

THE VAMPIRE FRED

*Wicked
Game*



VAUGHN R. DEMONT

The Vampire Fred: Wicked Game
by Vaughan R. Demont

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Dedication:

For Angie, who loves to see boys kissing.

Chapter One

I didn't start hating Scooby Doo until after I died.

To begin, it's a ridiculous formula. How those kids could not catch on that it's a guy in a mask every single episode just boggles the mind. And these mysteries just *happen* to occur on whatever long road trip they happen to be on. No one *asks* them to check it out. They just do! Don't even get me started on how they spend entirely too much camera time on the stoner and the dog.

They also tend to show it in clumps, fat four-hour blocks entrenched in the early morning, and by early, I mean two a.m. until just before sunrise. Granted, you would think this wouldn't be much of a problem. Normal people are usually asleep, or working all night, as is the case with myself. We're either waking up or going to bed when the extravaganza of 70s kitsch winds down.

But I still hate it, and even though I never see the damned show, I have come to see that overgrown, badly drawn, gluttonous beast as the symbol that I am truly dead inside.

And I'm not talking about the put-on-a-hoodie-and-some-black-eyeliner kind of dead inside, I mean *literally* dead inside.

And who the Hell over the age of six still watches *Scooby Doo, Where Are You* anyway?

But I'm getting ahead of myself. Let's rewind about a month.

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Imagine, if you will, a cool April night, about an hour after sundown. The clouds are breaking above; there's a waxing crescent moon that looks like a big banana; there's still a light mist in the air since it only stopped raining a half hour before. Imagine this in Victory Square, with all the lights and buildings, and that great Italian restaurant on the corner where they shot that movie scene that one time.

Take that scene and insert a car. Not just any car, though. We're talking upper tier. A car worth more than a house in Destry Bay—with sleek, clean lines and a loud engine. Imagine this scene as a still, a snapshot, if you would. Keep the car in that freeze-frame but let it rumble around in your mind that at the moment that car is doing about one-twenty.

Now imagine a man, about five nine in height, maybe a buck fifty. He's wearing an off-the-rack suit from a store that sells TVs, clothing, and produce, his body suspended just above the hood of that car, upended, his legs contorted into a position yoga instructors would wince at, one shoe on, the other knocked off by the impact. His arms are outstretched, his black hair blown away from his face by the rush of wind, his brown eyes registering shock, and his monitor-tanned face showing vague surprise.

That guy? That's me.

Frederick Joseph Tompkins, twenty-five, of 11483 Cameron Avenue, Apartment 1712, who died tragically after being struck by a stolen Ferrari driven by some asshole that ran a red light. He is survived by a somewhat estranged sister, four co-workers who might sign a sympathy card, and a disapproving mother.

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Back to that snapshot. See me there? All shocked and surprised? I know I'm going to die. And my big regret? The last thing that's going through my mind (other than "Aw, *fuck*," of course) is, "Where the Hell is my shoe?"

That's it. Looking back, I'm rather pissed that I wasn't lamenting that I'd never gotten laid, but I guess when you've got maybe a second to live, you focus on the weirdest shit. I didn't even like those shoes.

Now, before you get the idea that you're listening to yet another one of the City's aggravated spirits, perhaps on a quest for vengeance to lay his angst to rest so he can ascend to the "next level," as if the afterlife were some strange video game, imagine something else.

Imagine you are me a month later, wearing that same damned suit, having just finished working eight hours punching in mortgage data from microfiche into a computer database, standing in front of the door to your crappy little apartment on Cameron Avenue, knowing that when you open the door, the first thing you will hear, as you've heard every night for the last three and a half weeks, will be...

"You bring any blood home, fledge?"

The five eleven, buck seventy asshole with the brown hair and green eyes, wearing *my* favorite T-shirt and jeans, sitting on *my* couch and watching *my* TV? That's the same asshole who hit me with the car he stole.

I want to throw the bag with the Styrofoam cup of cow blood that I picked up from the local slaughterhouse at him. Ten bucks with tax. I add it to the running tally. I pour out the cup into a tall dinner glass which is supposed to be

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reserved for one of those "nice dinner occasions" and put the blood into the microwave for a couple minutes.

He returns to watching the screen, showing surprise, *genuine* surprise, when it's revealed that the evil slime monster hiding in the swamp was, in fact, just some real estate developer in a mask. Who'd have thought, huh? Probably would've gotten away with it, too, if it weren't for the human population having an average I.Q. over 25.

He gets up when he hears the microwave go off and retrieves the glass. He takes a long swig from it, making a bit of a face, and then hands it to me. I look down at the thick, deep red liquid. My mouth does not, in fact, water at all. I pinch my nose and upend the cup into my mouth, swallowing quickly, the taste absolutely revolting. The texture is close to sour milk, and there's a mixture of salty and sweet that's a little too salty and not really all that sweet. I won't feel as tired in about an hour or so, but I'll probably be asleep by then anyway.

It really does suck to be a vampire.

"Amazing." His voice sounds older than he looks, which is mid-twenties. "It was all a gift, rather impressive if you consider the lack of resources he had at his disposal."

"Daniel, it's always a guy in a mask, okay?" I've told him this. Countless times. I look toward the clock. "Sunrise is..."

"About half an hour. Plenty of time." He looks at me. "Give it a while, you'll just be able to feel it eventually." Daniel smirks slightly and takes the cup back from me, licking the rim for the last few drops. "A little better than last time."

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I sigh a bit. "Not that I would condone it, but tell me again why I'm spending half my paycheck on blood from a slaughterhouse instead of, well..."

"Drinking from someone?" He shakes his head slightly. "Only difference in taste is that it's a little warmer, a little sweeter. That's it. That, and people tend to remember when you drink their blood. Unless you kill them, of course, and murder's much harder to get away with in this day and age." Nope, nothing about the moral implications of casual murder. Just an inconvenience. He looks me over a few seconds. "Something bothering you, fledge?"

Let's see, you're freeloading off me, watching my TV, wearing my clothes, sleeping in my bed, using my shower, I'm pretty sure you used my toothbrush... What else? Oh yeah, you killed me, you asshole.

"Nothing."

I, unfortunately, have a severe problem with confrontation.

"Are you still angry about the car?"

I grit my teeth and head into the kitchen.

"The last car I drove could go twenty-five miles *in an hour*." Spoken with true awe. "How was I supposed to know automobiles could go so quickly now? Besides, I brought you back, you should be..."

I stormed back into my tiny living room/dining room/foyer.

"Grateful?"

"You would've been dead the other way."

"I'm dead *now*!"

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Daniel rises from the couch and walks to me with a smirk on his face. Still hasn't taken a damned thing seriously. His hand is a blur and it's on my upper arm, gently squeezing the muscle there. "Huh. Doesn't feel atrophied." He tousles my hair as I try to pull away, but his other hand holds my shoulder, and me, in place with little effort. "This doesn't feel brittle." I see a blur of motion and my eyes go wide as I feel a set of fingers against my groin, pressing gently as if he were appraising a purchase from the produce section. "And *this* doesn't feel at all shriveled. I could go into details on how a month-old corpse *should* look, but we both just ate."

"Take your hands off me, please." It comes out as more of a whimper, more pathetic than I really wanted. This is the first time anyone, male or female, has touched me down there in a non-medical context. I don't feel violated, just really really embarrassed. With a shrug, he backs off a step, hands up and visible.

"You gotta loosen up, fledgling." He reaches up to stretch, and then scratches the back of his head a few seconds while he speaks. "For what it's worth, I'm sorry that I hit you, okay? But right now you and I kind of need each other. You don't know how to be *vampyr*, but you sure as Hell know how to act human—well, at least like a modern human. I've picked up what I can from watching you and the, uh..." He wiggles his fingers in the direction of the television. "The tivvy."

"TV." A simple nod in reply, his eyes narrowing a bit as he commits it to memory.

He then motions down at my clothes, the T-shirt and jeans that he's currently wearing. "Does everyone dress so casually

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nowadays?" He doesn't wait for me to answer, he simply reaches down to unbutton the fly of his jeans, pushing them down to reveal his smooth pale skin, the T-shirt large on me but fitting him well enough that it doesn't hang down to cover his groin, which I avert my eyes from. From my momentary glance, though, I can tell that no matter how long Daniel's been dead, nothing's started shriveling for him yet, either. The shirt goes next, baring a leanly muscled torso, arms showing a bit of definition. His motions are clean, graceful, practiced. He prefers to sleep nude. I don't. "I certainly don't mind the comfort of it, but you all end up looking so *plain*. Even that suit you wear looks so uniform."

Daniel heads toward the bathroom, where he sleeps in the tub. No windows in there. I sleep on the couch because my bedroom has east-facing windows and I can't afford curtains heavy enough to block out all light. He stops as he reaches the doorway and looks back at me. I haven't moved from my spot yet. "Something *else* bothering you, fledgling?"

I look down at my feet. He exhales a forceful sigh to punctuate his emotion, considering that neither of us breathes anymore, and covers half the distance between us. "What have I done now that requires apology?"

There are a thousand things I could tell him, but when it's like this, with that tone in his voice, I'm well reminded that he did in fact bring me back into the world, and I'm *equally* well reminded that he could take me out of it again. Gripping about my toothbrush doesn't seem a wise choice right now, but I have to tell him something. So...

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"You, um..." I motion quickly to my groin, not wanting to say it. I grew up in a proper family where I was fed the stork myth until I took sex ed. I didn't even figure out masturbation until I was nineteen. A penis was practically just the thing piss came out of, for all the use I was getting out of it.

And he laughs, but it's a disbelieving laugh, as if everyone just randomly gropes each other throughout the day with no more recrimination than you'd receive for referring to fruit preserves as jelly. Daniel then blinks at me when he realizes I don't share his jocularly in the situation. "Oh, God, you're serious."

The rest of the distance to me is quickly covered, and a naked man now stands in front of me, meaning I can't look at my feet anymore. I keep my eyes on his face. "Am I intruding on some relationship?" He reads my expression. "No? Perhaps some outdated vow of celibacy? Is your work allied with a monastery?" A gentle smirk crosses his face. "No?"

He reaches his fingers to my face, and I pull back slightly. His touch is light, his eyes are calm, a bit playful, but not at all predatory. "Might this humble thief have made a certain scribe realize he'd not as dead as he believes?"

I swallow hard, even though my mouth had been relatively dry for weeks. So apparently Daniel swings that way, though I don't know how he could, considering he's a walking corpse.

I feel his hand gently pat my cheek. "Don't worry. It's certainly not uncommon for a fledgling to develop this kind of feeling for his sire or dam."

I shake my head quickly. I'm not crushing on him or anything. Of course not. He's an irritant. An annoyance. He

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killed me and he won't leave my apartment. I'm not falling for the guy. At all. Daniel McKay is just a bloodsucking *creature* who's dragged me into—

Who's kissing me.

His lips, cool and soft, press firmly against my own, his tongue slipping between and into my mouth, tracing along the outlines of my teeth. My arms feel weak, my legs two stilts of dead weight. I feel a soft warmth in my body, my mouth aching slightly as I feel something pushing from my gums. My tongue flicks along the growth while Daniel's continues to explore my mouth. I feel tips, pointed, sharp. Fangs.

A tingle spreads throughout my body, followed by a deep ache in the pit of my stomach. My eyes burn a moment, and everything becomes too bright. I scrunch my face, gritting my teeth as I smell the air, the various aromas of dried blood and refuse mixing and coagulating into a pungent stench. I can see Daniel in front of me, and he smells rather good in that his scent is weak compared to the rest of the room. There's no sweat, no stink, just the barest hint of the blood he drank a few minutes ago on his lips, and a subtle undertone just beneath.

He pulls back from me for a moment, studying my face. "Well, this was bound to happen sooner or later."

I can hear the words but they don't really register. All I know is that the gnawing in my stomach is growing stronger, deeper, like I'm being hollowed out. My mouth feels too small, teeth too big. My hands feel rubbery, useless, my legs weak, only good for standing. My eyes sting from the light in

the room, the strong flares from the cheap sconces on the wall, the ambient glow of the TV.

The light is blocked out for a moment as Daniel pushes me against the wall, a corona around his head as I feel cool skin press to my lips. "Go on. Not too much; though; just take the edge off." He chuckles lightly. "Who the Hell am I kidding... I'll knock you off when you've had enough." The words are just strange sounds at this point.

My teeth begin pressing against the skin, my hands holding it in place. An arm. The wrist is against my mouth. I push hard, feeling the puncture go through, and I hear a loud gasp. What comes out is smooth, thick, drizzling slow across my tongue. The taste... I can't describe the taste. It's slightly warm, goes down my throat easy. If I'm being hollowed out inside, then this will make me full again.

I don't know how it's possible, but I taste a memory. I taste the sweet flavor of youth, rakishness, perfecting a rogue's grin. I taste a first kiss, hidden in a rectory, a zealous devouring of a forbidden fruit, feeling the warmth of another moving inside me, feeling myself within that same person. Joy, lust, ecstasy, the bitter tang of discovery and the sweet aftertaste of victory.

I feel my tongue drag slowly across the wound. The gnawing is far from sated, but I pull back, the world returning to me as the thick blood on my tongue trickles down my throat. I'd be panting if I could still breathe. I can feel a tightness in my slacks. Despite my death I've still achieved an erection. I lean back against the wall. "What the Hell was that?"

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A slight grin from him. "That was a few drops of my blood to keep you from doing something stupid." He tilts his head at me. "Unless you meant the kiss." He holds up his wrist and licks the wound clean, the two holes already closing, but what gets me attention is that the blood slowly flowing out (which makes me want to get more, please lick it faster...) isn't red. It's silvery, thick like congealed paint, but still having a dull sparkle to it, catching the light just so. The intensity of the room is beginning to fade, my eyes not aching so much, the smell getting more bearable.

"What's wrong with your blood?" My voice is small, shocked.

"I'll be happy to tell you." I stumble forward, and he catches me. "In the evening, though, fledge. You aren't old enough to stay up past your bedtime just yet." I can't really walk. I'm losing muscle control. Everything's going numb. I think I can feel the sun outside. And he hates me. I need to hide from him. If I'm asleep, he won't find me. Won't take me away.

I feel lips press to mine gently before the world begins to fade out. "See you tonight, fledge. Sleep tight."

Still with me? Now imagine you're fading back into some weird sleep/death knowing you had your first real kiss with a guy you can't stand. I mean, you wouldn't want sundown to come any faster, right?

Right?

When I wake up, come back to life, arise from the cold slumber of death, whatever you want to call it, I'm aware of a definite pressure on my chest. I open my eyes to see Daniel

with his hand on my sternum, his face calm, his eyes on me. His voice is soothing. "It was only a dream, fledge, that's all."

"Huh?" I crane my neck to get a better look at him. I'm still on the couch, the lights are off but I can see well enough. I'm looking for the alarm clock I moved from my bedroom, but Daniel's obstructing the view. "Was I dreaming? I don't remember anything like that."

Daniel sighs slightly, and takes his hand from my chest, and then pulls my legs over so he can take his usual seat on the couch.

"Daniel? Was I supposed to be dreaming?"

He shakes his head, picking up the remote from the coffee table and flipping on the TV. My eyes ache for a moment as they adjust to the sudden light. "Daniel, I'm going to need more than that. Why would you hold me down and tell me it was only a dream if you didn't know if I was dreaming or not? Is dreaming a bad thing for us?"

I see his eyes glance away, but I follow them to their target: the clock. Sunset was getting later, sunrise earlier. I have about forty-five minutes to get to work. "Shit."

I get up and brush off my suit. A nice thing about being dead is that you don't sweat, therefore your clothes last a couple days longer. I can cross laundry off my list tonight at least. Same thing with my hair. No sweat means no oil build-up. Just have to run a brush through it and then it'll be out the door to catch my train to Victory Station. I head into the bathroom to take care of my hair.

I have a reflection, I'm rather thankful for that, because now the mirror can let me know that at least I don't look like

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a corpse. My skin's just a little paler and it's cleared up completely, seeing as my pores don't have anything to clog up with. My eyes look a little bigger, the skin stretched a little tighter over my face but not in a freaky way. Any wrinkles I might have started to pick up are gone now. I'll look twenty-five forever. If it weren't for the blood drinking and high risk of freeloading couch potatoes, I'd be hawking vampirism on late-night infomercials.

I run my electric razor over my face, taking care of the light stubble that was there when I died and comes back every time I wake up. I like the fact that I have to do this. It's comforting. Normal.

When I exit the bathroom, Daniel is near the door, wearing a black T-shirt that I got at a concert and my "distressed" jeans that fit him far better than me. He's wearing the shoes he "borrowed". A pair of Doc Martin's, though I doubt he has any idea what they are. And he has the bomber jacket that belonged to my grandfather. All of it looking like it was tailor-made just for him. Daniel doesn't go anywhere, though.

"I'm curious to see what monks do nowadays." As if he were reading my mind.

"I'm not a monk, Daniel. If you're looking for a literal monastery, I have no idea where one of those might be."

He opens the door to the hallway where I hear muffled noise from other apartments: families having dinner, televisions on full blast, music playing, a couple of louder "discussions." Daniel sniffs the air several times and winces. "I do believe someone has recently urinated in this hallway." He looks back to me. "You spend many hours at this tower

you speak of; I'm curious to see where you sequester yourself every night."

"*Scooby Doo* not on tonight?"

"The tivvy informed me that there will be a..." He thinks a moment. "Move? Something about small dinosaurs who sing."

I move past him into the hallway. I don't have time to chat if I'm going to make my train and get to work on time. He follows after me and closes the door, walking at my side.

"Daniel, you can't go to work with me; you don't have clearance to get into the building."

I check to make sure that my ID badge is affixed to my vest pocket, tapping it lightly with my finger to confirm. I hit the down button for the elevator several times at the end of the hallway, and Daniel inspects the row of lights at the top, which are letting me know that the elevator's coming all the way up from the ground floor. Damn it.

"You make it sound like a fortress, fledge."

"It practically is. There are over a hundred companies with offices in there, a lot of them are Fortune 500." He quirks a brow at me. "They're really rich businesses."

He grins widely, eyes twinkling. "Now I really have to see this place." I glare at him as the elevator arrives and we both get in. He snickers at me, holding up his hands in mock surrender. "All right, all right. I'll be good." He claps my shoulder with a smirk. "You're truly too easy, fledge."

The elevator begins its descent, and Daniel looks about the car. "I can remember when these were iron cages that no one in their right mind would get into."

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I shrug in response. I know he's trying to make conversation, but if he's not going to explain the whole dream thing I don't know why I should humor him. He watches the numbers drop slowly and looks over at me, reaching a hand inside my coat, leaning into me. I lean away.

"Daniel, I have to work tonight, okay? It's on me to pay rent and buy blood."

"You're absolutely killing the mood, fledge." With a sigh, he leans away and returns to watching the numbers. "I saw a program on the tivvy the other night where a man and woman managed quite a few things in the time it took to descend fifteen floors."

The bell dings, the door slides open, and I push past him to the revolving door leading outside. He's behind me but I don't really care. Tonight I'm not in the mood for him.

"Have I done something wrong again, fledge?"

"Besides acting like a slut?" I mutter it under my breath.

"I heard that." I look back at him for a moment, and he's smirking. I turn and head back toward the station.

"Good."

I feel a hand on my shoulder, not holding it tightly, just getting my attention.

"Daniel, I'm going to miss the train and be late for work if you keep this up. Frankly, I'm starting to get tired of this. All you've done since that night is sit on my couch and drink half the blood I bring home. I don't know anything more about how to get by like this than I did the first night." I turn to face him, setting my jaw. "To be honest, I'd be rather happy if you

weren't home when I get out of work. And by that I mean I want you out."

He tilts his head slightly at me, then looks at the ground at my feet. "If you insist, fledge."

I step toward him. "Stop calling me that. My name is Fred." I grit my teeth and start toward the station again, breaking into a light jog. It's not like I'll run out of breath. A glance over my shoulder reveals that Daniel isn't following me. Just as well. I'm out my grandfather's jacket, but I have to figure that my grandfather is plenty pissed at me already for being a bloodsucking creature of the night with unpaid student loans.

The local station isn't far, and with my increased pace I make the Gray Line as it's pulling in. I swipe my pass in the turnstile and board the train with time to spare, finding a seat as the train and waiting for it to lurch into motion.

There are a few other people on the train, since there's always something to do in the City and it's still pretty early as far as the nightlife is concerned. Plenty of high class clubs to crash and low class dives to slum in Allora. People sit next to me and generally ignore me. I'm a suit, after all, nobody interesting, just some soulless cog of the corporate machine rolling off to toil at the feet of the uberclass or whatever my counterculture friends wanted to call it in college. I close my eyes and count out the minutes until I get to work. After a few minutes I'm more trying not to guilt myself about how I left things with Daniel.

"You work at Victory?"

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I turn in the direction of the voice and see a man in his early thirties, face weathered from outdoor exposure. Dark eyes, couple scars here and there. He sits down next to me.

"I don't carry any cash on me, man." I turn away and he chuckles. His breath has a borderline scent, but just on the wrong side.

"Just making conversation."

"I'm not the talkative type."

The man leans in close. "Don't seem to be the breathing type either."

Aw, shit.

You forget to do *one* thing.

I turn back to look at him. He opens his coat for a moment and I see a glint of metal. A knife. Not aw, shit. Aw, *fuck*.

"Nothing personal, kid."

"I would say stabbing me to death is pretty fucking personal." I inch away on the bench, like that would make some difference in this situation. "You are aware there are quite a few people on this train and I could start screaming like a B-movie blonde in high heels."

He chuckles again. "You must be new. Most leeches aren't funny." He reaches into his coat pocket and my eyes go wide. He's going to do it. He's really going to pull a knife on a train and stab me to death.

I feel my teeth aching, my skin tingling, my nose twitching, my eyes start stinging from the light on the train—everything a white blur as they adjust. I can see the flecks and scratches on the bench, the flaws in the stitching on the man's coat the nicks on the blade he's pulling, the scratches

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on the hilt that look like tally marks. I can count six. I'll be lucky seven.

And I can hear pulses. Heartbeats. Nine of them, all distinctive. Slow, quick, tired, eager. I can hear the flow of blood on this train like a symphony of rivers flowing. I can tell that the woman in the club clothes has a heart murmur and that her boyfriend is already aroused enough for both of them. I can hear that the stockbroker reading the paper in the back is probably four months from cardiac arrest. I hear all of them. Every heart, every pulse, every rush of blood.

Every one but his.

My fingers ache a moment, and I flex them, the knuckles crackling as bone splits the skin of my fingertips. I bring my hand at his face in slow motion. Or maybe he moves in slow motion and I move normally. I don't know.

But I feel the exposed bone cut his skin and drag across his eyes. I'm thankful I'm dead. I know I'd be sick otherwise at the sight of what I've just done. His face is streaked with silver, his eyes two large gashes, and I can feel something gooey, slimy, coating my fingertips. My jacket is stained, wet.

Oh, God, what have I done?

No. Get up. Run. Get away.

I hear screaming as I push off from the bench, twisting my body, dashing off toward the door leading to the next car. I don't look behind me. I don't want to see. I'm scared. I don't want to die.

Why the Hell did I send Daniel away?

"Next stop, Victory Station." The automated voice provides me with a bit of relief. I push on to the next car, keeping my

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eyes forward. I can get to Victory Tower, I've got clearance to get in, and then it's a guess for anyone following me. Everyone's moving slowly, or I'm moving quickly. I don't know. I don't know. God, I just want to get out of here.

I see the emergency stop button, but if you pull it, they know who did it, and they tend to want to know why you did it. That means a long delay, which I don't want when someone who wants to kill me is on the train. What the Hell is that guy anyway? How could he not have a heartbeat? If he's a vampire like me, then why does he want me dead?

Vampire *like me*. Listen to me.

Slowly, I look over my shoulder, wincing, bracing for a possible impact, but nothing comes. My right hand is misshapen, the fingers too long, white spurs of bone extending from the tips, sharp, dripping a dirty silver fluid. I shudder, or try to, when I find myself feeling the urge to lick my fingers clean.

Forget that guy, what the Hell am I?

I hear the telltale three tones of the station approaching, but two seconds apart instead of in rapid succession. I'm going faster than everyone. How do I make it stop? How do I make my hand normal? Oh, God, what if I'm stuck like this?

Despite not needing it, I take a long, deep breath, tapping my foot slowly, working out a rhythm in my head. Something common time, sixty beats per minute. That'll work. Slow and easy. Just imagine the snare on the left, bang the kick drum on the three, hi-hat on the four. I close my eyes, even though I know it's not a good idea right now and my drum kit's back

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at my apartment and this is hardly the time to think up a new roll. I'm better with six-eight time than common, but...

My hand's stopped aching.

I run my tongue along my teeth and feel nothing jutting. Everyone on the train is speaking normally; no one seems to notice me. When the doors open, I make my way into Victory Station with the crowd and ditch my stained jacket in the trash after getting my ID badge from the pocket. I'll wash my hands at work.

When I look behind me before heading toward Victory Tower, I see a stumbling figure clutching his face, dressed in a faded surplus coat.

I get in the elevator and head for the lobby, keeping the rhythm going in my head as I lean heavily against the wall of car.

Apparently, I can move quickly, I have heightened senses, and when it's all kicked on I feel like I haven't slept in weeks. When I emerge into the lobby, I wonder if I could actually get away with calling in dead tonight. That's right. Make jokes. Laugh it up. If it's ridiculous then I won't dwell on it all night.

I cross the lobby to the security station. Most people are leaving for the night, only a few heading in like myself, and I seriously doubt anyone's going to my floor. Records is pretty dead at night. Ha ha.

I swipe my badge at the station with my clean hand, keeping the other, muckier, fingers in my pocket. I pray that the silvery color of the thing's blood is just a color as I step through the metal detector.

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I'm clean. I take the time to breathe slowly, normally. I still can't believe I forgot to breathe on the train.

It's finally sinking in, I suppose.

I'm dead.

Maybe I've been figuring it all as one long nightmare or something, or some coma-hallucination, like at any moment everything will be normal again, that I'm not really one of them. But I can't afford the luxury of delusion right now. If I'm going to survive, I'm going to have to admit it.

I'm not human anymore.

But I still have to go to work.

Put yourself in my position again, just for a minute. The thought is there to contact the police, or authorities, or whoever, considering that someone threatened my life. But then, I did somehow scratch the guy's eyes out, and I still have the sticky remains coating my fingers. I doubt the law will see me as the victim. Besides, every vampire movie I've ever seen tended to have the evil undead avoiding the police, or "owning them."

Said movies also implied that I'd probably become a serial killer. I need new source material.

This leaves me with few options. I can go outside, where that guy might be waiting for me, or I can hide out in a massive skyscraper with fortress-like security for the next ten hours. The latter appeals to me more. I can get some work done, put in a couple more hours of overtime, and try to figure out my next move.

I arrive at the ninety-second floor, thankful that the height doesn't bother me anymore like it did when I could still work

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days. Why be afraid of high places when you're dead, you know? The air might be a little thinner, but that hardly matters. There's only a couple people here, and they're on their way out. I recognize some faces, but no one really talks to me anymore. Working all night on the backlog might be the only job I can hold down currently, but to my boss, I've got excellent initiative, and I'm setting an example to my co-workers by taking shorter breaks and showing remarkable focus and accuracy in my work. To my co-workers, I'm an overachieving kiss-ass who makes them look bad and chews up their overtime hours considering that I never call in sick, and I come in every night.

Don't those movie-vampires usually have access to disgusting amounts of money? Hell, I'm dead, where's my trust fund?

No luck there, though. I have to get by on my paycheck. My job isn't even all that glamorous. I punch in data from microfiche into a computer database, back it up onto a tape, and put it on a shelf. In a few years there'll be a new method of storage that'll be more cost efficient and I'll have to do it all over again. I've probably got job security for the next few decades. This does not exactly please me, but this is what I get for being a music major in college instead of computer science like my mother told me to, and still tells me.

A trained monkey could do this job, honestly. It's what's called, in the industry, a "warm body job." I get the irony. Ha ha.

When I get to my cubicle, there's already a cart with several stacks of film to run through, as well as paperwork,

and whatever else my co-workers have dumped off on me. You'd think I'd have a problem with doing their homework, so to speak, but it gives me something to do to fill the hours, and I've got a lot of hours to fill tonight. A lot of thinking to do as well.

I'll admit I'm rethinking the way I handled things with Daniel, but I'm pretty sure that my yelling at him isn't really going to send him packing. I don't miss him, though. I could get by without him. It'd be good not to have him hovering around trying to feel me up or make out with me or letting me drink from his wrist and hearing him moan and know that it's me making him do that and—

God damn it.

Close quarters syndrome. That's all it is. Spend enough time with someone without any other real socialization and you'll start to find them sexually attract—

God damn it.

This is because I died a virgin and maybe I want to take care of that even though I'm pretty sure that isn't possible. But there are plenty of ways to confirm that. I can go out and pick someone up, or, Hell, even pay someone to hop in my lap. I don't need to pursue some charming rogue with smooth skin and a light touch and a slight rumble in his voice almost like a purr when he's—

Damn it! Stop that!

When I check my watch, I see that I've managed to kill a couple of hours. I head to the bathroom to splash some cold water on my face as well as wash my hands. I shouldn't think about him. I just need to think about something else. Like

mortgage figures, or my student loan balance, or, say, a now-blind dead guy with a knife who wants to kill me. Anything but him, or his hair, or his gentle and playful eyes, or his soft lips that brushed mine with a confidence I wish I could—

Damn it!

