or separate solid matter from liquid. How is this thing supposed to mix up the ingredients for the cure?"

"That's a good question, but the thing you forgot was that many magical items are created with a mixture of solid and liquid parts. What this is doing is stripping away the solid aspects and leaving us with only the liquid elements. According to Dr. Mortimer's instructions, it's the liquid that makes the cure work. That's probably why the gypsies couldn't develop the cure in the early eighteen hundreds. The centrifuges that separate solid from liquid weren't invented until later in the nineteenth century. Besides, gypsies weren't known for using science in those days."

The centrifuge stopped. Benjamin took out the well with the liquid components in it. He stared at it for a moment.

Thomas cocked his head slightly. "What are you staring at?"

Benjamin took a deep breath. "Salvation."

Thomas took the well from Benjamin and held it near his lips. "Bottoms up." He drank it all, and then he looked like he was about to gag. He grabbed the table in front of him and dropped the well. Benjamin grabbed him to keep him from falling.

"Tommy? Baby, are you all right?"

It took a few seconds for Thomas to find his voice. "If this doesn't work, I want you to find a way to raise Dr. Mortimer from the dead just so we can pour some of this shit down his throat and see how he likes it."

Benjamin chuckled. "Are you feeling anything yet?"

"Not so far. How long do we wait to see if it works?"

Benjamin shrugged. "I don't know. The instructions don't say."

The sound of shattering glass echoed through the lab. Thomas knocked Benjamin out of the way as shards from the skylight hurtled to the ground. No sooner had the pieces of glass reached the bottom than twenty vampires burst through the hole where the skylight used to be. Their eyes glowed the eerie red that Benjamin was all too familiar with. He'd seen it in the eyes of his lover. Fortunately, he wouldn't ever have to see it in Thomas' eyes ever again.

That train of thought quickly went by the wayside when Benjamin saw two vampires advance toward him. He quickly conjured a pair of fireballs and flung them at the vampires. Both hit their targets, and the vampires only had a few seconds to wail in agony before they became piles of ash.

Benjamin jumped to his feet as Thomas leaped onto one of the tables, brandishing his sword. The vampires inched closer, the look in their eyes appearing almost ravenous. Benjamin glanced down at one of the vampire's wrists. There was a bird tattoo on it.

"Thomas, they're from the Dark Phoenix."

"I see it. Any ideas on how to escape?"

Benjamin climbed onto the table with Thomas. "Has the change occurred yet?"

"No. I'm not feeling any different."

"Can you jump up to the roof with me on your back?"

"I can try."

Benjamin leaped onto Thomas' back. Thomas crouched and tried to jump. Nothing happened. Some of the vampires laughed at the amusing sight.

Thomas grimaced. "Oh, that can't be good."

Benjamin stood up and helped Thomas to his feet. "Can you still handle your sword?"

"It feels a little heavier, but I can manage."

"Good. It looks like we're going to have to fight our way out of this. Are you ready?"

Thomas spun his sword with practiced dexterity. "With a bunch of vampires, I'll get ready real fast."

With that, Thomas and Benjamin flew in separate directions -- Thomas swinging his sword and Benjamin holding fireballs in each hand. Benjamin easily bested the bloodsuckers that came toward him from the front, but he couldn't see one vampire who had snuck up behind him. The vampire grabbed Benjamin, lifted him high, and then tossed him toward a wall like a sack of flour. The force knocked the wind out of Benjamin. He just lay there for a moment.

The vampire who ambushed Benjamin crept closer and grabbed him by his shirt. The vampire's fangs were bared, and his eyes were glowing the darkest shade of crimson ever seen. The vampire was inches from Benjamin's neck when, suddenly, Benjamin heard a slicing sound. The vampire's expression changed from rage to surprise, and his head rolled off his right shoulder, landing on the floor with a squishing sound. The decapitated vamp's grip loosened, and Benjamin fell to the floor, weakened from hitting the wall so hard.

Benjamin looked at a pair of legs standing in front of him. He recognized Thomas' blue jeans. Thomas' left hand was extended to help Benjamin to his feet. In his right hand was his sword, the blade stained red from the blood of slain vampires.

Benjamin grabbed Thomas' hand and slowly rose to his feet. "Thanks, Tommy. I needed..."

The words froze in Benjamin's throat, forming icicles in the canal. Thomas' eyes were glowing red, indicating the cure had not worked.

With a vicious growl, Thomas plunged his fangs deep into Benjamin's neck. Benjamin could feel his strength being leeched away. He couldn't believe it. The man he fell in love with and had spent eight years of his life with was now consuming his blood like it was water for a thirsty man. The man who had only a few days ago recoiled at the mere mention of drinking Benjamin's blood was now sucking it like a vacuum.

Benjamin could feel his life fading away. He knew he would be dead in moments unless he did something. His survival instinct kicked in, and he lifted his knee up hard, scoring a direct hit on Thomas' groin. He then summoned up all his remaining strength and punched Thomas, who released his hold on Benjamin and fell backward, knocking over several vampires in the process.

Benjamin limped a few steps away and looked back at his lover. "It's nice to know vampire men can still feel pain when you nail them in the grapes."

