



# A Different Breed

A NOVEL

Angel Martinez

## A DIFFERENT BREED

...Richard's eyelids snapped open, his ears deafened by the thundering of his own heartbeat. Since the change, waking always ambushed him this way, the abrupt shift from not-there to painfully present like a tiger leaping on him from a tree limb above his head. Only when he had been gravely wounded or had neglected his feedings too long did the hard edges of waking soften to something more normal.

He hated it, that moment of doubt, wondering, once again, if he woke up secure. A few deep breaths calmed his heart. He lay still, taking stock. Bedroom. Yes. Which one? Sarasota...Portland...no, Ithaca. The house in the hills. A life stirred out in the hallway, a heart that beat to a familiar rhythm.

Confusion furrowed his brow. William? No, of course not...Josh. He smiled at the memory of those skilled hands on his skin, the ferocious, consuming *need* the little hunter exuded when aroused. *God*, what fire lay under the sarcastic exterior, what depths of tender passion roiled in that hard-muscled, compact body...

Wait. A second heart beat alongside the first outside his door, faster than the first, most likely out of fear.

Sorrow and rage welled up in his chest. Why had he been so quick to trust? To fall headfirst into the hunter's trap of seduction? Now Josh had help. They waited for him to emerge. A man like that would want him awake and alert, of that he was certain. *The revenge-mongers never want to take you in your sleep...*

## PRAISE FOR A DIFFERENT BREED

*“Ms. Martinez weaves in passion, fantasy, and love with such a comfortable flair you forget that you’re reading a fiction novel. The emotions of both Josh and Richard are simply palpable. A leader in M/M romance, Angel Martinez has yet another hit to add to her list.”*

—Catherine Bybee  
Best-selling Author of *Silent Vows*

*“From page one, this dark, sultry tale had me locked. It’s full of passion, mystery, and suspense. A must read for the paranormal fans! Angel never ceases to amaze.”*

—Yvonne Nicolas  
Author of *Black Rayne, Silent Screams*

# A DIFFERENT BREED

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BY

ANGEL MARTINEZ

AMBER QUILL PRESS, LLC

<http://www.AmberQuill.com>

A DIFFERENT BREED  
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ISBN 978-1-61124-025-2  
Cover Art © 2010 Trace Edward Zaber

PUBLISHED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

*To all the people who helped with the birth of this story—  
my patient beta readers, the kind and encouraging  
ladies in my critique group, and all the wonderful folks  
at Amber Quill, unlikely midwives all.*

# CHAPTER 1

## HUNTER

No self-respecting monster did the things this one did. *Bastard's toying with me. Has to be.* Josh ground his back teeth in frustration.

The bookstore had been bad enough. He'd been itching for a good kill, and his hunting sense had led him straight to Ithaca. In a downtown bookstore, he'd been browsing through the shelves when his internal vamp radar went berserk. The sudden awareness of a monster in the same room with him slammed up from his gut. He spun around to see the vamp at the counter making a purchase. Of a fantasy novel.

Granted, the clouds lay thick over the sun, rain threatening, and it was early evening. Not unusual for an old creature like this one

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to be out prowling in those conditions, but something struck him as so wrong about the whole scene, a bloodsucking killer calmly buying the latest Lynn Flewelling novel and gracing the clerk with a smile.

“Shit. I read those,” Josh muttered as the vamp sauntered out into the street. Could the monster know that somehow? Did it know he was watching?

He had followed at a discreet distance, waiting for the vamp to pick a meal, to start chatting up some pretty girl or boy. Josh liked to wait until the bastard damned himself, until the triumph shone in those undead eyes. Then he would swoop in and dust him. Not that vamps literally turned to dust like on TV. No, the minutes of slow decay happened in revolting, Technicolor slow motion.

But this damn vamp, with his perfect, long-legged body and his gorgeous face, stuck his nose right in his book and walked to the nearest public park where he settled with feline grace on a bench to read. An athletic young woman stopped to rest on the bench next to him and to adjust her skates, but he (*no, it, dammit!*) never looked up.

*So it's not hungry. Whatever. Still not gonna make it through the night.*

No matter how many times he did this, the shock of recognition was still there. The strange, humming pull to every new location told him where a monster had made a home. Then the hunt was on, his feet taking him through the streets and alleys until the electric spark of discovery hit him between the eyes again. *Bam, there it is*, the spark screamed. Vampire.

He'd felt it the first time the night Jenny died, though he didn't know what it was then. He knew now.

Finally, the vamp rose, tucked the book in the pocket of his



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coat, and strolled down the street.

“About freaking time.” Josh shivered. The wind had picked up, the air saturated with the scent of impending autumn rain.

His quarry meandered through downtown, in no apparent hurry. Some of the merchants actually *waved* to the vamp, so it had been in residence here for some time. It, he...*shit*. This one would have been super hot before un-death overtook him, with his shoulder-length black hair and his arresting gray eyes. He moved with the power and natural authority of a man accustomed to his strength, trained to use it. Dangerous, that combination of power and beauty. It could draw a hunter in, take him off his guard, or worse, let him think his prey had some spark of humanity left.

Still, the one, close glimpse Josh had of those eyes when the vamp gazed out the window of the bookstore...those sad, intelligent eyes...

“Damn! Stop it, stop it, stop it.” Josh picked up his pace as the vamp did, squashing any stray thoughts about how those gorgeous pecs would feel under his hands. Dead. That’s how they’d feel. And soon. The ground-eating pace became purposeful now. The vamp headed for its lair, Josh was certain. Outside of town, the vamp turned and headed off the main roads, into the tree-decked hills that graced the area.

The first fat raindrops fell on Josh’s shoulders as he crossed a stream. The vamp was ahead in the darkness now, but the heavy pull of its presence allowed Josh to pick his place and time. He couldn’t lose the monster now if he tried.

It had stopped ahead. Josh used the sound of running water to cover his movements and circled around ahead of the monster, which had stopped to drink at a waterfall, carefully cupping the water in one large hand.

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*Good. Picky, fussy monster. Probably never lived a rough day in his natural or unnatural life.* The rain pelted against the dry leaves, covering any stray noise, though Josh moved soundlessly. He had trained with survivalists, retired SEALs, martial arts masters, anyone who would have him, and had honed his body into a precise and deadly weapon to match the precision tracking of his mind.

This vamp would be his twenty-fifth kill.

He leaped up a small rock outcropping to gain the advantage of higher ground. The monster approached, its feet moving over the forest floor without a sound, head bent forward against the driving rain, intent on its goal.

When it passed beneath him, Josh leaped, iron spike clutched in his right hand. The monster's head came up, lips pulled back from sharp teeth. Instead of lunging to meet him, though, it sidestepped.

Josh landed in a crouch, sprang up, and attacked.

"This is for Jenny, you motherfucker!"

He came in low, under the monster's guard, stabbing upward with the spike. A frighteningly strong arm blocked the blow, but Josh expected that. He pulled back to feint and lunge, to wait for an opening, and made a crucial mistake. His eyes met the vamp's, those large gray eyes regarding him with calm, frank curiosity. Sorrow lurked there, old pain and new. A strange electric jolt ran through Josh that had nothing to do with the hunting sense.

The vamp's fist smashed into his jaw. The world tilted and went white.

\* \* \*

"What am I doing here?" Josh leveled the sword he had

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snatched from the mantel at the vampire's bare back. *His ripped, gorgeous back...dammit! Monster, stupid, he's a monster!*

The vamp turned. With the arrogance of his kind, he arched a brow and leaned back against the kitchen counter. "That's my father's sword. If you must kill me, have the decency not to ruin a priceless heirloom doing it." He turned back to filling the teakettle, the perfect mounds of his glutes outlined by his track pants. "Do you have a name, hunter?"

"I asked a question, asshole."

"Tsk. So rude." The vampire set the kettle on the stove and turned on the burner. "I am Richard von Schaumburg."

"Richard?" Not Vlad or Octavian or any of the other pompous names vamps picked for themselves, Richard sounded too damn normal. "You're shitting me."

"No," Richard-the-Vampire replied in his softly accented voice. "That's the name my mother gave me." He waved toward the kitchen table. "If we're going to chat prior to my demise, you may as well make yourself comfortable. Tea?"

"Tea?"

"That's an annoying habit, parroting everything as a question."

Josh's brain felt like it had turned to mush. No threats, no "you'll die slowly and I'll enjoy it, hunter" speeches. Instead, the vamp acted like a civilized host, as if he truly did just want to talk. *Guess it won't hurt to find out what its game is. And I've still got the sword.*

He eased into a chair, the sword across his lap. He should have slaughtered the monster by now, but everything had slid sideways and strange. This wasn't how things were supposed to go. "You want to poison me."

Richard laughed. The rich, silken sound caressed Josh's frayed

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nerves. “If I wanted you dead, I would’ve snapped your neck. You tried to kill me on my way home. I struck you.” Rain battered at the window. “It didn’t seem right to leave you lying in the mud. I brought you home, which I’ll most likely regret.”

“Damn right,” Josh muttered. He felt along his jaw and winced when he encountered the tender knot. Right. The vamp had clocked him. He tugged the borrowed bathrobe closer, the one he’d found wrapped around his naked body when he woke. “Where the hell are my clothes?”

“At the moment? In the laundry.”

Laundry. Tea. “Your servant taking care of that?”

“No.” The word came out short and sharp. “I haven’t had servants for three hundred years.” Richard slid into the opposite chair and placed a steaming mug in front of each of them. His full lips took a careful sip.

“You’re drinking...tea.”

“Chamomile. I find caffeine has unpleasant side effects, but herbal teas are safe enough. Mostly water in any case.”

Josh pondered this. He’d never thought about vamps consuming anything but blood. If this one said he was a vegetarian and liked to eat at Moosewood, though, he’d know he was in some coma dream. “Why didn’t you kill me?”

“You bellowed a name when you attacked.” Richard’s long fingers drummed slowly. “I gathered you’re one of those who hunt because of personal pain.”

Josh swallowed hard and glanced away from those sea-gray eyes. “Yeah. Personal. One of you bastards killed my sister. Made her promises and then ripped her to pieces.”

Another slow sip. Josh found himself watching Richard’s Adam’s apple move up and down his long, pale throat.

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“One vampire murdered her, so you blame us all. If a doctor had killed her, you would hunt medical professionals?”

“That’s different. And it would be stupid.”

“Is it? But because you encountered a sociopathic vampire, you assume all of us are evil monsters.”

“Yeah, pretty much,” Josh muttered, but it lacked conviction. He tossed his hair back from his eyes and winced at the movement.

Richard pushed a bottle across the table to him. “You may want two or three.”

“Aspirin? Why the hell do you have aspirin?”

“They were William’s.” Richard gazed out into the storm-swept night.

“Were.”

“William died seven years ago. I have trouble parting with anything of his.”

“You killed him.”

A sigh expanded the hard muscles of Richard’s chest. “No, hunters killed him. They waylaid him. Kidnapped him. Tortured him.”

“Why?”

Richard stared at him as if he had grown a goat’s head. “Babe in the woods, aren’t you?” He said it softly, though, his expression serious. “For information. To find where I sleep. How best to catch me off guard.”

“So you found him. If you know what happened, you found him. Why didn’t you save him?”

“He was beyond that point. Lost too much blood. They had put out his eyes. Cut off his hands, his feet, and his testicles.”

A lead ball settled in Josh’s stomach. Hunters were the good guys, right? Why would they do something so evil? If the world

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didn't stop tilting sideways, he was going to slide off. Of course, the vamp could be lying...except the pain was real, rolling off him in waves. He felt hints and bits of emotions sometimes, but never anything this strong before. "The hands and stuff would've grown back, after...right?"

Tears welled in Richard's eyes. "The change doesn't work that way. You carry any scars or flaws with you. Even if I could have saved him, how could I have asked him to live eternity like that?"

"He was like, your Renfield?"

"He was my companion. My lover. My friend."

"Oh." Josh rubbed a hand over his face, dizzy with sudden realization. The vamps he'd dusted were mindless killing machines. This one, who reacted to an attack with the cool detachment of a born warrior, who lifted his fallen opponent out of the dirt, brought him home, and cleaned him up, was different. He was a completely different breed.