"You're adorable when you're flustered, fledge." I turn quickly and Daniel is leaning against the exit of the restroom, shuffling a deck of cards in one hand. He looks me over, appraising.

"I thought I told you to leave me alone?"

"I did. For about an hour. Now I'm back." He grins and stuffs the cards in his pocket, and takes out a small bag of sunflower seeds, nibbling one, closing his eyes and moaning softly.

"They can't taste that good, Daniel." I fold my arms, roll my eyes.

"They do to us. Heightened sensitivity. You should try chocolate, like a literal orgy in your mouth." He stuffs the bag back in his pocket. "Mustn't eat too much, though. Goes right through you, after all."

Wait a minute...

"How did you get in here?" If Daniel could slip in here undetected, then what if...

"That was easier than expected. You've prattled on about this tower so much I didn't need an address for the taxi. When I got here, there was a man behind a desk with a lot of tivvies mounted on it. I told him your name and that I was your roommate and I had to drop something off to you. It was all very reasonable. Even gave me a little card."

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He reaches into his pocket and pulls out a blue visitor's pass. Still though, security wouldn't let him in just on that. As if reading my mind, he pulls something from his front pocket, grinning slightly. "Told him I had your wallet and you'd probably be needing it."

I think back. He'd reached into my coat in the elevator. That son of bitch. I snatch it from his hand and check it, finding about thirty dollars, which is how much should be in there.

"How'd you afford a cab? You don't have any money..." I stare at him a moment.

Another grin. "There was a small poker game going in the bar near the apartment. Thanks for the stake." He held up a small wad of bills. "This should cover the week's expenses. Shall we go home?"

"A poker game? You could've lost all my money."

"A pleasant advantage to our condition, fledge, is that you can hear the subtle fluctuations of a man's heartbeat when he's bluffing." He puts the pass and cash back in his pockets and takes out the cards again, shuffling with relative flair. "Or when he's got a hand." He then slides five cards off the bottom of the deck and fans them out, showing four tens. "Or rather, when he's got the hand you dealt him." He pulls five more cards off. "So that he'll bet big against the hand you dealt yourself." He fans the new cards, showing a small straight flush.

"You *cheated*?"

"I took money from individuals who came to gamble it away, I hardly assaulted them. And my situation leaves me

with few employable skills that can be put to use in my available hours. We will have our rent bills paid, have blood for the week. I don't see why you're so flustered about this."

He tilts his head slightly at me. "Are you feeling all right, fledge? You look like death." He sniffs the air. "I smell blood. *Our* blood." Daniel puts his cards back in his pocket and folds his arms.

"There was a man on the train, he had a knife and I'm pretty sure he wanted to kill me." An indulgent look from him. Apparently I shouldn't fear potential muggers anymore. "He knew what I was, and he didn't have a heartbeat. He went for his knife and..." I feel my fingers aching, the spurs of bone extending from the memory. Calm down. Get a rhythm back in your head. "His... his eyes were... I..."

There's a hand on my shoulder, squeezing it gently. "Did you kill him?" I shake my head. "So he's still out there?" I nod. "How do you know he knows what you are? Did he call you anything?"

"A leech."

He chuckles softly.

"This isn't funny, Daniel."

"Probably a Seneschal. They don't like us very much."

I'm confused. He sees this. "There's more than one type of *vampyr*. I'll explain it all some night as best I can." He chuckles again. "Still, though, you're not a leech, nor am I. If we're going to be called anything, it's lapdogs." Daniel rolls his eyes. "Leeches. With a knife. *Seriously*. Well, I suppose it's to be expected from the help."

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He shakes his head and opens the door for me. "Talk to your supervisor. You're feeling rather sick and you're coming home with me." He motions to the long mirror above the row of sinks. "Shouldn't be too hard to sell."

When I check my reflection, really check it, I have to pull back a bit. My eyes are sunken, have dark circles underneath, and my skin is even paler, a couple of shades from the pallor of death. "What happened to me?"

"You're drained. Tired. You exerted yourself, probably more than you had to. We'll get some blood on the way home. Fix you right up."

"How come I'm not hungry, baring fangs, wanting to kill people or something?"

"Because that, dear fledgling, takes quite a bit of energy, and you're fresh out. When we starve, we don't go mad. We generally fall asleep, making us very easy targets. This is why it's good policy to remain well fed."

I lean heavily on the counter, and I see him standing behind me. Hell, he looks practically normal next to me. "C'mon, fledge, let's go home. I'll take care of you."

I sigh softly. "I'm sorry I yelled at you."

"Already forgiven and forgotten."

I look at his eyes through the reflection in the mirror. He smirks gently.

"And I apologize if I haven't been the most tolerable of houseguests, fledge." He takes my arm and puts it around his shoulder, supporting my weight as I feel my body start feeling more numb than usual. I shake my head at him. "Not sincere enough?"

"I wasn't asking for an apology." I lean my head back to look at him. "Why'd you follow me? I threw you out."

He rests his forehead against mine. "Takes a lot more than a temper tantrum to get rid of me, fledge." I kind of resent that implication. "Besides, we don't abandon our kind. We're going to be stuck with each other for a very long time."

"All right, if we're going to do this, I need to let my boss know. She's probably dropping off some things upstairs." Daniel starts toward the door, opens it, and we begin the trip to the elevator.

"Mr. Tompkins, where are you going?"

I sigh as Daniel turns us both around. I raise my head to look at her, my eyes a little unfocused. Great, the assistant manager. If she's still here than my real boss must've already gone home. She's just over five feet, wearing a mid-grade pantsuit, hair tied back to give her a rather severe look, like she's a librarian or an angry nun. I'm starting to see why Daniel thinks of my workplace as a monastery. I try to focus on her nose, which is a bit wide and bulbous.

"I'm afraid he's taken rather ill. I tried to convince him to stay home, but I'm afraid Frederick here is a bit of a work-holic." Daniel flashes her his grin. She isn't impressed.

"Sick days are to be called in at least eight hours prior to the beginning of your shift, Mr. Tompkins."

Who cares about the fifteen percent increase in efficiency I'm responsible for? Or the fact that I've pulled your ass from the fire at least six times in the last three months, you decrepit old sea hag. That's why Mrs. Greene loves my ass and you're still an assistant.

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I don't say a word, of course. Bad at confrontation.

I mentioned that, right?

"Must have been a rapid onset, Miss...?" Again Daniel tries. He does have a good smile. I can understand why he hasn't given up yet.

"Mrs. Hester. And I'm speaking to Mr. Tompkins."

"My God..." His voice is so soft, so low, but somehow I hear it. *"Someone married that?"*

"Mrs. Hester, I'm really not feeling well. I think I might go to the ER." My voice sounds about as near to death as I actually am.

"I'll have to dock your pay for this evening, Mr. Tompkins. Policies must be followed." I weakly nod, and she picks up a nearby phone, probably to call someone in to work on the mountain of backlog that was heaped on me tonight. Considering all I've been through, I feel little to no remorse.

The elevator arrives, and Daniel and I step in. When the car goes into motion, Daniel hugs me to him softly, and whispers in my ear. "I would assume that there are people watching us in here, yes? On the tivvies in the lobby? I saw elevators on some of the screens."

I make a grunt in affirmation.

"Drink. Just a little, so I don't have to carry you out of here." I look at him oddly, but I can already feel my teeth aching, everything getting brighter, the sound of the elevator's motion growing into a cacophony. "The neck. Lick it when you're done. Just a little, fledge. We'll get the regular on the way home, all right?"

He pulls me closer to him, and my lips brush against his neck. My teeth are fully extended, and, gingerly, I press them to his skin. I can sense the movement of the blood just underneath, and it steels my resolve. My eyes close and I push down hard, his arms tightening around me for a moment as I feel a thick liquid dribbling onto my lips.

Gently, I suckle the skin, feeling it flow more readily, slide over my tongue, and Daniel makes a low growling sound. I feel his hand gently stroke my hair. "It's all right, fledge." His words are a little choked. "You're making me feel *quite* good right now."

I pull a bit harder, eliciting a soft moan from him, and I feel the blood trickle down my throat, my body readily absorbing it, waking back up. I take a little more. Daniel pushes me firmly against the wall of the elevator, nipping at my ear, growling gently, his voice having the edge of a purr as I pull more from his neck.

My mind starts to waver as I drink, and I taste a fall through broken glass, I taste fear and desperation, the subtle flavor of remorse and the strong tang of delight. I taste the first drink from a sire, the first time being drunk. Passion, lust, loyalty, devotion, duty, honor, I can taste it in Daniel, but it's not him...

I feel a tapping at the back of my head. With heavy reluctance I stop, licking the wound, pulling back. The lethargy is gone; I could take on the world. Daniel leans against the wall heavily, and chuckles a bit loudly. I join him, not knowing why. It's just infectious.

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Daniel slips his hand to the front of my pants with a grin, and I realize I have an erection. I gape down at it. That's something I never thought I'd see again.

"Don't worry, fledge, that happens. Feeding can get the blood flowing, literally." I can see I had the same effect on him. I'm not embarrassed at all, but that could be because I've just drunk from him. Daniel is in my veins right now. Only makes sense, right?

The elevator door opens in the lobby and we cross it. Daniel moves a little slower than I do, but he doesn't look any paler, or like he's going to be sick. His movement is easy, graceful, his steps are planned and confident, just like he was taught...

Wait, what?

He sees me staring at him, and flashes his grin.

I smile back at him.

Daniel crosses to me quickly. "I didn't think you did that. Are monks allowed to smile now, fledge?" He claps my shoulder and follows me to the security desk after I give him a look of mock indignation. When he drops off his visitor pass, we cross the lobby and head through the revolving doors leading out into Victory Square. It's a nice night, no clouds, reasonably warm.

Daniel moves out in front of me, walking backward. "So, what shall we do? I figure we're both awake and aware enough to hit the town, perhaps visit a few houses of ill repute, maybe find a dance hall or a speakeasy?"

I shake my head slightly. "There aren't speakeasies anymore, Daniel." He looks hurt, shocked, like I've told him

I've run over his puppy and danced on the corpse. "Those went out of style with Prohibition. No point to a speakeasy when alcohol's legal."

"Oh, thank God!" He pats his chest as if settling his heart, and breathes out a long, loud sigh of relief. "How long did it take this fair nation to come to its senses on that? Ten years? Maybe twenty? Infernal law was in full swing when I went to sleep. Hell, it's why I went to sleep." He continues to walk backward through the crowd in the square, smoothly moving along, not running into anyone.

I shrug. "I don't know, not too long." A man in a surplus jacket and with dark, bloody eyes stands just beyond Daniel, facing his back. Oh, God, he's holding a knife. "Daniel!"

With a spin on his toe and an almost-flourish, Daniel twists his body with relative ease, the knife's blade whistling through the air and cutting nothing but air. "So you're the dumb lump of horseshit my fledgling slashed up. My God, that must've been plenty embarrassing for you."

Why isn't anyone panicking or screaming? This guy is swinging a *knife* at Daniel. City people aren't *that* blasé!

Another fast swipe, this time at eye level, to which Daniel responds with a simple lean backward, letting the edge pass right in front of his eyes. "Honestly, that won't even work. How do you expect to serve your liege when you don't even know what you're hunting?"

The man swings again, three quick snaps of the blade, left, right, center. Daniel leans right, left, backward, and yawns. "I can see this isn't going anywhere. Regardless, my fledgling and I are not leeches, and we do resent the implication."

Daniel tilts his head to the right to avoid another thrust of the dagger.

"Stand still, damn you!"

Daniel chuckles lightly. "Do you think me mad?"

The Seneschal lunges at him, and Daniel sidesteps, sticking his foot out to catch the man in a trip, sending him to the ground a few feet from me. I, obviously, back the Hell up.

"Seriously, look at you. You stand flatfooted, you hold the dagger like a piece of flatware, your attacks are weak, awkward, no rhythm whatsoever." Daniel shakes his head as the Seneschal rises to his feet. "Are you aware of how many times I could have killed you in the last minute?"

Another slash at his face, but this time Daniel catches the attacker by the wrist and twists it hard, putting the Seneschal on his back, the knife clattering to the ground. People still walk around us like this is all perfectly normal. What the Hell? "Be a lamb and get that, would you, fledge?"

I quickly pick up the knife, holding it like a piece of flatware, I guess, but I'm not planning on using it.

"I refuse to play the game, Seneschal." I see the other vampire's eyes go a bit wide, and Daniel smirks in satisfaction. "Be grateful that I find the whole affair a childish waste of time compared to other things I could be doing, like getting roaring drunk, and bedding my fledgling."

Daniel winks at me, I grin nervously. He lets go of the Seneschal's wrist and walks toward me, leaving his back to the vampire. I see Daniel reach into his pocket

The vampire starts toward him, pulling a second knife from his coat, raising it high. Daniel spins and extends his hand to strike at the Seneschal.

And misses.

I see something fly from his hand, scattering into the crowd, the Seneschal's eyes following, his head turning at an almost sickening angle to watch.

"Oh, damn it all." Daniel chuckles as the vampire moves into the crowd, kneeling down to pick up something from the ground. Daniel shows me a small empty bag. "I do believe I've scattered what was left of my sunflower seeds all over the ground."

He looks back at the vampire, who, apparently, is picking each of them up, one at a time. "So sorry about the mess!" After taking the knife from me and slipping it into his jacket's inside pocket, he claps my shoulder. "Shall we?"

I just stare for a moment.

"What the Hell was that, Daniel?"

"He's a Seneschal."

"And we're not picking up seeds because...?"

"We're not. What, you never heard that story, before? Some have to pick up spilled seeds one at a time, some can't cross running water. Some have a garlic problem..." He starts into the crowd and looks back at me. "Coming, fledge? He'll finish eventually. I'd prefer to have some distance between us before that happens. He's hardly a threat, but I don't feel like taking him along with us."

"And why aren't the police being called?" I look around at the people who continue to stroll about. "I mean... Seriously, what the Hell?"

"Humans see what they want to see." He shrugs once. "Vampires don't really exist, after all, so do you really think they'd accept watching two of them have a knife fight in public? Of course not. To them we were probably having an animated argument about the tivvy, nothing anyone would bothered getting involved with." He then cocks his hand at the teeming crowd. "Coming then, fledge?"

Daniel takes my hand and tugs it gently. With a sigh, I follow him into the crowd, leaving the vampire behind, who curses both of us loudly as he picks up seed after seed.

Home doesn't seem any different when Daniel and I get back. Well, it did seem strange to be home before midnight, and carrying two plastic bags with six two-liter bottles filled with steer's blood. I, of course, had no idea I could ask for that size, or that I was getting gouged on the price. Daniel was kind enough to handle the negotiating, and both of us came home with blood for the rest of the week easy for about fifty bucks.

"Honestly, fledge, we've been buying blood from slaughterhouses as long as they've existed." Daniel takes his jacket off and tosses it on the couch, and then picks up a bottle from the bag, unscrews the cap, and takes a long pull from it, making a face after he swallows.

I'm standing near the door shifting my weight from foot to foot still, watching him, considering that less than hour ago

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he could've easily killed another vampire but didn't because he had "better things to do."

Like bedding his fledgling. And I didn't see any other guys stashed in the apartment.

So yeah, I'm fidgety and nervous as Hell.

I've only gotten close once to losing my virginity, and that was prom night back in high school. I went with a girl I kind of knew where we were mutual last resorts. I booked a room at a motel, snuck a bottle of wine from my mom's stash, and after a night of slow dancing and bad punch and faux-cheering for whoever the Hell ended up prom queen, we headed for said room.

I was nervous then, too, taking off her dress that was some frilly mauve thing while she worked on my rented tux. I remember her corsage falling off and at some point I stepped on it. There was some awkward kissing (I heard the words "dead fish" the next day) and nothing really ended up happening. We both kept putting it off, thinking up different methods of foreplay that really weren't doing anything until the two of us were coming up with excuses to end the night early. I can't even remember her name or what she really looked like, just that ugly mauve dress and the crushed corsage.

That, and I remember the song "Wicked Game" was playing during the prom, part of the standard rotation of slow dance songs but I never really hated it.

"Fledge? You're staring at me." Daniel wasn't even looking at me. "Making me feel all self-conscious." He then chuckles, and looks over his shoulder. "Well, not really."

"Sorry."

He tilts his head at me, appraising me for a moment. "Any reason you haven't stepped from the door?" Daniel sighs softly. "Don't worry about what happened earlier tonight. It's normal, I'll teach you how to handle such things. As for explanations, those are coming along, just give it time. I'm afraid you can probably only understand so much at once."

I look down at my feet. It's hard enough to accept that I'm crushing on Daniel, what's harder is that I'm crushing on a *guy*. I feel a hand on my chin, lifting my head up to meet his eyes. "Is something wrong, fledge?"

I shake my head more with my eyes than anything else. He claps my shoulder gently. "I still don't quite get you, fledge. Eventually you're going to have to loosen—"

Oh God, I'm kissing him.

He tilts his head to better meet me, his hands sliding around my waist to press me closer to him, and then we lean back against the door. My teeth ache slightly, my eyes close as everything starts becoming too bright. I can hear muffled conversations from the apartments across the hall, feel Daniel's lips sliding and rubbing against my own, his tongue slipping into my mouth, and I taste the blood remaining there.

I don't know how long we stand like that, my hands slowly slipping around his sides, fingers interlocking above the small of his back. I can hear my soft moans, his grunts of exertion from our tongues delving deep, exploring each other's mouths. Our hands explore cool exposed skin, leaving trails of electric sensation.

Daniel pulls back reluctantly, leaving us in an embrace, his lips maybe an inch from my own. He comes into focus slowly, out of the harsh artificial light. I avert my eyes. "That was unexpected, fledge."

"Sorry."

"Fledge, look at me." I gingerly look back at him, my eyes focusing on his, his irises a brilliant green, unnatural. "You will never apologize for doing something like that again. Understand?"

I nod once in reply.

"Good. Perhaps you felt I was teasing you before, about having feelings for me? Is that why you kissed me, fledge?" I shake my head. He grins slightly. "I see. Perhaps this old thief hasn't lost his charm, eh?"

I'd blush if I could.

"Relax, fledge. I've been growing a bit fond of you, too, even if you are a bit of a monk."

"Sorry if I'm so nervous. I, uh..." I look away again. "I've never kissed a guy before."

Daniel laughs, but it's light, good-natured. "I suppose there are quite a few things you've never done with a man before. Worry not, I'm happy to remedy that." He kisses me again, a soft brush against my lips that I return awkwardly.

"Not much of a kisser, I know."

"We have many nights ahead of us to practice, then." He reaches his hand up and strokes the side of my face. "If you'd prefer, we can proceed at your pace."

My turn to laugh. "Then probably nothing will end up happening." I shake my head slightly, and lean into him

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more. This feels nice, being held like this, Hell, being held at all. "I'm relatively inexperienced with this sort of thing. Dating was never a strength of mine."

He arches a brow. "Dating, is it? You already have us courting? Whatever shall I do to win your favor..." Daniel smirks again, and kisses slowly along my neck, his teeth grazing my skin, and in the moment I want nothing more than for him to press his fangs deep in, drink from me, let me sustain him. He doesn't, but I tilt my head back against the door, and I hear myself gently moan his name.

And then I feel his teeth.

My body goes limp, then my senses fire and I don't have any words, no comparison. Nothing in my life has prepared me for this. Maybe this is what rapture is supposed to feel like. All I know is that there's no pain, no heat, no cold, no light, no dark, no sound, no anything but pleasure, and the gentle feeling of someone kissing my neck. It ends far sooner than I'd ever want it to, and I feel terribly dizzy as Daniel staggers the two of us toward the couch, a wide grin on his face that I know I'm mirroring.

"By the gods, you taste good, fledge." He hugs me closely to him, kissing me slow, his tongue flicking against my own, smearing my blood there, letting me taste myself. Not nearly as good as him, in my opinion. I can feel something pressing against me and I can tell that he's erect, and once again, I'm mirroring him. Daniel chuckles slightly, drunkenly, and hands one of the blood-bottles to me. "Sorry if I drank a little long. I wasn't expecting... It's just that..." He takes a second, and then says with a wide grin, "Gods, you taste good, fledge." He

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kisses me again, and leans back heavily into the couch. I unscrew the cap and drink quite a bit of the bottle, not really realizing how hungry I am until the blood's flowing down my throat. The taste doesn't even register until I'm nearly full.

I set down the bottle and Daniel's looking at me. "Want me to return the favor and give you a taste, fledge?" He's smirking, but eager.

I can only nod in response. Daniel grins widely and stands up, taking off his shirt, unbuckling his pants and pushing them downward. Tonight I don't care that he isn't wearing underwear. He runs his fingers along his inner thigh, barely brushing the pale skin of his erection, and taps the skin where his thigh meets his groin. "Here is sweetest, a bit thinner, but it flows easy. Drink slow, relish it."

So yeah, I'm mostly staring, because my nervousness just shot through the roof. Sure, I've seen Daniel's penis before, I've even seen it erect, and yes, he *has* teased me on occasion about it, but that's entirely different from him asking me to drink from there, to bury my head between his legs and...

"Too fast?" Daniel smiles warmly, and then nods. "Fledge, we've already been about as intimate as two of our kind can get. We've drunk from each other; it's much like making love."

Again, I'm rather thankful that I can't blush. "I, uh... Don't really, uh..." Now I feel really stupid. "I've never, uh..."

"With another man? I don't doubt it, considering I'm the first man you've ever—" Recognition. "Ah..." He tilts his head at me. "I'm rather curious how that's possible in this day and

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age, considering how much lovemaking occurs on the tivvy. It shouldn't be all that difficult to figure out." He watches my reaction. "Of course, I feel even worse now about the car."

"Daniel..." And now I feel like an idiot. I'm sure it comes across in my voice.

He pulls me to him and kisses me again. "Fred." Another long kiss, his hands sliding along my waist. "Would you make love to me tonight?"

I chuckle nervously. "Not going to ask if that came across as sincere?"

He looks me dead in the eyes. "Lovemaking is the one thing I do *not* jest about, fledgling. You would do well to remember that. When I ask a man to make love to me, I mean it."

"Sorry." I look down again, but his fingers lift my chin to meet his gaze.

"No apologies. I simply desire an answer." He smirks slightly, breaking the intensity. "Among other things."

I take a deep breath, looking at him, his skin smooth, pale, his body ready and eager, his eyes hungry as they take me in. I'm still having trouble believing that *I'm* doing this to him, that he really wants to be with me. Close quarters syndrome runs through my head again and again. "I don't know what to do."

Daniel rubs my shoulder gently. "Fledge, it's all right if you're uncomfortable. I won't be angry if you say no." I shake my head, and he nods in reply.

"No, no. I mean..." I avert my eyes again. "I don't know what to do." Confusion clouds his face. "I don't know how

to... you know... How it all works?" Recognition. Daniel nods twice and rubs my shoulders again.

"First, we'll remove your clothing. We can do this minimally, just open your pants, or take everything off." Daniel smiles gently. "I would prefer the latter. You've never let me see you."

Sure, Daniel's a Hell of a lot more forward than the girl with the corsage, but my confidence and resolve hits the same wall as it did back then. Daniel's God knows how old, so he's probably been with a bunch of people. I'll just be some fumbling idiot. I don't even know where everything goes, really, outside of rather tasteless jokes.

"Fledge?"

And it seems like Daniel wants to do this, so why am I hesitating?

"Any reason you're staring off into the ether?"

I mean, I threw him out of the house a few hours ago, and now I'm thinking about having sex with him? Look at him. He's sitting naked in front of me and he's asked me to drink blood from his groin.

Would it taste any different?

"Fledge." I feel his hand on my shoulder and snap out of it. "Still with me?"

"Why do I want to have sex with you?" The words just tumble out, an edge of panic, like he's hypnotized the straight out of me or something.

"That's..." He blinks once. "One I haven't heard before. I've never worked a seduction that had a short answer portion."

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"It's just that everything's changed so fast. I couldn't stand you yesterday and tonight I'm drinking your blood and getting ready to lose my virginity and..." I look at him, and then rub my face slowly, more to hide than anything. "I don't really know how I got here." My shoulders sag a bit and I avert my eyes. "I'm blowing this, aren't I?"

Daniel squeezes my shoulder and gently kisses my cheek, then my lips. "You're wondering how I could agitate you to no end one night, and the next you find me attractive?"

I nod slowly. "You didn't, like... do something, did you?"

Solemnly, he nods. "I'm afraid I did, fledge." He straightens up, trying to look dignified despite his nudity. "I removed my clothing in front of you, causing you to stare agape at my body and more than likely realize that you desire a man's touch." He kneels before me, taking my hand to touch his forehead. "Forgive me, please, for the horrific transgression of arousing your loins from their deep slumber, good sir."

I can see that his jaw is firmly set, his chest twitching every second or so. "Bastard." He starts laughing loudly, rolling onto his side. "Smart-assed, irritating bastard. God, I don't think I've ever met anyone half as annoying as you."

"Indeed." He rolls onto his back, beckoning with one finger. "Now that you have your answer, would you shuck those clothes and join me down here?"

I'm halfway through taking off my pants out of some strange sense of spite when I realize I'm not as nervous as I was a minute ago. I'm not self-conscious anymore, really, as dying tends to burn off a lot of your remaining fat, so I've got

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a nice and wiry build, just on the right side of stick-figure, even though I never exercised much. I'm not even nervous when I unbutton my shirt. There's still a tear in my skin just above my left kidney from the car's impact when I died. Daniel doesn't look at it; he focuses on my face.

Taking off my underwear, that's the part that gets me nervous. Even though he's groped me and teased me and we haven't even done anything yet, the underwear coming off feels like the point of no return. And I don't think I can do it. I slip my fingers behind the waistband, tug down slightly, and bite my lip, closing my eyes a moment.

"Daniel?" He doesn't say anything, just looks at me. "Could you... Would you help me?" He doesn't mock me, there's no playful grin. He simply rises to his feet, and removes my hands from my waist, and then gently holds my face, pressing his lips to mine.

I close my eyes, and hear him moan a second before his mouth opens and his tongue slips in. My tongue makes a swath over his, collecting the offering. I don't notice when his hands leave my face and caress my skin inside my open shirt, run gently down my sides, brushing over the scar, reaching my waist. I taste him, drink him in, take in flashes of memory, of a first, long kiss filled with so much fear and so much passion. After a moment he pulls back from me, smiling gently. All I'm wearing is my opened shirt. I can feel his skin against my own.

"Better?"

I mumble something incoherent but affirmative.

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He runs his fingers along my face, tracing the remnants of stubble the razor didn't catch earlier this evening, which tickles slightly. "Take a deep breath, fledge."

"Why?"

Daniel smirks again, leaning into me. I lick my lips, my eyes focusing on his left eye, then his right. My hands gingerly reach up to his chest, fingers moving so slowly toward his skin. His hand clasps my wrist, holding it in place.

"Deep breath." I nod slowly in reply, and do so. I don't feel any different. "Fred, you and I are going to make love, not rob the Vatican." He quirks a brow at me. "There is still a Vatican, yes?" I nod once. "What I'm trying to say is, stop over-thinking it. It's relatively simple. One of us puts his phallus in the other, and more than likely we'll be drinking each other during the whole thing. The latter is more complicated, and you've already proven yourself able to find the right spots to nibble on me. Relax, and enjoy this." He kisses me again, and I tremble slightly, but it's a good tremble.

Easier said than done, Daniel, but I might as well shut up and try this.

"Daniel?" He pulls back from me a second, studying me. "Could we do this in the bedroom?"

He nods once. I feel his arm sweep out my legs and I fall back, caught by his embrace, lifted up. After the surprise fades I find myself face to face with him, my arm around his neck, I can see silver flecks in his eyes.

"As you wish, fledgling." His mouth presses hard to mine and my head is pushed back, my teeth scraping along my

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tongue, and I feel them cut. I hear Daniel moan as he collects the exposed blood, carrying me across the living room.

My door is closed, but I hear a loud crack and crash. He kicked it in, but I don't really mind right now. All that matters is that Daniel's drinking what I'm offering and I wonder what he sees when he tastes me.

My room is dark, the curtains drawn, but my eyes are already adjusted. Everything's in sharp detail, the room having a musty smell from a month of disuse. I can smell the leather of the stool for my drum kit, the dried sweat on the snare, faded scents of lonely nights coming from the bed along with the smell of detergent. The bed is a double, hugging the corner of the room to give my drums workable space. Daniel breaks the kiss to lay me on my back on the mattress, and then climbs on, swinging his leg over to straddle my waist.

I look up at him, his eyes sparkling in my dark sight. My hand reaches up to trace along his chest even as I feel myself rubbing against the cleft of his ass. "Just lay back, fledge. Let me take care of this." I see his hand reach behind him and then feel it brush against me. "Do you have any oil?"

Oh, my God, this is really happening.

I motion off toward the nightstand, where there's some lubricant in a drawer. Like I said, lonely nights. He retrieves it, inspects it a moment, and then spreads some on his palm and reaches behind me again.

I gasp. To Hell with not breathing anymore. He moves along me, and the sensation is far different from when I was alive. It feels similar to him touching my chest, or my face,

just more intense. No difference in the feeling, just stronger. I'm a little surprised, but I'm not complaining.

Slowly, my eyes close and my lips part as I feel something begin to grip me, like a perfect fist stroking me all the way down to the root, squeezing me just right. I then feel his skin begin to press against my groin and hear him sigh softly. "Eighty-seven years is far too long." His hand traces a circle around my left nipple. "You all right down there?"