Thomas looked up at Benjamin, but instead of a look of regret or confusion, he stared at Benjamin with malevolence. His eyes glowed fiercer than before. Benjamin was sure that the cure, or whatever it was he had made, was responsible for Thomas' altered behavior. The only question was whether or not it was permanent.

The answer would have to wait. The few vampires left in the room were advancing toward Benjamin, and as he looked toward the main entrance to the lab, more vampires appeared, all with piercing eyes shining in scarlet tones. Benjamin glanced at the shattered skylight. The fact a skylight was even there hinted at the possibility that there was a way to get to the roof. His only hope was that there would also be a way down so he could get to the Jeep.

Benjamin leaped onto a lab table and did a kamikaze dive toward the door that led to the other hallway. He reached the doorway and looked back at the vampires. In the course of half a second, he noticed some spilled chemicals near the door, conjured a fireball, and threw it at the chemicals. The force of the rising flames from those chemicals was so strong it shook the building, making Benjamin fall against one of the shelves. He didn't have time to lick his wounds, however. He jumped up and made his way down the hallway, praying he wasn't heading for a dead end.

Fortunately, he found a stairwell and started to climb, hoping it would lead someplace where he could get away. He was no match for all those vampires right now, and he didn't want to fathom the distinct possibility that he would have to kill his beloved in order to stave off his own death.

Benjamin made it to the roof, and after resting a moment to conserve his strength, he found a ladder leading down to the ground. Once there, he knew he had to hurry to get back to his Jeep, as it was only a matter of time before the vampires got out of the building. He was weak from the blood loss he'd suffered so far, and his wound was still bleeding. As he climbed down, he knew he had to find a way to stop the bleeding if he had any hope of surviving.

As Benjamin reached the bottom of the ladder, he heard a fierce growling. He spun around.

"Oh, my God."

Chapter 15

"Why, Mr. Carpenter, you look you've seen a ghost."

Benjamin's eyes widened as he tried to comprehend what he saw. There, standing only a few feet away from him, was Dr. Samuel Mortimer, the ill-fated supreme wizard who had met an untimely doom a couple of days ago on a hilltop in Sedona. Dr. Mortimer looked pretty much the same as he had a few days ago, aside from his clothes being filthy from continuous use.

"I don't believe it," Benjamin said when he was finally able to speak again. "I saw you get thrashed by the Dark Phoenix vampires. You're supposed to be dead."

Dr. Mortimer smiled and folded his arms. "Oh, but Benji, I am dead, or to be more precise..." His eyes filled with ruby flames. "Undead."

Benjamin felt his body stiffen. Instinctively, he held up his stake and lunged at Dr. Mortimer. That action proved to be futile, as Dr. Mortimer grabbed his elbow and whipped his arm back so hard it sprained the muscles. Benjamin cried out in pain and dropped the stake.

"Ah, ah, ah! You naughty little boy bitch! I come here to bury the hatchet, and you try to stake me! That's rather rude!"

Dr. Mortimer tossed Benjamin to the ground. Benjamin tumbled twice and leapt to his feet. He used the hand on his good arm to favor his injured arm.

"I don't think you're going to find it as easy to take me down as you think, Doc."

"You're forgetting that you're dealing with a supreme wizard. I could rain down everlasting torment on you right now, and you wouldn't even have time to cry for mercy."

Benjamin smirked. "You must really think I'm stupid! Now that you're a vampire, you've lost all your human abilities, and that includes your powers. Threatening to thrash me with your non-existent powers is about as scary as finding out you won the lottery."

Dr. Mortimer let out an evil laugh. "I never said I was using *my* powers."

Just then, the ground started to shake beneath Benjamin's feet and an invisible force punched through, sending Benjamin sprawling. After coughing to get some dirt out of his mouth, he looked at the pair of shoes standing inches away from him. He looked up and saw Dr. Mortimer staring down at him menacingly.

"And yes," Dr. Mortimer added, "I do think you're stupid."

Benjamin struggled to get back on his feet. The broken ribs, the sprained elbow, and the loss of blood were all taking a critical toll on him. He wasn't sure how much longer he could hold out.

"So you've managed to retain a few tricks. Congratulations."

Dr. Mortimer flashed Benjamin a look of disgust. "Tricks? You like tricks? Here's one that should sweep you off your feet."

A miniature tornado blew out from behind one of the buildings and collided with Benjamin, sending him flying again. As he picked himself off the ground again, he saw spatters of blood. He touched his lip and discovered he was bleeding from another part of his body. This was not good.

Benjamin shot Dr. Mortimer a defiant look. "So, who's pulling your strings, you sadistic puppet?"

Dr. Mortimer grinned wickedly again, his eyes still burning red. "Come on! You already know the answer to that question. I planted it in your head."

Just then, a gray shadow with a green flame in the center expelled itself from Mortimer's body and took a position to his right.

"I am Asmodeus, the Lord of Hell. I am the burner of souls and the bane of hope. I strike fear in the hearts of great warriors, and I destroy the virtue of all who are good and right..."

"I'm sorry to interrupt," Benjamin said, still defiant. "But is your brilliant plan of Armageddon to bore me to death? If so, I think it might be working."

Asmodeus sent a shadowy tendril toward Benjamin. Benjamin managed to dodge the tendril, but a second one scored a direct hit on his broken ribs. He winced and muffled his cry of pain.