A tear rolled down Richard's clean-shaven cheek. Without thinking, Josh reached across the table and smoothed it away with his thumb. Richard turned his face and Josh's heart lurched, anticipating bared fangs, but only soft lips met his palm. *Such soft lips...*

Others had warned him about vamps' seductive powers. Part of him still screamed to pull away. This wasn't seduction, though. Attraction, yes, confusion, yes, a lot of that, but mostly he felt an overwhelming sorrow for this beautiful creature's loss.

He pulled his hand back and stared at the sword in his lap. "Was this really your father's?"

"Yes."

"He was a knight or something?" Josh traced along the spider web-fine etching on the cross guards.

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“He was.”

A note of worship colored those simple words. Josh jerked his head up to see Richard’s face and winced again at the sudden movement. Dizzy nausea swept through him. He put the sword on the table and stood, swaying. “Dammit.”

“Easy there.” Strong arms caught him as he fell. “I think I may have hit you harder than I intended.”

As Josh faded out again, a voice at the back of his mind whispered that he should be afraid. Weird thing, though, the fear didn’t come.

## CHAPTER 2

### NOT QUITE TAME

When Josh woke again, he was back on the sofa. The robe lay draped over the chair next to him. Someone had tucked fleece blankets around him with great care, wrapping his feet so they wouldn't chill.

He sat up with a groan. Small demolition crews had set up a worksite in his head. *Where...oh, yes. Richard the Vamp's house. Why the hell am I still alive?*

A terrible suspicion crept over him. He snagged the bathrobe and staggered to the bathroom in the hall. In the bright light over the mirror, he searched for telltale marks on his throat, his wrists, the crooks of his elbows, and his inner thighs. Nothing. Where



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else? Thumbs. None of the damning double punctures there either. Ankles? No.

So if the vamp hadn't kept him to snack on, and he didn't want to kill him, why was he still there? Why bother to take such gentle care of him?

Noises drifted from the kitchen, soft humming and muted clanks and thumps. Josh made his way to the kitchen door, confusion overriding caution. Richard stood at the stove again, this time fully dressed in jeans and a blue chamois shirt. *Damn but his ass looks delicious in tight jeans. And for fuck's sake, he's a vamp. What am I doing thinking those things?* Richard turned with a tentative smile.

"Ah, good. You're up." He stirred something in a pot as he spoke. "I thought I might need to take you to the hospital, but you looked like you were waking."

Josh shook his head, trying to clear it. He made his dazed way to the kitchen table and plunked down in a chair. Richard turned off the stove, brought him aspirin, water and an ice pack.

"For your jaw. It's swollen still."

Those sad gray eyes watched him with concern, though Josh wasn't sure if it was concern for him or because of him. Richard's hand brushed his as he handed off the ice pack. It sent a frisson of firefly sparks down to his toes. He glanced up. The kitchen clock read five-thirty.

*I slept through the whole day?*

"I found one of those noodle soup packets in the back of a cabinet," Richard went on. "Thought you might be hungry."

"Why?"

"Because you probably haven't eaten since yesterday."

"No, why help me? Why take care of me? Hunter, remember?"

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Richard chewed on his lower lip a moment, the sorrow in his eyes shifting to anguish. "I hurt you. You needed someone. How could I simply walk away?" He turned his back, a slight catch in his voice. "If you've brought death with you, so be it. Maybe I'm a fool but I couldn't do anything but what I did."

There it was again, that certainty that this vamp, this man, only told the truth. His brain still tried to scream at him about lies and traps, but his heart knew better. He felt truth as he never had before. His vampire radar, that strange humming pull that had first hit him the night Jenny died, still sang in his head. He was in the same room with a vampire, after all. But the timbre of it had changed, the threat, the anxiety that always came with it replaced by something warmer, a soft-fingered, gentle note.

Richard had squeezed his eyes shut, his handsome face visible to Josh in profile. Looking at those features, so beautiful in the soft light of the kitchen, a realization struck him like a runaway city bus. Maybe every other vamp in the world was an evil monster. It was all too clear Richard was not. Between what Josh felt from him and his actions, which spoke louder than any sweet, seducing words, he had shown his true nature. Josh swallowed the aspirin and gulped down the water to give himself a minute, his thoughts reeling.

*Only good vamp's a dead vamp...*

*Kill 'em all, let the devil sort 'em out...*

*It's not a good kill unless they scream...*

All of those things and more, he had said them. A sick feeling settled in the pit of his stomach as he realized how much he sounded like some old school racist bastard. He stared down at the sleeve of the robe he wore. The sleeves should have been too long. Richard was a good three or four inches over six feet. *It's not his*

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*robe, you moron, it's William's.* Richard grieved for his human lover, couldn't part with his things, but he had no hesitation in sharing them with someone in need. That alone made him more human than lots of humans Josh had met.

And here he was acting like some ungrateful jackass, hurting someone who had tried to help him.

The sudden urge swept over him to comfort Richard, to take the pain away. He rose and walked around the table to put a hand on Richard's back. The muscle under his hand twitched but Richard turned to him instead of jerking away so Josh's hand slid around to his chest. It felt good there, natural, his palm flat against the hard muscle. He reached up to take Richard's face between his hands, his thumb stroking over his jaw.

"You're in pain," Richard protested softly.

"So are you. I'm sorry." The urge to kiss those soft lips washed over Josh in a dizzy rush. He tipped his face up, an electric javelin shooting down to his balls when their lips met.

At first, Richard let him lead, his hands flat on the counter behind him, answering Josh's questing mouth. He opened when Josh ran his tongue over the seam of his lips. Josh plunged inside, plundering every ridge and dip of his mouth. Richard's skin held a slight chill, like marble in the summer shade. Part of his brain said he should have been repulsed. He told it to shut the hell up.

Richard tugged gently at the tie on his robe, as if asking permission. Josh stepped closer and helped matters along by shrugging out of the terrycloth. He pressed up against that long, gorgeous body, his heated skin drinking in the sensations of hard muscle under the cloth, as the kiss grew heated and desperate. The huge bulge against his stomach gave him some idea of Richard's impressive package. His own cock twitched and leaked under a

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rush of lust so intense, he thought he might come right then. Richard's hands were exquisite, long fingers caressing whisper-soft over the shivering muscles of his back, the implied strength under restraint incredibly sexy.

Josh pulled away from the kiss to lick at the curves of Richard's ear. "Fuck me. Please. I need you inside me."

A deep moan rumbled in Richard's chest. He took Josh by the shoulders and eased him back. "Odd request from a hunter."

"I know." Josh popped the button on Richard's jeans. He tugged the zipper down to expose the thick, finely veined cock waiting for him. *Shit, he goes commando. Can he get any sexier?* His mouth watered.

"You know nothing about me. You're reacting to the sympathy you feel for another lonely, wounded soul." Richard's voice hitched when Josh ran a thumb up the underside of his shaft.

"You're saying I'll regret it in the morning?"

"You might."

"How about we worry about that then?"

Richard's head fell back on a gasp as Josh toyed with his slit. "But we've just met. I don't even know your name."

"How did I find the only vamp on the planet with sexual mores?" Josh said on a snort. He pumped the cool erection slowly while he kissed along Richard's jaw. "Joshua Kempski. Josh, if you don't mind. Better?"

"Yes." Though Josh wasn't sure if this was in response to the hand job or the name.

Richard wrapped his arms tight around Josh, lifted him, and laid him on his back on the table. He strode to the counter and returned with a bottle of lotion. Josh blinked in surprise. *Well, hell, I guess his skin might get dry sometimes, too...*

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When Richard moved between his thighs, Josh lifted his legs and hooked his feet at the top curve of Richard's ass. Any rational thoughts skittered away as the pad of Richard's thumb toyed at his puckered entrance. Josh gasped and squirmed, pushing back against the invasion, every nerve straining toward a release too long denied. Three years without sex, he realized in shock. *Three years and what do you do? You hook up with a vamp.* But that argument was getting old. His body insisted this felt right.

"Stop teasing," he growled as that thumb slipped in and out. "Don't be so damn careful."

Richard leaned over to plant sucking kisses along his collarbone. "You're so tight. I don't want to hurt you."

"You won't." Josh stroked his face. "I need this so bad."

Still, Richard took his time lubing his cock and easing the head carefully past Josh's ring. He forced himself to relax, teeth gritted as the true size of Richard's erection sank in. *Huge, dammit, I've never...* His thoughts cut off on a long moan as Richard slid deep inside, the momentary pain hurtling over into exquisite pleasure.

Richard gathered him close, long arms wrapping Josh in gentle strength. The spicy musk of their arousals filled his head; Richard's scent an intoxicating mix with hints of peppermint and chocolate. Josh had been with half a dozen lovers and more than a few one-night stands, but he had never felt so full, so complete, so safe.

He should have felt some anger at a universe that would allow him to lust after someone like his sister's killer, or maybe he should have felt fear because of all the vamps he had slaughtered. But Richard was right. It was time to stop condemning an entire race because of the dirtbags. He gazed at Richard's face and saw an honorable soul, someone to trust, to cherish. Hell, if they'd

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lived in the Middle Ages, Josh would have been on his knees, promising his sword and his loyalty.

Long, slow strokes had him bucking and rising up to meet each thrust. “Richard, harder. Please. God, you feel so good.”

Richard complied with bone-jarring enthusiasm, each hard thrust edging Josh farther up on the table. He wrapped his legs higher around lean ribs, the new angle letting Richard stroke his prostate in ways that set off showers of sparks at his core. With a little rumble, Richard lifted his arm to lick at the crook of his elbow.

“May I?” he murmured. “I so want to taste you.”

*Oh, hell, no...* So he did want to feed. A twinge of fear joined the rising pleasure. “Why the fuck would I say yes to that? Let you drain me dry? Make me into some mindless thing bound to you?”

Richard had the nerve to chuckle. “A few sips will hardly drain you. I’d take less than they would if you donated blood at the Red Cross. And it takes weeks of continual, brutal feedings before it would affect your mind. I promise to be gentle. Since it’s your first time.”

Josh looked up into those gorgeous eyes, and saw the hunger tempered with tenderness. His thoughts scattered and his cock twitched hard as Richard licked along the vein again. *Damn that feels good.* What did the feeding feel like, anyway? Why were so many people drawn to it, went back for more even when they knew they might be slaughtered?

Curiosity won out as he shoved the fear aside. He grabbed Richard’s ass with his free hand to pull him in harder. “Do it. Now.”

Sharp canines flashed in the lamplight. Sudden pain ricocheted up his arm as those teeth closed through his skin. Like the pain of

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Richard's cock entering him, pleasure soon replaced it in volcanic waves. Richard moaned as he drank, his handsome face suffused with ecstasy. Nothing could possibly have been more erotic than having the same lover enter him twice in such deliciously different ways. The pull of Richard suckling at his arm tugged his nerve endings, making his cock and his gland throb in time to his blood. Ecstasy crashed through him with explosive force.

Josh bellowed Richard's name as he came, decorating both their bodies with thick jets of white. A soft whimper caught in Richard's throat. He crushed Josh close and thrust deep within, his hips jerking and twitching through his own orgasm. They both lay panting, clinging tight to each other as if they might fall into oblivion.

Richard withdrew his teeth and licked over the tiny puncture wounds to close them. When he lifted his head, uncertainty filled his eyes. "Josh? I think, perhaps, we need each other." He swallowed hard, his next question almost too soft to hear. "Would you like to stay with me? Keep me company for a while?"

Josh tangled his fingers in the thick, black silk of Richard's hair and pulled his head around for a tender kiss. The single word he whispered against those soft, full lips had never felt so right. "Yes."

\* \* \*

"Josh."

With a sleepy murmur, Josh rolled to wrap himself around the hard body beside him.

"Josh." This time a gentle shake accompanied his name.