"Am I... you know..."

Daniel smiles warmly and leans downward, and I feel him tug and pull me, squeeze me firmly as his body moves. His lips press to mine and I feel another squeeze. "You are no longer virginal, fledgling." I feel him wriggle gently against me, and my face scrunches up from the stimulation. "I'm quite honored I get to be your first. Feel good?"

I nod slightly. "Feels more weird than anything." Daniel returns the nod, not looking hurt or insulted. "I guess that's normal?"

"I'm afraid so. We can derive stimulation from this, but very little pleasure." He kisses along my neck. "May I?"

"Oh God, yes." His fangs push in and the pleasure floods my body. My hips begin pumping slowly, the stimulation from penetrating him blending with the ecstasy of his kiss. I can feel him tasting me, my emotions flowing from me into him. Maybe he can taste how much I want him right now. My hands ache, my claws split my skin and dig into his hips on instinct, holding him in place.

Daniel responds by pulling harder on my neck. My vision is brightening, my hips thrusting harder now, the sound of my

thighs smacking against him starting to reach my ears. I can hear him grunt as he swallows me, low growls of passion, maybe his, maybe mine. I don't know what I've become, but God, it feels so right.

A tongue drags slowly across my neck, and Daniel pulls away, his posture awkward, woozy, a drunken grin on his face, his hands rubbing the skin of my chest. My hips have slowed, everything returning to intense stimulation.

"Why'd you stop?" My voice is slurred. My arms feel so heavy. "It felt so good."

Daniel lifts my arm and it drops quickly to the bed. "Because you're nearly drained, fledge." He wriggles forward, and I feel myself slip out of him and release a breath I didn't know I'd been holding. I don't think I can move.

Why is he grinning?

Daniel moves up my chest, walking on his knees, his groin growing closer to my face. I can smell lubricant as his shaft starts to dominate my view. He's erect, the organ even twitching slightly as he looks down at me, my head now squarely between his thighs. My eyes drift to the valley of skin between his thigh and penis. I swear I can hear the blood flowing there.

Weakly, I lift my head forward, my nose burying itself in his crotch, vestiges of a musky scent there that my nose makes new again as my teeth scrape along the skin. He keeps twitching, wriggling in anticipation. I close my eyes and bite down, my lips closing around and beginning to pull.

I hear him moan, his hand slapping his thighs, his noises getting muffled now, but they're pleased noises. Grunts,

groans, choked off cries. I'm making him do that. And then I taste him.

It does taste different. And he's going to have a problem getting me to drink from anywhere else after this. It's sweet, syrupy, the flow fast and almost warm. It trickles easy down my throat, my body filling with a phantom heat as my mind starts opening to the blood, feeling him filling me back up.

My vision blurs a moment, and then I see, and feel myself entering an older man who looks my age.

My body is warm, I feel life coursing through my veins. I'm on his back and my arms are hugged around his chest. I'm showing my gratitude for something, but I don't know what. It feels too good. The sensations I'm remembering are what I know I should've felt when I entered Daniel.

Oh God, Marcus, please let me finish.

Wait, what?

I'm feeling better, but I pull back, licking the wound, closing my eyes. When I open them, Daniel is stroking my forehead.

"Very, very good, fledge."

"Marcus?"

Daniel stares.

Then he slowly gets up off me.

"Daniel?"

He gets off the bed and quickly looks around the room, sniffs the air, and takes a step back.

I've never seen him look afraid before.

"How do you know that name?"

"I..." I look at him oddly. "When I was drinking, I saw..." His eyes go a little wider. "You can do that too, right?"

"No." He looks down. "Thankfully, no."

Now I'm afraid.

"Daniel, what's wrong?" What happened to my strange but perfectly enjoyable evening of losing my virginity to a really hot guy? I can still feel his blood pulsing through me, but it's slowing into the thick syrup it normally is. I can still see the pale skin of the man's back, feel fingers stroking his short red hair. I can't see his face, though. "What's happening?" Why is he backing away? "Daniel, is there something wrong with me?"

He stops, closes his eyes for a second, and looks down, a gentle sigh coming out before he comes back to the bed, sitting on the side. "There's nothing wrong with you." Daniel turns to look at me, his eyes meeting mine. "Is this the first time this has happened?" I shake my head. "What else have you seen?"

"Kissing someone. It looked like it happened in a church, and I got caught. It happened last night, when you kissed me."

I see a weak smile on his face. "I got caught, fledge. Long time ago." He rubs his face slowly with his hands. "Back when I was still alive." Daniel closes his eyes. "Damn it." He then looks at me. "What did you see just now?"

I avert my eyes. "Um, I was making love to another man. I couldn't see his face, but I know he was very handsome. I was worried that I wouldn't finish. I was asking him to let me, I think, or I was thinking that I wanted him to let me finish. I

remember the name Marcus." He winces slightly at the name. "Daniel, who is he?"

"Your sire wasn't exactly the most virtuous of people when he was alive." I give him a look. "Yes, yes, I know, quite the surprise." He manages a small chuckle, but there's a bit of gratitude in it. "I worked in two of the world's oldest professions."

"A thief and..." Daniel looks at me and nods once. "Oh. How old are you, anyway?"

He shrugs once. "More than a century, less than a millennium." I move over to sit next to him, and gently stroke his thigh. He looks down at my hand and laughs lightly. "Trying to comfort me, or does my potential age work that well for you?"

Before I can answer to the former, he takes my hand and squeezes it. "I would sleep with both; it was common. Males were more rare, obviously, but occasionally I'd find a wealthy merchant who wanted to indulge in some debauchery, or a quiet noble who needed his trysts discreet. The former are good because they'll buy you lavish gifts, the latter are better because they won't press charges. I was skilled as a whore, but better as a thief. One helped the other. I had a bit of pride about it. And then I met Marcus."

"Who was he?"

He sighed slightly, but smiled. "A knight in shining armor. There were nobles who gained their titles because ancestors had pissed near a battlefield, nobles who bought their titles through clever finance, and then there were nobles who earned their titles through service to their liege. Marcus was

the latter. He was tall, strong, regal bearing. Clothing was always functional, never went anywhere without his sword. And I made the decision to rob him blind."

Daniel looks at me. "Before you ask, to prove I could. And a few nobles wanted to see him embarrassed. If I retrieved his sword, I'd be paid handsomely." He shook his head slowly. "Turned out to be much easier than I thought."

I squeeze his hand. My sight is fading back to normal. My teeth have receded. The memories from Daniel are just wisps of images floating into the dark corners of my mind.

"Marcus, as it turned out, shunned women. Considering he was a knightly noble, I decided a more forward seduction would be an option. There was a formal ball my employer had gained me an invitation to; I posed as some nephew, I believe, dressed in moderate finery. My role was a young noble who preferred hunting and the wilderness to gaudy shows of wealth and self-congratulation. Masculine, self-sufficient, no-nonsense, didn't mince words. I approached Marcus, the Lord Annandale, and began conversation, then told him exactly what I wanted. First I asked for a spar, as I am skilled with shorter blades, and he granted it."

"He was a knight, though." Daniel nods. "You asked a knight for a spar and what, you'd take the sword if you won?"

Daniel laughs. "Fledge, a knight doesn't give up his sword until he's dead, usually not even then. He was humoring me and we both knew it. I got more than a few shallow cuts during that spar, but I did get one in on him. I went for his sword hand, which isn't done usually in an honorable spar. It was a simple cut. I didn't even see blood, but he pressed his

offense afterward, and I yielded soon enough. I couldn't even tell you how many strikes I made, or about his form, his swordplay, but I do remember the intensity of the moment. There was fear and passion, and they fed on each other. When I cut him, he looked satisfied. When I yielded, I told him I wanted him to bed me and he agreed."

"Just like that?"

"Marcus always knew exactly what he wanted and when he wanted it. He wanted me, and got me to want him, too. I completely forgot about stealing the blade, I only wanted him. I was so dazed from my wounds and my lust that I didn't think to wonder why he insisted we make love before a fire, why he insisted that I mount him even though he was clearly the stronger of the two of us, why, even as I slipped into him, he felt warm and comfortable and I never saw or felt sweat on his body. All I wanted was to finish, to spill my seed inside him. I even wanted to tell him who I really was, to perhaps be with him. I wanted him that badly." He looks down. "And then he took my life." Daniel looks at himself, runs his fingers along his pale skin. "And gave me this."

"Wait... if he's a vampire, how could he have been so close to the fire?"

Daniel sets his jaw, furrows his brow, his voice taking on a serious edge. "We are of the Queen's Guard, fledgling. We stand in the face of all, without fear, to protect our divine queen from her enemies, who are legion and always watching. We never shy from battle, never flee from the sun's blades or the kiss of flames, and we will gladly give our lives again to afford our Lady safety."

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Daniel then smirks. "If you actually want to buy into that wagon of horseshit. Marcus, unfortunately, did. Blindly loyal to some dead bitch no one has seen in millennia because the people she ruled over finally usurped her. *That*, fledge, is why they call us lapdogs. It's in our blood to serve her, even though she's dead and gone."

I thought back to the "Seneschal" from earlier that evening and a puzzle piece fell into place. "So that guy you threw the seeds at..."

"Not one of us, no. He serves a different master."

"Who?"

Daniel shook his head slowly. "I really didn't want to tell you about any of this. What does it matter which master he thinks he serves? What does it even matter which one we're supposed to serve? Any one of them would have treated us the same: as pawns. It's just a game, fledge. A stupid game no one can win that only gets you killed. The less you know about them, the better. The more human we act, the better we blend, the longer we survive. That's what matters, fledge, getting to wake up tomorrow evening. One night at a time."

I put my hand on his shoulder and squeeze gently. "What's wrong with me, Daniel?"

Daniel closes his eyes a moment. "I thought it wouldn't show itself, honestly. It didn't with me. And you were dying in front of me. I didn't take the time to think about whether you'd end up like this."

I grit my teeth a second. "Daniel, seriously, just tell me, all right? Is this something that's going to kill me? Make me a

freak? Is there a price for it? Quit apologizing and qualifying everything and just fucking tell me, okay?"

"You're an Inquisitor." I'm confused. He notices this. "The bitch apparently didn't trust all of her guard, so there are some who'd inform on their fellow lapdogs. They could get everything they needed from blood. There was no lying to them."

"Okay..." I arch a brow.

"You think I'm making it up? You're the one seeing my memories." He shakes his head.

"No, I'm failing to see how this is eliciting this kind of reaction from you. So I mostly see your various sexual exploits; who gives a shit? Only thing I know for sure now is that you were the right guy to take my virginity, given your wealth of experience."

He smiles weakly, letting out a soft laugh. "There's more to it than that."

"Like what, maybe I get to see your—"

One second he's sitting there on the bed next to me, and everything's fine. A blink later the world has taken on a bluish tint and Daniel's hand is flying at my face, claws extended from his fingers, and my hand is gripping his wrist and pushing it aside, causing the claws that would've shredded my cheek to gently graze my hair. The world fades back into color and his arm relaxes. Mine remains tense.

"What the fuck..."

"Took me twenty years to learn that."

"You took a swipe at me."

"And you stopped it with ease."

"You *attacked* me."

Daniel looks at my hand which still clenches his wrist, my claws out and pressing hard against the skin. "I knew you would stop it. I knew that you would be perfectly safe. If I had *any* suspicion you couldn't, I wouldn't have. You drank my blood, Fred. You drank *me*. Everything I am is flowing in your veins. Without even thinking, you could kill me. You know all my weaknesses, the gaps in my defenses, everything." He motions to my tightened fingers. "See?"

I let go. Holy shit. Holy shit. Holy shit.

"What happens now?" I really hope that he won't walk or something, out of some fear that I'll kill him in his sleep or some crazy shit like that. I hope he won't want to fight me while I still have no idea what is going on. If what he is saying were true, I am a threat, after all. Life was so much simpler yesterday. "I mean, where do we go from here?"

Daniel looks over to a digital clock on my cheap night table and shrugs. "Well, it's getting close to midnight. I'm going to go watch the tivvy until the crime-solving dog comes on." He gets off the bed, and goes to the bedroom door, and looks over his shoulder at me. "You're welcome to join me, of course."

"You can just go watch cartoons after all this?"

"Are you going to kill me, fledge?"

I shake my head.

"Then yes."

I look at the room, myself, taking in everything that has happened. "So I guess making love is out of the question."

Solemnly, he nods. "I'm sorry, fledge, but I just can't."

I nod in return. Great, a needlessly complicated relationship. Virginity was so much easier than this bullshit. "Because I'd be too tempted to drink. I get it."

"Actually, while I must admit I'm not quite savvy to the customs of this society just yet, I do know that it's not proper to call out another man's name whilst *in flagrante delicto*." Daniel winks at me with a grin, showing a bit of teeth, and then heads into the living room.

So what the Hell does being an Inquisitor mean? Fuck if I know. Right now I'm just happy Daniel seems to be over the shock. Still, as I sit down next to him on the couch after putting my clothes back on, I know that something's changed between us. Maybe it's the Inquisitor thing, maybe it's the sex, I don't know. He'll look at me differently from now on. Now he knows I can hurt him if I wanted to, but whether it's fear that I'll literally or figuratively break his heart, I still have no idea. I wish I knew how to give him some peace of mind on it, but I've never been good at dating or that whole communication thing. I stumble over my words.

So I lean over a bit, putting my head on his shoulder while we watch cartoons in silence, and I wonder if this is going to be over before it ever really begins.

But I have to smile that I'm even devoting brainpower to this. When Daniel reaches down and gently scratches my thigh, it has a new weight to it. Sure, I suck at dating, but I'm in a relationship. Sure, it's shallow as Hell and it solves nothing, but it's a bit of a boost when you know you've got a hot boyfriend.

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When the sun finally comes we're still on the couch, leaning into each other, his arm around me, holding me to him, and I fall into sleep wrapped in a memory of warmth.

The traitor escaped again.

I'm awake just before sunset, but I could have risked earlier. I suspected rain just before dawn, and just as I predicted, the storm is still raging just outside, the clouds thick and oppressive. The Emperor is making another show of power, obviously, but I don't fear him anymore since the Queen humiliated his forces during the War of the Second Moon.

I swing my legs over the side of the slab and hear my boots slap the stone, causing an echo in the chamber, stirring the others of the guard still slumbering on the dozen massive stones ringing my own. There's a bit of lethargy in my limbs, something I can easily remedy from drinking any of the guard. To deny me is to invite further investigation, after all.

The traitor escaped.

I know this every time he runs. Every time he is brought back, every time the Queen gives him special attention to ensure his loyalty, and every time he runs again. I've drunk him many times and am yet to discern his motives. I'll need to step up my methods when they bring him back. My Lady has approved the use of gold for his next offense. I can tell this because a rough link of thin chain is hung on the hook next to the chamber door, gleaming gently in the moonlight, and I can feel a primal fear of the sunmetal.

The Queen's infinite patience and compassion has been tested for the final time, it seems. A shame, but I will do as

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my Lady commands. I reach for the chain, thankful my fingers are gloved...

When I wake up there's a hand on my chest and I want to kill that fucking dirty traitor. I want to tear his fucking throat out, dine on his blood, and offer what's left of his mangled body to my most gracious—

"It was only a dream, fledge."

My claws are out and I'm slashing, following instinct, finding purchase in tough dead skin. I can sense the slow, thick flow of the traitor's blood. My fangs are out. I want the secrets. I want to know why—

"It's just a dream, Fred, snap out of it!"

Everything is bright, sharp, crisp in detail. My blood is pounding through my veins, everything is slow. I know the movements of the one before me. I know he'll duck left when I swing right. I know he'll be open to a kick to put him on his back, and then the kill.

I swing hard and kick out and connect, seeing him crash onto a table. I'm on him in an instant, my fingers spreading and curling, spurs of bone extending from my fingers. How fucking *dare* he betray the—

Oh, my God.

I can see a long gash in Daniel's chest, his skin oozing silvery blood from the wounds. His eyes are centered on me as my hand goes limp and stops aching. My voice is small.

"What'd I do?"

He doesn't answer as I look at my fingers, see blood droplets fall from the receding bone. I think I'm going to be

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sick. I get up and back away quickly. Oh my God, what did I do?

Oh my God, what the fuck did I do?

"Fred?" His head is craned up, looking at me from across the room to where I am, in the tiny kitchen area.

"Oh, God, Daniel, I'm so sorry..."

"Be a lamb and get me some blood, would you?"

I blink several times that he can sound so calm, but I quickly obey, fetching one of the two-liter bottles and handing it to him. He drinks slowly, making a face when he swallows.

"It was a dream, fledge. Nothing more." He smirks slightly, putting on his brave face as he drinks from the bottle. "But if you want to take the burden for this, it is kind of your fault."

Shock? Check. Horror? Check. Self-loathing? Oh yeah, big damned check.

"What'd I do?" His wounds start closing, but it's slow. I'm almost thankful for the big display at work last night that sent me home, because I'm pretty damned sure that I wouldn't be able to handle punching in mortgage data tonight.

Hell, I don't know if I can handle anything tonight.

"Well, you tasted my blood for the first time, which thankfully didn't trigger anything unpleasant like just now. Then you got all curious about being an Inquisitor. It's partly my fault as well, for saying that word around you." He offers me his hand, and I take it, pulling him upright as his blood trickles down his chest. I ignore the subtle urge to drink it. "This is why I'm loathe to tell you more about yourself. It'll only make things worse until you're prepared to resist it. Unless, of course, you want to be a good little lapdog and

fight the Queen's enemies." He stumbles over to the couch while I support him, and I retrieve his bottle for him so he can continue his recovery.

"I don't understand."

"The blood in your body? It's yours. It's also mine. Then again, my blood isn't necessarily mine either, but Marcus'. And so on and so forth all the way back. All of us have the dreams, every one of us. And nearly all of us see them as a blessing, a way to commune with whoever the Hell we're supposed to be serving. But it's a game. A grift. A con. And the players have been dead for ages, but most of us are too stupid or blind to question it. We just behave like good little pawns and bishops and knights and rooks and have at each other over and over again. And now that you know what you are, you're going to want to *be* what you are."

"I was going to kill you, wasn't I?"

He nods once. "I am a deserter in their eyes. I prefer to think of myself as a free man. Their little game will play out fine without me, as it always has, as it is right now, and as it will long after you and I are gone. There will always be a part of you that will yearn to serve her, fledge. That's just the way it is, it's the price of being what we are."

"There's nothing I can do, then? Some night I'll wake up and attack you and either you'll kill me or I'll kill you?" He shrugs. "I don't want to end up like that."

"Dead, or controlled?"

"Either. Neither."

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"Not that I have a problem with you not wanting to serve her or kill me, but mind if I ask why this desire not to harm me? I mean, I am responsible for you being like this."

"We aren't really square on that yet, no." Daniel nods in reply. Doesn't look hurt, it's just a statement he can accept as fact. At least he's responsible, right?

Life has a way of breaking the tension in moments like this, or at least shifting it onto something else. The phone is ringing, and Daniel's looking at me expectantly, as I've made it rather clear that he's never to answer it. It could be work, wanting to know if I'm coming in tonight, or my Mom, in which case I'd just let the machine get it.

So I pick up the phone because I don't really want to dwell on whether or not I might kill my boyfriend one night before our relationship ever really gets anywhere.

"Hello?"

The first thing I hear is static, a lot of it, and people talking, crying, complaining, a P.A. system, the sound of someone breathing on the other end of the line. There's a sharp inhalation, followed by a long almost groan. Christ, it's loud.

"Hello?"

"It's me. You dead or something?" I feel a knot of tension relax in my chest and chortle.

"Hey, Em." I look over at Daniel and put my hand over the phone. "It's my sister." He nods once and stretches and starts tidying up the apartment while I'm talking. "I could ask you the same question. They running you ragged again?" She's worn out, I don't need super-hearing to tell that. She's

probably in the doctor's lounge at Mercy Hospital either on a nap break or getting ready to clock out. She also probably looks worse than I do.

"Twenty-two hour run."

"Their idea or yours?" There's a few seconds pause on the line, and I smirk. "I thought so. Overachiever."

"Slacker." I know she's smiling on the other end of the line too. "So you'll be happy to know I covered for you with Mom. She called me up here wanting to know if you'd stopped in after you left work sick last night. Just tell me if we need to make the lie into truth, okay? You actually sick?"

"I was last night but I'm good now. Rested up, drank some fluids, all that."

"You sure you're all right? I can swing by on my way home." She would too, but Em's too good a doctor to not notice that something is definitely wrong with me the moment she lays eyes on my rather dead body. "Besides, that way you can't just hang up when I ask you why you're living with a life coach."

Wait, what?

"Come again?" Daniel then shrugs with a grin and waves a little. I have no idea what the Hell she means by life coach, but I can't really let on about that now, can I? "Oh. Him. You talked to him, huh?"

"Him? You two not getting along?" I know she's smirking as she says this. "What, lover's quarrel?" So yeah, I'm giving Daniel the Death Stare right now. Unfortunately while I'm doing this I let the pause on the line grow a little too pregnant. "Fred, it's me, Emily. I'm your sister. I don't mind

that you're gay, okay? And no, I won't tell Mom, I figure you're saving that for a special occasion, like Mother's Day. Or Christmas."

No words. At all. I'm wondering how the Hell she found out, considering that I only figured it out less than 24 hours ago. But still, at the same time, she's okay with it. I'm pretty sure that's a good thing, but I'm still in a bit of shock.

"Uh... How did you know?" If Daniel told her I'm going to kick his ass.

"Well, for starters? I'm your sister. I've been around you your whole life, it wasn't hard to figure out. Hell, I've known for a couple years now."

"Em, would've been nice if you had given me a heads up about it."

"I figured you'd tell me when you were ready, but after two years of waiting I figured I'd just let you know it was cool with me."

"No, Emily, I mean if would've been nice if you'd let me know I was gay two years ago. I only figured it out last night."

"Details. Now. I'm the big sister, I'm the one who figured it out first, I'm the one you kind of came out to first. I get to know how it happened first. It happened with your Mr. Blake, right?" She sounds more awake now, she's probably sitting upright on the couch and smiling and bright-eyed and eager. God, Emily, I wish I really could share this moment with you in person without you seeing I don't have a pulse and freaking the Hell out.

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I look over at Daniel, who's standing a few feet away, the apartment looking much more in order now. Maybe he sped himself up. I can probably never see my sister again, and yeah, this is probably because of Daniel. But he could've left me on the street to bleed out and die in a lot of pain, and then I'd never talk to my sister again. Ever. At least this way there's something.

So yeah, we're not square about the car yet, but at least there's a couple points in his column.

"Some of it I can't tell you specifically because you're my sister. It would be gross to give you the details, so please, don't press on it, okay?" I stop her protests before she can start them. "But I will give you this. Yeah, something happened with Daniel, if that's what you mean by 'Mr. Blake'." I look at Daniel, who smirks at his own private joke.

"So when do I get to meet him? And is he really a life coach, or is that just code for him being a high-priced hustler who gave you a pity screw?"

Well, he *was* a high-priced hustler but no matter how pathetic it might make me to admit I'd been a virgin up to last night, it's not nearly as pathetic as admitting having to pay for it.

Daniel takes the phone from me though, and thanks to my heightened senses I can still hear the end of the conversation.

"Actually, I am a life coach, though Fred isn't my client. Otherwise I'm sure that tidiness would be a personal life goal he'd ask for assistance in maintaining a positive mental attitude toward. As it is, I currently specialize in repressed life tensions and redistribution of financial priorities, with added emphasis on interpersonal dynamics, primarily in close

quarters." He then smiles genially, as if Emily were actually there. "And it's lovely to speak you again, Miss Emily."

"If you're doing my brother, Daniel, it's probably safe enough to call me Em. And just to get it out of the way? If you break my brother's heart, you should know I'm a doctor. I have access to lethal doses of narcotics, medical records, and the morgue. I could call it a suicide, dispose of the body, and I doubt you'd be missed." Daniel's eyes go a bit wide. "So! How'd you two meet?"

"There... We... It was a..." He blinks a few times. "You are jesting, yes?"

"Not at all, it's perfectly fine to call me Em." Daniel then just hands me the phone.

"You scared him, Em. I actually didn't think that was possible."

"So when do I meet him?" As always, she doesn't really give me time to respond, meaning I don't get the chance to weasel out of it. I'm starting to see why Daniel told me this was a bad idea. "I can swing by on my way home, we'll go out, get some drinks, swap horror stories about work—"

"Not a good idea, Em. You're coming off twenty-two hours, you'll just pass out on my couch. Go home, get some rest, and we'll meet up the next time you get a night off."

"Fred, the next full night off I have is in three weeks. Can't we meet up during the day?"

During the day. Yeah. Right.

"I work nights, remember? And I work about as much as you do. Just give me a call and if the relationship's still going in three weeks there'll at least be a point to meeting him." I

hate doing this. I do want to see her, shoot pool and grab a couple beers and bullshit about music and go over names for the band we'll never form.

"C'mon, I covered work for you and everything."

"You what?"

"I talked to your boss, he said you left work early and I covered for you. I told him I was aware of your condition and I recommended you needed a couple days sick time. He seemed okay with it." Normally, I'd get rather pissed and tell her that's something that Mom would do, only Mom would probably demand I be given a performance review and docked pay so I'd learn some responsibility. Between her overbearing nature and Dad skipping out on us, I'm surprised Em and I turned out as well as we did. Maybe it was spite.

"Emily." I hear her sigh. Full first name means I'm putting my foot down on something and there's no point arguing. It doesn't often work, actually. "I'll say it again: You just finished twenty-two hours. Go home, get some sleep, watch reruns of *E.R.* or something, and we'll hang out soon. I promise."

"Ugh. Fine. But at least now I can talk your ear off about which doctor's the cutest."

"Not the one who looks like Dad."

"If we're not hanging out tonight, then at least do something with your night off, okay? Go out, get drunk, have safe but casual sex. Doctor's orders."

"Will do. Night Em." I close my eyes. "Love you, sis."

"You too, Fred." I hear the line click and it's a few seconds before I set down the receiver.

"I think I like your sister, fledge." Daniel. I practically forgot he was there. I nod a bit, and turn toward him.

"A life coach?"

"Many informative programs on the tivvy feature them. They talk about making exorbitant sums of money in six days or less, losing weight, changing attitudes, personal power." He shakes his head slowly. "Simple grifts, but they're executed well enough: just use impressive sounding words and have sincere eyes and they'll gladly hand you their coinpurse for anything that will save them the slightest bit of effort." He then strokes the side of my face, pushing a few stray locks of hair back.

"You're awfully affectionate considering I nearly killed you twenty minutes ago."

He leans in and kisses me gently. "Wasn't under your control, but if it helps anything, I forgive you."

"What about the whole Inquisitor thing?"

"Do you want to kill me?"

I shake my head.

"Are you planning on serving the Queen, fledge?"

"I hope not."

"Any other family members going to be calling? Should I be expecting an angry visit from your father at some point?"

I sit down on the couch and stretch a bit. "I seriously doubt it. My dad died when I was twelve. Heart attack. He left us when I was six." I sigh a bit. "Just... up and left, just like that. No explanation, nothing. Em, she took it kind of hard and went all overachiever. She's my protector too, usually from Mom. I was just a regular kid, really. I don't really look

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a lot like Dad, just the same color hair, maybe the chin, eventually the nose. He was a musician, though, and I guess my wanting to be one just makes me wanting to be him in my mom's eyes."

Daniel chuckles as he sits down next to me. "Well, if the Queen did still exist, you could always lord that over your mother. To be an Inquisitor of the Queen's Guard was one of the highest positions in her court. Something you'll learn from the dreams. Eventually you'll learn to see what you aren't supposed to be seeing, hear what isn't being said. Makes it easier to see the con, resisting isn't as difficult." He looks over at me. "However, there is one thing that I've found helps in resisting her."

I turn toward him, thankful that he's actually opening up about all of this vampire crap for a change. "What is it?"

"Liquor."

"Ha. Ha."

"I'm serious."

"We're dead, Daniel, I fail to see how we can get drunk."

I feel his teeth sink into my neck and my eyes rolls back, I'm making sounds that are vaguely animal, and my pants are feeling tighter by the second. His hand slips behind my waistband and gropes me as he licks the wound. "Doesn't feel all that dead to me."

My teeth are out, I want to drink him. Now. His hand presses against my chest, holding me down a moment while I'm guessing I'm supposed to be composing myself. Fuck that. I want to return the favor.

"Fledge, not now."

"That isn't fair, Daniel." My voice is a bit harder, hungrier. Predatory.

I see his brow furrow a second. "Is that your mother coming down the hall?"

Shit, shit, shit!

My jaw aches as my teeth recede quickly, the room going dark as my eyes overcompensate. The tent in my jeans is obviously collapsed as well.

"Now, would you mind running to a shop and obtaining some whiskey, fledge?" I stare at him a moment. "I wasn't lying last night. I plan to get roaring drunk and bed my fledgling, and I'm sorry, but those bottles of goat piss in your icebox aren't going to do the job."

"But..." I look toward the door. "You heard my mom in..." I look back at him and he's stifling a grin. "Oh, fuck you."

He smirks. "Been there, done that, and if you run along and get a good enough whiskey we'll do it again."

I shake my head slowly as I get up off the couch. "I can't believe I bought that."

"I have sincere eyes." Daniel chuckles lightly.

"Why do I have to do the booze run? Hell, I don't even drink. I don't know how to tell what a good whiskey is, I don't even know *what* whiskey is!" That gets his attention.