"Interesting," Asmodeus hissed. "This is the warrior who is supposed to play a role in the end times, but he can't even save himself right now, much less his beloved."

Benjamin stood up straight again as he cast his backpack aside. "Oh, goody. We've gone to the insult phase. Could you wake me when you get to the 'mwa-ha-ha'?"

"Your will is strong, witch. Too bad we can't say the same about your boy toy. He fell under the influence of the 'cure' way too easily. About as easily as you fell for our intricate ruse that a cure even existed."

Asmodeus and Dr. Mortimer laughed together, their cackling echoing off the buildings of the industrial complex. Benjamin took the opportunity to conjure up a fireball, fighting through his pain to do it, and flung it at Asmodeus. The flame went right through the monster's shadowy form.

"Foolish boy!" Asmodeus said. "Do you really think I would lower myself to appearing in your realm of reality? This is just my way of communicating in this world. You have no inkling as to the scope of my powers. I am not just some demon or monster you can annihilate. I am evil itself!"

Benjamin cradled his broken ribs, which were causing him excruciating pain right now. "So you're evil itself. If you wanted me dead, why didn't you just kill me? Why this elaborate deception?"

"You were never the target, boy, although you were quite fun for target practice. Think about it - who has been the focus of this entire crusade? Who is the one you have been trying to rescue from eternal damnation?"

Benjamin's jaw dropped as he realized whom Asmodeus was speaking of. The Lord of Hell had been after his lover, the same man who had been the focus of all his efforts.

"Why? What possible use could you have for Thomas?"

"His goodness is an abomination. It goes against the very nature of being a vampire. His desire to reclaim his mortality is even more sickening. I used that desire as the bait you and he could not resist, starting with that pathetic pawn Turlock. His thirst to retain his immortality led him on a destructive path that led him to Sedona. The fool never really knew where Dr. Mortimer was, but I needed you to believe he really had the answer. Using my influence over a mimic, I was able to make it look like Turlock was killed to keep you from finding the truth."

"So there never was a cure, was there?"

"Oh, a cure does exist, and Dr. Mortimer here uncovered the secret, but he's not likely to tell you about it now that he is part of my legion of darkness. He has been a faithful little bloodsucker for months now."

"Months? But I saw him in daylight. How could he be a vampire and survive that?"

"You were clever to suspect Goren McRae of being a mimic, but did it ever occur to you that anyone else could have been a mimic in disguise, such as the supposed doctor himself? Using my own powers to simulate those of a supreme wizard, the mimic put on a very convincing performance, especially when you witnessed his supposed demise at the hands of the vampires of the Dark Phoenix. I created the eclipse when you went to fetch the Mormon tea, and I transported some vampires to your location to keep you from escaping...or at least make it seem like Dr. Mortimer didn't want you to survive. I must admit I hadn't planned on the werewolves transforming during the eclipse and going after your friend with the comic book store, but that was just a bonus."

"You never did explain why you want Thomas. If he's such a disgrace to all things evil, why would a Lord of Hell want anything to do with him?"

"You saw how quickly he transformed in the laboratory from loving boyfriend to ravenous prince of darkness. He has great evil within him. It will play a pivotal role in my future plans."

The blood loss was starting to take its toll on Benjamin. He fell to his knees, but he looked up and shot Asmodeus an angry glance. "Not if I stop you."

Asmodeus' laughter echoed again. "You can't even stand. You don't have a prayer of stopping me. It's the story of your life. You put your nose into dangerous situations you can't get yourself out of. For a warrior on the side of good, you're pretty pathetic."

Benjamin heard a hissing sound that seemed like it was coming closer. All of a sudden, Dr. Mortimer twitched and looked down at his chest. An arrow had pierced his heart -- a wooden one. Dr. Mortimer collapsed to the ground, dead.

Benjamin looked toward the main gate on the other side of the complex. There stood Kenda and Goren. Goren had a crossbow in his hands, the apparent source of the arrow that had slain Dr. Mortimer.

"Looks like we got here just in time," Kenda said.

"Piffle!" Benjamin said, breathing heavily. "I had that ex-wizard right where I wanted him."

Kenda smiled politely. "Sure you did, sweetie. Tell you what, since I'm on a roll, why don't I take care of that floating puff of smoke for you?"

Asmodeus' voice shook the ground. "You cannot hope to destroy me! I am evil itself! I fester in the hearts and minds of every..."

Kenda threw a tiny bottle with a red liquid at the shadow hovering near Benjamin. It produced a brief flash of red, and then she began to chant.

"Romanian gypsies, hear my spell. Expel this evil and return it to Hell."

With an inhuman wail, the shadow broke up like a billowing cloud after the storm. One last quake capped off Asmodeus' departure, and then he was gone. Kenda hurried up to Benjamin and held her hands near his neck while they glowed.

"So, Benjamin, what the Hell happened to you? I thought you were just going to come here, make the cure, and go home."

"Not that I don't appreciate what you did, Kenda, but how did you know I was in trouble?"

"Honey, you're always in trouble. However, the actual reason I knew you were in deep shit was when Goren started talking about his experience in this lab."

Goren came close to Kenda then and said, "I had this pretty filly mesmerized by my words."