He cracked a lid, struggling to recall where the hell he'd gone

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to sleep. Gray eyes stared back at him. *Good God, he has thick lashes...*

*Oh, yes, Richard.* On the king-sized four-poster in what he called the “guest room.” Josh suspected it had been William’s bed and the big guy just couldn’t say it. Richard had scooped him up from the kitchen table the night before and carried him upstairs to the bed. He had held Josh and stroked his skin so tenderly Josh had fought back tears. Then he had kissed him and told him to go to sleep.

“Morning,” Josh murmured. He leaned up to kiss Richard’s incredibly kissable lips and tried to pull him back under the covers.

“I have to leave you for a bit. I have to sleep.”

“So sleep here. I could use some more z’s myself, hot stuff.”

“Not that sort of sleep.” Richard had that uncertain expression again, the one Josh found endearing but that broke his heart at the same time. “I will go to my room, lock myself in, and...go away for a few hours. A sleep from which you won’t be able to wake me.”

“Oh.” Josh scrubbed his hands over his face. “You have to go play dead. Or be dead. Or whatever.” He smoothed a stray lock of midnight hair behind Richard’s ear. “Ever try not doing it? The whole sleep of death thing?”

“Yes. I have.” Richard looked away. “I can struggle against it for an hour or so after sunrise. But eventually, I fall over where I stand. I prefer to be somewhere safe when it takes me.”

“Got it. But I’m here to protect you.” Josh frowned. “Though I guess it’s kinda early to trust me like that, huh? You don’t sleep in a coffin and stuff like some of the freaky vamps, do you?”

Richard smiled and he wanted to bask in that smile forever. “No, my dear. I have a bed. A simple but comfortable bed. I’m



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pleased that you want to play white knight for me.” He shrugged. “But I’m a creature of habit. And I’d rather you didn’t see me like that.”

“Asleep?”

“Lifeless.”

*Did William ever “see you like that”?* The thought reared its ugly head but Josh kept it to himself. If he started getting green-eyed over poor William, seven years gone, he was going to make himself nuts. More nuts than he was.

Richard brushed a last kiss over his lips and rolled from the bed, giving Josh a glorious view of his perfect, muscular ass. “Go back to sleep, my dear. You had a long day yesterday.”

“Mmm.” Josh curled up on his side. “How long, usually?”

“Six hours. And then I’ll come back to you.”

Josh watched that perfect body until Richard disappeared through the doorway. Any flaws or scars go with you into the change, he’d said. A few old, white scars interrupted Richard’s perfect skin here and there. The long one down his left arm and the wider one across his abdomen must have both hurt like hell when they were new. *Who were you before?*

Eventually, he rose to shower and dig through the not-surprisingly-bare cupboards. Ancient crackers crumbling to dust. A tin of sardines. Right. Tea was one thing. Food another. He found his clothes, neatly folded, on the hall table, his wallet, keys and weapons all carefully laid out beside them.

Josh’s throat closed over at the show of trust. Even if he still had wanted to dust Richard, the guilt would have stopped him. *How can you murder someone who’s such a freaking considerate host?*

He dressed, stomped into his boots, and pocketed the wallet

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and keys. His spikes, his pistol, and his garrote, he left on the table. Whistling to himself, and still feeling a little like Alice down the rabbit hole, he strode out the front door to make the walk into town to retrieve his Jeep and pick up some supplies.

\* \* \*

Richard's eyelids snapped open, his ears deafened by the thundering of his own heartbeat. Since the change, waking always ambushed him this way, the abrupt shift from not-there to painfully present like a tiger leaping on him from a tree limb above his head. Only when he had been gravely wounded or had neglected his feedings too long did the hard edges of waking soften to something more normal.

He hated it, that moment of doubt, wondering, once again, if he woke up secure. A few deep breaths calmed his heart. He lay still, taking stock. Bedroom. Yes. Which one? Sarasota...Portland...no, Ithaca. The house in the hills. A life stirred out in the hallway, a heart that beat to a familiar rhythm.

Confusion furrowed his brow. William? No, of course not...Josh. He smiled at the memory of those skilled hands on his skin, the ferocious, consuming *need* the little hunter exuded when aroused. *God*, what fire lay under the sarcastic exterior, what depths of tender passion roiled in that hard-muscled, compact body...

Wait. A second heart beat alongside the first outside his door, faster than the first, most likely out of fear.

Sorrow and rage welled up in his chest. Why had he been so quick to trust? To fall headfirst into the hunter's trap of seduction? Now Josh had help. They waited for him to emerge. A man like

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that would want him awake and alert, of that he was certain. *The revenge-mongers never want to take you in your sleep.*

Fog-silent, he rose and eased to the steel door of his room. The hinges, hung on the inside, meant no one could get in with a screwdriver. The heavy bolt ensured that it would take a blowtorch and a good deal of effort to break in at all.

Richard slid his back against the wall beside the door, in case of missiles aimed at his bedroom. Without exposing himself to any would-be assassin's line of sight, he shot the bolt open and flung the door wide.

No crossbow bolts flew. No shots rang out. No hunters raced through the doorway screaming for blood.

"Dude?" Josh's voice floated to him from the hallway, tense and wary. "You're, ah, kinda growling. You have a bad dream or something?"

Richard kept his voice low, but failed to keep the threat out of his tone. "Who's out there with you?"

Josh said something half-audible. He almost sounded embarrassed.

"Kat?" Richard snarled. "Who is Kat?"

"No, not Kat. A cat. She was hanging around your porch and she looked kinda hungry..."

A quick dart of his head around the doorframe confirmed what Richard's sense of smell would have told him if he had been calmer. The second heart beat so fast because it was *felis catus*, a little gray shorthair with eyes wide as saucers. Cat. Josh. No other scents lingered in the house.

He passed a hand over his face and came out to lean against the wall facing Josh. "Sorry."

Josh snorted and put the startled cat down. "Not exactly all

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sunshine and flowers when he first wakes up, is he, Miss Kitty?" She raced down the stairs, tail fluffed like a bottlebrush. "I was just coming to kiss you good morning. Or good afternoon. Or whatever."

"You were?"

"Yeah. You said six hours."

Richard cleared his throat, as much a habit when he was uncomfortable as to clear the last remnants of growl from his speech. "I did. I didn't think...I'm out of the habit of having company when I wake. Maybe best to give me some room until I'm accustomed to another life in the house again."

"Got it." Josh held up his hands with a crooked grin. "Some guys need their space first thing. Not a morning person. Hey, it's cool. But you could've told me you have a case of raving paranoia."

A weak chuckle got past Richard's chagrin. "I think, my dear, that I have reason to be paranoid. It keeps one's head attached to one's neck."

"Yeah. Nice head, too." Josh had the audacity to wink at him before he swaggered after the cat.

With a view of the most desirable backside he had seen in several centuries, high, tight half-globes of muscle clad in clinging denim, Richard indulged in a long ogle before he pushed off the wall and headed to the shower. Not only had Josh not betrayed him, he had endured Richard at his most animalistic with humor and patience. Perhaps this would work after all.

Eventually, after showering and getting dressed, he made his way down to the kitchen where Josh was devouring something...dreadful.

"What in all the rings of hell is that?" Richard wrinkled his

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nose at the chemical-laden, sodium infused stench.

Josh lifted the box as if he had to check. "It's supposed to be teriyaki beef. I've had worse, I guess. You didn't have a lot of grub in the house, big guy. It was cheap and I was hungry."

Richard ran his fingers back through Josh's hair, tilted his head up, and kissed his forehead softly. He would have kissed those luscious lips if they hadn't been tainted with processed, boxed junk.

"I'm sorry," he said softly, still stroking Josh's eider-soft hair. "For snarling at you. For not thinking of your needs."

"Yeah, well, it was pretty cruddy of you..."

"Forgive me?"

Josh put down his fork and skimmed a hand up Richard's arm. "Oh, I think we can work something out." He tangled his fist in Richard's hair to pull him down for a kiss, but the smell of the almost-food nauseated him and he turned his head away to kiss Josh's jaw.

"Shit! You're a fussy, prissy vamp!" Josh laughed and shook his head.

"Prissy? I've been called too many things to count, but never that." Richard arched a brow at him as he pulled away.

"First time for everything." Josh shrugged. "Sorry about the nasty food. Won't happen again." Bright green eyes followed Richard as he cleaned up the kitchen. "All this politeness, though, all this being domestic and shit. It's all a cover, isn't it? I mean, upstairs, under all the gentlemanly stuff, you're not really tame, are you?"

"I am a hunter by nature." Richard leaned a hip against the counter. "But I do try to be civilized."

"Dude," Josh said softly. "You put a dog collar on a wolf, it's

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still a wolf.”

Richard answer came out sharper than he had intended. “Just what is that supposed to mean?”

“Don’t get me wrong. It’s hot when you get all fierce and shit. Defending your home and castle.” Josh’s shrewd gaze bored into him, giving Richard the impression of a soul far older than his probable twenty-five or so years. “But I bet you were like that before the change.”

“Which one?” Richard folded his arms over his chest. “Fierce or prissy?”

Josh laughed so hard, he dropped his fork. “Okay, so I take the prissy part back. I was just yanking your chain. Fierce. I bet you were. I can see you defending a castle against the hordes outside.”

Richard closed his eyes in an effort to banish unbidden memories. “Yes. I suppose I had my moments.” To deflect the conversation, he asked, “Where did you grow up?”

“Oookaaay,” Josh drew the word out with an incredulous look. “We don’t like to talk about ourselves, I see.” He shrugged again. “St. Louis. Not in one of the good neighborhoods. You want the history of Josh in fifty words or less?”

“No need to be defensive.”

“Look who’s talking.” Josh shook his head on a wry smile and pushed his plate away. “It’s not a new story. Dad was a deadbeat. Took off before we were born. Mom was a druggie. Half the time too trashed to care, the other half all strung out and bitch from hell. I guess it’s kinda miraculous we survived at all.”

Richard knelt by his chair and took his hands. “She beat you?”

“Yeah. And other stuff. Me and Jenny, we were in and out of foster. Sometimes not so bad. Sometimes awful. Most of the time together, though.”

## *A DIFFERENT BREED*

“You were the older brother?”

Josh pulled a hand back to rub at his chest. “We were twins. But, yeah, I was born first. I was stronger. I knew it. I had to take care of her.” He surged up to pace. “I tried, dammit! I did the best I could...”

“You were just a child, Josh.” Richard eased into a chair to give him room.

“It’s no fucking excuse!” Fists balled, Josh stood tense, his body radiating agony.

Richard longed to go to him, to ease the pain, but he knew Josh had to take it to the end now. “What happened? How did it happen?”

“We were...” Josh took a shuddering breath. “We shared an apartment. Finally old enough to get out of the system and away from dear old Mom. We weren’t doing great, but we got by. *He* came into the coffee shop where Jenny worked one night. Told her how beautiful she was. How he wanted to dedicate his life to making her happy. She came home to me and told me. The alarms in my head went off like crazy. I knew he was bad news. I told her so. But she went with him anyway. And he killed her.”

“Does he live still?” Richard kept his voice soft, though the protective imperative in him wanted to flay this bastard who had caused Josh such pain.

“No,” Josh snarled. “I killed him. I hunted him down like the fucking dog he is and I made him beg. And then I killed him.”

Richard rose and approached Josh carefully. Either the wound could be lanced or it would fester forever. “He is no more than dust. But it didn’t ease the pain, and it didn’t bring Jenny back.”

“Oh, fuck, yes! It made everything all better and resurrected Jenny so she could be with me!” Josh turned on him, handsome

## *A DIFFERENT BREED*

face contorted with rage and pain. He roared as he stabbed a finger into Richard's chest, "What do you *think* happened, you soulless motherfucker?"

Richard caught the offending finger and folded Josh in his arms. At first, Josh fought and screamed, beating at him with both fists. Richard closed his eyes and hung on, ignoring the pain. Finally exhausted, Josh let out a heartbreaking wail and threw himself against Richard's chest to sob in a release he suspected was too long overdue.

He lifted the chiseled, compact body in his arms and sat back down with Josh in his lap, rocking him and soothing him until he quieted. He tilted Josh's head up to kiss the tears from his cheeks. "I think I'm not the only one who isn't quite tame."