"Seriously, Mom doesn't drink, it was a very strict household. I didn't even find out the actual details about sex until college. Strict Catholic high school, conservative university, and contrary to popular belief, they aren't all secretly raging orgies of girls in uniforms."

He blinks once.

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"You never drank or bedded anyone before me?" I nod once. "Ye gods, fledge. You're an innocent. I'm contributing to the corruption of an innocent with my very presence..." He turns away slightly.

"It's not that bad, Daniel—"

"Sweet lord, my mother was right about me."

"Daniel, I'm hardly a saint—"

"You'll end up a debauched lech with only my corruptive influence to blame, much like that fellow in that novel by Wilde."

"Huh?"

He steps to me quickly, placing his hands on my shoulders, looking me square in the eye. "Fledge, don't worry, I can see the path that I'm leading you down."

"Daniel, I—"

"And I must tell you that while I cannot promise anything—"

"Daniel, c'mon—"

"I will endeavor to insure that your journey down the road of temptation is filled with as many pleasures, both sacred and profane, as possible." He then winks.

So yeah, I laugh a bit. "God, you're a goofball."

He tilts his head slightly at the term, rumbling it around in his brain. "I suppose that's a compliment. Now, evening's burning, go get some whiskey."

"Fine, fine." I reach into the pocket of the leather jacket and take out some twenties. "How will I know what a good whiskey is?"

"You've drunk enough from me. You'll know."

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I know it all seems odd. It seems strange to me when I really think about it. I just found out that I'm apparently some "chosen one" interrogator bloodsucker guy, someone tried to kill me last night, and I tried to kill Daniel when I woke up.

I've had about twenty-four hours to deal with all this shit and more keeps getting piled on. I never thought I'd say this, but I could honestly use a drink.

So maybe Daniel isn't as much of a goofball as he seems.

I've got about eighty dollars in my pocket, which should be enough for a few bottles of "good whiskey," which needs to be about twelve years old, have decent color, and I'll need to pick up some lemonade to serve it with because I really don't trust the tap water to splash it with and they'd better have a proper Scotch whiskey because God knows these Yanks can't make a decent liquor to save their—

Yeah, I think I've drunk enough of Daniel to pick a good brand.

Despite the fact that I don't drink—well, not yet at least—I do know there's a liquor store not far from the apartment building, and since it's still in Allora, I can guess that it'll still have higher-end liquor even though it's not really all that high-end looking. I may live in Allora, but the neighborhood's not the greatest.

This isn't to say it's a cesspool of crime. I mean, it's still Allora. This is where the rich people live and cops drive down your street every half hour or so just to let you know they're there and everything's safe and cool. It's probably the only reason Mom allowed me to move to a place like this. I've

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lived here over a year now, and other than some loud arguments and cops being called on raucous parties, I've never seen dead bodies or drug dealers or even heard about anyone getting mugged.

So, it of course comes as a huge surprise to me when I'm roughly shoved into an alley a block away from the liquor store and thrown heavily against a wall and end up flat on my ass looking up at a tall, dark figure holding a knife.

Hell, I even forget I'm already dead and get rather scared.

"Listen, I'll give you the money, okay?" From what I've seen on TV, this is what you're supposed to do and say. Just give them what they want, avoid a major confrontation. Finally, something I'm well-suited for.

I remember to breathe this time, taking shallow breaths because it goes well with nervousness, and I'll admit it's more a fear response than just playing human well. I don't really smell any sweat on this guy, though. He's not nervous at all. That's not a good thing, right?

I start to reach into my pocket for the cash and his hand thrusts toward me quick. Instinct takes over and my free hand swings across my body, colliding with his forearm and knocking it off course. Thank you, Daniel. My senses go heightened just in time to feel the knife bite deep into the meat of my shoulder.

"Fuck!" Because ow. Seriously motherfucking ow. Like someone planted a tree that sprouts blooms of rusty razorblades in my chest ow!

"Lovely night for a stroll, isn't it?" His voice is smug. What else would it be? He just fucking stabbed me! "You don't

smell alive." He yanks the blade from my body, a splatter of silvery blood spraying outward, the knife dripping it. "And you sure as Hell aren't a Dagger."

"What the *fuck* are you talking about?" My voice is low, growly, rough, like someone who just got stabbed and is in a shit-ton of pain, actually.

He kneels in front of me and taps the blade at my neck. My skin stings at the edge. "Listen up, lapdog, the Emperor has made it perfectly clear that this is *his* city, so the Whore and her little lapdogs can find a new place to play."

"Huh?" He taps the blade against my face, and I can see the knife is golden, which causes my teeth to slide out, my muscles to tense. Keep that thing away from me.

"You don't have to understand." He punches the dagger into my chest, and I can't move, can't scream the pain that is becoming all that exists for me. When I force my eyes downward, I see the hilt of the blade sticking from my sternum. Holy God, I'm staked. "You're just the example."

I hear a sharp whistle from him, and then he just walks away, just leaves me there. Maybe I'll be left here until someone finds me, probably ships me off to the morgue, takes out the knife, and then I can roll off the slab and find my way home. Yeah, sure, I'll be fine.

And maybe after that I'll visit the land of lollipops and ice cream and have a big party! Sure.

This is not going to end well for me.

That guy, whoever the Hell he was, left a solid gold knife in my chest and then *walked away*. Obviously there's a bit more to his plan.

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Which makes me all the more nervous: there was obviously some thought put into this. I'm being made an example of. Whether I want to "play the game," as Daniel puts it, or not, apparently the other players don't give a damn and still have no qualms about staking me four blocks from my home.

Maybe Daniel will just know that something's wrong. I mean, I've drunk him, he made me into this, I thought we were finally starting to form a real connection, so there's a chance he'll be sitting on the couch watching *Scooby Doo*, and then get a faraway look in his eyes as the feeling that somewhere, something is wrong will slip into his mind and wriggle in deep until he can't escape it, and then he'll burst out of the apartment, possibly breaking down my door in the process while he comes to my rescue...

I hear howling. Loud, scary, not-quite-animal howling.

And I'm helpless and bleeding in an alley where people are walking by, not noticing a damned thing.

Maybe if I think *really* hard at him.

Getting hit by the car? Not so bad when I think about it. It happened so fast I barely had time to register that anything happened. One second I'm crossing the street, the next I'm airborne and wondering where my shoe went, the next just the big black. After that, I woke up in my apartment.

Now? I can't move, I'm bleeding, I'm feeling more tired by the moment, and I don't have any sensation. I guess I have to be thankful that being staked eventually kills all pain.

I see a shadowy form enter the alley, hunched over slightly, its arms long, fingers elongated as well. I can see

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claws and hear sniffing. The ambient light begins to reveal detail as the thing moves farther in. There's fur, mottled colors, its face is a bit smashed in, like a bulldog's, and it has an overdeveloped upper body, its legs looking too small to support its weight. It leans on one of its arms, gorilla-like, and moves in toward my shoulder, sniffing at the wound, a tongue flicking at my blood.

The creature throws its head back and howls, and in the distance I hear a discordant chorus return an answer.

I'm going to be eaten alive.

Hell, I can't even spit at this thing, what am I going to do? Give it angry eyes and hope I can stare it down? Yeah, I'm sure I'm a real intimidating sight.

I see one of its claws, dirty with dirt and grime, dig into my shoulder wound, and right now I'm happy I'm staked, because I'm certain that would hurt like a bitch. And I can't believe I'm worrying about whether or not my ventilated shoulder is going to get infected now.

"Step away." The voice is off to my right, farther down the alley. It's cultured, dominant. If I were able, I probably would step away. I see the thing's head snap in the voice's direction, a low growl issuing from its throat. I hear the metallic sound of a sword being drawn, at least I'm pretty sure that's what it is, I don't know if I'm going off old action movies or Daniel's memories right now. I do know one thing, though; that voice isn't Daniel's.

"Considering your current state, I will make this simple. We are not organized peoples, there have never been enough of us or of you to bother uniting under common banners. A

war between your people and mine simply isn't feasible. Therefore, conflicts tend to be settled on a case-by-case basis. Skirmishes, if you will." *This* is keeping it simple? "With that in mind, I could disembowel you in this very alley without any fear of retribution or reprisal. Your pack would not avenge you, you would merely be their meal of choice for the evening." I see the creature stand up a bit higher, spreading its arms, flexing its claws. "And if you *are* considering combat, I feel I must inform you that I have had eleven hundred years to master the use of this blade, and you are merely a thug with claws and a short temper. I do not see this duel ending well for you, so I would suggest yielding and taking your leave."

Okay, who the Hell is this?

I see the thing's paw shoot toward my chest, gripping the hilt of the blade, and it's yanked out fast and hard as the creature runs away into the night, baying loudly all the way. Me? My blood starts gushing out of the big hole in my chest and everything fades quite quickly to black as I slump forward. The last thing I see is an expensive-looking sneaker.

The prisoner is already prepared when I arrive. The Emperor has been pressing again; Daggers have already infiltrated the estate. I've checked my unit; they're all clean, though two are sent down for checks. Morale has started to flag since we found the first Dagger in the Guard, but we need to be thorough. Tonight will be a rest of sorts. A traitor only needs to be led back to the flock, or simply dismissed and returned to Her Majesty for revocation.

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The interrogation chamber is circular, only one door in, with the ceiling open to the night sky. All windows face east, to keep the prisoners well aware that dawn is always approaching. Everything is in dark, muted colors, the stone specially selected for its drab qualities. All of the ornamentation in the room are images of the Queen at her most caring, most compassionate. It settles my nerves to see them, to know I'm doing her will, that my work pleases her.

"She has a weak chin."

I don't say a word. This isn't my first night on the job. Insulting Her Majesty is common practice for a prisoner. To use the length of gold chain wrapped around my forearm would be a victory for him. My teeth would merely be an act of desperation.

The traitor is on the platform, which is raised at an angle, facing him toward the windows, a large mural just above them of the Queen taking this land from the Emperor, her victory over the Caretaker, the execution of the Judge. He is nude, as prisoners are kept, and chained down tightly across the waist and neck, hands and feet tightly manacled.

"Just get turned?"

This is our first session, but it's not mine. I've broken six prisoners before him. The Queen appreciates my talent; I only need practice.

I don't talk to prisoners for at least three sessions. I keep them isolated in small clean cells, no bugs or vermin for them to interact with. I don't starve, but I do limit. I prefer to keep my prisoners thinking. They are their own worst enemies, and

while I'm not their ally, I plan to be better than the devil they know.

At first, it's a simple inventory. I look for scars, marks, anything he's sustained before and since his Rebirth that I can use.

"Not a talkative one, I see. Will my real Inquisitor be along soon? I have ever so much to chat about."

Several dark marks, decorative, on his inner thigh. Similar designs on the forearm, luck sigils, primarily. Perhaps a gambler in life, as the color is faded.

"Long as you're poking about down there..." He's grinning, I don't need to look up to see that he's doing that. I just know. I push aside his scrotum with my left hand, inspecting the skin there, the chain slipping down my forearm to brush along his phallus. Purely accidental, of course, but he still stiffens and trembles slightly. Places importance on his genitalia; I make a note of it.

I could drain him right now, of course, find out everything he knows, why he turned his back on the Queen, and go from there, but he'll know I did, he'll resist, and my job will be more difficult. Revocation's possible, but that would be a mark on my reputation, a result I'm not all that fond of.

His color is good enough, he's been maintained, kept well-fed like I prefer. Now it's a matter of mapping him out and bringing him home.

I step back, inspecting him one last time, and head toward the door, knocking thrice.

"What, that's it?"

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I step through the door, and it's closed behind me. I look to the guards assembled along the hallway. All have bowed their heads. "Four days, then bring him back." They nod once, and I start down the hall, passing all of them, giving a slight nod to those who've served me well. I stop before I leave the hallway, turning my head back slightly. "He insulted our Queen. Acquire an apology." The guards chuckle darkly, but it's not my concern how they acquire that apology, after all. I'll have to inform the prisoner of my regret when next I see him.

Only proper, of course.

When my eyes open, I feel sick. Like I-hope-that-rug-wasn't-expensive sick. I'm in a moving car, the bumps of the tires hitting the asphalt seams not helping my fluttering stomach. I can see a tube attached to my arm, a dark red liquid filling it. My chest is heavily bandaged and my muscles don't quite want to respond to my commands yet. All I smell is blood, mostly mine, and I'm in a bit of pain.

But hey, I'm alive, well, scratch that. I'm *conscious*, so good for me, right?

Yeah, not convinced yet, either.

"Try to remain still; I would gather you're hungry."

The voice from the alley. Well, the second one. Third, if you count the freaky creature thing as a voice. "What happened?" My mouth feels stuffed with cotton balls, my throat constricted, my voice coming out as a rough wheeze.

"You were nearly ended, fledgling. You must be a fledgling, anyone older wouldn't have been so foolish." The source of the voice leans into my view. It's a guy, as I expected, his

features rather common, but well-groomed, brown hair cut short, beard trimmed, his nose slightly flattened, probably broken more than once. His eyes are a steely gray, a bit intense, the beginnings of crow's feet at the corners, and his skin is pale. I don't hear a pulse, but I didn't really expect to. "Gratitude would be appropriate."

I nod, and I'm grateful I can still do that. My skin feels slightly warm, everything slowly knitting back together, all the blood that's flowing into my body putting it back together again. I mumble thanks, seeing as I'm still wisp-voiced.

He holds up my wallet, which still has my ID.

"So, Frederick Tompkins, who made you?"

I give him a look of disbelief. I can barely put two words together right now and he wants to play Twenty Questions?

He makes an exasperated sound and changes the bag. "I don't share my blood with just anyone, Frederick. You've caught me in an interesting position. It's odd for a fledgling to be staked and left for dead close to his home, unless his attacker is very smart, or said fledgling is very stupid." He leans in a bit. "I would wager on a combination of both, considering that the lycanthropes know little of our existence, much less the effectiveness of staking, when their feral sides have taken them. Did someone else attack you?"

I nod. I can do that, at least.

"Another of us?"

I nod and then shake my head.

"I don't quite follow. He was a vampire?"

I nod.

"But wasn't one? Or..." He nods once. "He wasn't a Guard."

I nod again.

"Did he mention anyone in particular? The Queen?"

I nod, trying to sit up, but it's still a strain. Damn, I feel sore.

"Anyone else? The Judge?" Shake of the head. "The Caretaker?" Same again. "The Emperor?"

I nod quickly. Hey! I can nod quickly again! I can feel my shoulder warming to a searing heat, blood pumping into the area, the skin stretching, closing, the pain beginning to fade.

"I see. This is no matter for a fledgling, Frederick. Worry not, your attacker will be dealt with." I feel the car slowing down, coming to a halt. "For now, though, it is best for you to return home, the sun will be on us soon." Wait a minute...

The door is opened by a man in a suit, and as I'm helped out, I can see that the vampire in the car is dressed in a suit as well, save for a really nice-looking pair of sneakers. The tube is pulled from my arm, and the vampire leans down to lick at the puncture, and the skin tingles as it closes. I'm sat down on the curb, lightheaded, heavily bandaged, my throat finally starting to open, my mouth losing its dry feeling as the car, a limo, pulls away.

"Wait! Who the Hell are you?" There's no answer, the limo turns the corner and vanishes from sight.

I look around to get my surroundings and find that I'm on the curb in front of my building. As I slowly get my feet I stumble about, making my way to the front door. I reach into my pocket for my wallet, which has my keys attached.

He didn't give it back, that son of a bitch.

I slap the call button for the apartment, praying that I'm not going to be roasted by the sun because Daniel has no idea how to work an intercom. There's no response, so I punch the button several more times, which I know is making a series of vicious buzzes in the living room. I hear the click of the intercom.

"Daniel, open the door." I'm sucking in air, my lungs feeling paper thin as they push the words out of my mouth.

"Fledge? Is that you?"

"Daniel, hit the little button that has 'door' written under it. Please."

"Are you all right?" Obvious concern. I can feel the sun starting to creep over the horizon. "Where have you been all this time?"

"God, please Daniel, just hit the button!" I know he can hear the desperation in my voice. I hear the door buzz loudly, and I push it open and stumble into the lobby. I make it a few steps before I trip and fall forward, feeling a great wind rushing toward me, and then feel arms catch me, cradle me as I'm lifted.

I'm carried down the hallway, doors passing through my peripheral vision, my eyes focused on Daniel. His skin is paler; he used his blood to slow his time, to clear several flights of stairs. The door to the stairwell is hanging off its hinges as I'm carried in and up.

"Drink, fledge. Not going to have you die on me." He manages a weak smirk. "Not when you still owe me a bottle of whiskey." He chuckles a little nervously, seeing the thick

bandage on my chest, over my heart. "I mean... do you honestly find sex with me so repellent you'll go to such lengths..."

The door to the apartment has trouble closing until he sets it back in the frame with his foot. I'm laid gently on the couch, still tightly embraced by him. He's muttering now. "Never should have let you go out alone... should've followed you... I'm such a fool... find who did this and..."

"Shut up, Daniel." I smile weakly. "Can't you see I'm trying to get some sleep?" He climbs onto the couch next to me, wrapping his arms around me tightly, his forehead resting gently against my own.

"It will be a long time before I let you out of my sight again, fledge." A soft smile, and his lips brush against mine. "Tomorrow night you're telling me everything." He shakes his head a bit. "Every word."

I nod once, and start to tell him something, but the sun takes both of us, and I fall back into a deep, dreamless sleep.

"Do you honestly expect me to let you go anywhere, fledge?"

I feel like shit. I'm not in any real pain anymore, and when I showered and shaved, the remnants of my wounds were discolored skin. My movements were a bit sluggish, but the last two-liter bottle of blood took care of that. Now, instead of the walking dead, I just look like an overworked office drone, which is good, seeing as I have to go into work tonight. I'm standing in front of the door and Daniel is blocking my way.

"I've missed two days, Daniel. I can't call in again or I'll get fired, and then we're pretty much fucked."

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"I can get money easily. There's card games, dice games, and higher-class taverns with trusting individuals. And you still owe me an explanation about what happened last night."

"Some guy stabbed me with a knife on the way to the liquor store and told me the Daggers owned the City or some shit like that. Then some big, fucking bulldog-looking thing was about to kill me when another vampire showed up and scared it off, and he put me in his car, bandaged me up, and gave me some blood before dropping me off here."

"Did the last one say anything about who he was?"

"Yeah." I think back to the night before. "I think he was Guard or something?"

"Intimidating, probably had a sword?" I nod. "Good to know he's still in town. Raphael. He did right by me, by which I mean he left me alone and let me do what I wanted as long as I didn't cause trouble. The Daggers, though..."

"I guess I have to play the game whether I like it or not, huh?"

Daniel shakes his head quickly. "Never play their game, it'll only get you killed."

"Not playing nearly got me killed last night."

He smirks. "But only nearly."

"It's not funny, Daniel, I was terrified."

"Think I wasn't? When I heard you like that, I thought..." He looks down a second. "I'm not letting you go. Frankly, I'm surprised you want to leave at all, considering."

"If there's anything I picked up from my mother, it's—"

"Bullheadedness and coarse hair?"

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"Responsibility. Maybe I'm not going to play the game, but I can't let it take over my life. Let's say I do stay home tonight, what about tomorrow night? Or the night after that? Eventually I have to leave this apartment, so I might as well get an early start." I gently nudge at his shoulder to push him away from the door.

"I'll follow you, then, make sure you get there all right." He folds his arms. "And I'm not budging on that."

"Fine, but would you move so we can both get out of here? I don't want to miss the train."

We go, and the moment I'm out of the building he's gone. I can't even smell him. I take heart that he's just being careful in his shadowing, considering it was his idea, and I make my way to the station.

The trip is uneventful for a change. It's nice to not have someone threaten to kill you within thirty minutes of leaving your home. I'm starting to consider moving.

I could stay home, sure. Hell, I actually want to just crawl under my bed and never have to deal with any of this, and I'd do it if I thought for a moment that it would make any bit of difference. If anything, ironically enough, last night convinced me of my own mortality.

Despite being one of the blood-drinking undead, I can still be killed just as randomly as I'd died the first time. I'm not going to live forever. And if I hide and run from everything, I might live a really long while, but I'll probably end up alone, like—

Like Daniel.

At least until he and I had our unorthodox little meet-cute.

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No wonder he was such a wreck this evening. Who'll shake their head at his humor and call him a goofball if I'm not around?

I get on the train and strap-hang for a change, looking up and down the car, remembering to breathe this time, letting my senses slide upward. I hear a chorus of heartbeats akin to a beginning drum class, but it's comforting. My mind drifts a little while the train runs the rails, and "Wicked Game" gets stuck in my head. I run through the lyrics, because that's the best way to get a song out of your head, and they don't really seem as trite as I remember. Some of them are actually kind of sweet, you know?

Considering that that bastard Raphael took my wallet, I don't have my work ID, so when the train pulls into Victory Station, I'm already working on a story to explain how I lost a badge that will be replaced from my pay. Unfortunately, I'm a shitty liar, so I decide "I lost it" will be the best route to take.

When I emerge from the elevator into the lobby, I head to the security desk with a hangdog expression, and proceed to explain to the security chief that I did, in fact, lose my badge.

"You mean this one?" And there it is, held in front of my face, even the belt clip still attached to it. "Someone dropped off your wallet. Guess you left it in the break room or something?" Meekly, I nod. Hell, it's a better explanation than I could come up with. Still, though, the guy knows where I live, why not just drop it off there? Other than maybe to say, "I know where you work too," that is?

I thank the chief and swipe my way through the station, and then the elevator, all the way up to Victory Financial,

Records Division. When the twin doors open, Mrs. Hester is there, arms folded, angry schoolmarm look at full strength.

"Feeling better, Mr. Tompkins?"

I weakly nod, and start to move past her so I can clock in and head to my cubicle and catch up on the mountain of backload I'm certain will be there. She steps to the side, blocking my way, and shoves a paper at me. I take it, gingerly.

"A written warning." Oh, shit. "For an unexcused absence." I wince, and she shoves another paper at me, which I meekly take as well. "Your second warning, for leaving your pass in the break room." Oh, fuck. That means— "One more slip-up will result in your termination, Mr. Tompkins. As this is your second offense, you are required to meet with the department head." She points at the elevator behind me. "Ninety-fourth floor. He's expecting you."

Can I have one night where I don't end up in some sort of trouble?

"Can I clock in, at least?"

"No." She smiles smugly. "You might not need to."

Oh, bite my ass, bitch.

With an annoyed sigh, I turn right around and get back into the elevator, hitting the button for the ninety-fourth floor. Fantastic, I could get fired. Well, Daniel would be happy, I'd let him gamble all he wanted and I'd probably never leave the apartment, seeing as I couldn't even hold down a data entry job. Just how much of a fuck-up do you need to be to lose a job like this?

In the scant few seconds the elevator needs to climb the two floors to the executive level, I'm already thinking about the Hell I'm going to catch from Mom. Maybe now would be a good time to let the world know I'm actually dead. That'll at least get Mom off my case for a little while, right?

Seeing as I'm a lowly drone, I only have access to the reception area, which has two really nice leather couches, classical music playing over some hidden speakers, and a huge reception desk with a well-dressed woman wearing a headset. Gotta love executives, they'll work 'til they're dead.

I've never met the department head. Hell, I didn't even know who the Hell the department head was. Normally this would be a red-letter day for me.

I show my pass to the receptionist and tell her I'm expected. I check the plaques on the back wall, listing the various offices and their occupants.

"He's waiting for you. End of the hall, door's open." Her voice is curt, polite, and very much leave-my-sight-now. I can take a hint. If I'm going to get fired, I might as well speed it along.

I proceed down the hall into an office carpeted in hunter green, the furnishings a bit spartan other than shelves lining the walls, a large antique oak desk with a high-end computer on top, and one uncomfortable-looking chair in front.

The man seated behind the desk looks up at me.

Brown hair, gray eyes, nice suit, and when he gets up and comes around the desk I see a pair of expensive sneakers on his feet. Oh shit.

"Have a seat, Frederick."

"You're the department head for Records?"

He motions to the chair in front of the desk, and I walk to it, sitting down.

"Working nights is hardly new to our kind, Frederick." He walks around me and I hear the door close. "I had my suspicions when one of my workers suddenly switched to the night shift without any explanation, but I wasn't about to argue with an fifty-five percent increase in a worker's productivity, so I let it sit until your troubles came to my door." He walks back around his desk and sits in an expensive, mesh-backed chair. "And here we are."

"So... you're Raphael?"

He furrows his brow a moment. "That is a name I haven't heard in years. Long before your time, so I suspect someone else told you. This, of course, returns us to the conversation we didn't get to finish last night." He steeples his fingers.

"Who made you?"

"Does it matter? I mean, I'm not killing anyone. If anything, I'm the one who's in danger, considering that Dagger guy nearly killed me last night." I stumble a bit. "Oh. Yeah. Thanks for saving my life, or whatever it is that I have now."

"You're welcome." He looks me over. "You still look a bit dry, fledgling." I nod slightly. Daniel and I are going to have to make a blood run sometime tonight or tomorrow night. He gets up and walks toward me, and then presents his wrist.

"Go ahead. A sip should refresh you well enough."

I blink slightly. "Uh... I don't know about that. I mean, I barely know you, and, uh..."

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"Frederick, you are refusing a very gracious offer from a ranking member of the Queen's Guard. You are embarrassing yourself and insulting me."

Okay. I can take a hint. Gingerly, I take his wrist, my teeth slipping out for the chance to drink. His skin smells vaguely like soap and leather. I remember his words from the night before, his taunt to the bulldog-thing. Eleven hundred years that I'm about to drink from. This scares the shit out of me. If I can start to get lost in Daniel's memories, I don't want to know what this guy's will do.

"I shouldn't. I'm really grateful, but..." I push his wrist back slightly, and lean away. My teeth are still out, the urge still there, even stronger with the temptation right in front of me. "I'm sorry. I don't mean to insult you, it's just..."

When I look up at him, he's leaning back against his desk. "As you wish. Shall we move on to the purpose of this meeting?"

I nod quickly, eager to change the subject.

"Last night's incident is going to cause trouble. The Daggers and the Guard have been warring for ages. There are so few of us left now that many of us have abandoned the war in the interests of our own survival. It appears that some wish to begin the conflict again. I would suggest you be vigilant, and learn to protect yourself."

One second he's standing relaxed, leaning against the desk, the next a letter opener is in his hand and I can feel a wind as it pushes through the air toward my body. The world goes dim, filtered in blue as my hand snaps to his wrist, twisting it about in a bad direction, causing the small blade to

fall to the floor as the world comes back into proper color. His face is an inch from mine. "Unless, of course, someone's already taught you."

My eyes meet his, deep down into the well of his soul, and I know he could've killed me. That was a test, and by succeeding, I failed. Shit.

"Who made you, Frederick?"

I let go of his hand and get up from the chair.

"Why is it so important that you know?"

"It's more important that you tell me."

Why would he put it like that? Unless... Damn it!

"You already know, don't you?"

He nods once.

"How is Daniel, Frederick? Still a roaring, rakish drunk?"

He shakes his head slightly. "That one will teach you little, Frederick. A knight of the Queen's Guard fights as a warrior, with honor; not as a rogue, with *cowardice*." I start backing away. "I'm curious why you refused to drink when you clearly need it." He remains in place. "Even more so now, drawing on your blood as you did. There is so much for you to learn, and Daniel is not the ideal instructor."

"What, you want me to sell him out?"

"I care little what happens to him anymore. However, if he decided to initiate another member of the Guard, it's best to train you properly before he corrupts your mind with thoughts of desertion."

"What if I say no?" I back toward the door. "What, you'll kill me?" I feel a rush of wind and a gentle poke of something sharp against my back. I hear his voice against my ear.

"If that were my plan, you would not have made it home last night." His teeth gently brush against my neck, and I shudder. I try to convince myself that that did *not* feel good. "You could go far at my side, Frederick. A proper Guard, have a purpose, a direction." I feel my tie being loosened, the top buttons of my shirt being opened. Oh, my God. I turn to face him, and I can see his teeth out, his face strong, exuding confidence and hunger. I can see a prominent bulge in his well-tailored slacks.

Title Seven. Title Seven. Title Seven!

"Uh... I'm really flattered, but, uh..." I back away a step or two. "I don't want to sleep with you. In fact, this is kind of sexual harassment right now, so I should probably leave." He laughs, and advances on me, and motions down with his eyes.

"It appears you're not entirely convinced yourself."

I'm not checking. Fuck him. I mean... You know what I mean!

"Let me leave." I back away another step.

"Again, you fail to convince me, considering you're moving away from the door and toward my desk." He steps closer to me. "It has been many, many years since I was with another Guard. Considering that Daniel sees himself above my work now, it would fall to you to take his place."

Gee, Daniel, thanks for not telling me that Raphael was your old boyfriend. No wonder he let you get away with so much shit.

"I'm not obligated to do anything." I start sidestepping to get around him and make a beeline for the door. I feel his

teeth press into my neck, and in that moment I don't know why Daniel would ever have left this guy.

He drinks, and pushes me back against the desk, his hands pushing out spurs to cut through my pants. I'm feeling lightheaded, tired, as I hear him work his own pants off. Apparently I'm losing the other virginity tonight, but I feel so good I'm rather looking forward to it. I honestly wouldn't care if he drained me dry.

I weakly lift my legs, wrapping them around his waist as he slides me toward him, and I feel a definite pressure against my ass. A big, hard pressure. Sure, I know what it is, and since I'm dead I doubt he'll rupture something, but still, what's he putting up there, a tree?