Kenda scoffed as she elbowed Goren. "He wishes. Anyway, he told me that Dr. Mortimer had tried an earlier concoction with essence of midnight on another vampire, but it just turned him into a mindless killing machine. When he told me that, I knew you were heading into trouble. I tried to call you to warn you, but someone left his cell phone at the club."

Kenda pulled Benjamin's cell phone out of her coat pocket and tossed it to him. "You left it in Thomas' office. I suspect it fell out of your pocket while the two of you were making out."

Benjamin felt his cheeks burn with embarrassment. He didn't know how Kenda had found out about that, but he planned to uncover the truth... later. Right now, he had other problems to deal with.

"Geez, Benjamin!" Kenda exclaimed. "You're torn up eight ways to Sunday. I'm not going to be able to make it go away right now, but I was able to close up that vamp bite and mend the ribs. You'll still feel pretty tender, but we should be able to get you out of here. We'll just need to find Thomas."

Benjamin and Kenda both screamed as Thomas landed two feet from them. His fangs were bared, his eyes were the reddest they had been yet, and he was beginning to foam at the mouth. Kenda gasped, which was all she could do before Thomas struck her with the back of his hand and sent her flying. More vampires were pouring out of the lab building.

Goren raised his crossbow to shoot Thomas, but he was no match for the vampire's lightning-quick reflexes. Thomas knocked the crossbow out of Goren's grasp with one hand while grabbing him with the other one and squeezing his throat. All Goren could do was gurgle as Thomas crushed the life out of him as easily as a person flattened a beer can.

Benjamin knew he was next unless he did something. He tumbled over to where the crossbow had been tossed and scooped it up. Summoning up every ounce of strength he had, he created numerous astral projections that surrounded Thomas, each looking like they were holding the crossbow. Thomas dropped Goren's lifeless body and spun around, clearly confused by the illusions. He let out a frustrated snarl.

With an echo that came from many voices speaking at once, Benjamin said, "Let's see if you can figure out which one of us is the man you love."

It was a standoff. The astral projections surrounded Thomas, but the vampires of the Dark Phoenix had formed a circle around the Benjamins. The real Benjamin knew he had to figure out how to eliminate some of these vampires, or else his efforts to save Thomas would be pointless. While he could easily summon a fireball at will, he'd only be able to fry one or two vampires before the rest swarmed on him. He needed a spell, and he realized just the one to use.

"I call upon the embers of the sky, rain down your fire and let my enemies die!"

With that, fireballs fell from above, hitting the vampires on the outer perimeter. One by one, they fell like dominoes, wailing in pain as their demonic bodies disintegrated. Unfortunately, the spell casting had required Benjamin to refocus his mental forces, which meant the astral projections had to vanish. When that happened, Thomas found his real target.

He leaped toward Benjamin, who was so diverted by his other tasks that he didn't realize he was being attacked until he crashed to the ground. He lost the crossbow in the struggle, and it took everything he had to keep Thomas' fangs from plunging into him once again.

"Thomas! Fight this! You don't want to hurt me!"

Benjamin's words did no good as Thomas continued to hold him helpless. He glanced over and saw Kenda had made it back on her feet. She was a few feet from his backpack, which held one more weapon to fend off Thomas.

"Kenda! In my backpack! The flask!"

Kenda quickly dove for the backpack and dug out the flask of holy water Benjamin had packed. She pulled off the top and flung some of the water at Thomas. He screamed in pain and rolled off of Benjamin. Benjamin hurried to Kenda's side.

"Well," Kenda said, "I hope you have a plan to put down this rabid dog."

Benjamin exhaled. "I thought I'd start with a kennel." He cleared his throat and began to chant. "Powers of Itzhak, hear my call. Place my beloved behind an energy wall."

The energy barrier surrounded Thomas, who went into a rage and threw himself at the wall, trying to escape. After a few times bouncing off the barrier and enduring electric shocks, he stopped and fumed.

"Nice trick," Kenda said. "How long can that hold him?"

"I don't know. I've never had cause to keep someone in the energy barrier for very long, but we'd better find a way to get Thomas back to normal. Is there an antidote for the essence of midnight?"

"Just one -- wolf's bane."

Benjamin's face fell. "I hope you brought some with you. My supply was destroyed by Dr. Mortimer or Asmodeus or whoever the fuck that thing was that came into my home."

Kenda smiled. "I just happen to have some with me. I thought it might come in handy, considering we were fighting the forces of darkness."

She reached into her coat pocket and pulled out a small glass bottle with the wolf's bane in it.

"There's just one problem," Benjamin said. "As soon as I pull down that energy barrier, he's going to be in attack mode. Chances are he won't be holding still for us long enough to nail him with the wolf's bane."

"I have an idea. Here's the holy water, just in case." Kenda tossed the flask to Benjamin.

Benjamin raised an eyebrow and looked at the bottle. "Just in case of what?"

Kenda waved her hands and floated into the air. She pulled her arm back, ready to throw the wolf's bane. "Drop the barrier."

Benjamin nodded. "Let the energy return to the night. Release this quarry from the light."

The barrier fell, and Thomas started to move toward Benjamin, but Kenda's throw was quick and accurate. The bottle shattered against the side of Thomas' face, and the breath drawn in by Thomas' gasp pulled the wolf's bane into his body. He took a couple of steps toward Benjamin before the herb took effect, and then he fell to the ground, completely immobilized.