"Yeah," Josh grated out in a hoarse, broken voice. "Guess not. Two wolves in a goddamned too freaking civilized world."

Richard stroked his hair. "Sometimes...no, more often than not, the wolves are far more civilized than what human society does out."



## CHAPTER 3

### A BID FOR PEACE

Mist rose from the hills in delicate, multi-layered veils. It gave Josh the impression that the isolated house was an island in a vast, uncharted sea, a place where no one would ever threaten him or make demands of him.

He was smart enough to know it was an illusion.

“No, I’m okay, man.” Josh paced on the back porch, cell pressed to his ear. There had been twelve messages from the Guild waiting for him when he finally turned his phone back on three days after climbing into bed with a vampire.

“You sound off, Josh.” Mick’s gravelly voice came through as sincere. “We’ve been worried. Did you get it done?”

*Yeah, I did it, and then I did it again, and again, until I*

## A DIFFERENT BREED

*couldn't walk straight...* Josh forced his grin down before he answered. "No. I think my radar's on the fritz. There's no evil monster here." Only half a lie since his vamp radar worked fine, but true about the monster.

"Don't sweat it, bud. The thing must've moved on by the time you got there." Mick's tone shifted from sympathetic to all business. "Are you coming in first or going right back out? You need anything?"

"See, about that..." Josh hesitated, a hard hand gripping his gut. He owed Mick, was grateful to him, but he was sick to death of it all. "I'm not going back out."

"You sick, Josh? Hurt? You need medical to come to you?"

"No, man. I'm...tired." He blew out a long breath. "I can't keep going like this. Running on adrenaline rushes and caffeine before a kill. Then crashing hard and crawling into the bottle afterward like some manic-depressive psych ward escapee."

"Dammit, why didn't you say so? You're overdue for some leave time. Take a couple weeks, Josh."

"Mick, you're not hearing me. I'm walking. I quit. Get out the meat thermometer, I'm done."

"Right." Mick's snort came over the line loud and clear. "You kick back, clear your head. Come on back in when you feel better. You'll never be done, kid. It's in your blood."

"What part of *done* are you not getting? Do I need smaller words?" A prickle of anger crept up Josh's scalp as his control slipped.

"You're the best we've got, Josh. No one else can do what you can. Tracker, hunter, killer, you're the whole package."

"Aw, thanks, man. I didn't know you cared."

"I'm serious, Kempski. We need you. The whole human race

## A DIFFERENT BREED

needs you. What's standing between innocent lives and those monsters besides us? And we've got funding now. We'll get you better equipment. Better pay. Better housing."

"I don't care about those things. And seriously? From what I've seen, most of these *innocent victims* were idiots who didn't know better than to talk to strangers."

Mick's voice dropped to a growl. "You mean like Jenny?"

Blood pounded in Josh's ears. His brain disconnected from his mouth. "You shut the fuck up, dickweed! Don't you ever put her name in your filthy ass mouth again! I'm walking, I am so fucking never coming back, and I never wanna hear your ugly, three-miles-of-bad-road voice again!"

"Calm down, Josh. It was a low blow. I'm sorry."

"Damn right you are." Josh scrubbed his hand back through his hair. His skin felt too tight and his head felt like someone was doing demolition in there. "When I started this, you said anybody could call it quits when they needed to. That you didn't want someone whose heart wasn't in it anymore. Mine isn't."

"What's this really about? You meet someone? Think you can crawl into a love nest and make the world go away while you screw the little twink's brains out?"

"Yeah, something like that," Josh muttered. Let Mick build whatever sordid scenario he wanted, as long as it threw him off the real trail.

Mick's voice softened. "Go get some, bud. You deserve some R and R. Just remember that big things are brewing out here and that the world needs you. You keep in touch."

"I gotta tell you, the whole guilt trip thing is *really* helping your case." Josh heaved a shuddering breath. "I'll be in touch, Mick. You guys watch yourselves."

## *A DIFFERENT BREED*

His fingers shook as he snapped the phone shut. He knew the Guild wouldn't just let him walk, and that there would be more wheedling and cajoling. Possibly threats. At least he'd made his position clear.

The click of boots ricocheted in the hall behind him. Richard made noise like that on purpose when he didn't want to startle Josh. "Are you all right? Things sounded...unpleasant."

Josh settled into the circle of iron-muscled arms. "Had to call in. Told them I'm out. Guild isn't happy, but they can kiss my tight white ass."

"Guild."

"Yeah. Guild of American Hunters."

Richard snickered, pulled Josh in tight, and then burst out laughing.

"What?" Josh turned to glare at him.

"That's the worst acronym in history. GAH?" Richard made an effort to control himself, though his body still shook with laughter. "Just dreadful."

"Does kinda sound like the noise someone makes when they accidentally step on a banana slug," Josh muttered. He managed a smile, though his heart sank when he gave Richard a quick up and down glance. His vampire lover had pulled his hair back, dressed in a dark green button-down and fitted black slacks, both muscle hugging and mouthwateringly sexy. "Got a date, big guy?"

"It's a feeding night, my dear." Richard cupped his face with both hands. "I did tell you."

"Yeah." Josh backed up a step. "So stay home. Feed from me."

"No." Richard's negation shot out fierce and sharp. "It's too soon. I won't harm you or risk you in any way."

"So, what then? You go cruise the bars?"

## *A DIFFERENT BREED*

“Ah, no.” Richard’s forehead crinkled in an endearing way. “I have an appointment.”

“You pimp yourself out? Oh, that’s just—”

Richard gripped him by the biceps and lifted him off the ground to eye level. “If you truly want a full explanation, you have to be quiet and let me give you one.”

With his insides melting at the display of Alpha strength and control, Josh could only whisper, “Kay.”

“Better.” Richard put him back on his feet and steered him inside to the sofa in the living room. “Some time ago, I found that my feedings were able to relieve certain types of pain. Back then, I didn’t have names for the things my feeders suffered from. I only knew that when I fed, their pain diminished.”

“Like what kind of pain?”

“Shh.” Richard lay back on the leather, pulling Josh down on top of him. “Let me finish.”

Content to lie with his head on Richard’s chest, with his deep voice rumbling under his ear, Josh relaxed. So he was going out to screw someone else, so what? There was a connection here, something rare and fine. Richard made him feel cherished and needed.

“As I was saying, certain kinds of pain. In the twentieth century, I learned names to match the symptoms. Fibromyalgia, Parkinson’s, multiple sclerosis. Neurological issues, all of them. My feeding, heaven only knows why, eases these issues.”

“It sure took me to a happy place,” Josh murmured.

The chuckle vibrated against Josh’s ear in a pleasant way. “I’m pleased to know that. The result is that I choose my feeders carefully. I offer my services, feeding in exchange for, ah, physical therapy, if you will.”

## *A DIFFERENT BREED*

“Sexual healing, huh?”

Richard cleared his throat. “Joshua...my clients are all female.”

“Oh.” Josh took a minute to process this. Then it hit him and his heart soared. “Right. Gay vampire. Got it. So you feed without the screwing part. You can do that?”

“I can.” Richard’s hands wandered down Josh’s back to cup his butt. “It’s not as pleasant or as satisfying as feeding during lovemaking. But it’s nourishment. Think of it as the difference between eating thin rice gruel and a prime rib dinner.”

“So the client chicks are watered-down farina?”

“And you are most definitely prime.” Richard whispered against Josh’s throat.

“God...” Delicious shivers ran down the muscles of Josh’s back. The rush of blood from his brain made the sofa tilt. “Thanks, I think. How long have you been eating gruel?”

Richard’s hands stilled. His lips abandoned their exploration of Josh’s throat, the change in mood so abrupt Josh picked up his head.

*Dammit. Stupid, stupid...* “Don’t answer that, big guy. I’m sorry. Didn’t think you’d go all this time—”

“I did. I have,” Richard whispered, his gaze out the window again as if it might show him the past instead of the backyard, his body taut and radiating misery.

Josh slid his arms under Richard’s shoulders in a fierce hug. If he couldn’t stop himself from saying brainless things, at least he could offer his warmth and his strength. After a few moments, Richard relaxed under him with a soft sigh.

“Do they pay you?” Josh cringed as the words somehow escaped him again but an odd thought had taken hold.

A surprised bark of laughter leaped from Richard. “Ah, no.

### *A DIFFERENT BREED*

That would be pimping myself out, wouldn't it? No. Fair trade. I get fed, they feel better."

"So where's the money come from? Nice house. Nice clothes. I've seen the Benz in the garage."

Richard sat up, taking Josh with him. "Are you asking if I invested the family fortune wisely and live on the ever-growing interest? It's a nice thought, but there was no family fortune and money is a temperamental beast. Like everyone else, I do have a need for funds. My workshop is in the basement."

Workshop? He had noticed the locked door but what the hell did a vamp make, dungeon furniture? "Um, what kind of workshop?"

"I'll show you when I come home, all right?" Richard tapped a finger on the end of Josh's nose. "I need to be off. I'm running late." His finger slid down Josh's sternum, over his belt to stroke the bulge under the zipper. "Keep this warm for me."

"Oh, hell yeah," Josh got out in a husky whisper. He moaned when Richard cupped his cock through the denim and then cried out when the hand withdrew and Richard strode off. "Damn cocktease!"

"Appetizer," Richard called before the backdoor closed behind him.

Josh drew in a shaky breath. He'd been with hot lovers before but no one had ever affected him like Richard. His touch was like a thrown switch, not just a kitchen light kind of switch but one of those big, black handled switches that brought rows of arc lamps or stadium lights to life, all of his nerve endings standing at attention and quivering with instant need. Vamp thing or Richard thing, it didn't make a damn bit of difference.

He prowled the house until his heart rate calmed and then

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worked with the weights until his groin didn't ache quite so badly. His duffel still sat at the bottom of the stairs. He took it up and put it by the bed.

"Guess I am staying. Weird, weird shit." The thought of leaving Richard now was like staring into a black, echoing canyon with the ledge giving way. His gaze fell on the evening paper on the side table. "Can't be some sorry-ass deadbeat, though, Kempinski. You need a job or you're gonna start feeling like somebody's pet."

He took the paper, a glass of milk and a peanut butter sandwich out to the back porch where he stretched out on the chaise to peruse the want ads. After a few pages of nothing, he thought he heard a distant howl drift over the hills. Dog? No...coyote, probably. He'd heard they were coming farther east these days and living closer to people. *Oh, well. So long as they don't eat Miss Kitty.*

\* \* \*

Glory McMahon was the reason Richard had moved to Ithaca. A writer of historical fiction, she and William had shared an agent and had been friends for years. After William's murder, Richard had put everything in storage and had driven aimlessly, drifting from town to town, staying in one nondescript hotel room after another. From one of these rooms, he emailed Glory to tell her William had died. After that, she emailed him every day, forcing him to think outside himself, making certain he knew someone else remembered.

Eventually she had suggested he come to upstate New York. "It's lovely here, Richard," she wrote. "The scenery, the people. I



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think you'll find it restful."

Seven years later, she still acted as an emotional anchor. Her house sat at the end of an otherwise empty lane, a comfortable, smug one-story with eyebrow windows that made it look like the real estate version of Groucho. Richard parked behind the house, as he always did and made his way to the side door.

*"No one will see you," Glory scolded him the first time he visited.*

*"Perhaps not. But I'd rather not chance your safety," he told her.*

He would never allow someone vulnerable to be imperiled because of him.

"Never again, love," he whispered to the stars as if William watched from somewhere among them.

The door opened before he reached the steps.

"Heard your car door, hon!" Glory called out. "Come in, come in! Don't let all the heat out!"

Richard leaped up the concrete steps, a smile blossoming on his lips. Glory stood framed in the lamplight from the kitchen, her short blonde curls catching the light to crown her with a halo. Her tiny frame took up far more psychic space than physical mass, even more so when she stood leaning on her cane. Retiring and mousy could never be used to describe her, though, her lion's heart giving her the courage to say what she felt and a flair for the dramatic. Heaven forbid even her cane would be plain and simple. This one was her favorite—red and black enamel with a carved dragon curling his way up toward the handle.