"By the gods, you taste so good." His voice is strained, muffled as his motions gain speed, intensity. This is nothing more than pure lust. I don't feel pain, just discomfort as I'm pushed open from behind, feeling him sink in inch by inch. His head rests against my shoulder as he grips my ass tightly in his hands, pulling me off the desk. My arms wrap around his neck to keep myself upright as he fucks me standing.

His hand presses my head to the nape of his neck, and I can't resist anymore. I'm too dry, too aroused, the moment too intense to deny my hunger for him.

Oh God, Daniel, I'm so sorry.

I bite down hard and something like a roar of battle bellows forth from him. His blood hits my tongue and I drink deep.

My arms and legs burn, a blur of images pouring into my brain, mixing, overlapping. My own life seems so far away

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by Vaughan R. Demont

amidst scenes of battle, endless training, power, and the Game. My loyalty to the Queen is unwavering, as rigid as the steel of my blade, as pure as her blood that sings in my veins.

I merely need her to send me someone. Someone to rebuild her reign with. Someone to share the title of—

My eyes burst open as I pull back from his neck.

"You're not Raphael."

He gives me an odd look as he begins thrusting at me, I hear his skin slapping against mine. "Of course not. He was a deserter. He was dealt with." Oh, my God. I feel his teeth sink into my neck again, my body flooding with ecstasy as he picks up his rhythm.

I hear him growl into my neck as he pushes as hard as he can against me.

I twitch, tremble.

"Marcus!"

I feel myself come.

I didn't think I could still do that, or that *he* could still do that.

Oh God, what have I done?

His tongue slathers over my neck, the skin tingling as it heals. I'm set on the desk, and his hands move to my shoulders, keeping me in place. Marcus' eyes lock into mine.

"You aren't leaving, fledgling, not anymore." I try to work free from his grasp, but I'm still woozy from the feeding and the sex. "You're coming with me."

I shake my head, and he nods in counterpoint.

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"To begin with, Frederick, you possess a remarkable ability." He grins wryly. "In that no one, man, vampire, or mythic, has been able to make me spill my seed in a long time. This in and of itself would be enough, even if not for... other reasons. But then you sealed your own fate not long after."

"What, because I came? I'm just as confused as you are."

A soft chuckle as his mouth descends toward my neck.

"The name on my door is Roger Landry. I never told you my name is Marcus. There is only one way you could know who I really am..." I hear the word whispered in my ear. "*Inquisitor*."

I want to let out a string of profanities at my own stupidity, but he's already drinking me again, holding me in place as my body begins to feel heavy, slow, unresponsive. My attempts at struggling become weak flails of my arms until all that's left is sitting there, my brain shutting down while I feel nothing but pleasure.

I'm so sorry, Daniel.

Marcus pulls away from my neck, and I'm just a limp body, barely aware of my surroundings. I think I'm being carried somewhere. "Don't worry about Daniel, Frederick. He's a deserter, eventually, you'll understand that I have your best interests at heart. You merely need to experience the Queen's love. She has need of you, Inquisitor. One with your talents will be a useful weapon against the Daggers."

"Where's Daniel?" My voice is mumbled, slurred.

"In a safe place, fledgling. His command of stealth isn't nearly as impressive as he believes it is. You'll see him again

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soon." I feel something brush my forehead as the world goes black. "Sleep, fledgling. The Queen is waiting for you."

He is trying my patience.

It is our fifth session. His body is mottled with cuts and scar tissue. He's been branded with the traitor's mark three times, and for the last four weeks he's spoken to no one but me. I haven't used the chain yet, nor have I drunk. I refuse to allow him any more minor victories.

But I will tolerate little more of this.

"Twice in one week. Did you miss me, Inquisitor?" He's lost teeth, so his attempt at a roguish grin isn't as effective as he'd like. I will admit I had the guard disciplined. I expressly ordered after our last session that I no longer wanted him damaged, as it wasn't getting us anywhere.

I inspect him, as usual, for cuts, scars. He was a gambler in life, as I suspected, and had cheated one of the Guard in a game of squares. After that, the Guard had the prisoner recruited to cover for his own mistake.

"I've been dreaming, Inquisitor. Would you like to know what of?"

"Our Great Lady, as all of us do." I don't meet his eyes. There are new scars near his groin. I grit my teeth; I had suspected my unit wasn't as disciplined as I would like, but the Queen has decreed that traitors are lower than the Daggers, and I allow terrible things to happen to the Daggers.

"You, Inquisitor."

"This won't work." My tone is as if I were refusing a bowl of bread.

"No falsehoods, Inquisitor. I've always dreamed of you."

My fingers tighten around the end of the chain, the rough edges cutting into my palm. I'm tempted to feed him, lull him. The Queen gave me so many gifts, but to use them incurs displeasure. I wonder why she bothered in the first place.

No. I'm sure there was a logical reason. This is merely teaching us Inquisitors restraint, good judgment regarding our gifts. Nothing more.

"Why do you let no one talk to me, Inquisitor?"

I don't want to answer. So, he's onto my gambit. I never suspected he was a fool, but I don't see a reason to change my strategy.

"Going to claim I want you all to myself?" I immediately regret it. I shouldn't engage.

"I believe it's so that someone, anyone, in this fortress will talk to you." A small chuckle from him. "Irony, isn't it? I'm the prisoner and you're the one who's lonely."

I look at his face, see his flattened nose that's been broken, the small cuts and bruises that a lack of blood has slowed the healing of. "You aren't insightful."

"Of course I'm not. I'm stating the obvious."

I flash the chain in his face, the metal dragging slow across his skin. He doesn't wince. Guards wince at gold.

My prisoner might very well be a Dagger. But there's only one way to tell.

"Who do you serve?"

"I serve no one, Inquisitor. I am free."

My mouth moves toward his neck.

"Who were you, Inquisitor, before your Rebirth?"

I don't remember.

"It doesn't matter. The Queen granted me a gift, and unlike some, I accept responsibility."

"Then I pity you, Inquisitor."

I drink. He will feel pleasure, it's one of the gifts bestowed on us; he will come to crave it, and he will betray his resistance to Her Majesty as all do. The task will be easy now, so I have failed.

The scenes come in a rush, bright and stinging: living memories. The taste of them is bittersweet. I taste loss and guilt and anger, passion, devotion, chasing a figure. I take in dreams and images, sensory, and he has been dreaming of me. My plan to make him dependent on me for contact has succeeded, but in a way I didn't expect: he lusts after me. Even before he betrayed the Lady. It doesn't make any sense. I need more. I need to see...

I pull away as he goes limp. Dry.

I leave him there, and inform the guard to feed him and return him the next evening. Perhaps the puzzles and dreams are a trap, but there are secrets in his blood. I need to unlock them, I need to know.

I need to see him again.

You would think that being dead, not needing to breathe or anything, and also considering the fact that I'm, you know, a frigging *vampire*, would mean that I wouldn't have any sort of problem waking up inside of a coffin.

Oh, how wrong you would be.

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by Vaughan R. Demont

Here's a glimpse of what your thought process is for the first five minutes: Oh fuck oh fuck there's no air I'm gonna die I'm gonna die I'm gonna die!

The next five minutes: Oh fuck oh fuck I'm buried alive no one will ever find me I'll starve to death in here I'm gonna die I'm gonna die I'm gonna die!

And shortly after that, once you've stopped panicking, you calm down and arrive at a general conclusion: Well, *this* fucking sucks!

And yes, I did try to open the lid at first; I'm not a moron.

I feel a little weaker, but I guess that's to be expected, considering I don't know how long I've been asleep and the last thing I remembering drinking was Marcus—

I shudder. Yeah, sure, the sex was actual sex, but I essentially lost my backdoor virginity to Daniel's dad. Not to mention to someone who threw me in a coffin hoping that I'd wake up a dutiful servant of the Queen.

But I'm not in the mood to kill any traitors. I don't hate Daniel or... Oh fuck, they've got Daniel.

I kick at the lid of the coffin, and well, it hurts, letting me know that the lid is more of a slab, or I'm actually buried. Yeah, I'll go with slab for now, the latter would drop me back into panic-mode. My vision's rather limited as there's no light in here, just vague grayish borders and an idea of the shape.

Daniel will be okay. I have to keep faith in that, and worry about getting the Hell out of this thing.

"God damn it, let me out of here!" Like that's going to work.

And the slab slides away from my head, revealing a dark ceiling far above.

Okaaaaaaaay.

Not complaining.

I squirm and wriggle up through the opening, poking my head out looking for whoever let me out, but there's no one there. I'm in a circular room with a high domed ceiling, all stonework, a number of slabs arranged around me in a circle, me at the center. The air is a bit chilly, the room only lit by a pair of torches by a door. Actual torches.

Now I'm getting a little creeped out.

Getting out of the tomb isn't that difficult, but when I hop down to the floor, I noticed that I've been clothed to attend a Renaissance faire, apparently. Leather boots, woven leather pants, a silk shirt with a hardened leather chestpiece, vambraces on my wrists, all of it colored black.

What the Hell?

"Inquisitor!" A male figure dressed in somewhat ornate armor appears in the doorway lit by the torches. Oh shit. Am I dreaming?

"Uh, yeah?" Best to play along, I guess, until I know what the Hell's going on.

"The prisoner is ready, Inquisitor." I nod once. He stands there a moment. "Is there something the matter, sir?"

I blink once. "Uh, no? Everything's fine. So... shall we?" I gesture with my hand toward the door, and he looks at me oddly.

"Are you all right, sir?"

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"Just hungry is all." The best cover for a lie is always the truth. Thanks, Daniel. "Mustn't keep our guest waiting, right?" I start toward the door, and, thank God, he turns and leads me down a series of very dark hallways. I follow him step for step to avoid running into anything, or anyone.

"Bring some blood, would you?" I'm at the door, and there are two similarly attired guards on either side of the door. One gives me another odd look. "For me. I'm ravenous, and it'll be fun to drink in front of him." Another pause from them. "Just go, damn it."

I push open the door and close it behind me, hearing the guard shuffle off down the hall.

I'm standing in the interrogation room, and chained to the slab...

Well, there he is, the man of my dreams.

"Always a pleasure, Inquisitor." His voice is rough, dry, weak. When I advance to look at him, I can see that his body is severely emaciated, almost literally just skin and bones. His eyes are sunken in, skin stretched tightly over his body, his face. Grotesque is the word I'm looking for. So yeah, I step back a bit, and I'm rather grateful there's nothing in my stomach currently.

"What the fuck happened to you?"

He looks at me for a moment, his pale eyes staring at mine. Even in the dreams he didn't look this bad; he had scars, sure, but not a roadmap on his skin. He was being starved, yeah, but not to *this* degree.

"Trying a different tack tonight?"

"Who are you?" I never learned that from the dreams.

"You know there's no answer to that question that will satisfy your curiosity." He attempts a chuckle that emerges as a cough.

"Humor me." I hear a bang at the door. "It's just some blood." I walk to the door, and open it a crack, and a large goblet is handed to me, slightly warm. I don't want to know how they got this. I close the door with my free hand and head back to the slab, and put the cup to his lips. "You need this more than I do." He leans away.

"I'm finally close, Inquisitor, don't take death away from me."

I exhale hard and set down the goblet. "I'm just trying to help you."

"I'm sure you are."

"Where's that sense of humor that kept those dreams interesting, huh? He beat it out of you?"

"Who?"

I roll my eyes. "The Inquisitor, the one who's got you all chained up for the dead Queen? The guy I've been dreaming of that nearly made me kill my boyfriend?"

His face goes dead serious.

"What did you say?"

"I woke up and nearly killed my boyfriend. I saw him as a traitor and felt the need to serve the Queen. And yes, I know, she's dead."

"How do you know that?"

"She's been dead for millennia, at least that's what Daniel told me."

"Daniel is...?"

"The one who made me."

"Give me the blood, I need a moment to think this through." I pick up the goblet and he readily drinks, the liquid a deep silver. He doesn't really look any better, but his eyes regain a bit of their light. "You claim that another Inquisitor has been interrogating me, that someone named Daniel made you, and that the Queen has been dead for thousands of years." I nod. "You're mad."

"Oh, really? Then why don't you set me straight?"

"The Queen has been dead only three months. You were made by the Queen, as all of us are, save the chosen few made by the Captain of the Guard, and you, dear Inquisitor, have been keeping me company these last few weeks."

Oh God, where the Hell am I?

"You seem confused, Inquisitor."

"I'm dreaming, right? I mean, this has to be a dream. I was in a high-rise executive office getting fucked in the ass by my maker's maker that I *might* have drank a little too much from, and now I'm here." I think back. "He said he was sending me to meet the Queen or something."

"What do you dream of, Inquisitor?" He sounds very interested now.

"You."

And he smiles. It's warm, relieved, almost trembling.

"I've waited so long to hear you admit that, Aron." His eyes are hopeful. "Do you remember me?"

I shake my head. "I think you've got me confused for someone else, maybe the guy I'm dreaming I am when I dream of you. My name's Fred."

The Vampire Fred: Wicked Game
by Vaughan R. Demont

He looks to the floor. "So you tell the truth. You have gone mad."

The room is growing colder.

"Tell me your name, please."

"Aron, please." He's not looking at me anymore. "Stop. There's not much left."

I hold his face, but his eyes are focused elsewhere.

"Please, Aron, remember me. I've given you everything of what I am." His voice is growing softer.

"Hey, snap out of it, okay? You're starting to creep me out."

"Aron, I will always..." I step back from him.

And I'm still there. I see my head buried in his neck, drinking, the prisoner's body starting to crumble to dust.

My double looks at the dust slipping through his fingers.

"I don't understand." He shakes his head, stepping back from the slab. "There has to be more. I don't understand. It doesn't make any sense."

"Aron?" My double stops dead, and stares at me.

Oh shit, bad move.

Okay. I can figure this out.

Somehow, I'm dreaming. That's a given in this situation, or everything falls apart and I have to start all over again. Or maybe a hallucination. Or a curse. Something where this isn't actually happening. You get the idea.

So here's the setup: Three players. You've got me, the utterly confused data entry clerk wondering where the fuck he is; a guy chained to a slab who's a prisoner in a dream I've been having; and the third player is the actual Inquisitor I've

been dreaming of, only he looks exactly like me, or I look like him.

So the logical thing to do is wake up from this very fucked up scenario.

Now to figure out how to do that.

"You must be my new prisoner."

Aw shit.

I blink and my legs and arms are shackled, hard stone against my back. I'm on the slab.

Bad to worse. Frying pan to fire. Wake up wake up wake up wake up!

"Why have you betrayed the Queen?"

"What, you're not going to leave me isolated for several days, try to get me to socialize with only you, you know, good-cop, bad-cop me? I thought you had a system. And how could I betray the Queen? That bitch is dead." I can see the murals on the wall now, showing the Queen in all her glory...

But there's just smears there. A vaguely female figure, a blob of what's either blood or red hair.

"How do you know so much about my methods, prisoner?" Real confusion on his face. "Tell me." I don't have time to answer. "No, you'll tell me falsehoods like the other one. I need to know for sure." He's leaning toward my neck. Oh God, can he really drink me in my own dream?

"Aron! Stop! The Queen's dead! Hell, you're probably dead! Everyone's dead! This is all a dream! *My* dream! And I really fucking want to wake up from it right now!"

His teeth sink in, and it doesn't feel great. I'm not begging him to keep going. I do not get an erection.

I can feel myself slipping away.

He pulls back a moment, looking at me. "What are these names... Emily, Daniel. Who are the faces? What are these things you show me?" He grabs my face, holding it still.

"Answer me."

"Please stop." Oh God it hurts, like my brain is being peeled away from my skull one layer at a time.

His teeth sink in again, my life flowing away from my eyes.

"I don't understand." His eyes are twitching back and forth like the night owls in the break room when they've had one cup of coffee too many. "Where is the Queen?" He shakes me hard, snapping me out of a lull in my consciousness. "How did the Daggers learn of sunmetal?"

"Don't know what you're talking about." My head drops back down, my chin hitting my chest. My clothes are extra baggy now, my hands and feet damned near skeletal.

"Daniel..." He smiles slightly, eyes twitching about. "Yes... the traitor. He must've betrayed the Queen. I'll find his secrets."

No. Not Daniel.

"Yes... He deserted, just like the other one. Why else would he do it? I can find out what he knows." He licks his lips.

No.

My teeth are out.

"No."

He turns to me, his eyes open a little wider. Aron has punched his ticket for the crazy train.

Aron closes his eyes slightly.

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by Vaughan R. Demont

"Yes... I can feel it, taste it. They're coming so quickly."
I don't know what the Hell he's doing, but he's distracted.
And my hands and feet are smaller now, thanks to him.
And he didn't tighten the shackles.

I slip them carefully, my strength already waning, but I've got enough to throw myself at the good Inquisitor and lock down my jaw around his neck.

I drink.

My spurs are out, and I dig into his sides to get a good grip as he snaps out of his reverie to try to pry me off. Every swallow brings me back a little more, knocks him down a little further.

And there are no memories.

All I'm drinking is him.

This is a weird way for the dream to go, I'll admit, but hey, I'll take a shot of survival even if it comes with a chaser of crazy.

"Stop."

Oh no, you bastard. You don't get a whit of restraint after draining the kinda funny guy and then trying to kill me.

"Please stop."

Finally, starting to see *something*. I taste fear, the tang of betrayal, now we're getting somewhere.

"Please, stop it."

Everything's gone dark, my eyes are closed, and I can feel the blood flowing down my throat, slightly warm, filling me, bringing me back, the one under me getting weak, fading. Serves the fucker right.

"Please."

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I pull back and open my eyes.

I'm in what looks like a conference space with windows along two of the walls, squatted on top of a long metal table, where someone is heavily strapped down just under me.

"Daniel?" He looks like... Well, nearly drained dry. thanks to yours truly. "Oh shit, oh shit, oh shit." I put my wrist to his mouth.

What the fuck is going on?

"I don't know who Aron is." He shakes his head slowly.

"Daniel, it's me. It's Fred. Fledge, remember?" Oh my God, what have I done? I lift my wrist to my mouth and bite down, wincing as the blood starts dripping out. I press the wound to his mouth again, letting me trickle in.

"Just a trick." He shakes his head away.

Aron was in control of me, just like when I tried to attack Daniel before. Only he had me the whole way this time and I was stuck running around dreamland while he was interrogating Daniel. Oh fuck, what have I been doing to him?

"It's not a trick, Daniel. It's really me." He doesn't look convinced. "Okay, uh..." I think. "You hit me with a stolen Ferrari and made me the same night."

Shakes his head. "Could've drank that from him."

"How about the fact that I look exactly like me?"

"You're an Inquisitor, masks are simple."

"Huh? Like taking someone's face?"

"Fred would show na*vete, but you did your homework, didn't you?"

Gee, thanks for telling me I could take someone else's face, Daniel.

"Fine..." I think hard. "Okay, you told my sister your last name is Blake because my name is Fred."

He stares at me a moment.

"Oh, c'mon. It's Daphne's last name. Fred and Daphne? I know you'd think that was cute, that's why you smirked at me when Em said it.." I lean in close, and kiss him gently. "Trust me, Daniel, this is the one time that it's not a guy in a mask."

"Fledge?"

"Yeah, Daniel, it's me."

He smiles weakly. "I can see that. As I was I saying before you rudely interrupted me, would you be a lamb and get me off this table?"

I start working at the straps holding him down. "All right, seeing as I'm completely in the dark here, mind telling me how the Hell we both ended up here?"

"The last thing I remember is security asking me to wait in a small room while they cleared getting me another pass. I didn't believe it, of course, and slipped into an elevator with a simply charming woman. Very talkative, has a cat or two at home, or two very unfortunate children." I work one of the bindings loose, and he starts tugging on his hand to free it. "Then the door opened and there was my sire in a rather expensive suit." He motions with his eyes down to his chest. "Didn't end well for me, I'm afraid."

I help his left hand free and get to work on his right. "Marcus was near the elevators? Must've happened before he got me. He told me you were being taken care of, something about how you aren't as sneaky as you think you are."

"I got him pretty good, put a nice scar on his cheek that'll take him the night to heal."

"He wasn't scarred when I saw him." Right hand free, now for the legs. "And I know it was Marcus that got me."

Daniel chuckled. "I'm curious how. What, did he tell you?" I shake my head, suddenly remember *exactly* how I found out, and considering that I'm still full up with God knows how much blood, it's a little tough forcing back down the erection. "You drank him, didn't you?"

"Uh... A little more than that." I figure I might as well confess, I've nearly killed him twice in the last few days, this seems pale by comparison. Besides, I've seen enough sitcoms to know that keeping something like this secret never turns out well. "We sort of..."

"Made love?" Hurt tone. Fuck.

"I wouldn't call it that. He fucked me in the ass, and I was so messed up from how good the drinking felt that I didn't struggle. Hell, both of us, well, came." Daniel's staring at me now. "Daniel, I'm already planning on hating myself for quite a long time over this, don't add on to my guilt for cheating on you."

He blinks, leaning forward. "Cheating on me?"

I nod. "I fucked up. I'm sorry. I know you can't forgive me right now, maybe someday, I don't know."

"Fledge, are you under the impression that there's something more between us?"

Why does my heart feel like it just dropped through the floor?

I look at him, my fingers working slowly on the bindings on his right foot. "Isn't there?"

"Do you see us as lovers, fledge?"

"Like, the two of us are making love on a regular basis?"

"That the two of us are in love."

Oh shit. But not in the bad way.

"How do you see it, Daniel?"

He shakes his head once. "I'm asking you."

"Daniel, do you really love me, or are you just afraid of being alone again?"

"Do you really love me, or are you just afraid of standing on your own?"

"Daniel, we're kind of in the lion's den right now, how about we get free and get you some blood and then we'll talk about this?" I feel a hand grip my shoulder.

"No. Now."

"I don't know." I have to be honest. "I don't know what I'm feeling, okay? I know I want you around. I know it's comforting to know you're there. I know everything isn't as scary because of you." I look down at the floor. "And despite what happened when the car... despite everything that's happened with Aron and Marcus and the Daggers, I know that my life is better because you're in it." I turn my head back toward him. "So yeah." I swallow hard. "I love you."

Now for the hard part. "What about you, Daniel?"

He shrugs once. "I love you. Now, could you get my other foot free?"

I stare at him a moment.

"You expected perhaps a sonnet?" He wriggles his foot a bit against my hand. "I'm in love with you and I'd like my foot unbound. One we'll go through one night at a time, for better or worse, and the other is easily remedied by you. I hope you're clever enough to discern which is which." He winks, flashing that smile. Goofball. But I chuckle regardless and return to working at the straps.

"Daniel? Why is there a guy in my dreams who looks exactly like me?" With him tied up this is probably the best time to get a straight answer out of him. "Is he like, my dark side or something? The personification of my vampirism, maybe?" Daniel just looks at me oddly.

"We, the Guard, the Daggers, the Seneschals, the Masons..." He shakes his head. "Sad lot of bastards, those ones. Anyway, all of us are reborn again and again. It's in the blood. When we turn someone, the blood brings out someone of the line. You're apparently an Inquisitor named Aron. Or rather, you are Aron reborn. Just as my blood and Marcus's blood and the Queen's blood is in your veins, so is Aron's."

"Am I going to turn into him?"

"Considering you haven't killed me yet, fledge, I'd say no. But Fred? It would be a good idea to hurry our escape along."

"You hear someone coming?"

"No." His voice is calm, his head turning off toward the windows. "The sun is rising."

I pop my spurs and get to shredding.

A few seconds later his foot is free and I'm supporting him, his arm around my shoulder, his body too drained to even handle walking. I'll feel like shit later; getting out alive is the

current priority, and I feel so messed up from Aron's little mindscape that I don't think letting Daniel drink his fill would help our situation.

I hobble the two of us to the door and try it. Locked. Fuck. I bang on the door three times, since I'm supposed to be rehabilitated, right? Maybe they were just waiting for me to finish up in here?

I hear the locks click and I try to put on a face that suggests that I'm probably authoritative and definitely unstable. I use Mom as inspiration, primarily.

When the door opens, there's a pale-skinned man in a suit looking over the two of us. Best to answer the question before it's asked.

"He's got more in him. I need to know more." That's what Aron was going on about, needing to know more from draining people dry. I sound a bit nervous.

"What should we do with him?" The voice is a little familiar, but I can really place it. Hell, considering that Marcus is my department head, this might be one of my co-workers that I haven't seen outside of a Christmas party.

I look him directly in the eye. "I never said I was finished. I'm taking him away from the sun." So please go away so I can make my escape before I pass out for the day.

"I'll need to clear this with the Captain."

I shove him back into the hallway, his back slamming against the wall. Damn, I'm stronger than I thought. "Are you attempting to usurp an Inquisitor's authority over an interrogation?" I narrow my eyes at him, and he registers surprise. Shit, I think I just screwed up.

He laughs.

Okay, not expecting that, but okay.

"You're right." I am? I mean, I am! "Been so long since I've worked with another Inquisitor. Captain don't need to know shit, we only answer to Her Majesty, right?" He claps my shoulder. Another Inquisitor. Great. Please God, don't bite me.

"So get me a room while I still have some twilight."

He nods, and motions to a door down the hall. "That'll lead you to the elevators. Should be an open room on fifty-three, you'll know when you see it." I nod, and half-drag Daniel down toward the door. "Need any help?" I shake my head.

"I work alone."

I get through the doors and find the elevators. I can feel the sun approaching. I don't really have a plan other than getting out of the building, probably all the way down to Victory Station. I slam at least four down buttons before a set of doors slides open. I help Daniel in.

"Hey." I look out and the Inquisitor is there. Shit. Shit. Shit. I knew that was too easy! "Damned near impossible to tell who's who nowadays. Which one are you?"

I hit the button for Victory Station.

"Aron."

The doors slide close and the car smoothly goes into motion, the numbers descending quickly. Holy shit, I pulled it off.

"Decent grift, fledge." Daniel's voice is tired. I'm starting to find it hard to keep moving.

"I had a good teacher."

"You drank a good teacher. I would've preferred to teach you myself if you really wanted to pick up the trade, you need a completely different style."

"Because I'm an Inquisitor?"

"Because you're a nobody. You don't stand out at all, people probably forget you within five minutes of meeting you." Okay, I'm really trying hard not to feel insulted. "Do you know how prized that quality is in my profession? Just learn to keep your head down and you could run five to seven steady grifts at a time..." He's out.

The doors open to Victory Station, with several early bird businessmen shuffling past us to get into the car as I help Daniel out. With any luck they'll just think I'm helping my drunken co-worker home rather than letting him drive.

I'm having trouble walking myself now, though. Daniel's become dead weight and I have no idea how the Hell to get out of here. The trains will eventually head above ground and into the sunlight, so forget that idea. Taxis have windows, same with buses. Besides, I'm flat broke.

Think, think, think.

Hide in the bathroom? Yeah, no one will notice two dead guys in a stall in Victory Station.

Sleep on a bench? This is Allora. Bum patrol. Not to mention we'd be lying out there for all the world to see once it's noticed that I didn't arrive on the fifty-third floor.

Janitor's closet? Eventually a janitor's going to notice two dead guys.

The Vampire Fred: Wicked Game
by Vaughan R. Demont

We need to be somewhere that I can get to in the next five minutes away from the sun where no one's going to bother us until sundown.

I'm going to have to break the law. And trust that Daniel did a Hell of a lot more with his hands than jerk guys off for money.

I steer myself and Daniel toward a suit coming from the direction of the parking lot, and try to focus, trusting myself, trusting what I've drunk from Daniel. I collide with the man, the impact knocking him a bit off-balance as my hand slides into his pocket, my finger hooking his key ring and cleanly pulling it free before I mutter an apology and continue on in the direction of the lot.

I don't check my hand, don't squeeze to confirm it's there, I know that would be a rookie mistake. I just have to trust that I did it right.

The parking lot in Victory Station is largely for executives to have easy access to the Tower as well as the Square. Most of them live outside of town in nice gated communities and drive big-ass gas-guzzlers from Europe to work.

Big-ass gas-guzzlers with big-ass trunk space.

It takes a minute, but enough presses of the "lock/unlock" button on the remote reveal a silver sedan's flashing headlights. I use the remote to pop the trunk and put Daniel and I in before closing the lid tightly. With the last of my strength I curl up next to him, my arms limply wrapped about his body as I feel the sun crest the horizon and the darkness come up to claim me.

"Oh for Christ's sake, not this again!"

The Vampire Fred: Wicked Game
by Vaughan R. Demont

I'm back in the interrogation chamber, the prisoner is alive once more, and well-chained to the slab, still naked, and still a bit desiccated. Sure, I could've woken up in the tomb again and panicked for a few minutes, but I'm really starting to get sick of this place. I'm just hoping that while I'm here Aron-the-psycho-boy isn't frolicking about in my body in the waking world doing God knows what.

"Didn't I kill Aron or something?" I walk to the prisoner. "I was drinking his blood and everything and then I woke up and found myself nearly killing Daniel."

"I see you've gone mad again, Inquisitor." His voice is a croak. When I think about what I just said I can see his reluctance to believe me, actually. It's a little confusing for me myself.

"Didn't he kill you last time? I watched it. He sucked you dry and you fell to dust."

"Didn't learn what you needed to know?"

I roll my eyes.

"I'm starting to see how Aron cracked if *this* is what he's had to put up with." I stop a moment, take a deep breath more to calm my nerves than anything else. "How about we start fresh, yeah? I'm Fred, Fred Tompkins. You are?"