Kenda floated back to the ground. "It'll probably take about an hour for the herb to neutralize the essence of midnight. We'll have to stand watch, just in case there are any more vampires around."

Benjamin leaned up against the lab building. "I hope there aren't. I could live the rest of my life without having to see any vampires of the Dark Phoenix."

"How many of them did you kill?"

"I don't know. Probably forty or so."

"That's got to feel pretty good. You went up against more than forty of the most vicious and strongest vampires known to exist, and at the end of the night, who's the one walking away from this?"

Benjamin laughed, followed by a cough. "I don't know if I'll be walking so much as limping. Those bloodsuckers were brutal."

"The point is you're still alive, and so is Thomas. He's going to be all right. He wasn't in his right mind, Benjamin. That essence of midnight had a hold on him just like those Bebel petals did with that vampire in the eighteen hundreds. Unlike that vamp, however, Thomas is coming back."

"But there is a cure out there somewhere." Benjamin pointed to Goren. "Goren became human again. He didn't meet a particularly decent end, but he died as a human. I don't want Thomas to die as one of the damned. He wants to be human, and I want to find a way to make that happen."

Benjamin crawled over to Thomas and held his hand. He bit his lip and started to cry. He had wanted to make Thomas' dream come true, but he wound up almost destroying his beloved. What made things worse was the fact that this whole thing had been orchestrated by the Lord of Hell to get Thomas for some reason. Losing Thomas like that would be worse than if someone had just staked him.

As Benjamin pulled himself together, he looked over at Goren's body. He lay there, limp and lifeless. He might have been a force of evil for centuries, but in the end, he died a hero. And he was glowing.

"Kenda, look," Benjamin whispered as he pointed at Goren.

Kenda looked to where Benjamin was pointing. A white shimmer ascended from Goren's body. It floated over to where Kenda, Benjamin, and Thomas were. With a flash, it transformed into Goren. He knelt before Benjamin and Thomas and put his hand on Thomas' shoulder. The touch seared through Thomas' shirt. Benjamin gasped, but Goren gave him a reassuring look. After a few seconds, Goren pulled his hand away. Benjamin looked down and yelped. There was a symbol tattooed on Thomas' shoulder. It had three black tendrils with thorns on them, and it had a triquetra with a red stripes in the center. It was a symbol Benjamin had great reason to recognize.

"Kenda, it's an undotwa. That's a symbol from the Itzhak clan. It's supposed to be a sign of being a force for good."

"You're right, Benjamin," Goren said, his voice booming. "Thomas has proven himself worthy of being in the army of light. His desire to quell his thirst for blood and darkness shows he should be exonerated of the damnation that has been his penance for centuries."

"What does this mean?"

"While I cannot remove the vampire in him completely, his blood hunger will not be as strong, which means he will be able to make love to you without having an urge to bite you. He will also be able to walk in the light of day. He will still maintain his enhanced strength and senses, plus he will get a new ability."

"Just as long as it's not the ability to transform into a bat, because that's just gross."

"No, but he will be able to hypnotize people and get them to reveal the truth. It won't work on supernatural beings, but mortals will not be able to resist his spell."

Benjamin sighed. "I don't understand any of this."

"Asmodeus was right about one thing. You and Thomas will play an integral role in this world's darkest chapter. To be prepared for the end times, we must arm you properly. Thomas cannot carry out his destiny as one of the damned."

Benjamin looked at Thomas and smiled. It felt good to know that, even though his lover would not be human, he would not be damned either.

But Goren wasn't done yet.

"He also cannot carry out his destiny alone. You must also be prepared."

Goren reached out with his hand and pressed it against the small of Benjamin's back. Benjamin felt an electrical surge flow through him. As Goren pulled his hand away, Kenda craned her neck to see what happened.

"Benjamin," she said. "There's a smaller undotwa on your back."

Benjamin felt the small of his back. "So, do I get any new abilities?"

"Not yet," Goren said, "but you are going to be a powerful magic master. You will also serve as a source of strength for Thomas, and he will be the same for you."

Goren stood up and faced Kenda. He raised his hand, but she quickly lifted hers to stop him.

"I know you're like an angel or some kind of bizarre version of Casper the Friendly Ghost, but you're still not touching me."

Goren smiled. "You're destined for great things, as well."

"Really? So, what amazing things am I going..."

Goren's spirit began to shimmer as swirls of light passed around and through him. In a few moments, he had vanished.

"...to do?" Kenda finished, looking disappointed.

Benjamin chuckled at the brief adversarial relationship that Kenda and Goren had cultivated. This night had been so bizarre and confusing, it was nice to be able to find a silver lining.

Benjamin felt his hand being squeezed. He looked down and saw Thomas managing a smile. Even though the wolf's bane had incapacitated Thomas, he still found the strength to be close to his beloved. The loving expression on Thomas' face now was far different from the twisted look of evil he'd had a short while ago.

"I love you, Tommy."

Benjamin held Thomas close to him while waiting for the wolf's bane to wear off. He would have held his sweetheart forever, if necessary. Even though he was thoroughly exhausted from the battle and everything that happened before and after, he felt a new strength within him, something that made him realize all of the struggle and strife he'd been through so far was worth it.