"How've you been?" Richard leaned down to kiss her cheek.

"Never better."

He waved to the cane. "So Seymour is out because..."

## *A DIFFERENT BREED*

“Because he wanted to see you.” Glory tapped the cane on the kitchen floor with an impish grin. “Oh, all right. I walked too far today. Just overdid it a little.” She led him in to the living room where she had a pot of tea and two cups ready. When she had settled with the slow deliberation of someone twice her age, she cocked her head at Richard. “What’s happened, sweetheart? You’re positively glowing.”

“I am?”

She chuckled. “Don’t be coy. You’ve met someone.”

“Yes.”

“So? Spill it!” She reached up to grab his sleeve and pulled him down onto the sofa beside him. “All the specs. When, where, how handsome and how serious.”

He poured tea to give his hands something to do. “You’ll be angry with me.”

“Of course I won’t. You’ve grieved for so long, hon. I don’t think William would’ve wanted you to be so unhappy.”

“That’s not—” The mention of William still caused a hard, painful grip around his heart. He needed a careful breath before he could explain. “Not what I meant. This young man I met...I was attacked the other night.”

“Attacked?” Glory put a gentle hand on his arm. “A hunter? Were you hurt? Did your young man rescue you?”

“No. He...you see, this is the part where you’ll shout at me. He attacked me.”

*“You slept with a hunter?”*

Richard sighed. “You’re angry with me.”

“I’m not! I’m just wondering if you’ve lost your mind!”

“I wondered that as well.” He took her hands and turned to her. “He attacked me, ferocious and swift. He might have taken me

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down; he's that good. But he looked at me. Glory, his eyes met mine and he stopped. A spark of recognition leaped between us. I don't know...what else to call it. In his moment of hesitation, I knocked him out."

"And took him home? Richard, this isn't like you."

"I had to do something. He had tracked me, knew where to find me. I looked down at him lying there, his beautiful face washed with rain, his hair the color of ripe wheat glinting in the lightning, and I wanted him more than I have wanted anything since..."

"Yes, since," Glory said gently. "And you've been with him how long now?"

"Three days. Three glorious, passion-soaked days."

"You don't think he's using you? Waiting for something?"

Richard nodded. "It did occur to me. The first waking, I thought it might be. But if he had betrayal in mind, waiting so long when I have nothing to surrender but my own life, what sense would there be in it?"

"I guess I'm worried that you're just falling for a pretty face."

"He's handsome, heartbreakingly. Strong and agile. Passionate. But it's more. I...Glory, I feel things from him."

"Oh." She stroked a thumb over the back of his hand. "It's the real thing?"

"Too early to say." Richard sighed. "He's damaged. Almost as much as I am. No, more so, since he doesn't have the years to temper the pain. He may not stay. May not be able to devote himself to anyone long-term."

"But for now, it's good and you both have a little peace. I guess that can't be bad." She patted his arm and sat back. "Will they come for him? Whatever hunter group he was part of? Or was he solitary?"

## *A DIFFERENT BREED*

He slid off the sofa to kneel in front of her and unbutton the cuff on her denim shirt. "There's always a possibility. If they do, I may have to vanish."

"I'll take care of the house if it happens. Don't worry." She rolled up her sleeve and offered her arm with a wry grin. "Come and get it, big boy. Soup's on."

He had downplayed the sexual aspect of a non-orgasmic feeding for Josh. Every feeding was sexually charged, no matter the partner. He licked along Glory's skin to coax his fangs down, the ache and expansion far too much like a growing erection to be anything but erotic. The difference lay in the culmination. Feeding from Glory or Lynette or Tamara left a frustrated itch along his nerves, one he normally had to ease when he got home with desperate, hard masturbation.

Tonight would be different, he hoped.

Glory cupped the back of his head, signaling she was ready. He steadied her arm in both hands and bit into the vein at her wrist. She hissed and stiffened, but relaxed almost immediately as he began to suck and the endorphin-herding enzymes in his saliva galloped through her bloodstream.

Never too much from one partner and never too often. Not that a single feeding would turn a human, or even three or four close together, but there were other consequences to consider, ones he could not treat in a cavalier fashion.

As always, he helped Glory lie down when he had finished and tucked her in with the fleece blanket from the sofa. As always, she gave him a sleepy smile and reminded him to lock the door on his way out.

When he reached the door this time, she called to him.

"Paladin?"

## *A DIFFERENT BREED*

He turned to her.

“Watch your back, but watch your heart as well.”

Richard shot her a smile. “Ah, you’re worried for your knight.”

“Someone needs to be. I can’t have you losing your way, heartbroken, honor besmirched.”

“Death before dishonor,” he intoned as he swept her a bow.

“But neither before breakfast.”

He laughed at the familiar rejoinder, and then all but ran to his car. Thoughts of Josh pounded in his blood, a want so sharp it nearly set him keening. He forced himself to drive sanely, careful not to draw the attention of local law enforcement, but once he reached home, he didn’t bother to pull the Mercedes into the garage.

While he couldn’t fly, he could move swiftly enough that it hardly mattered. Within seconds, he was inside and up the stairs, following Josh’s scent. Panting hard, a growl rumbling in his chest, he waited outside the bathroom door for Josh to emerge.

Josh came out toweling his hair dry, in nothing but a tight pair of black boxer briefs. “Hey, hot stuff. That didn’t take so long. Everything go all—” He cut off as his eyes met Richard’s. His voice dropped to a shocked, husky whisper. “Oh...fuck.”

“Yes. An excellent suggestion.” Richard seized him in a rough embrace, crushing Josh close to feel their erections rub together through the layers of cloth.

“All worked up and nowhere to go, huh?” Josh managed a shaky smile as his hands slid up to Richard’s shoulders. “I don’t mind a little rough, big daddy, but don’t break me, okay?”

“Never,” Richard breathed out along Josh’s throat, his nerves singing at the moan he received. “But I will try to make you scream.”

## *A DIFFERENT BREED*

Josh melted against him, his eyes fluttering closed. “Go for it. I’m all yours.”

He knew the exact moment of Josh’s surrender, felt it as an achingly sweet rush through his blood. After only one small feeding from Josh, he shouldn’t have developed an empathetic bond. It wasn’t possible. His own heated desire must have manufactured the sensations.

Though he had satisfied his nutritional needs, he still ran his tongue over the pulse point on Josh’s throat, relishing the heat, the scent, the delicious taste.

“You gonna do something, hot stuff, or do you get off treating me like a giant lollipop?”

“Impatient little man,” Richard whispered as he took another lick. Then he relented and swept Josh up in his arms.

“Little?”

“Compact. Absolutely the perfect size.”

Richard set him down by the armchair in the bedroom, hooked his thumbs in the waistband of Josh’s briefs, and pulled them off as he sank to his knees. The spice of Josh’s arousal filled his head. He nuzzled at the crook of Josh’s thigh, nudging at his sac.

“This certainly isn’t little,” Richard murmured against his heated skin.

He licked a wet line up the underside of Josh’s hard cock and nipped at the head. Josh moaned, clamping down on his shoulders in a painful grip. With both of them so starved for physical contact, even for simple affection, he couldn’t tease long. Their respective sexual droughts added up to an entire decade, by God. Most of their bouts of rutting had been desperate and feral. This time promised to be no exception.

Later, when the feeding hadn’t driven him into a frenzy, he

## *A DIFFERENT BREED*

would take his time. Josh was already making desperate sounds, though. He took Josh by the hips, spun him round, and bent him over the arm of the chair. Josh offered no resistance and even spread his legs wide to give Richard better access.

“Come on, come on,” Josh’s voice wavered between demand and plea. “Stop messing around.”

“Dammit, Josh.” Richard gritted his teeth when Josh raised his beautiful backside in the air in invitation. He had to stomp down hard on the urge to plunge in recklessly. He slapped those muscular globes, leaving a red handprint. “Settle down.”

Josh moaned and squirmed, grinding his erection against the leather, the slap obviously having the opposite effect. Hands trembling with the effort of keeping himself in check, Richard shucked his clothes and reached for the lube on the side table. There was no rushing this part, not without regrets later. A man was either ready, or he wasn’t, no matter how impatient the man in question.

He set his hand on the small of Josh’s back to keep him still and eased a finger into his puckered entrance. Tight, too tight, as he had feared. He worked that finger gently in, teasing at Josh’s gland. When Josh easily accepted a second finger, and then finally a third, the tension eased in Richard’s chest.

“Babe? The finger fucking’s real nice and all,” Josh got out in a hoarse whisper. “But I need you. Oh, shit. I need you inside me.”

Richard smiled, feeling more in control again. “Can you ask me nicely? Without the cussing? Perhaps even a little begging?”

“You arrogant mother—” Josh managed to stop himself and grated out, “Please.”

“That didn’t sound very sincere.” Richard crooked his fingers deep inside Josh to stroke his prostate.

## *A DIFFERENT BREED*

Josh rolled his hips, his thigh muscles trembling. "Oh...Richard...please. Please take me. I won't last. Please. I want to come with you inside me."

"Much better." Richard replaced his fingers with the head of his aching cock. He eased the head inside, drew back, and then plunged in as far as Josh could take him. A sharp gasp caught in his chest at the sudden, tight constriction around him, a dizzy rush of pleasure nearly taking him out at the knees.

"Yes..." Josh breathed out, bucking up to meet him. "God...yes."

Richard gripped his hips to seize control again, keeping his thrusts slow and deep, reveling in each sensation, each gasp and squirm and moan he pulled from Josh. The sudden tightening of Josh's muscles caught Richard by surprise. There had been no demands for faster, harder. Josh's orgasm crashed over him, the rush and plummet of both their bodies tangling and echoing off each other in delicious, agonizing spikes of pleasure. He thrust his arms under Josh and crushed him close as the heavy pulses of his climax shot deep inside Josh's body.

Their harsh panting mingling, Richard slowly became aware of himself as a separate body again.

"Holy fuck," Josh whispered. "That was...amazing."

Richard managed an incoherent grunt in response. Careful of his balance and Josh's smaller body, he lifted himself off and slowly withdrew. He nearly sobbed when he slipped free of Josh's body, the feeling of abandonment leaving him with a chill. To fill the need, he gathered Josh in his arms and sat on the bed with Josh cuddled in his lap.

After a few long moments, when he thought he could speak, he cleared his throat. "I think, perhaps, that we both screamed."



*A DIFFERENT BREED*

Josh snickered. “Yeah, well, I won’t tell if you don’t.”

## CHAPTER 4

### FALLEN PALADIN

Josh woke up the next morning, sore but cat-in-a-pet-store-full-of-canaries satisfied. His head still rested on the cool skin of Richard's chest and he wondered why he wasn't chilled sleeping in arms that only heated to human temperature during lovemaking. Maybe he would be too cold to sleep with in the winter.

He lifted his head to find a tender glint of amusement in Richard's eyes.

"Dude, do you even sleep when we sleep together?"

"No. I can't truly sleep any longer. I'm either conscious or not."

"So, um, don't you have things you should be doing? Since night is like your day and stuff?"

## *A DIFFERENT BREED*

Richard ran a gentle hand back through Josh's tousled hair. "I like to watch you sleep."

"Now that's either the sweetest thing or the creepiest thing anyone's ever said to me." Josh wrinkled his nose. "Either way, I'm creeped out."

"Sorry." Richard sighed and hugged him close. "You're right, though. When I wake this afternoon, I need to get back to work."

"You gonna show me what you do?" Josh shivered with delight as those long hands skimmed over his back.

"Later today, my dear. At the moment—"

"Yeah, yeah. Go crawl into the crypt." Josh wanted to say something caustic about him always shrugging off questions about himself, but when Richard stood, he swayed, forced to catch a hand on the bedpost for balance. Irritation forgotten, Josh leaped from the bed and threw his arms around Richard's ribs. "You okay there?"

Richard answered in a strained voice. "I've...delayed. Longer than I should have."

"Damn stubborn vamp." Josh got them moving toward the door and down the hall. "Why didn't you just go?"