He stares at me a moment. I'm getting a bit aggravated now.

"Please don't play any games with me, okay weird-dream-guy? God only knows what's going on in the real world. I'd hate to wake up and find out I've killed thirty librarians because..." I try to approximate Aron's drone. "I need to know more."

Again, no response, he's just staring.

"Please, at least tell me there's no one standing behind me with a disapproving look on their face?" I don't really want my cause of death to be a movie cliché.

"You want to know my name?"

I blink. Okay. I can go with this.

"Yeah. I'd like to know your name. I mean, like I said, I've been dreaming of you, so I'd like a name to put to the face, you know?"

"Kol." I step toward him. "I believe..." He attempts a smile, his lips crack a bit, skin straining. "I believe I prefer you mad, Inquisitor."

"Why are you in my dreams, Kol?"

"Why didn't you stop drinking, Aron?"

I sigh, looking down. "I'm not—" I then see that his eyes aren't directed at me. Aw shit. Delayed movie cliché! A second later I'm colliding with a wall, and yes, it really does very much hurt. It's nothing like in the cartoons where you get flattened or leave an imprint of yourself. You hit, feel some things crunching, everything goes black for a second, and if you're still conscious, it takes a few seconds to understand *anything*.

Unfortunately, in those few seconds you're flopping around on the floor rather vulnerable and pathetic, and it's easy for someone to pick you up and do some more damage. Which is what Aron's doing right now.

"Stay away from him." Something hits my ribs. "He's *mine*." My head snaps back from impact. I try to get to my

feet, seeing as being dead and in a dream means broken bones don't amount to shit.

"What the Hell is your problem, Aron?" I cough and spit out some blood. That's more than a little scary. I mean, I'm supposed to be dreaming, right?

He's standing near the slab. There's no half-crazy eyes, he's not drinking from Kol. He's just holding a sword with a golden edge. I don't want to know if that'll work here. C'mon, Freddy Boy, wake the Hell up! "To think I'd be rebirthed by a *whore*."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa." I hold up my hands but he's still advancing. "Are you talking about Daniel?" I back up, away from the golden pointy-thing. "You weren't brought back from the dead, I was!"

He spits, or does an approximation of it. "And you. Refuse from refuse. Some time on the slab and I'll know everything I need to know." My body drops into a defensive stance on instinct. "You honestly believe you can fight me with what you drank from a whore?"

Okay, I officially miss crazy Aron.

I circle slowly toward the slab, catching the eye of the prisoner. "Hey, you believe me yet when I say I'm not Aron?"

"Perhaps I'm the one who's gone mad." He studies me, seeing both Aron and I dressed in the same dark leather, only he's got a big damned golden sword, and I've got whatever time he's giving me while he gloats over his assured victory.

Think, think, think.

I run.

Seriously, what else would you expect me to do?

The Vampire Fred: Wicked Game
by Vaughan R. Demont

All right, sure, I've drunk Daniel's blood, but I have no clue what the Hell I have to do to trigger it. Hell, I've drunk from Marcus, too, so you'd think I'd have his badass sword skills but again, I have no idea how to make it work. It's a grand thing to be an Inquisitor and have no idea how you're supposed to do your job. But hey, not knowing has kept me from turning into the batshit insane vampire chasing me around the room.

"You can't run away from me forever, coward!"

"I don't need to breathe, asshole, so yes I can!"

He is right, though, I'm only delaying the inevitable, but as long as he's got that sword and I'm armed with naught but snarky comebacks, I plan to delay as long as possible.

God, what would Daniel do? He'd probably avoid every sword swing while criticizing the guy's technique and inform Aron that he was a *courtesan*, not a whore. As well as a gambler and thief and grifter. But I don't think Aron's in the mood to throw dice, there's probably nothing in his pocket that'll help me, and how the Hell do you grift a guy who's chasing you with a blade?

All I know about the guy is that he's an Inquisitor who's been drinking my memories and he's rather pissed because I apparently got a little too close to Kol. Jealous type? He didn't have a problem with me chatting him up before, but he was a little crazier last time. Why not take a stab in the dark?

"If you kill me, you'll never find her!"

I don't hear running anymore. Okay. I turn around and he's standing there, sword raised and pointed at me.

"Who?"

All right, time to flesh out the lie.

"You know who." Oh please God, please know who.

He pauses a second in thought, the blade wavering before it reaffirms the point at me. "You couldn't know."

Honestly? I don't. I would guess he figures I'm talking about the Queen, probably. Doesn't really matter though, I have the feeling all I need to do is stall him. So I've just got to feed that little seed of uncertainty I planted in his head. And luckily, I've drunk from a someone with all sort of methods for doing that. I feel my lips curl into sly and winning smile. "Couldn't I?" Thank you, Daniel.

He takes a step toward me. "Then I'll simply take it from you." I wag my finger at him.

"With a sword? You'll never find out that way." I tilt my head slightly, letting my voice slip into an indulgent tone. "You're not very good at this job, are you?" I point to Kol. "I mean, look at him, he's one bite from death and he *still* hasn't told you anything."

He smiles grimly. "You have no idea where she is."

I return the gesture. "Are you really prepared to take that chance? Don't you just *need* to know one way or the other?" I see him quiver again, the blade lowering slightly. Dance, puppet, dance! "Put down the sword."

He nods once, and kneels, setting it on the stone floor.

And then there's a blur that slams into my chest and knocks me back onto the floor, Aron planted on my chest. My hands are already around his throat, pushing his mouth away from my neck. "I can get my answer this way, *fledgling*. I have every memory you have, every life you've drunk from

flows in me." His lips are brushing my neck, his teeth scraping along my skin. "Your pitiful life, your whore of a sire..." A pause. "Marcus..."

Wait, did he just moan Marcus's name? Ugh! Okay, well, now I think I know who he was talking about when he yelled "He's mine!" before. This also might explain why an eleven hundred year old vampire was fucking me and why I didn't resist all that hard.

Still, he's distracted, so I roll us onto his back. I push my knee back and tense myself. I don't know if I can speed myself up in a dream, but then again, wrestling with some vampire past-life didn't seem all that possible a few minutes ago, either.

Maybe he knows Daniel's dodging skills, and Marcus' swordplay, but I have to doubt that Aron would have paid much attention to what I learned my first week of junior high.

I swing my knee forward and bury it firmly in Aron's firm and erect genitalia with all the strength and speed my mind and my blood will allow. I'll bet he's regretting that hard on for Marcus now.

Slowly, I get up and stumble over to the sword, grabbing it before Aron can recover. I point it, albeit clumsily, at him as he rises to his feet. "Stay down, Aron."

"Why do you keep calling me that?" He's coughing, groaning, even death and being stuck in a dream not preventing the agony of a knee to a man's favorite body part.

"Because that's apparently your name, according to Kol."

"Who?"

"The guy on the slab." I roll my eyes, backing up a step.
"Jesus, you never even asked his name?"

"Guards have no names, *fledgling*. We forsake all identity in service to our Queen." He stumbles toward me.

"The Queen is dead, I think you're allowed."

He staggers back slightly.

"Who told you about our Majesty?"

I roll my eyes again. "She's been dead thousands of years. You're free. Go on to Heaven or Hell or wherever dead vampires go to and leave me the Hell alone. Stay out of my dreams." I level the blade on him. "Go away."

He smiles, showing teeth.

"Not when I've found him again." A blur and he's holding the sword, my arm aching from being twisted. His hand runs along my side. "You felt it, finding him, knowing real bliss." He caresses my groin. "Knowing my lover, my Captain, my maker. You touched souls for a moment, almost felt real warmth. I have ached for that since my rebirth, *fledgling*, do you truly believe you could deny it to me? Or have me settle for the pitiful ministrations of your whore? Every night you take me away from him, I will find my way back. I will flood your mind with him until you break and beg me to allow him in."

"The Captain isn't your lover, Inquisitor." Kol laughs softly. "And perhaps your mad twin may be weaker than you, but you have forgotten one important detail."

Aron turns on Kol, away from me. "And what, prisoner, might that be?"

The Vampire Fred: Wicked Game
by Vaughan R. Demont

Kol smiles toothily, some gaps showing. "It is now sunset in the waking world. And you have failed to subdue your double." He laughs, and it's a dry almost disturbing laugh, but Aron turns to look at me with rage, sword held high, but the room is already fading.

Right... So *that's* why I had the hunch to keep stalling. Don't know where the Hell that came from but that's something to figure out later.

But I can't help but feel I'm forgetting a mistake I made.

"Fledge, you're poking me." He doesn't sound at all amused. I become aware that I've got evening wood, as it were.

"Hardly the time or place for it, huh?"

"Not when your fledgling is grinding against your back and moaning your sire's name, no."

That bastard.

"I'm going to kill Aron if I ever figure out how." We're still in the trunk, thankfully, so the guy I lifted the keys from apparently hasn't noticed or is just working really late. It isn't like his car has moved. Well, I am pretty sure his car hasn't moved; I haven't opened the trunk yet.

So we spent the day in the trunk. I guess I picked the right overachieving businessman. Thank God for small favors. I'm also awake, Daniel might be pissed at me, but I'm not filled with the urge to kill him, a big plus, and so far the only task of the evening is getting out of the trunk. And luckily the keyless entry can pop the trunk.

I press the button and hear it click, and push the lid upward.

And find a flashlight shining directly in my face.

As well as a few guns.

With the other Inquisitor on the opposite end of it all.

God damn it.

"You see, I was under the impression that once we enter the Queen's service, we no longer have names, *Inquisitor*."

I remembered that morning, just before sunrise, that same guy asking me, "So which one are you?" He knew the answer before asking the question. It had probably been a test. Fuck. I *knew* I'd forgotten something!

The Inquisitor is flanked by two security guards holding pistols and Mag-Lites. They aren't Victory security either; the uniform's different. Instead of red blazers and white shirts, these guys look a step down from a SWAT team. They're wearing vests, have little canisters on their belts, everything's in dark colors. I wish I'd watched more action movies so I'd have some idea what the Hell to do.

"I'm curious why you bother asking what my name was, then."

The Inquisitor gives me a dubious look. "Obviously to confirm that you aren't who you say you are."

"It never occurred to you that maybe I just made one up on the spot to placate you?"

Bullshitting worked on Aron, Hell, why not this guy?

"I told you I was an Inquisitor, you would know that we do not have names."

"Are you aware of what year it is? How many *billions* of people there are in this world? How many millions in this city? How many thousands in this building? Do you honestly expect

us to go nameless for any length of time in this age?" I look at him indulgently. "I weep for the Queen if you're all she has to work with."

His fingers tense on the pistol grip. Oh dear God, why am I antagonizing a guy with a gun? There's a time to lean on Daniel's blood, and this probably isn't the time.

"Why, may I ask, are you in the trunk of this vehicle?"

I hold up the keys and pray they just found me through security footage.

"It's my car. Two dead bodies in the back seat would attract attention, and there was little time to find adequate shelter from the sun." Quick, cover the next question before he can ask it. "Why didn't I just stay in the tower?" He nods once. "Honestly, stay in some broom closet where I might be discovered? An office? Damned near every one has a window and regular visits from the janitorial staff. This was quick and effective." I look to both guards, and then to the Inquisitor. "Are you planning on wasting any more of my time tonight, or may I return to interrogating my prisoner?"

Again, mostly I'm channeling my mom. I'd fold my arms if I wasn't crammed into the trunk of a Lexus.

The Inquisitor looks a bit flustered. This is clearly not going the way he wanted.

"Now go back up and prepare a room for me. Take your attack dogs with you."

The two guards are already lowering their pistols. They apparently buy it. His aim is quivering. I keep my face stony, thankful I can't sweat anymore. "I am *not* your servant."

"I can appreciate that, but it will take some time to transport the prisoner, and Marcus needs this one treated... specially." I try to give him that "I'm doing the boss" smile that guy from marketing has on his face during a round of downsizing.

"Eventually... *Aron*..." He lowers the gun. "The Captain will have to consider actual merit when he doles out his favor." Okay. Marcus is apparently called The Captain. That's something new.

I keep it going. "Painful having to answer to someone else, isn't it?" I don't know who's talking right now: me, Daniel, or Aron. I shoo him away with a wave of my hand and I hear him grumble a few choice profanities as he takes his guards and storms away from the trunk. After a few seconds I wriggle out of the trunk and sit on the bumper, rubbing my face slightly.

Holy shit, I actually pulled that off.

So now what do I do?

"Fledge?"

"Yeah?"

"That was, by far, the most stinking, steaming, towering wagon of horseshit I have ever seen." I turn back to look at him, on his back now, but still scrunched up plenty in the trunk. He looks about as bad as he sounds. Daniel smirks slightly. "But at least I know you're *my* fledgling. Be a lamb and help me up?"

I take his hand and pull him from the trunk, and then support him rather heavily. It's difficult to tell whether he

looks overly drunk or about to die from blood loss. We'll go for the former before the latter happens.

"We're going to get to the station, okay? Take a train, then maybe a cab or something, and get you some blood."

"And we will pay for all of this... how?"

I tap down my pockets. Empty. Same with his. Shit. I look at the keys still in my hand.

"Well, uh... I could drive, but this isn't really my car, and a ride like this definitely has LoJack." He looks at me oddly for a second. "It tells the police where a stolen car is."

"Are you planning on keeping this?"

I shake my head.

"Then open it so we can leave this place quickly." I nod and unlock the doors, helping Daniel into the passenger seat, and then I hurry back to the driver's side and start the engine.

I am now driving a stolen car.

It's a lot easier than I thought it would be. Mostly you have to get wrapped up in the fact that you're driving a car worth more than you make in two years, get entranced by all the gadgets and doodads and clearly useless stuff that's still rather neat, and let the fact that you're committing a felony fade into the background.

Well, not entirely into the background. I'm driving like a paranoid grandmother and convinced that anyone who looks in the car will know it's not mine. Even when I pull out onto Station Street into the evening rush, I'm not aggressive, and probably attract more attention by trying to avoid it.

Daniel, on the other hand, looks downright relaxed considering our predicament. He's leaning back into the black leather seat, head turned to look out the window and watch the City roll by beyond the tinted glass. If I weren't such a nervous wreck and both of us weren't starving, this could almost be a date.

"So I figure we can drive back toward the apartment, ditch the car a few blocks away, get some cash or something, and then hit the slaughterhouse for blood. Shouldn't take more than an hour." I reach over from the gearshift to gently pat his leg. "So, we're going to be okay."

"Do you honestly believe your home is safe anymore, fledge? And that Marcus doesn't know about where you obtain your blood?"

"He doesn't know that I've—"

"Believe me, fledge, he'll know."

I exhale forcefully. "So, what are we supposed to do? We're driving a stolen car with no money, ratty clothes, and both of us are low on blood. I don't know about you, but I'm already starting to get drowsy."

He smiles slightly. "Simple. We find a field, dispose of the vehicle, and go to sleep until this has blown over." He yawns slightly. "Shouldn't take more than ten or twenty years, maybe thirty." The yawn gets louder and I catch it. "Half-century on the outside."

"No, seriously, what's the plan?"

"Fledge, allow me to underline this for you again: you're not human anymore. Eventually you'll have to come to grips with that, and perhaps it's best to handle it by sleeping until

what's left of your human life is long dead. We're going to live a very long time, but only provided we don't do something foolish, like ending up back in the care of my sire where I'll more than likely be killed, and probably at your hands."

I blink at him.

"One of us has to be practical in this matter, and as your sire, that responsibility falls to me."

"I'm not going to sleep for fifty years, Daniel."

"You have another idea?"

"I'll get us some blood and figure this out."

"Fledge? Look at me." I turn to face him when we pull onto the South Allora Parkway. "We are not feeding from humans. We are not animals, or leeches."

I smile slightly, turning my eyes back to the road. "But we can feed on leeches."

Daniel coughs a moment. "You're not ready for that."

He's right, of course. Hell, I'm just steering on instinct right now, I don't even know how I know I'm heading toward a known leech den.

Well, that's a lie. I do know. I've drunk the blood to know. Just like I know that the man who knows couldn't come within twenty blocks of that den without spooking the leech who lives there.

But Marcus isn't going there.

I am.

And I've got a special reason for visiting this one.

He staked me with a golden dagger and left me for dead.

I leave Daniel in the trunk again, much to his protest, but he's so drained he can't really resist or even offer assistance.

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I'm not going to have much left myself for a fight, but if I trust my blood I should be able to handle this quick, get a good drain, pick up some intel on the Daggers, and maybe have something to bargain with should I run into Marcus again.

Listen to me, sounding all professional and vampire-like. It's amazing how competent the right lingo will make you sound, huh? I'll bet you think I actually have a clue what the Hell I'm doing.

Here's what I'm confused about, though.

How the Hell does someone who lives in a crumbling brick garage in Southwest Allora manage to hold onto a solid gold dagger?

The place is a dump. It's only one story, with the windows blacked out and the garage door itself replaced with scavenged wood to keep it closed. This is a place for squatters and people who do drugs, or both. Maybe it'd be a choice feeding ground for a leech, but if the Daggers are setting up digs in places like this, why the Hell would they be threatening people who work at Victory Tower that have their own private security force?

I move aside the legless remains of a kitchen table blocking a hole in the garage door and duck inside, the air cool, the light dim even as I feel my senses quickening. My skin itches as my spurs slip out, the sound slightly unsettling to my ears, which I'm a little thankful for. I'm not ready to be used to this sort of thing yet.

I sniff the air and immediately regret it. I have no idea what the Hell I'm smelling, but I'm rather certain that no one

would describe it as pleasant. The only point of reference I have is a week I spent at a summer camp when I was eight and we had to go a whole week without showers because the plumbing went out. I'm not reminded of that scent, though, more like I'm longing for it. The air smells like shit, garbage, and burning hair.

So even though I don't need to breathe anymore, I cough. This is my first mistake.

I'm still blocking the door, so the light filtering in from the streetlamps outside is making me mostly a silhouette. A highly visible silhouette. That's my second mistake.

I also didn't bring any weapons, which renders the centuries of blade-training residing in my blood pretty much useless, and I'm too drained to speed myself up, meaning Daniel's unarmed training won't have much use, either. That's my third mistake.

As I'm tackled from the side by something that comes out of the darkness, I start thinking that maybe going to sleep for a few decades is an idea that shouldn't have been so readily dismissed.

The first thing that I realize is that *this* is the source of the smell.

The second thing I realize is that I'm not being killed, and that the person who knocked me over has already shoved me away from the opening in the garage door and has bolted through.

Okaaaaaay.

I get to my feet and take off through the hole back outside, seeing a dark figure, dressed largely in rags, running

like Hell down the street. So I follow. I dig in, trust my blood, and take off after him.

I wish I could say it's an impressive chase filled with incredible feats of athleticism worthy of any Hollywood chase scene, but instead I feel lightheaded for a moment, the world slows down, goes into a pale shade of blue, and my pace quickens. I cover the fifty yards between the escaping thing and myself in what literally feels like the blink of an eye.

When I collide with him, I hear a crunch of bones snapping as we impact the pavement, and those sickening sounds aren't coming from me. I roll him over, my teeth slipping out as I see his face—the leech, the Dagger who staked me and left me for dead. Before I can even consider the ethics of the situation, my instincts plunge my fangs into his neck, and I drink deep of the fruits of vengeance.

He's terrified.

Of me.

My eyes close, my mind filling with images, so many dead faces, whores, junkies, bums, all of them begging him for release, for one more bite, one last bit of solace from the cold. My God, he hates himself so much for it, but he's only doing as the Emperor told him and...

And I'm nowhere in there.

I drink deeper. I need to know how he knows about gold, how he's hiding what he did to me. I need to...

Oh God.

I pull back from his neck, licking the wound closed. He looks weak, near-dead, his skin stretched, eyes sunk in.

"You don't know me, do you?"

Slowly, he shakes his head.

"You've never seen me before tonight, have you?"

Again, he shakes his head.

"And you don't want a war with the Guard, do you, Dagger?"

He shakes his head again, but with greater urgency.

I pull back further, get to my feet, looking down at him. Oh, my God, what did I do? I step back a bit as he stares at me pleadingly.

"I'm so sorry." He's nearly gone. One more bite would probably finish the job. He can't even get up. I don't even understand what the Hell is going on right now, all that I can focus on is the fact that I just drained someone nearly to death. And all he did to me was shove me aside rather than staking me and leaving me for dead.

What do I do?

If he didn't attack me, then who did? And how could the guy who attacked me in the alley look exactly like this Dagger, but not, according to the blood I took, be this Dagger? Did he maybe just forget? Can Daggers resist an Inquisitor? I can't shake the impulse that what I need to know is in that last dredge of blood still in the Dagger's body. I need to know, and the secret could be right in there. All I have to do is drain him one last time. It's not like I'd be depriving the world. He's killed whores and bums and addicts, sure, but they were still people, it'd be fine to finish him off and learn what I need to—

"Fuck you, Aron."

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I pick him up and carry him back to the garage. I know that I'm doing the right thing and the wrong thing at the same time by doing this, but I know, despite all the people residing in my blood now, this is my choice. I set him down inside the garage, away from the door, and drag the table back in front of the door. Someone will find him, maybe feed him, and he'll probably hate and fear the Guard just a little more, but you know what? I still have a reflection, and I don't have to have any problems the next time I'm looking at it.

I didn't give him any of his blood back, though. I mean, I'm starving, Daniel's nearly dead, and that guy's killed a bunch of people. And let's face it, I'm one of the walking dead, so I'm not exactly gunning for sainthood here.

I head back to the car and open the trunk, thankfully finding Daniel still inside, so at least something went right tonight.

"Fledge?" His voice is soft, raspy. I'm reminded of Kol from my dream.

"Yeah, it's me. I've got some blood." I push my wrist against his mouth. "So, go ahead."

He doesn't bite.

"Oh God, Daniel, I don't have time for this shit, okay? It's me. It's really me, so just drink the damned blood so we can figure out what we're going to do."

His eyes are still.

Oh God, no.

I pull Daniel from the trunk, laying him on the cracked asphalt of the small parking lot behind a closed convenience

store. We're in the middle of a streetlight's circle of illumination; the world so much darker outside it.

"Damn it, Daniel, you are not dying here, you hear me?"

I shake him, slap him across the face, but he just lies there, still, staring unblinking up into the sky. Clenching my teeth, I bite down hard on my tongue, ignoring the shock of pain as I force his lips open with my tongue, letting my blood drip into his mouth, down his throat. Please, Daniel, drink.

I can't get through this, not without you.

He doesn't respond.

After a minute I close my mouth, my tongue already healed, and I hold him closely to me, burying my face in his shoulder. I waited too long. I drank too much from him the night before. Marcus did this. Aron did this. They took Daniel away from me.

"I'm going to get them, Daniel. Don't worry. I'll do it, somehow." I think I'm crying.

"That's a lovely sentiment, fledge, but was it really worth waking me up over?" I blink. "What year is it, anyway?"

I pull back and his eyes look tired, his posture wobbly.

"You're alive."

Daniel blinks slowly and looks around, seeing the car. "I suppose I've only been asleep a little while."

I hug him tightly, and then I kiss him hard, long, pushing him back onto the asphalt, and he grunts slightly in reply before weakly pushing me back. "I should rest more often if you're going to wake me up like this, fledge." He tilts his head slightly. "You bring back any blood?"

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I push his head against my neck, and feel his teeth sink in, my head feeling light as he starts drinking.

"I thought I'd lost you."

His tongue licks across the wound and closes it, and then he gently strokes my face. "My poor fledgling, so young and new that he can't tell a slumbering vampire from a dead one. But then again, it is so difficult to see the difference between a limp body and a pile of dust and bone." He winks slightly.

"I love you."

He smiles warmly, and kisses me gently on the lips. "I love you, too, fledge."

I smirk in return. "I know, I'm just reminding myself so that I don't kick your ass for mocking me during a vulnerable moment." Daniel leans into me, and I wrap my arms around him. I'm not used to being the one holding him, but it does feel as good as when the roles are changed. "I think we should ditch the car and get out of here. Someone's probably looking for it by now, so it's probably a safe bet we shouldn't be driving it."

I get to my feet and help him up. Both of us aren't exactly in impressive shape, but we can still walk, at least. As far as the car's concerned, I toss the keys under the front seat and lock it up and just leave it where it is after wiping down the steering wheel, door handle, the trunk, anything I touched, and probably end up making it messier than I expected, considering the shirt I'm rubbing it down with has been rolled around on the ground and the floor of a garage.

But hey, no prints, right?

Yeah, I don't know either. I'm just going by what I've seen on "the tivvy."

Daniel and I walk away from the car and toward the nearest station, at least according to the banged-up signs.

"I don't know what we're going to do, Daniel."

"New clothes would probably be a good idea, since you're so against going to sleep for a while." He looks at me as we walk side by side. "Did you kill it?"

"It?"

"The Dagger."

I shake my head. "I couldn't do it. And it was a guy."

He shakes his head. "No, it wasn't."

"Daniel, he was human once, okay?"

"Perhaps, but when it became a Dagger—"

"It was a he."

"Obviously you didn't rip its breeches off, then, otherwise you'd notice that a Dagger's genitals shrivel up and fall off within a month of the change." He smirks at me. "Aren't you glad you're a Guard?"

"You're kidding."

"After five years they're smooth as a doll down there." He chuckles slightly. "The Emperor only created them for one purpose, fledge. The Queen, luckily for us, I suppose, was a rather lonely woman."

I stop dead and stare at him. "So the Guard would..."

"If you were one of the unlucky ones, yes."

"Unlucky?"

"Supposedly in the beginning it was more romantic, but the Queen was like the Emperor and all of the others. She

had immense power, and power corrupts, and we were ultimately disposable. Eventually she'd get bored with her lover, need a new one, and she'd feed her old lover to the new one." He smirks. "Not a bad way to go though, being drunk to being dust. At least it was death with ecstasy. The Emperor would have his Daggers fight each other for sport. Eventually you'll see these things in your dreams."

I look down a moment. "Lately my dreams have been a little unsettling. I'm always fighting against Aron, now. I kind of dread the sun coming up, because Aron might get control of me and, well..." I swallow hard. "Hurt you again."

I feel Daniel's hand on my shoulder, and I turn my head to look at him. "Don't beat yourself up about it, fledge." He then flashes that smile of his. "Besides, I can always tie you up beforehand. Leave you at my mercy." He leans in close to me, his hand running up my thigh. "Have my way with you until I'm satisfied..." His lips brush my neck, his teeth gently scratching the skin of my nape. "Be sure that it's really you."

It has the desired effect. I shudder slightly. "Daniel, we're standing in the middle of the street."

"Indeed. You should feel honored. I used to charge quite the price for such a flagrant offense to social mores." He's nibbling my ear. Maybe...

I mean, sure, we're in the middle of the street, but it's not like anyone's really around in this neighborhood. The idea of standing under a streetlight while Daniel unzips my pants and drinks from my thigh is starting to sound like a perfectly doable—

"Wait wait wait..." I feel a little lightheaded. Yes, I really, really want Daniel to drink from my groin. But I can't get rid of the idea of Marcus pushing into me from behind at the same time, his teeth in my neck, pumping his hips against me while Daniel takes every drop I offer him, tastes my bliss...

"Fledge? Are you all right?" Daniel's standing in front of me, hands on my shoulders, concern in his eyes. "You're a bit... flushed." He blinks once, and then looks down at the insistent erection tenting my disheveled slacks. "You're thinking of *him*, aren't you?"

I can't answer.

"I have to compete against my own sire now, fledge?"

"I..." I swallow hard. "I was thinking of you, too."

Daniel walks away.

I go after him, of course.

"Will you talk to me? I can't help it, okay? I've got Aron in my head and he's all hot for Marcus and mocking me that he's going to make me want him instead of you. It's not like I like the guy, okay? The only thing he's done for me so far is scare off a were-dog or something after some Dagger staked me with a golden knife, but he's been pretty much a prick since then."

Daniel's staring at me.

"What did you say, fledge?"

"He's a prick, okay—"

"No, before that. You were staked with *what*?"

"A golden knife."

I honestly didn't think that Daniel's face could get any paler.

"I know, gold's, like, our weakness or something, right?"

"You say a Dagger used a golden weapon on you?" I nod once. "Fledge, no one's supposed to know our weakness, no one outside of the Guard. If the Daggers know, then the whole line is in danger."

"Because they know how to kill us."

Daniel shakes his head.

"Because one of our own has betrayed us. It'll go without saying that there will be war with the Daggers, but every member of the Guard will have to be interrogated." He looks down a moment. "We have to go to Marcus, fledge. This is bigger than you and I."

Well, this would explain why Aron was freaking out about the Daggers learning about "sunmetal."

"Daniel, we just went through so much to get away Victory Tower. We can't go back there. I don't really know where we'll go, but I do know that returning to Marcus isn't the best of ideas right now." It then really sinks in. "And if they need the Guard interrogated..."

"They'll need all the Inquisitors they can find." He sighs. "I know. I don't like it, either. Someone betrayed us, though, fledge. All of us." He starts moving a bit more quickly toward the station. I match pace.

"I don't get it, though, I even found the guy who attacked me and he didn't remember me at all. That's who I got the blood from. I drank him nearly dry and not once did I ever see my face."

Granted, everything from the Dagger is pretty much a jumble of images and faces, but I'm certain I didn't see my face or a golden knife in there anywhere.

"We should still talk to Marcus about this."

"Marcus already knows I got attacked, Daniel. He was there to scare off the were-thing, remember? He gave me a ride home and everything. Apparently he didn't declare war on the Daggers."