Chapter 16

Benjamin awoke in bed feeling oddly refreshed despite only having about an hour of rest. However, he was keenly aware at that moment that he was alone in the bed. Thomas was elsewhere.

Benjamin threw on a bathrobe and walked to the laundry room, which led to the backyard. He looked out the window and saw Thomas sitting on the porch as the sunrise bathed the world in light. The sun gleamed on Thomas' bare chest, and the new tattoo on his shoulder seemed to glow. It hadn't been a bizarre dream, Benjamin realized. What had happened was real. Thomas wasn't really human, but he wasn't fully a vampire anymore, either.

Benjamin just stood there for a few minutes. While Thomas' deepest wish hadn't actually come true, all the pain and struggle hadn't been for nothing. Thomas was enjoying the sunrise for the first time since the seventeenth century. Later on, the two of them would make love, and Thomas would be able to give in completely to the moment instead of turning into a bloodthirsty monster. It wasn't perfect, but it was a move in the right direction, and Benjamin needed to be happy with that. For all the changes, it was still the same Thomas he fell in love with, the same man who shared his bed.

"I know you're there, my beloved," Thomas said, not diverting his gaze from the sunrise. Benjamin felt his cheeks burn as he opened the door and stepped onto the porch.

"Did you gain some mental powers with that new tattoo?"

Thomas smiled and turned to Benjamin. "I've always been able to tell when you're near. It's one of the things that develop when you're in love. By the way, I love the tattoo, especially since you've got one of your own."

Benjamin closed his eyes and grinned as he put his hands behind his back near the location of his undotwa. "I didn't realize you had noticed."

"You don't become intimately involved with someone without noticing big changes to their body. I spotted it when you turned over, plus I was paying attention when Goren worked his mojo. It looks good on you."

Benjamin traced his finger around Thomas' tattoo. "I must say, when we first embarked on this mission to restore your mortality, I didn't expect a tattoo to be part of the deal. However, I'm glad it was a symbol from the Itzhak clan. It's proof positive that you and I are forever."

Thomas pulled Benjamin's chin up so he was looking directly into his lover's eyes. He inched closer and took Benjamin's lips to his own. The two of them held each other, and Benjamin felt a renewed craze. It was like a powerful new spark had been ignited, and Benjamin was eager to see where it would lead.

"So," Benjamin said, taking a step back. "What do you think all this means? The tattoos, the shift in destiny, the fact that you're still a vampire but now you can tan like the rest of us. It's all so strange."

"Well, my sweet," Thomas said, pulling Benjamin closer to his chest as they both turned toward the eastern sky. "I think everything happens for a reason. It's true we don't know for sure what the reason is, but I'm willing to accept it, whatever it is, because it means I'll be at your side. That's all that matters to me."

Thomas paused, took a deep breath and continued. "I thought I wanted to be human more than anything in the world, because being mortal meant I could have you completely without letting the dark side of me have free rein. However, all I really wanted was to be with you, and I've had that all along. It took all this to make me realize it, but I'm grateful you're here with me."

Thomas kissed Benjamin on the forehead and held him. His hands wandered around Benjamin's torso, giving Benjamin a warm feeling inside -- at least until a hand brushed across his ribs. Benjamin flinched at the pain.

Thomas grimaced. "Sorry."

"That's okay. I got these bruises fighting for the man I loved."

"And *with* the man you love." Thomas paused. "I don't know what I would have done if I had killed you, or even worse -- damned you. You know I would never consciously do anything to hurt you."

"I know," Benjamin said, stroking Thomas' face. "I don't know what I would have done if I'd had to kill you last night. For a time, I was afraid I would actually have to roast you like a marshmallow. I admit I was scared I had lost you for a while there, but if being in love has taught me anything, it's that it is more powerful than any spell I cast or all of your supernatural strength. Our love will win out in the end."

Benjamin pulled away and indicated he would be right back. He rushed into the house and grabbed his camera off the kitchen counter. He stepped back out and pointed it at Thomas.

Thomas looked confused. "What are you doing, Benjamin?"

"Making sure our love lasts forever. Now smile."

Thomas flashed his teeth as Benjamin fired off several pictures. Benjamin looked at the photos through his viewfinder, and he sighed as he saw the light on Thomas' pecs.

"There's just one thing I don't understand," Benjamin said. "Goren was human. That means a cure for vampirism exists. If the forces of darkness wanted to keep it all a secret, why did they let Goren come to us? If the attack I witnessed was faked, then why did they put Goren's name in my head? And who actually sent Goren to find me? It doesn't make any sense."

Thomas leaned against the porch railing. "All I can figure is that evil works without rules. While we all have a sense of fair play, Lords of Hell like Asmodeus don't. The only way they can gain an upper hand is through deception and misdirection."

"Tommy, do you think if we survive the coming battles..."

"I think you mean 'when.'"

"When we survive the coming battles, do you think we'll find a way to make you fully human again?"

"Anything's possible. I'd like to think we would deserve a reward for all the hard work we put into averting an apocalypse."

Benjamin set the camera on the porch and ran into the yard. Thomas looked at him with an odd expression.

"Benjamin, what are you doing?"