"I couldn't bear to leave you. And you slept so soundly."

"Great. Not only am I sleeping with a moral vamp, he's sentimental, too." He supported Richard's wavering steps to his door. "That mushy stuff'll kill you, big guy. You better fucking wake me up next time if you don't want to sneak off."

"Josh, I—"

"Don't want hear it. Lock the door, so I know you'll be safe." With a gentle shove, Josh got Richard across the threshold and closed the door behind him. The bolt slid home with a solid *thunk*. Good. Another heavy thud followed, a little too much like a heavy

## *A DIFFERENT BREED*

body hitting the floor. Not so good.

“Guess it won’t kill him to sleep on the floor for one day.” Josh scrubbed his hands over his face. He had promised himself he was getting a job that morning, no more excuses, though it worried him to leave Richard alone and vulnerable. “Shit. He managed without you for umpteen centuries. I think he can hang.”

The fridge, now fully stocked, yielded up the makings of a killer omelet, orange juice, and actual cream for coffee. When Richard went shopping, he went all out. The thought stopped Josh mid-bite. The grocery shopping, the interruptions in schedule, he did this all for Josh. A hard lump formed in Josh’s throat. Heat prickled the backs of his eyes. No one had ever treated him this way, with such tender concern, especially with the unspoken thought between them that Josh endangered his lover by simply being there.

“Why, von Schaumburg? Why me all of a sudden after all this time alone? That’s what I don’t get.” He crumpled the empty orange juice carton and tossed it savagely into the kitchen trash. The memory of that eerie, jarring moment of recognition in the rain smacked into him again, as sharp and disorienting as the first time. “What the hell’s happened between us?”

He ruffled both hands back through his hair. In his precarious, often violent life, he’d never felt so secure, so happy. Why was he trying to pick at the edges until it all unraveled?

The want ads had been damn near useless, so Josh drove into town to troll the shops around the Commons. The antique dealers wanted experience, the restaurants, likewise. The lady at the little boutique with the “Help Wanted” sign looked like she wanted to call the cops. On impulse, Josh stopped in at the bookstore where he had first spotted Richard. Bookstores dotted downtown the way

## A DIFFERENT BREED

some towns had bars, most of them with a nice feel to them. The one he wanted, *Muse's Retreat*, had a funky, disorganized air to it that appealed to him.

"Sure, we're taking apps for part-time day," the cheerful girl behind the counter told him as she handed him a form. "Cindy went back to school and the part-time guy we had was a waste of space. Fill it out and I'll take it back to Lynette."

Josh tried to be charming and civil, kept the language scrupulously clean, but shortly after the girl had taken his application back, a loud, angry voice came from the back office.

"Did you even look at the address, Kaylie?" The outraged owner of the voice swept out of her office, glasses perched halfway down her patrician nose. She waved the paper in Josh's face. "What's the meaning of this, young man?"

"I...um, wanted to apply for a job?"

"So you say, but I don't appreciate people falsifying their applications."

She reminded Josh of a school librarian, with that air of unquestioned authority and unbending will.

"I don't...I filled out what I could. I mean, I did just get into town, so if it's the empty spaces for the previous—"

"No. Your current address." She stabbed a finger at the offending line, her frown deep enough to furrow her forehead. "This is not your address. I know the man who lives here and you are most definitely *not* him."

"Yes, ma'am. I mean, no, ma'am." Josh pulled himself together far enough that the light dawned. "Right. I see. I'm not trying to say I'm Richard. I'm staying with him."

She stared at him a moment, hawk-sharp eyes boring through him, and then she nodded. "You're *Richard's* young man. I see.

## *A DIFFERENT BREED*

You do realize I'll need to speak with him to confirm this? Since you have no other references?"

"Yes, ma'am. Of course." He wanted to bristle at being called Richard's, as if he was a dog or a piece of furniture, but the anger slid away.

"What do you know about books? What do you read?"

He wanted to be able to say he'd read Chaucer and Dickens, that he enjoyed literary fiction, but that lie would have been too easy to call him on. Reading for him had always been a matter of escape. "I read fantasy. And sci-fi." He felt a hot flush rise to the roots of his hair. "And sometimes, um, romance."

The shop owner, Lynette, didn't bat an eye. "Good. Always helpful to have an aficionado of genre fiction in the shop. I'll call Richard this evening when he's...free, and we'll see what we can do."

"Thank you, I appreciate the chance." Josh shook her hand and got a wry half smile for his efforts. Maybe the old bat wasn't all bad. She wasn't even that old, forties, maybe. Some women just acted old.

By the time he got back to the house, Richard's bedroom door stood open, so he was up and about. A twinge of guilt pinged him when he spotted the breakfast dishes neatly washed and stacked in the drainer. He'd have to be more careful about those things. Richard might not kick him out for what he was, but he'd probably get sick of living with a slob damn quick.

But where was he?

A quick search turned up a lot of empty house. Josh knew the man was there, though. His Richard-senses were tingling, which was a weird thought. The sensation was similar to his hunting radar, but warmer, exciting but in an anticipatory rather than

## A DIFFERENT BREED

anxious way.

“Of course. Duh.” He headed for the basement door and tried the knob. Locked. He knocked. “Richard? You down there?”

He pressed his ear to the door. The clink of metal on metal reached him and an odd whooshing. Alarming clatters and clanks drifted up to him. The crash of splintering glass sent his heart lurching. “Richard!” He pounded on the door, rattling the lock to test its strength. “*Richard!*”

Heavy footfalls pounded up the steps. Josh stepped back to give himself some space. If Richard was in trouble and this was some enemy dashing up the stairs, he needed fighting room.

The door crashed open. Richard stood there wild-eyed, teeth bared. Then he blinked and leaned out to look past Josh. He cleared his throat. “I thought...ah, you seem well enough.”

“I’m fine, babe. What the hell is going on down there? I thought someone was murdering you.”

“Ah.” Richard’s smile dispelled Josh’s remaining fears. “Minor work mishap. Nothing that can’t be mended.”

“Okay, great. I’m glad you’re not being staked or anything. But do I get to come down now and see what all the mystery’s about?”

Richard took his hand and pulled him down the stairs. “No mystery, my dear. But the work gets noisy and I would rather not be taken unaware.”

“Makes sense.” Josh pulled up at the bottom of the stairs, blinking in astonishment. What confronted him seemed at first like some twisted Hephaestean forge, with three glowing furnaces, the whooshing noise he had picked up, benches and tools that could have been mistaken for instruments of torture. As he took in the whole workshop, he began to understand. Astounding glass creations lined a double row of shelves—vases, bottles, glass

*A DIFFERENT BREED*

figures, and bowls of fantastic shape and design.

“You’re...a glassblower?”

“Yes.”

“Wow.” Josh wandered over to the finished pieces, the dreamlike feeling persisting as he examined a gorgeous orange and red plate whose shape reminded him of sea anemones. “Where’d you learn to do this?”

“Venice.”

God. The one-word answers had to stop. “When, Richard? How long have you been doing this?”

He twisted around. Richard twirled his glassblower’s pipe in his fingers, refusing to meet his eyes.

“Dammit, babe, give me something here. Every question I ask about you, not someone else, but you, is like I’m asking you to rip your heart out for me.”

“I learned...long ago,” Richard answered softly. “In Venice. In the fifteenth century. I practice the art when I have a stable home and can rebuild the studio again.”

Josh sucked in a breath. “Holy crap. So long...so many beautiful things...” He turned back to the artwork in front of him. He could only call it art, all these amazing pieces, the glass stallion with his sweeping mane and the hooves that looked like ice chips, the set of wineglasses with braided stems and bowls of molten gold that cradled the light, the carafe of deep, blood red, with vines and leaves climbing its sides.

A tentacle of pain wrapped around his heart. He sat on the nearest bench, dazed with horror.

“Josh? Joshua?” Richard knelt beside him. “Are you ill?”

“I almost killed you,” Josh forced out in a strangled whisper. “You’re an artist, you create all this beauty, and I almost killed



## A DIFFERENT BREED

you.”

Richard took his hands gently. “But you didn’t. You stopped yourself.”

A sob caught in Josh’s chest. “Shit. Oh, shit. I tried to...you’ve probably never hurt anyone in your *life*.”

“Don’t think me so innocent.” Richard looked away. “If you had killed me, it would simply have been time.”

“What...what are you saying?” Josh took him by the shoulders and shook him hard. “Dammit, Richard, who were you? How did this happen to you?”

Richard put his head in Josh’s lap and heaved a weary sigh. “There is a right way to turn someone and a wrong way. Carefully done, there is clarity and a minimum of pain. The wrong way, the forced way, is agony, an unholy baptism of blood and madness.”

“I’m guessing this whole vamp thing wasn’t exactly consensual for you.” Josh stroked his hair, encouraging him to continue.

“I was...long ago...the Captain of the house guard for Henry the Lion, Duke of Bavaria and Saxony. A Christian knight. A good Catholic who went on crusade and fought at my liege’s side, sworn to defend the weak and combat evil. A...paladin of sorts, if you like.”

“When was this?”

“Twelfth century.”

“Oh.” Josh buried his fingers in Richard’s hair to stop his hand shaking. He had slept with a being nearly a thousand years old and was having trouble getting his brain past that fact. This wasn’t about him, though. “Go on. You came this far, babe. May as well tell me the rest.”

Richard sat back on his heels, his dark head bowed. “Very well. You will most likely leave me once you have heard. But I cannot

## *A DIFFERENT BREED*

keep you here with me on false pretenses.”

\* \* \*

“My lord, please help us.” The petitioner fell to his knees, though the Duke would never have demanded it. “We are all damned if you cannot save us.”

Henry leaned his head on his hand, regarding the Count of Eschenwald with narrowed eyes. “You cannot protect your people. You cannot control your own wife. So now you come to me begging for my men, whom I can hardly spare at the moment.”

“Please, your grace! I cannot trust my own men. She has taken so many under her influence or made them like her.”

“Precisely how long have you known your wife is a demon?”

Richard took advantage of the man’s hesitation to lean over from his place at Henry’s right hand and speak in his liege’s ear. “My lord, give me ten men. I’ll burn this devil’s nest out.”

Henry gave him a sharp look. “I can least afford to be without you.”

“I’ll be back inside a week, my lord. Well before the king’s march on Lombardy.” Richard rose, towering over every man in the court. “As a knight of St. Michael’s, I cannot let the call go unanswered.”

“I would be unwise to curse the day you took holy orders, but I most certainly regret it,” Henry said with a wry smile. Then he turned back to the groveling count. “Happily for you, Captain von Schaumburg speaks for you. I find it difficult to refuse him an honorable request. You may have his assistance and ten of my men to accompany him.”

The count stared up at Richard, slack-jawed. “Your grace, if all

### *A DIFFERENT BREED*

of your men are of such heroic size, the devil himself would not prevail.”

In the bright light of morning, the quest seemed a brave and noble thing. Richard’s knights gathered in the courtyard, armor gleaming, tabards emblazoned with the golden lion, rampant, that the duke had adopted as his coat of arms.

“Have a care, my boy.” Henry took Richard by the shoulders before he mounted. “No rash heroics. If there is truth to the tale, and you deem it as dire as this craven man insinuates, come home. I won’t lose you for bravado’s sake.”

“Understood, my lord. We will proceed with all necessary caution.”

Henry’s clap on his armored shoulder rang across the courtyard. “As you do in all things, Captain. Godspeed.”

Richard’s heart brimmed with pride at such a warm send-off. He turned in his saddle as they rode out to wave farewell and to catch a last glimpse of his beloved duke. Henry stood with his arms crossed over his broad chest, golden hair catching fire in the sunlight. The duke was both husband and father, and would never take his guard captain to his bed. Richard did penance each Sunday for his sinful thoughts about Henry’s body, but he was content to guard Henry’s back and live at his side as his trusted companion. It was enough.

They rode into the *Schwarzwald* at a ground-eating clip. Richard kept the men spread out across the road, with outriders at the rear and vanguard to scout for ambush. Like any knight of that time, an attack from above never occurred to him.