"Does he know you were staked with gold?"

Right, I forgot to mention that. Didn't seem too important of a detail at the time. Daniel can read my face for the answer.

"Exactly. If he'd known, everything would be much different. To begin with, he never would've let you out of his sight, and I would've been brought in shortly after."

"You *were* brought in shortly after."

He gives me a dirty look. "I was captured. With some incredible effort. There is a large difference. And I was keeping an eye on you, I believe."

The station's in sight. We shouldn't have to wait too long. Every train in the City eventually ends up at Victory Station.

"I still can't believe this is the plan, going back there after we went through all that to escape. Especially after you did your big thing about not playing the game and being your own person and all that shit."

"Raphael let me be my own person. He could see that I wasn't cut out for service to the Queen. I'm not loyal to her at all, or her idiotic war that our brothers feel compelled to

continue, but at the same time I won't betray them or allow them to be betrayed."

"Does it have to be Marcus, though?"

"I'd much prefer anyone else, fledge, especially considering what happened between you and him. I'd prefer Raphael, but he might be a little... unprepared to meet you." Well, yeah, considering that Marcus killed him for desertion. Daniel looks away a moment. "He was my lover. Before you. I haven't had time to look for him, and things developed between you and I and..."

"Daniel." Oh shit.

Okay, there was another guy before me. I can handle that. That's easy. It was, what, several decades ago? I wasn't born yet, even. I'm not the jealous boyfriend type. It doesn't even bother me.

But how do I tell him that the man he loved was murdered by his sire?

"Yeah, fledge?"

The words are catching in my throat.

"We should hurry if we're going to make the train." God, Fred, you are such a damned wuss.

We enter the station, hop the turnstile through some use of blood (well, *I* had to speed myself up, Daniel just waited for the perfect moment and vaulted. Guess it helps having been a career criminal and watching a lot of TV). There's not much of a wait until the Blue Line arrives from Beckettsville and we both get on. The train's relatively empty, no crazy people, everyone's got a strong and steady pulse save Daniel and I.

"So, what's he like?"

I'm sitting on a bench, Daniel's strap-hanging in front of me.

"Raphael?" I nod. "I think you'll like him. Pretty dry sense of humor, practical. Nice smile, though, on the few occasions I got to see it. Raphael had the weight of the world on him all too often. He's an Inquisitor as well. If there's anyone I'd want to teach you, it'd be him. You probably will meet him, though, considering everything's that's happening. Marcus will bring in all Inquisitors to interrogate the Guard." He smiles slightly and looks at me. "It will be good to see him again. He's the reason I lived long enough to sleep."

"Do you miss him?" Daniel chuckles lightly, leaning toward me, hanging off the strap. "I'm serious. It's not a jealousy thing."

"A little, yes, but I haven't really had time. I saw him right before I went to sleep, and since I woke up I've been busy with you, fledge. Went over that, remember? It's a shame, though, that he's not running the Guard anymore, but it's not surprising considering Marcus is here now. He's the reborn Captain of the Guard, after all."

"What's that all about, anyway? I mean, what do you dream about, though? Who were you?"

He looks down, a slight smirk on his face, but I can tell it's forced. There's no mirth in it, no playfulness. He doesn't speak for a few seconds, my ears filling with the rhythmic clacking of the train running the tracks.

"A deserter." Daniel shrugs slightly. "So I suppose perhaps I wasn't as revolutionary as I wanted to believe I was. Not all

that hard to stop playing the game when the man you're dreaming of doesn't want to play, either."

I want to ask him more, but every second that goes by where I don't tell him about Raphael gets harder. I should have told him right off, and now I'm just delaying it, being a chickenshit when he deserves to know what happened. I mean, we're going to see the guy who killed the man he loved, shouldn't he be prepared going in, in case Marcus just drops it on him? Thank God that memory hasn't surfaced from Marcus' blood yet.

The train pulls into Victory Station before I can even attempt to screw up my courage, and we disembark, heading toward the elevator. We're met by familiar faces from security before we even get there. There's no point going for the grift, there's already three guns on us, and I have the feeling the rounds are gold-tipped.

"I want to see Marcus. Now." Daniel's taken charge, his voice firm, authoritative. The three Guards don't look impressed. "I would like to see my sire, please, unless you'd rather tell him the Daggers have learned of sunmetal."

Holy shit, did that work.

Suddenly we have armed escorts leading us to private elevators and generally giving us the V.I.P. treatment. Hell, I didn't even know there was a direct express elevator to the managerial floor. The speed of the car is frightening, and I'm certain that if I weren't dead I'd be vomiting all over the walls of the car, so this is probably a "freight elevator" or whatever term they use to cover up that it's exclusively for dead people.

Within a minute of stepping off the elevator, we're standing in the office of Roger Landry, department head for Records, and we're alone with the man who killed Raphael and screwed me about five feet from where I'm currently standing, which is near the door. Daniel's arms are folded, still dressed in the same rags, while Marcus is wearing a finely-tailored black suit, along with his expensive sneakers. Marcus catches my eye and smiles with a gentle nod. I don't return it.

"I'm sorry, Frederick, but if you've returned for a bit of indulgence. I'm afraid it's not a good time." He looks over at Daniel. "Unless, of course, you'd like to in front of him."

I want to tell him "fuck you," but I'm not lobbing him a softball like that.

"You're quite bad at your job, Sire." Daniel doesn't miss a beat. He steps a bit closer. "Irony that it would be a deserter letting you know that the Queen's been betrayed on your watch."

Marcus' turn to fold his arms. "This is what you come to me with?" He looks over at me. "Should I allow your sire this indulgence, lover?"

I grit my teeth.

But Daniel again doesn't miss it.

"The Daggers know of sunmetal, Sire. Perhaps if you weren't too busy indulging your baser urges with *my* fledgling, you could have prevented it."

Marcus takes a half-step back. "They couldn't possibly—"

"When you supposedly saved my fledgling from being staked and left for dead, did you bother questioning him

about the attack? Perhaps ask him what kind of blade he was staked with, or were you too busy ogling him and wondering how best to get his breeches off?" He shakes his head.

"Raphael must be slipping. He never would have allowed this sort of sloppiness before, even if he weren't running things."

Oh God, no.

"You didn't hear, Daniel?" Oh God, I let him walk right into that. That bastard is smiling. Smugly. Marcus, you son of a bitch. "You honestly don't know. Raphael was chained, drained, and left for the sun at least three decades ago now." Daniel is trembling. "After all, such is the price for desertion."

I only see a blur.

And then I see Marcus holding a blade, similar to a rapier, the edge golden. I see him and Daniel in profile, the blade going into Daniel and coming out the other side, Daniel's hand scraping into Marcus' neck, his spurs out, but not drawing blood. I think I'm screaming.

Daniel slashes into Marcus' skin, a spray of silver going into the air as he wrenches himself away, the blade going with him...

Sandwiched between his arm and his chest. Free of blood.

"My, my, dear Sire. Were you just disarmed by a whore?"

In a moment the blade is flying through the air in my direction, my hand catching it on instinct. Daniel backs away from Marcus, who's covering the gash in his neck with one hand while drawing a shorter blade.

"Marcus, believe me when I say that I will have retribution, but right now there are more important things, agreed?"

After a few seconds, he nods once.

"Someone has apparently told the Daggers about sunmetal." Daniel doesn't look away from Marcus. "Fledge? What exactly did the Dagger tell you?"

"That this is the Emperor's City, and we're going to be driven out. He told me all that while I was staked with a golden knife. And he left me for the were-dog-thing, then Marcus showed up and scared the thing off."

"You're certain it was a golden knife?" Marcus' voice is dead serious now. "Absolutely certain? You'd stake your blood on it?"

I nod. "I tracked down the Dagger that attacked me, but it wasn't him, though. It was weird." Marcus gestures for me to keep going. "I drank his blood and I wasn't anywhere in there. Nothing about gold daggers or anything, just a lot of faces of dead bums and hookers and junkies and a lot of self-loathing. Guy had the exact same face, but it wasn't him." I shrug slightly. "Maybe a twin or something?" I think, there has to be some other explanation than 'his twin brother did it,' but I'm not coming up with anything. I *should* be able to come up with something, though, I'm not an idiot, and I'm an Inquisitor, right? Shouldn't that automatically jar something loose?

There's nothing there, though. All I'm feeling right now is kind of stupid.

"It's an intriguing theory, but how am I to know all of what you're saying is true?"

"Why would he lie, Marcus? Did he even know about sunmetal before he was staked by it?"

"I wouldn't know." Marcus turns to Daniel. "You tell me, fledgling. Did you even bother teaching your progeny anything about being a Guard, or were you too preoccupied with filling his head with poison against the Queen?" He glances at me a moment. "Why would Frederick lie about such a thing? Perhaps to sow doubt and dissension amongst the Guard, throw us into a state of chaos while we confirm that the secret is safe and make it easier for you to continue your nights in desertion unpunished?" Daniel clenches his fists tightly. "Want to prove me wrong? Bring me more than words. Want what's best for your fledgling? Leave him here in my care so he might become a proper Inquisitor. If what the two of you say is actually true, the culprit is an Inquisitor, and so far there is only one in my knowledge who has failed to gain my trust." Marcus again looks at me. "And I executed him for desertion.

"I care little for your sire's antics and indulgences, Frederick. The Guard has little use for a thief. Daniel is the mistake I will pay for until the end of my days. His only redeeming act is that he brought you to me. I require another Inquisitor, and Inquisitors do *not* desert their posts." He folds his arms, and there's a blur, and then Marcus is standing before Daniel, holding his sword, the blade against Daniel's neck.

Marcus's eyes bore into mine. "It is time for you to make a decision, Frederick." I advance toward them and Marcus shoves Daniel against the wall, pinning him with one hand and holding the blade with the other. "I will gladly release this failure of a Guard to do as he pleases, provided he gives up

all claim to you. In return, you stay here, with me, and serve the Queen as an Inquisitor, and find the one who has betrayed us."

Oh. Shit.

I don't know what to do. "This is how you plan to get me on your side? Threatening the man I love?"

Marcus smiles darkly. "Is that a no, fledgling?" I see the blade press hard against Daniel's skin.

I close my eyes. I don't know what the Hell to do. I can't exactly try vamping on him, considering I just professed my love for Daniel.

Oh God, I don't want to do this, I can't let him win.

C'mon, Freddy Boy, you know this isn't over yet.

"Michael would be very disappointed in you right now."

What the Hell am I saying?

But I hear the blade clatter against the floor, and see Marcus' eyes lock on mine, burning with rage.

"How... *dare*... you speak his name."

"Did I say disappointed? You're acting a common thug. Threats against your fledgling, refusing to listen to an Inquisitor, and you think you're acting as a proper Captain of the Guard?"

Being thrown into a bookcase hurts. So does being held up by your neck in a tightly gripping hand.

"You're *shaming* his name."

Oh God, why am I still talking? Shut up! Shut up!

His fingers squeeze tighter, and I'm laughing. Why am I laughing?

"You're trying to choke me?" My voice sounds like I'm gargling razor blades. "I don't need to breathe. Letting your emotions get the better of you, again?" I'm still laughing. Who the Hell speaking through me? Is this Aron?

"Be *silent*!"

"What I find the most humorous about this, Marcus? You're forgetting a very important detail."

"Please. Enlighten me." I feel my neck crunch. That... *really* hurts. I can't feel anything now. Anything. But I still see a golden blade push through Marcus' chest, with Daniel on the other end of it.

"I've got your sword, Sire."

Marcus lets go of me and we both crumple to the floor in a heap. I feel Daniel picking me up, my neck slack, and I'm seeing Marcus' office upside down.

"We can drain him, fledge. We both need the blood."

"Just get us out of here, Daniel. I can't believe I'm saying this, but I'll get better. Besides, maybe he'll have a chance to think things over until someone finds him. We're not murderers, okay?"

I feel Daniel's lips press against my forehead.

"I was right. Raphael..." I hear him sigh, and then hear what sounds like a foot colliding with great force against the body of a staked vampire. "He definitely would've liked you."

I'd love to tell him I would've loved to meet him, but considering that my neck is broken, I pass out instead.

When I wake up, I already know that I'm not awake, so I just set to kicking and flailing and screaming obscenities to

catch Aron by surprise, because I know that bastard has to be waiting for me somewhere.

The kicking and flailing don't work all that well, though, considering I'm already bound to the slab and gazing at the messy mural of the Queen. One of the guards is standing in front of me, wearing dark studded leather with metal plate on the shins, thighs, knees, and forearms. His hair is cut short along his skull, beard full but well-trimmed, just a shade above stubble, all of it a dirty reddish-brown. There's a short scar just below his right eye, vertical, parallel with his nose. Blue eyes, deep and dark; they remind me of the first time I saw Destry Bay.

"You should probably let me go, I'm an Inquisitor and I could, I don't know, get you fired or something."

No response.

"What happened to your face?"

No response. Is everyone in my head going to be either tight-lipped or crazy?

Sure, I could antagonize him, but if the obscenities I was screaming when I woke up didn't faze him (I went for rips on the Queen's purity and virtue), I doubt I could find his buttons.

"So I take it Kol's not here anymore? Just holding me here while Aron has a ball with my body?"

No response. Really, I shouldn't be surprised.

I try to turn my head to look around, see if Aron is waiting in the wings or whatever the Hell this room has, but no such luck. My head is strapped down, too.

"So, I just have you to look at until sunset?" I sigh a bit. "I'm not even good enough for him to mock and drain anymore, huh?"

"Probably not, considering he left a husk to watch you." New voice, from the right. Slightly familiar—I can't place it, but it's not Aron or Kol. The owner of the voice comes into view, and I see a somewhat tall man wearing a gray trenchcoat and slacks, wingtips, all color-coordinated. He's wearing a jacket, shirt, and tie underneath, all a bit loose. His skin is pale, his eyes a darker shade of blue, similar to the guard's, his hair slicked back and black, a well-groomed goatee. He places his hand on the guard's shoulder. "Meet Tanak, a battle-hardened warrior from a land that hasn't officially existed for quite a few centuries. He was an expert in swordplay and studied philosophy and botany on the side. Until Aron, that is." He claps Tanak's shoulder again gently, and the guard's eyes glaze over slightly before he marches off out of my sight.

"Now, which one would you be?" He wags his finger. "And, might I add, it's impolite to lie to an Inquisitor."

"Fred. Fred Tompkins." Why not tell the truth? No one ever believes it in here, anyway.

"What was your grandfather's nickname when he was flying bombers over Germany?"

"How the Hell should I know?"

"You were told once."

"Doesn't mean I'll remember it."

"That's your answer? You don't know?"

I'd nod but I'm too strapped down to even consider it.
"Yeah, I don't know."

He shakes his head slightly, and begins undoing my bindings. "For God's sake, Freddy Boy, it's stitched into the lining of his jacket. That he gave to you. Probably rolling in his grave right now."

He called me Freddy Boy.

I knew that was familiar, considering that I have never in my life referred to myself as that, yet it had popped into my head a few times in the last few days. I thought I was just being glib at the time. Still, though, the guy's getting me off this slab, so I don't want to start anything yet.

"All right, how do you know that, then?" My arms are free, so I work on the straps holding my head down while he starts on my feet. "Hell, who are you, anyway?" Because I really do need to meet even more residents who live in my dreams. God, I'm going to need so much therapy.

"We'll start with something easy. Who is Aron?"

That's *easy*?

"I don't know, an Inquisitor who cranked up the crazy and tore off the knob?" I shrug, because I can do that now. "He probably killed Kol by draining him to death. And I'm guessing he's hot for Marcus."

"The Captain of the Guard."

"Yeah, Marcus is the Captain of the Guard."

"No, Aron is bound to the Captain of the Guard as High Inquisitor. Hence, he and the Captain are able to—"

"Fuck and come?" I don't really care about subtlety anymore as far as this is concerned.

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But he's not fazed, other than a chuckle. "Something all of us get to be influenced by for the rest of our existence. He'll always find us, we'll always find him. Whether we like it or not."

"But yeah, Marcus is the Captain of the Guard."

"And why is that, Freddy Boy?" I shrug. "God, you're new."

I grit my teeth, and once my other foot is free, I back away from the slab and Mr. Cryptic. The room is empty save for us, though Tanak is still standing by the door, just as statuesque as he was when I woke up in here.

"I'm tired of this, okay? I'm tired of these stupid games and interrogations and tight-lipped assholes who refuse to answer the simplest of questions. I'm beginning to see how Aron lost his mind if *this* is what he had to deal with every night. Could we skip the cryptic shit, please? Couldn't you just tell me what I need to know without jumping through all these stupid hoops, so I can wake up and get out of here and catch a break from this 'steaming wagon of horseshit,' as Daniel would call it, if only for a few hours? Who the Hell are you, really? No games."

"How simple do you want the answers?" I glare at him a moment and he holds up his hands. "Seriously. I need to know. This gets a little complicated."

"Let's start with your name."

"Roger. Roger Landry." I blink. I may have forgotten that my grandfather was called... Stitch! That's it! But anyway, I know that name. It's— "On the door of Marcus' office in Victory Tower. I know. After a few decades, you'll need a new name, too, Freddy Boy. Marcus liked mine, so he took it a few

years after he killed me." You'd think his voice wouldn't be so casual when he'd said that.

"He killed you?"

"That's what I said." Roger looks around the room, and sighs. "I could really go for a cigar right now."

"So if he killed you, how are you here? Why? How do you know so much about me?"

"Do you know why Marcus is the Captain of the Guard?" He doesn't wait for me to answer, so it's a rhetorical question. Thank God. "Because he's the Captain of the Guard. Marcus is the Captain. When Marcus was Alexander, he was Captain of the Guard. When Marcus was Rannix, he was Captain of the Guard. When Marcus was Zeth, he was Captain of the Guard, all the way back to the original."

"He's that old?"

Roger laughs a bit. "If he was, do you have any idea how strong you would be from drinking him?" He shakes his head. "Marcus is just the latest in the line, that's all, just like you're the latest in the line of the High Inquisitor."

"I don't quite understand yet."

"Marcus killed me in nineteen fifty-nine. So I've been dead a while." He thinks a while. "I can really only go off concepts you know, so..." Roger furrows his brow a moment. "Familiar with the idea of past lives?"

"Are you saying I was you in a past life?"

He shakes his head. "No. It's similar, but not really the same. You were, however, Aron. Just like I was Aron. Just like Tanak over there was Aron."

"What about Kol?"

"Never bothered to find out. I was too busy keeping Aron off my neck. Didn't like the idea of turning into Tanak over there."

"I'm still lost, Roger."

He chuckles lightly. "Not quite yet, Freddy Boy." Roger sighs again, and looks at me. "Do me one favor? One night, just try a cigar? It'd be nice to have one again, even if it's only in your head."

"Okay, I'll answer your question now. I want the answers very simple. Small words I can understand." I take a deep breath, for all the good it'll do. "Why does Aron want to kill me? Won't all of this end if I die in my..." I look around the room. "Well, whatever the Hell this is?"

"He doesn't want to kill you. He wants to drain you. Every last bit of you. You'll be gone, like Tanak over there, and Aron will get your body and pick up where he left off."

Okay, that I can understand. I'm a little scared now. It'd explain why getting bitten by Aron hurt like a bitch and felt like he was drinking my brain.

"So why aren't you a drone like that guy?"

Roger smirks slightly. "I had some of the same advantages you did. I had someone to distract me from Marcus." He gets a faraway look in his eyes for a second. "Damn him. The bastard killed me and I still get wood. Obviously I wasn't distracted enough, as you can see. Luckily for me, I suppose, I died before Aron got me, so now I'm just a minor annoyance to him rather than the primary target." He points at me.

"So, how do you know so much about me?"

"Same reason I'm a better Inquisitor than Aron, Freddy Boy. I have eyes and ears and a mind—well, figuratively now, at least—and I have the sense to use them. Aron's the High Inquisitor because he was involved with the Captain, nothing more. When it comes down to it, he prefers his teeth to his mind. I, on the other hand, was observant, and actually conversed with the detainees. You'd be amazed what you can get someone to tell you without even having to inform them you're an Inquisitor. Hell, most people I interrogated didn't even know what an Inquisitor was."

"One more thing?"

Roger nods once.

My turn to smile slightly. "Why'd you change your name to Raphael?" Definite shock on his face. "C'mon, I may work a warm-body job, but I'm not an idiot."

He arches a brow. "Is it that obvious?"

"Just fits too well. Raphael was an Inquisitor, he was involved with Daniel, and Daniel said he'd probably like me. Not to mention that I tend to start meeting people in my head after I become aware of them, it seems. I mean, I learn about Inquisitors and Aron shows up. I hear your name, and poof, here you are. Besides, it's a nice irony that Daniel thought he was cheating on you with me when, in a sense, we're same person. Fate usually has a sense of humor as far as my life's concerned, it seems."

He smiles weakly. "Freddy Boy, you have no idea how right you are."

"And where's Aron? Where's Kol? They're always here. If Aron's so hot to drain me, then where is..." I blink. "Oh shit."

Raphael looks downward. "I'm sorry, kid."

I'm already awake.

No.

Aron's awake.

"Why?" I don't know what else to say.

"Only way he'd leave me alone, Freddy Boy. I don't want to end up like Tanak." He stands still as I lunge at him, swinging my fists. He lets me do it, I might as well be punching a wall.

"He'll kill Daniel! Don't you see that? How can you let him do that? You loved him! I love him!"

"I needed time, kid." I close my eyes tightly for a moment. Daniel could be dead already. I could be trapped in this room until Aron comes for me. I look at him, and he's leaning his head to the side, baring his neck. "I needed time for this, when he wouldn't be watching."

Wait, what?

"I'm not going to end up like Tanak. Or Hin. Or Krix. Or any of the others. Aron doesn't get to have me." He grabs my chestpiece and yanks me forward, pushing my head against his neck. "Only Daniel. Only you." His hand presses me more insistently. "Drink. And face him. End this."

I wrestle myself back a few inches, staring at him.

"What the Hell are you doing?"

"Face Aron. You've done it before. Faced with draining, you fought back and drank *him*. You reclaimed what he took from you. Don't doubt yourself, you're a lot stronger than you were."

I look away. "Yeah, because I drank from Marcus and Daniel." His hand pushes my face back to his and he lets go of my chestpiece.

"The blood doesn't make your decisions, Freddy Boy. You aren't Daniel when you're pulling a grift, or Marcus when you're fighting, or me when you're figuring something out, or Aron when you're drinking. It's all on you, everything you do. One hundred percent. You're your own man, Fred Tompkins, with a Hell of a lot of old blood in you. But this..." He taps my head. "And this..." He then taps my chest. "Are yours, no matter how much you drink from who."

"If I do this, won't you end up a drone, too?"

He shrugs. "Fred, I may lust for Marcus. I probably always will, just like you always will. But I love Daniel, just like you said, and I'd rather be drained by the man who'll be with the man I love."

"Have you been helping me, Raphael?"

He nods. "When you've needed me, when Aron wasn't watching. I knew how to handle that Seneschal on the train, how to get away unnoticed, I knew that Marcus would be distracted if you mentioned his sire." Raphael looks into my eyes. "Please, you don't have much time."

This isn't going to make me any stronger. If anything, it's going to weigh down my mind with baggage, and I honestly don't think I'll be able to take down Aron, suck him dry, and then go back to the real world and solve all the problems there. Like I said, I work a warm-body job. I'm not an idiot.

But he's terrified.

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And he's asking me to do this for him. For all the status he might've had when he was still walking around, for all he might've done that was good, he's just a whisper now, a shadow in my head that can't outrun the darkness anymore. So he's throwing in with me.

I could do this for Daniel, so that he can be with Raphael again, at least in some way.

I could do this to spite Aron, to deny him another prize.

I could do this to give Raphael a shot at vengeance against the man who killed him.

Or I could do this because it's right.

I couldn't tell you why, honestly. I don't know. I just press my teeth against his neck and drink until I'm holding an empty trenchcoat. I won't go into the details because I don't want to dwell on them. He's gone now, a whisper that surrendered to my voice.

I'm sorry, Raphael.

I walk to the slab because, even though I've said before that I'm tired of this game, I actually understand what that means now. My fingers grip the straps, and I yank hard on them, the stone interrogation slab breaking off the dais. I twist my body, swinging the slab around toward the windows with the smeared murals of the Queen, and let go.

The windows, the wall, the ceiling—all of it shatters in great shards of glass that disappear before they hit the floor. All that remains is a black void, the dais, and a slab with Kol strapped to it.

If I'm going to get through this, I need to take responsibility for all of this, take control.

"None of this was ever really real, was it, Kol?"

Maybe it was a distraction. Maybe it was Raphael trying to nudge me into learning what I needed to know. Does it matter if it was real?

"I don't know what you're talking about, Inquisitor."

I smile weakly, stepping up on the dais to him. "You don't need to, Kol. I think I understand now."

"You're the mad one, aren't you?"

I nod once. "You loved him, didn't you? You were in love with Aron. And the Captain took him away from you."

Despite his eyes being weak and sunken in, I see recognition.

"So you came back, even after deserting, hoping you would find him again, convince him to leave with you. Only he didn't remember you, did he?"

Slowly, he shakes his head. "Why don't you remember me, Aron?"

"I don't need to remember you, Kol." I lean in close to him. "I know who you are." My lips brush his ear. "I want you to know something."

"Why are you so cruel to me, Aron?"

I gently kiss his cheek. "Kol, I will never remember you. You aren't even Kol, you're just a memory in my blood. But I will know you. The real you. I will find you, time and again. Sometimes you'll lose me, and sometimes you'll have me."

"I don't understand, Aron."

"You don't need to, Kol." I kiss his cheek again. "You don't need to. All that matters is that, this time, you won."

Kol arches a brow, and I smile.

"You'll always desert, Kol. You'll always find me, over and over again. You found me when I was Tanak, Hin, Krix, and Raphael." I don't know why it took me so long, but like I said, it all fits now. "And this time I found you. A thief, named Daniel." I lean in close to his ear again. "And this time, I love you, too, Kol."

I know that I'm not really saying this to Kol.

Kol's dead. He's been dead. This is just the withered wisp of memory still carried along in my blood, a final reminder that I have a choice when it comes to Marcus, that I can be my own man.

Do you think if I saw myself now, who I was at the beginning of all this, that I would I recognize me?

God, I hope not. I kind of like knowing where I'm going for a change.

I run my finger's along Kol's face a second, and then turn away from him.

"Where are you going, Aron?"

I don't look back.

"To save you, Kol."

There's no answer, but I don't need one. I don't need to look behind me. I know he's gone.

"Come out, Aron. Let's end this."

For once, everything goes according to plan. He steps out of the dark, onto the dais, dressed in my clothes, a silvery trail of blood marking his mouth and chin. He's holding a blade, of course, the edge gleaming and golden. I'm not armed.

"Surrendering at last, fledgling?"

"It's over, Aron."

He laughs. "Going to explain all of it to me? Convince me that your way is best? That the Captain isn't right for me, that I belong with your whore? Perhaps drag the prisoner into it, maybe suggest some nonsense about how I belong with a deserter instead of serving Her Majesty at my Captain's side?" I just let him go on. "Or maybe more idiocy about how my Queen has expired? If that were true, her blood would not flow in my veins."

"No."

He's slightly taken aback. "No?"

"What would be the point to it, Aron?"

A smile, a gentle nod, and the blade lowers. "Finally you're showing some sense, fledgling."

"It would appear so." He advances toward me. "Because I don't need to explain anything to you, or convince you of anything. I don't need to swing your opinion one way or the another on whether the Queen's alive, or whether I should be with Marcus or Daniel."

Aron is standing right before me, the blade at his side, his face triumphant.

"Because your opinion doesn't matter, Aron." I look over at the slab, and Aron is quite surprised to find himself there, strapped down, his head held in place. Hey, it's my head. My mind. My rules. And I say he's on the slab this time. "Because you're dead. You've been dead. You're not a ghost, or a spirit, or a past life trying to resurface."

"How did—" He glares at me, his teeth out. "Release me!"
I'm not stopping.

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"You're just a shadow in my blood, Aron." I step closer to him as he thrashes against his bonds. "My blood. My heart. My soul. How did I do this?" I smile slightly. "Because I remembered that I'm not an idiot, Aron. Because if there's someone out there who loves me for me, then maybe I'm not such a screw-up. Because someone took the time to remind me that I'm my own man, and I make my own choices, and I live with my consequences."

"You believe I don't, fledgling? I—" I put a finger over his mouth.

"I don't give much of a damn whether you did or not, Aron. You're dead and gone. You're in my mind. There is no Queen here for you to serve, no Emperor for you to fight. Both of them are neither right nor wrong, good nor evil. They're just gone. There is only me." I lean in close, meeting his eyes. "And I am very disappointed in you."

"And I, you, fledgling." He spits on me. That prick! "You don't even know what's happening out there, do you? Who staked you?"

"And you know?"

He doesn't answer.

"You know, I could find out. I have observed your methods." Aron smirks, and, as enticing as the idea of payback is, I have the feeling that if I do it, he'll somehow win. "But I can figure it out."

"Truly? Impress me, fledgling."

"Obviously, it wasn't a Dagger. If they really knew about sunmetal, there would be a lot of bums assaulting Victory Tower. That crosses out theory that there are identical twin

vampires out there and one of them attacked me." I lean away from him, and start pacing back and forth in front of the slab. "So, it's someone else."

So... who? Okay, let's run down a list of probables based on what I know.