"Trying to get you to chase me. Of course, I don't know." Benjamin shot Thomas a wicked grin as he folded his arms. "Maybe big heroes are too dignified to chase their boyfriends in the backyard."

Thomas smirked before jumping off the porch and chasing after Benjamin. Benjamin led him all around the yard, ducking behind bushes and climbing up trees. Thomas acted like he couldn't catch Benjamin...for a while. Then he leaped ten feet to corner Benjamin in an oak tree. Pinning Benjamin to the tree, Thomas put his tongue deep into Benjamin's mouth. Benjamin loved the probing sensation. After a minute, Thomas scooped Benjamin into his arms.

"Tommy, what are you doing?"

"Do you trust me?"

"Always, my sweet."

"Then hold on."

Benjamin wrapped his arms around Thomas' neck. Thomas leaped into the air and landed on the ground. Benjamin hadn't felt such a thrill with the wind whipping through his hair and the rush of moving at high speeds in midair.

"God, Tommy, you are such a freak!"

Thomas shot Benjamin a hungry look, but it was the glance of a man who was horny, not the one of a vampire out for blood. Without a word, Thomas carried Benjamin into the house and into the bedroom. He threw Benjamin on the bed, and then Thomas proceeded to unbuckle his jeans. While he did, Benjamin shucked the robe, revealing a hungry, naked body.

Before climbing into bed, Thomas walked to the curtains and flung them open. While it would likely give the neighbors a show, the act also allowed Thomas to make love to Benjamin in the light of day. Their lovemaking that morning took on a new life, with Thomas giving in to all of his urges, and Benjamin letting every thrust count.

After both men had achieved orgasm, they lay in the bed, enjoying the quiet after coitus. Benjamin was kissing a pattern around Thomas' tattoo.

"So, Tommy. Do you have the urge to bite me?"

Thomas shook his head. "Nope. Do you have the urge to have me bite you?"

"Definitely not. We're just going to chalk that up to stupidity."

"Agreed."

Benjamin pointed to Thomas' tattoo. "Did you notice that the red stripes on your tattoo were glowing as we made love?"

Thomas moaned to indicate affirmation. "Yours was glowing, too. Maybe it's a mystical representation of our love. When we're close, the undotwas glow to indicate a force of good."

Benjamin licked his lips. "I don't know how it's possible, but the tattoo has made you seventy-five percent more sexy."

"Would you say it adds to my street cred? When things that go bump into the night cross my path, do you think the tattoo will make them run in terror?"

"If it doesn't, I have a bunch of fireballs that will change their minds."

Thomas laughed and pressed Benjamin tightly against him. "I love you, you fire-slinging witch."

Benjamin chuckled. "Love you, too, you bloodsucking fiend."

The two of them lay together for another few minutes. Then Benjamin popped his head up and said, "Let's go dancing tomorrow night."

"Sure thing."

"Can we bring Kenda and Ivan along? I feel like we should be celebrating. True, we didn't make you human, but at least we're all still alive to tell the tale."

"Anything for my prince."

Ivan and his new boyfriend, the model Simon, were dancing in Eclipse to "Let's Hear it For the Boy," appearing to not have a care in the world. Benjamin and Thomas watched from a corner booth as they sipped rum and Coke. The club was having an Eighties music night, which suited Benjamin just fine.

Kenda walked into the club, and she wasn't alone. She was arm in arm with Todd, the grad student who had been turned into a werewolf. Benjamin was surprised, first by the fact that

Kenda was interested in someone, and secondly that it was someone who grew fur three nights every lunar cycle.

"Hey, gypsy girl. I see you've brought an old friend back."

"Yeah. I thought that, since we met under less than stellar circumstances, we should just wipe the slate clean and start fresh."

Thomas stood up. "Hello, Todd. I'm Thomas Nighthawk." He shook Todd's hand.

"Nice to meet you," Todd said. "So you're the man Benjamin risked everything for in order for you to regain your mortality."

Thomas looked back at Benjamin. "I'm a very lucky creature of the night."

"I'd say that's true, Mr. Nighthawk."

"Please just call me Thomas. Would you like a drink? I have connections with the owner of this establishment."

Benjamin huffed. "Big whoop! I'm shtupping the guy."

Kenda rolled her eyes as Thomas and Todd strolled to the bar. "It's nice to see this whole experience hasn't changed you. You're still a big ol' smart ass."

"It's a badge I carry with pride."

"So, how are you two doing after all this?"

"It's been exhilarating. It's been confusing. It's like we've entered a brand new life. We still have bits and pieces of ourselves, but there's a bunch of new stuff that we have to sort through. I was going through the *Teuromenici* earlier today, and there's this new chapter that appeared. It has the undotwa marking at the beginning and talks about our destiny."

Kenda whistled. "That's weird. Are you sure it hasn't just been there the whole time without you realizing? I'm sure it didn't list you by name."

"No. I'm called 'the powerful witch of destiny who will avert the end times.' No pressure there."

"Anything in there about whether or not I will play a role?"

"Not yet, but I still have a lot of reading to do. There are about thirty pages. Who knew destiny was so time consuming?"

"Well, make sure that it doesn't completely take over your life. While you obviously play key roles in the future, we don't want you and Thomas to turn into the Batman and Robin of the paranormal world."

Ivan and Simon had finished dancing by this point and came over to join Kenda and Benjamin.