Twilight glowed indigo between the evergreen branches when the first shadow plummeted from the trees. The man it took down hardly had time to scream before it tore out his throat.

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“Close up!” Richard bellowed. “Into the middle of the road!”

His desperate orders came a heartbeat too late and might not have been enough regardless. A dozen shadows joined the first, his men dragged from their saddles and slaughtered before they could draw steel. A hair faster than the rest, Richard had his blade out when the first creature dropped on his back, tumbling him to the hard-packed dirt. He caught a nightmare flash of pale skin and sharp fangs before he flung the creature off and struck its head from its shoulders.

The creatures beset him on all sides, hissing and snarling. Their faces were masks of feral madness but they were not beasts, since weapons flashed in their hands. One slashed at Richard’s shield arm, cutting to the bone. Unable to bring his shield up any longer, he gave ground, trying to get his back to one of the huge trees. He plunged his sword into one creature’s stomach and watched in horror as it kept its feet. The thing seized his sword arm in both hands and snapped his wrist.

Driven to his knees, his arms held behind him, Richard glanced up to see the count still in the saddle, calmly watching the slaughter.

“Why, Eschenwald? What is the meaning of this treachery?”

“I am so sorry, captain.” The count’s voice quavered. “She would have killed me. You will not perish, never fear. You are the one she will want.”

Before he could ask what this meant, a heavy blow rocked his head forward and the blue twilight turned black.

When Richard opened his eyes again, pain consumed him. It took some time before he could sort out his surroundings. He hung suspended by his left wrist, his broken right one bound tight to his wounded left arm. Blood trickled down his body to drip from his

## *A DIFFERENT BREED*

left heel in a distressingly steady rhythm. Shackles hung with weights circled both ankles so he could neither kick out nor move his legs to try to find purchase on the walls. The pounding of his head was almost pleasurable compared to the agony in his arms and back.

Torches guttered on the walls, revealing the rough-hewn stone of his cell with its ironbound, windowless door. The ceiling was lost in shadow and when he looked down, he wished the floor had been as well. Arranged around him as if they were some gruesome scattering of flower petals lay the severed heads of his men, all ten gazing up at him with the horror of their final moments.

“Dear God...” Richard whispered.

The door opened and a woman of astounding beauty swept into this miniature hell, hair like spun gold cascading loose down her back. The treacherous Eschenwald trailed her like a dog. Her white teeth flashed in a smile. “He will not hear you. You are forsaken and must forget the church and its absurd notions.”

“What do you want from me?” Richard snarled, though he feared the answer was his soul.

She ignored the question, raking his naked, battered body with her gaze. “He is magnificent, Joachim,” she addressed her husband without glancing his way. “You will introduce me to this brave Siegfried you have brought me.”

The count wrung his hands, his voice wavering. “My dear, this is Captain Richard von Schaumburg, commander of Duke Henry’s guard. Captain, this is my wife, Ilse Wittelsbach, Countess of Eschenwald.”

With a smile that would have been charming in a different setting, she curtsied. “I am honored to meet you, captain.”

Richard caught himself in a nod of acknowledgment, court

## A DIFFERENT BREED

manners simply too ingrained. Angry at the slip, he spat out, "Whatever you wish to gain will be futile. My liege will come for me and take this place apart stone by stone."

"It is my fondest wish that Henry the Lion will come for you," she purred. "By then you will be mine, body and soul, and you will kill him for me."

"Not in a hundred thousand years. No matter what tortures you plan," Richard growled.

She laughed and clapped her hands in delight.

"You are pleased, my dear?" the count murmured. "I did well?"

"You did very well." She turned to her husband and took his face between her hands in a tender gesture. Her lips brushed his forehead. With a sharp twist, she snapped his neck. The count fell dead to the stone floor.

Cold horror snaked deep into Richard's soul. *St. Michael preserve me, she is insane. How do you plead for reason where reason has fled?* "He was your *husband*," he whispered.

"Yes, he was." She approached him with a cheerful smile. "I no longer require him. You, my magnificent champion, you will be my consort, one worthy of the goddess I will become. Power and pleasure beyond your wildest dreams await you, my love. Strength beyond anything you have ever known. There will be terrible pain but this is merely the crucible which will forge you into a god."

Her fingers brushed his thigh in an intimate caress. She bent her head, he thought to kiss him, but as he watched, her canines extended, sharp, white daggers of bone. Agony ripped through him when she sank her fangs into the vein in his thigh. He gasped and struggled, desperate to get away from this horror in female form. The pain slid into soft ecstasy, his body relaxing as she fed, the shame of taking comfort from her unholy feast increasing with

## *A DIFFERENT BREED*

every heavy pull of her lips. When she finally pulled back, licking her full, red lips, she stroked his hip gently.

"It is begun, my hero. Your time in this cell will only last until the change takes hold. Be steadfast and strong. We will be together soon."

With that, she left him hanging limp and panting in his shackles. Left alone with the severed heads of his men staring at him in accusation, Richard prayed the end would come swiftly and drifted into a twilight of misery.

The cycle repeated seven times. She came to taunt him, caress him, and to feed, and then left him weaker and more despairing each time. Thirst clawed at him. Continual blood loss left him weak and dizzy. Time lost meaning and his captivity could have been days or weeks. After the seventh feeding, he hung in his chains, shivering.

"Please," he croaked out in a spare whisper. "Water."

"My poor love," she murmured. "Perhaps it is time to let you drink."

Other figures entered the room. He couldn't make them out through his blurred vision. He screamed in anguish when they lowered him to the floor, his arms no longer capable of bending properly when they tried to arrange them in a more natural position. A hand lifted his head, pressed a cup to his lips. He took a desperate gulp and jerked back in revulsion.

*Blood...*

"No," he whispered, fighting against the hands that held him despite his starved, weakened state. He didn't know what they meant to do, but he feared it, certain this was the final step that would cost him his soul.

Sharp-nailed fingers clamped onto either side of his head like a

## *A DIFFERENT BREED*

wise. They tilted his head back, forced his jaw open, and poured the contents of the cup down his throat. Forced to swallow or choke, a few trickles snaked down his throat. Satisfied, they released him and let him curl into a ball on the damp stones as searing pain knifed through his gut. Fever roared through him, and his awareness narrowed to chills and stifling heat by turns and continual agony, as if serpents devoured his insides.

Rage curled through him even through the fever. Every fiber of him rebelled at being forced to partake in this hellish game she played. Soon the hunger reared up to shut out all else. It swallowed sense and buried the rage in a dark chasm. Vague recollections of suckling at her breast in some gruesome parody of mother and child haunted his nightmares, and each time she fed him, he grew weaker. Finally, darkness closed around him, blissful peace he hoped would be the end.

When his eyes snapped open, his heart pounded. He had a brief moment of clarity where he realized his arms had healed and *she* lay curled up against his naked body. She held a young man by the throat, ignoring his struggles to free himself.

“My love is awake,” she said with a sparkling laugh. “Come, we will share your first meal.”

Her voice brought the rage surging up from subterranean depths. The hunger rose with it in a titanic wave that crashed upon him and drowned all that was Richard. He seized her head and with a bone-rattling roar, ripped it from her shoulders. The young man who was to have been their feast fled screaming while Richard drank from the blood spouting from her severed arteries. Her blood no longer satisfied the hunger. He howled in frustration, joining the keening from all over the castle. Her blood children had felt her die.



## A DIFFERENT BREED

He lurched from the bed, snarling, desperate to satisfy the agony of need. Retribution stalked the castle's halls that night until all the screaming ceased.

\* \* \*

*That sure as hell explains a lot...* Josh sat with his arms on his knees, leaning forward to catch the final bits of Richard's story since his voice had dropped to a choked whisper.

"When I came back to myself, when I found thought again, I was kneeling in the stable courtyard with a boy across my lap. His throat had been ripped out. I killed them all. The countess. Her crazed men. The scullery maids. The kitchen help. The stable boys. Everyone. Like some monstrous tidal flood, I killed without regard for innocence."

Richard still knelt with his head bowed, his hands in his lap. The sorrow rolled off him in waves, and Josh barely kept himself from flinging his arms around him and weeping. Richard didn't need that.

Josh spoke softly and chose his words carefully. "You know I'm not a priest. Can't do the *te absolvo* thing."

"No. I know."

"And I can't make it all better if it still hurts so bad."

"No."

Josh took Richard under the chin and forced his head up. His voice took on a sharp note. "Did you tell me all this to try to scare me? Let me see what a big, bad vamp you are so I'd run screaming?"

Long-lashed gray eyes regarded him steadily. "I don't believe anything would frighten you. I never thought you would be afraid."

## *A DIFFERENT BREED*

Revolted. Disgusted. But not afraid.”

“How old were you then?”

“Twenty.”

“Okay, so this completely shitty thing happens to you, that you don’t have any control over, when you’re not even old enough to go to a bar. Yeah, it was awful and you did some awful things when you were out of your head. You think maybe it’s time to let it go?”

“I can’t.” Richard tried to pull his head away but Josh held tight. “There is always hunger below the surface. Some day it might happen again.”

“Yeah, I get that. So has it? Ever happened? You even get close to losing control again in, what, nine hundred years? Kill some babies and shit?”

Anger sparked in Richard’s eyes. “Never.”

*Better. Come on, babe. Enough with the pity party.* “So you go around walking on eggshells for centuries, making sure you remind yourself that you’re a bad person ’cause you were supposed to be one of the good guys. You were supposed to be infallible, the white fucking knight! And your pride still hurts after all this time ’cause you weren’t the hero! You couldn’t pull off the fairytale miracle, so you have to play the martyr and flog yourself over something you can’t fucking take back now!”

“No!” Richard snarled and surged up to pace the room. “I killed! The potential is there, always there under the surface! I have to be so careful. I have to live to atone for what I did. I can’t possibly live long enough even if my life extends to the end of time!”

Josh snorted. “God, that’s melodramatic. Really over the top, babe.”

## *A DIFFERENT BREED*

Richard roared in frustration and slammed his fist into the wall. The plaster cracked. Josh rose and walked to him, his approach slow and cautious.

"I haven't run, babe." He put a palm against Richard's heaving back. "Not gonna run. You're right. I'm not scared of you. For you, maybe. Not of you. Far as I can see, you still are one of the good guys. Fairytale knights don't exist, babe. Not fair to think you should have been one."

"I didn't..." Richard trailed off, shaking his head. He turned and folded Josh in a tender embrace. "I can't help being haunted by it all."

"I know, big guy. We all have nightmares. And stuff we regret." Josh stroked his back, the hard muscles tense and shivering under his hands. "What did William say about all this? About you being worried it might happen again?"

Richard cleared his throat, twice. "William...said that if I stayed out of strange women's beds, I should be fine."

Josh smiled against Richard's shoulder. "I think I would've liked your William. Gotta have a sense of humor when you live with a drama queen."

## CHAPTER 5

### A SENSE OF DREAD

“Thanks for taking time out, everyone.” Mick leaned closer to the speakerphone. His heads of medical and intelligence sat across from him. All the other chairs sat empty since the hunters were out in the field. Those who were able had called into this morning’s conference.

“Sure, Mick, but I’ve got a nest to find before dinnertime.” Roark’s deep voice cut through the various background sounds on the hunters’ cells. “What’s up?”

“There’s a possibility we’ve got an operative gone rogue.” Mick let the announcement hang in the air. *Wait for it...*

The explosion of voices happened a heartbeat later.

“Who, Mick?”

## A DIFFERENT BREED

“When the hell—”

“Gone Ren?”

“Did they—”

He let them work up a little anger before he broke in. “Settle down, boys and girls. I didn’t say he’d gone Ren and I didn’t say he’d been turned. I said rogue. He called in from the field, said he was quitting, and refused to come in. We don’t know the details yet, but I’d say not coming in for a final debrief raises some serious red flags.”

“Dammit, Mick, who is it?” Roark growled from the phone.

“Josh Kempinski.”

Several gasps and shouts of denial came through loud and clear.