"There's the Seneschals, but I doubt it'd be them. Why throw it on the Daggers when they're happy to announce that they hate us? Hell, the Seneschals attack anyone openly. One went after me on the train on my way into work. If they knew about sunmetal, there would be a lot more than some isolated attacks.

"Obviously the knowledge of sunmetal would have to be taken from a Guard, but what kind of Guard would be dumb enough to sell out his own line? He'd only be signing his own death warrant, because eventually his enemies could just take care of him, the loose end."

So there has to be a reason why a Guard would do it. What purpose would it serve?

"Okay, let's just say for a minute you say that the Daggers know about sunmetal. That's a definite threat to the Guard, right? The Guard are on high alert now, and there's probably a sweep being prepped to get rid of the Daggers in the City. At least, that's what Marcus would probably do, and since I've got his blood running my head, that probably is what he's doing."

So what's the point of getting rid of the Daggers? Or making it seem like the Daggers know about sunmetal?

"The Daggers have apparently been our enemies since the days of the Queen, right?" I don't wait for him to answer. "So

no one's going to even take the time to interrogate all of them, they'll just kill them. Hell, if there's a sweep out there to kill Daggers, you could probably kill off a few of the Guard and toss it on the Daggers because they supposedly know about sunmetal, right?"

Okay.

Okay.

Okay.

Why do I feel like a major piece just fell into place?

"But wait, you *can't* kill all of them, you *need* to confirm they really know, even if you just capture one and kill all the rest. And the only way for the Guard to do that is for an—"

I look dead at Aron.

"For an Inquisitor to interrogate a captured Dagger."

I know that's important. I know I'm staring right at the solution, but I can't see it quite yet.

"Is there any way to confirm that an Inquisitor is telling someone the truth?"

Aron snorts indignantly. "An Inquisitor answers only to the Queen. Are you implying that we would tell Her Majesty falsehoods?"

An Inquisitor answers only to the Queen.

God, where have I heard that?

There's more to this, though, Freddy Boy. Think it through.

"What if you wanted to betray the Queen? Or if she wasn't around for you to report to? Let's say for the moment, just hypothetically, the Queen's indisposed. Who's in charge of the line?"

Aron looks at me like I've lost my mind.

"Aron, we both know the line's in trouble. How about we call a truce and figure this out so we'll still have a line when I get out of here?" I know I can leave now, but I know Aron's got answers. I'm probably standing there like a dumb shit in the real world, but better that than trying to kill Daniel.

"The High Inquisitor. He would work with the Captain of the Guard until the Queen returned." He glares at me. "And I would *never* betray Her Majesty."

"What if the High Inquisitor's not there?"

It takes him a couple of seconds to get over himself and maybe realize I'm speaking more in a Socratic fashion (whatever that means, probably something Marcus knows).

"The Captain of the Guard would rule the line in Her Majesty's stead."

And there's the proverbial light bulb.

Marcus, you son of a bitch. No wonder you were there to rescue me so damned fast.

Bastard probably set the whole thing up.

He killed Raphael, the previous High Inquisitor, and he's been in charge ever since. Except there are new Inquisitors now. He'll have to answer to someone now, give up some of his power and authority that he's been enjoying for the last few decades.

Yeah, right.

"I have to go, Aron, before your Captain kills me, too."

He thrashes against the slab, spits some curses at me because he's under the impression that I'm going to kill Marcus first, and yeah, the thought did cross my mind, I'll admit it. But I think waking up would be a better idea, have

some idea what I'm working with. I take a deep breath, close my eyes, and open them.

I could think of worse places to wake up.

Granted, there's certainly *better* places to wake up than being banged around in the back of a windowless van with no upholstery, crammed in with three other people who are all well armed and dressed in the same SWAT-like security uniform as the Guards at Victory, as well as Daniel, who looks more than a little pissed.

"Are we going to jail?"

Daniel blinks once, and I can see that he's wearing fresh clothes, similar to the other guys in the van, only without that handy body armor. Same goes for me. Black T-shirt, black boots, black BDUs, and that's pretty much it.

"No, fledge, we're going to kill Daggers. Thank you so very much for calling Marcus to volunteer our services." Fucking Aron. "Jail would be preferable. At least I could break out of that place by acting dead."

"Daniel, I would never—"

"It was Aron. I know. Though I'm beginning to tire of him." He looks at the three other Guards. "Can you believe the Guard now? Just mindless drones following orders. Completely surrendered to their blood, not a whit of personality to any of them, save Marcus and that damned Inquisitor."

"He was there?"

Daniel nods once. "Marcus wanted to take you along with him on his hunt, but the other one insisted that you weren't to be trusted and that you would more than likely stake him

again." He rolls his eyes. "No offense, fledge, but you don't have that kind of skill yet." He waves his hand in front of a Guard's face. "Look at this, honestly. They're little more than trained dogs now."

"So, why don't we just kick open the doors and get out of here? We could survive the fall."

Daniel gives me an indulgent look, and reaches his hand to the door latch. Immediately the three Guards draw pistols and press them against his face. Daniel lets go of the latch and places his hands back in his lap, the guns lower, and then return to their holsters.

Okay.

"You, Guards. I order you under the authority of the High Inquisitor to release us, and stop this vehicle." No response. I look to Daniel. "Worth a shot, right?"

"You're not Marcus, fledge, they'll only answer to him, he's in charge. So unless you can—" He grins that winning smile. "Oh, right, you can." Off my look of confusion, he continues. "You're an Inquisitor, fledge. Take his face."

I wince, mostly out of stupidity. I completely forgot that I could do that, but hey, I've been under a bit of stress from mental warfare and growing as a person, okay? Not to mention that when I heard that we had bigger things to worry about. Like the sun. "How do I do that?"

"You've drunk him, fledge. And you're an Inquisitor. Just trust your blood."

Why not tell me to use the Force while you're at it, huh? Or maybe offer me a Scooby Snack? I don't know what the Hell I'm doing. Does my face change? Do I concentrate on

Marcus' face? His memories? Should I try doing an impression of him? How the Hell do you "trust your blood," anyway?

God, is it getting hot in this van?

"You think they could maybe turn on the A/C?" I hear some movement in the front seats and... Wait, that wasn't my voice.

And the Guards are now sitting straight at attention.

"Daniel?"

He's grinning at me. "Yes, dear Sire?" I feel a bit of cooler air moving through the back of the van now.

I reach up and feel my face, and find a much more rugged one, chiseled, some scar tissue here and there. Holy shit, did I do it? It doesn't *feel* like my skin though, more like a mask. I don't want to know how growing this thing looked to the casual observer.

"Where are we going?"

"To cleanse South Allora, Captain." I hear that from the front seat, the tone a little confused. Not a one of them is wondering where the scrawny kid went and how their Captain magically took his place? Daniel's right, the Guard's full of drones. That's more than a little disturbing.

"Where is the Inquisitor?"

"In the other van, Captain, with..." Definite confusion now. Apparently Marcus is in the other van.

"It doesn't matter who else is there. Take us to their location, I need to strategize with the Inquisitor."

"Yes, sir!" Questions are not the forte of these people. Orders? Yeah, they apparently eat that shit up.

"Doesn't make sense for the two of them to be in the same vehicle." Daniel chews his lip a moment. "All the eggs in one basket? If the Daggers truly were a threat, you would keep the Captain of the Guard in reserve to coordinate the attack."

"They're not a threat, though, that's the thing." I feel the van making turns, and see that we're heading away from South Allora, so apparently this is working. "They don't know about gold weapons, it'll be a slaughter."

"It's not like they're killing children, fledge."

"Then why'd they leave them around for so long? Marcus..." I get some weird stares from the Guards. "I know where almost every Dagger in the City is, so why haven't *I* done anything about it if the Daggers apparently have this coming? What, because they hadn't done anything to us yet? Maybe because they're getting rid of the 'waste of humanity'? Why go after them now?"

"They know of sunmetal, Captain." Apparently the driver's the only one who's chatty.

"No, they don't. I..." I take a breath. This is getting a little hard to keep track of. "Another Inquisitor confirmed that the Daggers never attacked the Guard, much less with sunmetal."

"There's a new Inquisitor, Captain? The Guard hasn't been properly introduced."

"So... the 'new Inquisitor' wouldn't have any authority with the Guard, Sire." Daniel shrugs slightly, but then, why would we bother with getting me an introduction when we were planning on deserting?

So as far as the Guard's concerned, there's only the one Inquisitor, and Marcus. I'm apparently not an Inquisitor to

them yet, despite the fact that I'm the damned *High* Inquisitor. So as official Inquisitor's go, there's only the guy from the elevator and the parking garage. And Marcus is in charge, unless something happened to him of course, but I doubt anyone could take him in a fair fight. You'd have to gain his trust and get the drop on him, and even if you *did* take him down, you'd need a fall guy and then have to explain what happened to him to the Guard unless of course you could just—

Take his face.

"Oh shit." I look at the driver. "Floor it! We need to get there now!" I feel the van lurch as the engine guns and we're all pressed back a bit by the sudden acceleration.

"What's going on, fledge?"

"The Inquisitor. I'm so fucking stupid."

"I'm not quite following."

"We're nearly there, Captain."

I take a deep breath, search my mind, and then look at Daniel. "There isn't a Dagger here."

The van comes to a halt and I yank open the door, looking around. We're in the middle of an intersection, with a tenement building, a small park, another tenement building, and a warehouse on each respective corner.

"Fledge, what's going on?"

I turn to the Guards and point to them in turn. "You check the park, you check that apartment building, you check the other one. If you see the Inquisitor, you shoot him on sight; he's the traitor. And one of you give me a weapon." I'm handed a pistol before they disperse. Great. A gun. Well, I've

seen enough action movies to know how to turn off the safety, after that I'm kind of lost, past point and shoot.

"Please tell me you aren't making a play, fledge." I grab his arm and head toward the warehouse while the Guards follow their orders with precision. Handy trick, this. Once we're out of sight of the Guards and near the warehouse, I reach up to my face and put out my spurs, digging into the skin and peeling Marcus' face off my own.

Yes, this is just as disgusting as it sounds. My face is slick with blood when I finally pull it off, and toss it aside, the mass of "skin" quivering and melting into a puddle of silvery goo.

"Neither of us have anything to protect ourselves with, Daniel, okay?" I wipe my face on my shirt sleeve. Ugh. "And no, I'm not staging a revolution."

There are double doors leading into the warehouse on the corner, the chain threading the handles broken, the padlock still intact between two links. Someone rather strong came through here. Bingo.

Holy God, what am I doing?

I push open the doors and head in, Daniel clamoring a bit but shutting up once he sees the door. Yeah, this isn't a place to do a recap or explain what's going on.

All I know is that someone's going to die tonight, all the way, and it's either going to be someone who doesn't like me, or someone who really doesn't like me.

I take a deep breath, letting my senses quicken, my teeth slipping out, everything starts to take a bluish tint, but at least I can see. I keep the gun pointed where I'm looking because that's what the cops do on, well, *Cops*. I can see two

figures in the back of the warehouse, apparently in a struggle, both the same height, similar build, similar dress.

I dash across the large open space, the echo of my footsteps sounding through the empty warehouse, serving well to get their attention. Daniel follows behind me, and as my eyes focus, I can see the two of them.

Or rather, two of him.

Marcus and... Marcus.

"God damn it." The gun moves back and forth between the two of them. "Okay, stop fighting because I'm pretty sure these bullets are gold-tipped and I don't mind shooting the two of you." I actually do kind of mind, considering that whole "thou shalt not kill" thing, but they don't need to know that.

"Fledge? What's going on?"

"The Inquisitor is murdering the Captain of the Guard and taking his place, Sire." No reaction from either of them. Fuck. "You see, dead or not, servants of the Queen or not, we're all still pretty much human. Same kind of instincts, just amplified in some regards." Both of them are kind of doing it for me, so I can't tell which one is Marcus that way. So much for him and Aron having a spiritual connection. "And when it comes right down to it, people in power tend to want more."

No answer from either of them. What, are they statues?

Daniel looks at me. "Still not following, fledge."

"Inquisitors answer to no one but the Queen, unless the Queen's not around, then they answer to the High Inquisitor. But alas, he's not around, so they have to answer to the Captain of the Guard. But what if he weren't around?" Both of

them are facing me, both wearing well-tailored suits, blades at their sides, hair's the same, faces are a dead match.

"But how do you off the Captain of the Guard?" I pull back the hammer with my thumb. No reaction there. Huh. It's always so intimidating in the movies. "You'd need a fall guy, of course, or maybe a whole line. The Daggers hate us, we hate them, but you can't actually tell them about sunmetal. Sure, they're weak, they probably couldn't take you in a fight even with gold-tipped weapons, but what if they just blab it to all the other lines in the City? You're pretty much fucked then, right? So you have to make it seem that the Daggers know. Luckily, though, Inquisitors can take faces, can't they?"

"So, during a Dagger hunt, a trusted Inquisitor could easily stake and drain another Guard, even the Captain himself." Daniel nods once, catching on. "And if no one accepts him as leader, he can just take the Captain's face and rule in his stead." He lightly scratches his chin. "So, which one is which? I doubt they'll let us get close enough for you to drink." Daniel leans in close. "And I'm not about to let you cavort with either of them to see which one can make you come."

"Wasn't planning on it." I look at the two of them again, and sigh slightly. "Ah, well, if I'm wrong I doubt God will mind." Well, he probably *would* mind, but how many chances am I going to have in my life to have a badass moment?

I pull the trigger.

A burst of silver erupts from the left Marcus' neck, and he sinks to his knees. Oh shit. I was aiming for his knee.

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The "right" Marcus quickly draws his blade and shoves it through the "left" Marcus' chest, causing him to go still, his blood pooling around his head.

"How did you know, Frederick?"

I motion down with the gun between the two of them. "That one isn't wearing sneakers worth half-a-month's rent. You are, Marcus."

Daniel approaches the staked Guard, and slips out his spurs, peeling off the skin, unmasking him. "Why, it's the Captain's personal Inquisitor who runs Victory's private security!" He smirks slightly. "And he would've gotten away with it, too, if it weren't for your meddling, fledge."

I manage to stay stone faced for a few seconds before we both start laughing.

"Interesting how you staked me and left me for dead, Frederick, and then come running to save my life."

"How's it go? Better the devil you know? Besides, I like the idea of you owing me."

Marcus faces me fully, folding his arms, narrowing his gaze. "And I shouldn't have the Guard confine you because?"

"Because I can just as easily take your face, Marcus, and pull the same shit he was going to. Only I can do it better. He needed to go through all of this because he's not the High Inquisitor. I, on the other hand, *am*. I can take your authority over the Guard and see how well you can handle being harried through Tolon Park by every Guard in the City."

"And if I kill you first? Right now?"

"Like you killed Raphael? Maybe Krix as well? Probably Hin and Tanak? Hell, maybe you killed Aron as well, because, you

know what? Just because you can make me shoot my wad, it doesn't mean I love you. They all probably figured that out, too, eventually, because I don't see how else the High Inquisitor could be killed so many times." I shake my head slightly. "Your Sire, Michael, he wanted better for you, Marcus. You're the Captain of the Guard. Forget about me and concentrate on your job."

"Fledge, don't bring him up." Daniel's hand is on my shoulder. "This is probably hard enough for him, owing his life to a fledgling, being betrayed by a trusted advisor."

I look at Marcus. "So, let's work this out, okay?"

Marcus looks at the staked Inquisitor, and then at Daniel and me. "I'm listening."

"You stay in charge, the Guards don't know who I am, and Daniel and I are off the grid as far as the line is concerned."

"I can't allow that. Considering my Inquisitor has revealed himself to be a traitor, I need one in my service. As there are no others, you will be required to fill that role."

"Okay, leave Daniel out of all this, and I'll come in when you need me."

He nods once.

"One more thing. You're telling my boss in Records that I've been on special assignment for you for the last few nights, considering I've missed several days of work. I want pay for that, too, and before you get any ideas, I'm never working on your floor."

"No request for a raise? A bonus? A company car and benefits?"

"What I have is fine for now, thank you." I look between him and the Inquisitor. "So, Daniel and I will be going now. This way you can tell the Guard the truth: that the Inquisitor staged a coup, you staked him and put him down. Daniel and I were never here, never saved you. The credit's all yours."

I turn toward the door, and Daniel follows along, his arm around my shoulder, a bit possessively, but I don't mind.

"Frederick. A word, before you leave." He motions for Daniel to continue on his way. "Don't worry, fledgling, I won't keep him long."

I turn back to face him, and Daniel takes a few seconds, but eventually heads for the door.

"I won't be executing him, Frederick." His eyes meet mine. "I doubt he had the wherewithal to come up with a plan like this on his own. If there is a desire to have me killed, I would like to know who is behind it." He motions to the staked vampire. "He might have answers, and you can obtain them." He smiles slightly. "Besides, I have the feeling you need to know yourself."

I do.

"But not tonight. Not enough time for a proper interrogation. I will arrange it, and contact you once he's prepared properly." I nod once, and turn away, heading for the door once again. "Frederick." I stop. "Perhaps you may not love me; this I can accept. Perhaps in this life you prefer the Deserter, but I have learned from my mistakes. I can wait for you. I have eternity, after all. I have found you again, Aron, and just because you don't love me quite yet, it doesn't mean that my feelings for you will change."

I feel rush of wind and suddenly I'm in his arms, his lips pressed gently to mine. I pull away from him, wriggling from his grasp. "No, Marcus."

He lets go of me, and it's hard to step away and walk toward the door. Aron and Raphael were right. I will ache for him. I will yearn for him. And eventually a night will come when my resolve will break, and I'll seek the passion of his kiss, for the memory of warmth to become a reality in his embrace.

But not tonight.

As I leave the warehouse, I find Daniel waiting for me, and I take his hand, smiling gently as I kiss him a few seconds.

"I love you, Daniel."

He flashes that winning smile, and I don't feel warmth at all, but I do feel a bit closer to alive.

"I love you, too, fledge. What say we go get some blood and watch the tivvy? I've had a decade's worth of excitement this past week and I'd like a rest." I nod once, and we head off toward the nearest station. "Quite an interesting first month, eh, fledge?" He chuckles a bit. "You poor bastard."

Maybe Daniel and I are on borrowed time. Maybe I'll leave him for Marcus or become High Inquisitor and rule over the line or become a costumed avenger of the night or just work that same warm-body job until civilization finally collapses all around me.

I don't really want to think about it.

When we get home there's a message on the machine from Emily. Her next day off is in a couple weeks, I'm not allowed to get out of it. I guess I'll just cross that bridge

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when I come to it, really. Maybe if a couple of vampires can fight in the middle of Victory Square without anyone noticing, maybe Emily will just see me, and ignore the pale skin, and that every now and then I forget to breathe.

Regardless, it's nothing I have to worry about tonight.

We heat up some blood and drink plenty, and get a small wash basin and fill it with steaming hot water to keep the blood warm in case we get thirsty while we're watching TV.

For the first time in a few nights Daniel and I are both filled, the apartment is safe (for now, God knows what might pop up eventually with the deal I worked out with Marcus), and there are a few hours until sunrise.

"So, what did he want to talk to you about?" It's not difficult to discern what Daniel's asking about. I know he wants to know what Marcus said, what he did. Maybe he didn't pick it up with his heightened senses, or maybe he did, and he just wants to see what I'll tell him.

"In a nutshell? That I should break it off with you and just be with him. I think he believes he really loves me, you know? That I'm really Aron, or that if he waits long enough I'll become Aron and I'll want him. I'm not going to lie to you, Daniel, there's a part of me that does, okay? It's not a big part, but it's there and I'm going to have to deal with it."

Daniel sits down on the couch and leans back, looking up at the ceiling.

"Did I tell you I had the same problem with Raphael? Marcus and I competed for him as well. He went to Marcus in the end, and Marcus..." He closes his eyes tightly a moment,

setting his jaw. "My sire still hasn't settled that debt yet." His eyes open and look at me. "And now he's doing it with you."

"I'm here, aren't I? I love you. Yeah, there's a part of me that goes for him but I want you, Daniel." I sit down on the couch next to him, place my hand on his and squeeze it gently. "Cut me a little slack, okay? This is my first real relationship." I lean toward him and press my lips to his, my tongue slipping into his mouth, running it along his tongue and teeth before I pull back. "Besides, I thought you and I were supposed to be getting some rest and watching TV. And you still need to get around to getting roaring drunk and bedding your fledgling."

Daniel shakes his head with a weak smile. "A week ago you would never have said such a thing."

I grin in response. "Well, I suppose you've been a corruptive influence, huh?"

"My mother *was* right about me." He rests his forehead against mine. "I'm still rather agitated with my sire, however. I wanted to be the first one to mount you, essentially."

"Despite that it felt rather good, it was all over pretty fast. He just grabbed me, pushed his dick in my ass, and I rode him for a maybe a minute, minute and a half, and that was it." I wince slightly. "Yeah, probably not good to go into details."

"Of course it is. My sire only lasted ninety seconds? Either you're quite good, which only makes me want to have you more, or he's quite bad, which is far more likely. A shame such an event should be so rushed."

I raise a brow at him. I know where he's going with this, but I take the bait regardless. "So, what would you have done, had it been you?"

I feel his hand in my lap, his fingers drifting toward my waist, slipping behind the BDUs where I'm not wearing any underwear. I can already feel myself responding to his touch, and I lean back into the couch, biting my lip softly as his fingertips find the root of my shaft and massage the skin there.

Sure, I could be cool about this, inform him that *Scooby Doo* will be in on a few minutes, give him a sultry look and just observe him as he starts groping me, watching his hand make a gyrating mound in the crotch of my pants. But let's face it, I'm not that cool, and I don't really see the point to it either.

"Can I take my pants off now, Daniel?"

He shakes his head once, and taps my shirt with his free hand. Right. I pull the shirt over my head quickly, exposing my bare chest, throwing the shirt somewhere behind me. My hands drop to my groin, helping his fingers beneath the fabric to start stroking me.

Daniel shifts on the couch, draping one leg over the side, still massaging my erection which does actually feel nice. He moves his head to my chest, his tongue flicking against my left nipple, pushing the nub of flesh about, adding a new sensation to the mix until I feel his teeth break the skin. I pull a hand up to hold his head to my chest, keep him there as the pleasure floods my brain, his mouth vibrating against my nipple as he practically purrs at the taste of me.

"Daniel, oh god, Daniel, please let me take my pants off." He snickers as he laps at the wound, closing it, and looks up at me with a sparkle in his eyes.

"What do you want me to do, fledgling?"

"I want you to fuck me in the ass, you goofball, what the Hell else would I want?"

"Then why not take off your own pants, dear Inquisitor, while I fetch some oil."

They aren't my pants; I get them off with my spurs. Daniel, however, uses some of his blood to retrieve the lubricant from my room and doff his clothes in a matter of seconds. I'm not the only one who's eager, it seems.

Daniel squeezes the tube of lubricant onto his fingers, getting his fingers slick, and motions for me to roll onto my stomach. I do so, and then get on my hands and knees while he positions himself behind me on the couch. I take a deep breath, trying to trigger my blood, let my senses heighten so I'll feel this the way I want to.

So I shiver more than a little bit and practically jump when the rather cool gel on his fingertips slides into the cleft of my ass, spreading itself against the way into me. My spurs are still out, and dig into the cushions of the couch. Fuck. Well, we'll replace them later, I'd rather enjoy this.

"I don't think you need to prepare me at all. You can just push in, you know?" I look over my shoulder at him, and see (and feel) his hand stroking between the cheeks of my ass, and his other hand drags the tips of his exposed spurs slowly over the small of my back. I tense at the trails of sensation being made there. My head hangs low as I try to steady my

breathing, meaning I'm not paying attention when he slips his fingers into me.

"Are you aware how enjoyable this is for me, fledge? Seeing you react to my touch, wanting me. This is a lovely stroke of my ego." His two fingers wriggle about inside me, scissoring open and closed to spread me a little wider. It feels... Well, it's not like it was with Marcus (and yes, I do feel guilty for making the comparison), I can feel the movement inside me, I can feel the brush of his fingers against something deep inside me (the prostate, right?) and I feel a subtle twitch in my penis, more like a flex.

But I felt something. And it felt kinda good.

"Daniel? Please don't stop what you're doing."

"I had no intention, fledge. Now that I've found your special spot I plan to give it a bit of a workout. If you were alive you'd probably sweating heavily at this point. I once prided myself on being able to make a man come without letting him touch himself." I feel a shiver go through my body that evokes a memory, but it's not Daniel's or Marcus's or Aron's or Raphael's or anyone I drank from.

It's mine.

Granted, it's not the proudest memory. I'm remembering a rather hot day where I took off all my clothes so I wouldn't sweat to death, scratched an itch near my groin and subsequently learned the handy skill of masturbation. You'd think that that wasn't embarrassing at all, just a normal part of a guy's life. I actually thought I was the first guy ever to figure it out.

Still, I remember the shiver that went through my body when I first wrapped my fingers around my erection and gave it a pump or two. And I was feeling it now.

"Fledge, you're starting to look a bit peckish, are you drawing on your blood?"

I could feel other memories starting to bubble up from the depths of my mind, from my blood. I'm remembering wearing a trenchcoat, smoking a cigar while I stand in an alley, my back against a brick wall, a young man knelt in front of me bobbing his head on my groin in a slow deliberate rhythm. I'm remembering an older woodsman taking me under his wing to train me to be a warrior, to be a man, my hands exploring his rugged physique as he helps me straddle him, feeling him fill me with heat and life and the essence of what it means to be a man. I'm remembering winning another game of dice against another young man, and stroking each other hard and fast to clear his debt to me. I remember all of it, I can practically feel it, the hands, the eager tongue, the firm spike of heat entering me from behind and making me no longer empty.

I feel Daniel pushing something larger than a finger into me now, and I remember when Daniel did this to Marcus. But I have Marcus's memory of it as well. I remember how Marcus felt when Daniel's warm thick erection spread him open and made him whole again.

I remember it because I feel it now. Daniel may be room temperature, but I remember how he felt when he was still alive. And my body, my Inquisitor body, is all too eager to let me truly feel that warmth, that tightness, that fullness.

I truly feel Daniel inside me.

I want more.

"Fledge, maybe we should stop. You're not looking all that well."

I stare back at him. No way in Hell are we stopping.

"Hand me a bottle of blood from the basin, and start stroking me off." I probably look a little crazy, but since I'm asking for blood and not trying to kill him or anything, he hands me the bottle. My eyes roll back for a moment while I chug down the steer blood, the taste not even registering until it's three quarters drained and the nasty taste and texture returns. "And don't even think of not pounding my ass."

"Well, this is a new side of you, fledge. I must admit I like it so far." He arches a brow. "You're not thinking about *him*, are you?"

"Trust me, Daniel, I'm only getting off on you right now."

When I feel Daniel's fingers grip my dick, I remember him stroking off a merchant while hiding under the table at a rather fancy banquet at a nobleman's estate. I remember the firm grip of Daniel's hand, the steady pumping, his thumb rubbing against the slit of the merchant's shaft.

And I feel it too. As Daniel strokes me the same way he did the merchant, thrusts himself into me the same way he did to Marcus, my body remembers it all. I'm not warm, but the memory of warmth is almost the same.

Through the memories in my blood, I can really make love to Daniel.

Romantic, I know, but it also feels really *really* good. There are no shadows of sensation, no dulled feelings like our first night together. I don't need to drink him or have him drink me to derive joy from this. From Daniel's wealth of sexual experience, I'm able to feel his memories of fucking, being fucked, being stroked, feeling the slap of warm sweaty thighs against my ass and his low grunts of lust and exertion as he pumps into me harder, strokes me faster. Or maybe it's me making those noises, or maybe...

My whole body is tingling now. I feel half-dead, barely able to stay upright, my arms trembling, my elbows wanting to buckle and put me face-first into the armrest of the couch. I dig my spurs deeper into the cushion, trying to a good grip, lock my elbows as I start wobbling a bit. I feel a memory of a deep fire, an eruption of heat and bliss, my ass clenching hard on Daniel, holding him in place. I feel something come out of me in frenzied bursts, my mouth making sounds I don't quite recognize.

Daniel made me come.

A few seconds or minutes or however long later I find myself on my back, a still warm bottle of blood being pushed to my lips. I swallow it slowly, my eyes opening slowly to see Daniel, looking concerned. My head kind of hurts, my body feels sore, over-exerted, burnt out, honestly.

"Ye gods, fledge, what possessed you to burn through that much blood?" He strokes my face gently, worried. "And why you grinning? You almost put yourself to sleep for the rest of the century."

The Vampire Fred: Wicked Game
by Vaughan R. Demont

"I love you, Daniel." I drink some more blood. So yeah, I can apparently make love to my boyfriend, it'll just nearly kill me and blow through two or three bottles of blood. I'll literally have to pay to have sex with Daniel. Somehow this doesn't bother me all that much.

"You're going to be an interesting fledgling Fred, that's for sure." He kisses my forehead. "I think it would be prudent to rest for the remainder of the evening instead of cavorting anymore, as enjoyable as it was." My lips get the next kiss, and my body's quick to inform me that I probably shouldn't go any further than that. "I love you, Fred."

So yeah, grand conspiracies, family problems, possible love triangles, a new career... A lot can happen in a month. Tonight, though, I'm not going to worry about it. I'm going to curl up on the couch with the man I love and watch a big cartoon dog solve mysteries and remember how it felt to see it for the first time.

And tomorrow?

Well, I can take heart in what Daniel taught me.

We'll just take it one night at a time.