"Hey, guys!" Ivan said. "This is awesome. Eclipse should have had an Eighties music night years ago."

Kenda pointed to Simon. "Who's the looker?"

"This is Simon. Benjamin introduced us a few days ago, and what a whirlwind time it has been."

Kenda whispered to Benjamin, "Bet they would have really thought it was a whirlwind time if they'd been up at that industrial complex with us surrounded by umpteen vampires."

Benjamin chuckled. Thomas and Todd returned just then, with Todd sipping a screwdriver.

"So, what did we miss?" Thomas asked as he slid in next to Benjamin.

"Destiny, Simon, and being the Batman and Robin of the paranormal world."

Thomas vigorously shook his head. Benjamin laughed as he watched Thomas' expression.

Simon excused himself to go to the restroom. When he was out of earshot, Benjamin motioned for the others to move in closer.

"Hey, guys. We're glad you could come tonight. Thomas and I wanted to thank you for everything you've done the last few weeks. I know Kenda and Ivan had better things to do than gallivant around the state with me, and Todd, I'd say your werewolf syndrome shows you paid a higher price than most."

"I just wish I could have helped you find the cure you were seeking," Todd said.

"We'll find it someday. Goren said there were several other former vampires who had been cured, so we can try to seek them out. Still, I think Thomas got a pretty good deal when it's all said and done."

Ivan had a smirk on his face as he said, "Thomas, I heard you were bouncing around your backyard in broad daylight. How did that feel?"

"I just have to say I hope you all take some time to appreciate that you've always been able to step into the light," Thomas said. "Having been relegated to the shade for more than three centuries, it feels good to have the sun warm your face."

"Anyway," Benjamin said, "I appreciate what you all have done. Hopefully I won't have to involve you guys in anything quite so dangerous in the future."

Kenda snickered.

"Find something amusing, Kenda?"

"You don't seriously think Ivan and I are just going to sit idly by and let you try to save the world by yourself, do you? You would have been vamp chow if I hadn't shown up to bail your butt out the other night."

Thomas raised an eyebrow. "You guys should think about what you're getting into. We have no idea what the end times will bring, at least not for sure. It might make the search for the cure look like a birthday party."

Ivan put his hand out on the table. "I say bring it on. Whatever will be, will be."

Kenda nodded her head once and firmly planted her hand on top of Ivan's. "You can count me in. You all will probably be raiding my shop anyway, so I might as well be a full partner in this long day's journey into night."

"If it hadn't been for you guys, I probably would have killed somebody when we had that solar eclipse," Todd said, sticking his hand on the pile. "I figure I owe you guys, so I'm in, too."

Benjamin and Thomas smiled and each placed both hands on the others, interlocking their fingers. Then Benjamin began to chant.

"Itzhak masters, see our hands pile. Bless my friends with skill and guile. Guide us in our battle royal. Let our friendships remain loyal. Help us in the fight to find a way to give this wonderful world one more day."

Blue shimmers rained down from the ceiling. Itzhak blessings always included a light show of some sort to give a sign that the blessing worked. Benjamin and Thomas stole a kiss as the shimmers fell.

"What about Simon?" Ivan asked. "Should we keep him in the loop?"

"I'm not sure about that yet," Benjamin said. "I only know him from my photography shoots. We have no idea if he even knows about magic and demons and that sort of thing. Just to be on the safe side, we should probably keep things between the five of us for now."

The five of them pulled their hands away. Benjamin looked around at his friends and those he held closest to him. He had never seen a group of people more determined to make things happen.

Kenda and Todd stood up as the Kenny Loggins song "I'm Free" started to play. "We'll be right back. We're just going to dance," Kenda said.

"God, I love this song," Benjamin said. "Maybe we should dance, too, Tommy."

"Of course you love this song. Remember? It was playing the first night you came in here."

Benjamin laughed. "You mean this song was playing the night I pounced on that drunk Hessican who was trying to stake you? I can't believe you remember that!"

Thomas kissed Benjamin on the cheek. "I could write a book on all the things I remember." He listened to the song for a moment and added, "You're right. Let's dance."

Simon returned from the restroom and grabbed Ivan by the arm. "Hey, Ivan. We should remember to wear monster costumes the next time we come here. Everyone else is."

As Ivan and Simon retreated to the dance floor to join Kenda and Todd, Benjamin and Thomas looked at each other in disbelief.

"Good call," Thomas said regarding Benjamin's suggestion to keep Simon out of their otherworldly affairs for now, to which Benjamin nodded in affirmation.

As the two of them walked onto the dance floor, Thomas had his arms wrapped around Benjamin. The two of them stayed that way as they danced and sang the chorus to the song.

"Heaven helps the man who fights his fears," they crooned. "Love's the only thing that keeps me here!"

Before long, their friends were singing with them and dancing. Benjamin realized the epic battle between good and evil was far from over, but it was nice to enjoy a cease-fire for now as humans and otherworldly creatures came together for fun and pleasure. He knew there were more battles to fight, but they would make themselves known in their own due time. If this crusade for the cure had taught Benjamin anything, it was that good things come to those who wait. *Let them come*, he thought. As long as he had one more day with the man of his dreams, the sensual Thomas Nighthawk, that was all that mattered.