“It has to be a misunderstanding.” That came from Lucy. “I mean, it’s *Josh*. What did he say to you?”

“He said he’s tired. Said he’s done.”

A long silence followed. Then Stuart spoke up, “He does get depressed, Mick. Was he drunk?”

“No. If he was, I would’ve sent Doc out after him. It’s a gut feeling right now, folks. Things just didn’t sound right with him. So if he contacts you, asks you for anything, I need you to let me know. Do not go to him. For your own safety and the group’s security, do not reach out to him until we know more. Got it?”

He listened for their responses, counting them off in his head, and came up one short. “Stuart? There a problem?”

Their most empathetically sensitive hunter took a moment to respond. “No, Mick. But I’m worried about him. Josh has saved most of our butts out here. More than once.”

“I hear what you’re saying, bud. I don’t want anyone jumping to conclusions, either. I’m only asking everyone to be careful if

*A DIFFERENT BREED*

you hear from him.”

“All right, Mick. Understood.”

With all his remaining hunters on board, Mick ended the call and turned to the men in the room. “I need confirmation. If he’s where I think he is and settling in, we’ve got a problem.”

Jenner leaned back in his chair. “He shouldn’t be able to track them.”

“Doesn’t matter. He’s uncanny in how he gets info. If he runs across this, the whole project’s in jeopardy.” Mick stabbed a finger at the table. “I need to know exactly where Kempiski is and I need those loose subjects recovered. Now.”

“We’re on it. I’ll get you an update in the morning.”

\* \* \*

“Do you dream?” Josh trailed a finger around Richard’s nipple in lazy circles.

“Not when I sleep.”

He pinched the nipple between thumb and forefinger, pleased when he got a little catch of breath. “Which means what, Mr. Cryptic?”

Richard lunged and rolled Josh onto his back. “You never give me a chance to explain.”

“So explain.” Josh ground his hips upward, sliding their morning erections together. “I’m listening.”

“Hardly.” Richard laughed. “Your mind’s already wandered to something else.” He pressed his hips down, letting his full, impressive weight crush Josh to the mattress, his hands pinning Josh’s wrists above his head.

Josh moaned and squirmed, letting Richard push his buttons

## *A DIFFERENT BREED*

without protest. He loved Richard in dominant mode, and sometimes needled him and pushed him to get the Alpha dog to come out and play. “Whose fault is that?”

“Entirely mine,” Richard whispered against Josh’s throat, letting his fangs scrape against his skin. He lifted his head suddenly and went on as if he hadn’t just turned Josh into a moaning, pre-orgasmic mess. “I have times, especially in a quiet, meditative moment, when I drift away into a fugue state. Sometimes into memory. Sometimes into something like a dream.”

Josh tried to lift his head for a kiss, but Richard backed away. “Bastard,” he panted out, irritated at Richard’s smug smile, and turned on as hell. He let his head flop back when he realized he wasn’t getting any until he finished the conversation. “Okay. So your brain’s still basically human, I guess, and it needs to dream or you get sick. I read that somewhere.”

“Did you?” Richard shoved a knee between Josh’s thighs.

“Yeah,” Josh grated out. “So since you don’t really sleep, you zone out like some head case.”

Richard’s forehead crinkled in that endearing way, his expression halfway between amusement and offense. “Something like that. Though I am still aware of my surroundings on some level.”

“You better not be doing that while you’re screwing me,” Josh growled. “Or I’ll beat your ass.”

“I’ll have to consider that. I might enjoy it.”

“You have some time, babe? Before we need to tuck you in for the day?”

Richard did his best to look puzzled. “Time for what?”

“You know damn well—” Josh took a deep breath to grab hold of his temper and changed tactics. He arched up into Richard,

## A DIFFERENT BREED

pressing their bodies closer while he spread his legs and lifted his chin to expose his throat. Richard's eyes glazed over, a soft growl rumbling in his chest. Josh knew he had him as he whispered, "Just a little bedtime snack, big guy."

"Mmm, delicious," Richard murmured and lowered his head to suck on the pulse point. Josh gasped, so keyed up he felt his balls drawing tight, though Richard hadn't done anything but tease him.

With a soft smile, Richard let Josh's wrists loose. He kissed a wet trail down Josh's throat and shoulder. Fire skittered along Josh's nerves as Richard's wonderful tongue lapped at his skin. He bucked up with a soft cry when sharp teeth teased at his nipple, then collapsed back on the bed, moaning, as Richard descended.

While he wasn't one of those twink boys who always wanted to bottom, so far he had ceded top to Richard every time. The man was twice his size and far stronger, but that wasn't the issue. Josh had found an intoxicating power in playing bottom for him. Richard was the aggressor but every moan, every movement of Josh's body drove his vamp lover on, his reactions often so primal and instinctive, Josh knew *he* was the one driving.

Richard groaned, grinding his cock against the sheets when he buried his face in the curly hair of Josh's crotch. He licked up Josh's rock hard erection with eager abandon, drawing in deep breaths as if he couldn't get enough of the scent. He took the head between his soft lips. Josh panted, fists bunching the sheets.

"Babe," he forced out as Richard's sharp teeth teased at the finely veined skin of his shaft. "I'm not gonna last like that."

"I want to taste you."

Josh lifted his head to look down at his lover. *God, what a sinfully gorgeous body, those broad shoulders, that glorious, muscular ass...* "Um, babe, didn't you tell me it's too soon?"



## *A DIFFERENT BREED*

Richard licked the tip of his cock like an ice cream cone. “Not that sort of tasting, handsome. Not feeding. I want to taste you when you come.”

“Oh.” Josh gripped Richard’s head in both hands, encouraging him downward. “Go for it, babe. Whatever makes you happy.”

He thought he might have heard Richard whisper “You make me happy” but he wasn’t sure. Pleasure built behind his groin wall as Richard’s cheeks hollowed with the force of his suction.

*So damn close already.* “Hey, turn around, hot stuff,” Josh panted. “Don’t want you feeling left out.”

Richard ignored him, his face suffused with ecstasy, his hips grinding hard against the sheets. His eyes slid shut, little whimpering moans escaping his chest every time Josh’s cock brushed his fangs.

*He’s getting off on this. I’m screwing his mouth and it’s just as good for him as me taking him at the backdoor.*

Awestruck by this new discovery, Josh stroked Richard’s ear with his fingertips, lifting his hips into each suctioned pull, watching Richard’s meteoric rush toward climax. With a desperate groan, Richard opened his throat and swallowed Josh to the root, the tight constriction taking Josh over the edge. He forced himself to watch while his orgasm crashed over him. As his seed shot from him, Richard cried out and humped the sheets hard as he swallowed every drop. His muscles bunched and flexed, his hips bucking and jerking in the most uninhibited climax Josh had ever witnessed from him.

When he quieted, he lifted his mouth from Josh’s softening cock, careful of his teeth, and lay facedown, panting hard.

“Babe? You okay?” Josh stroked his hair gently.

“Yes,” came the muffled response.

## *A DIFFERENT BREED*

“That’s not, ah, gonna upset your stomach, is it?”

“Minor discomfort. Nothing to speak of.”

“What the hell was that all about?”

Richard shifted far enough to lay his head on Josh’s thigh. “My teeth are very sensitive. During arousal. Roof of the mouth as well.”

“Yeah, I see that.” Josh tangled his fingers in Richard’s hair to lift his head. “Babe?”

“Hmm?”

“That was hot as freaking hell.”

The smile Richard gave him transformed his handsome face into a thing of angelic beauty.

\* \* \*

“You’re Josh, aren’t you?”

A willowy redhead loomed over Josh when he glanced up from where he knelt on the floor unpacking the latest shipment. Lynette had asked him if he saw any glaring holes in the inventory and half-jokingly, he had blurted out that the store didn’t have any gay romance. Instead of laughing or reacting with embarrassment, Lynette had pursed her lips, nodded, and disappeared into her office. Two days later, the boxes arrived.

*Nothing like being caught by some strange woman on your knees while you’re up to your elbows in gay soft porn.* “Yeah, that’s me.” Josh shot her a grin. “Unless you’re a cop.”

“Actually, I am. I need to ask you a few questions about your whereabouts last evening.”

Josh stared at her, running back through the past few days in desperation for anything he might have done wrong. Her stern

## *A DIFFERENT BREED*

expression soon cracked, though, and she laughed.

“Oh, your face! If you could’ve seen it!” She held out a hand. “Sorry. I’m Tamara Banks. Richard might’ve mentioned me.”

Tamara...Tamara... “His art dealer friend, right?” Josh stood, wiping the dust from his palms before he accepted her offered handshake. Long, firm fingers engulfed his. She was nearly as tall as Richard.

“That’s me. Thought I’d stop by and offer to take you to lunch. Get to—”

“Hi, Tam!” A voice called from across the shop. The thump of a cane preceded the woman’s appearance, since she turned out to be shorter than the bookshelves. “So this is the one that’s stolen our Richard’s heart. He is a cutie, I’ll give you that.”

“Um...hi?” Josh turned to the new arrival to meet bright blue eyes staring up at him in frank appraisal.

“Hi, handsome. I’m Glory.”

Josh chuckled in relief. Richard’s fondness for this miniature dynamo shone through whenever he spoke of her. “Good to meet you in person.”

“I came to take you to lunch. We need to talk.”

“Well, see...”

“Joshua?” Lynette’s sharp voice cut through the shop’s normal quiet. “Are those boxes unpacked?” Her heels clicked on the hardwood as she, too, came around the shelves. “Oh. I see. Tam. Glory. Are you harassing my employee?”

“An offer to buy lunch is hardly harassment,” Glory said with a wry smile.

“From you, it could be.” Lynette looked from one to the other. “Well? Why are you standing here? Are we taking Joshua to lunch or not?”

## A DIFFERENT BREED

“We? What’s this *we* stuff?” Tamara bristled. “I asked him first.”

“Ladies, no need to fight over me,” Josh murmured. They all ignored him.

Glory cocked her head to the side. “You know, it’s not such a bad idea if we all go together.”

“Now, hold up a sec!” Josh protested as Glory took one arm and Tamara the other. “Don’t I get a say in this?”

Three voices answered in unison. “No.”

Feeling shanghaied and ganged up on, Josh still had no problem ordering at the restaurant, a burger with huge avocado slices and four-alarm hot salsa and a side order of Belgian fries. *Might as well go into the inquisition with a full stomach.*

The four of them made uncomfortable small talk and then silence fell when the food arrived. Josh tucked into his with gusto, his focus narrowing on his plate. Only after the silence became protracted did he glance up to find three sets of eyes staring at him.

“He doesn’t look starved,” Tamara said.

“Acts it, though.” Glory tapped his arm. “No one’s going to take it from you, you know.”

Josh put the half-eaten burger down, a hot flush creeping up his face. “Um, sorry. Old habits.”

“Of not having enough to eat?” Lynette asked. “Or being uncertain you would be given time to finish?”

“Both, actually.” He pulled in a deep breath. “Look, I know you’re just looking out for him, which is why I’m not mad. But if this little ambush is to tell me you’re gonna beat me like I stole something if I break his heart, I gotta tell you he’s a big boy, and it’s really none of your business.”

“We know who you are,” Tamara said, her voice dropping to a

## *A DIFFERENT BREED*

whisper. "Hunter."

Josh raised a hand. "This is a surprise to anyone here? No? 'Kay, then cut the dramatics. Ex-hunter, at any rate."

"We worry for him, Joshua," Lynette broke in, her voice softer than usual. "Surely you understand that."

"I don't think he needs a writer and a couple of shopkeepers protecting him," Josh said on a choked laugh.

Glory's hand settled atop his. "He's our friend. And he does need protecting. He may have survived a long time without us, but he's...vulnerable. Easily hurt. I don't know how much he told you—"

"I know about William. About what happened. If I ever find out who did it, their lives aren't gonna be worth spit."

"What the hell do you care about William? You never knew him," Tamara spat out.

"Neither did you, Tam," Glory interjected.

Josh directed his answer to Glory. He wasn't sure why, but she was the one he felt deserved an explanation. "I didn't know William. But I've heard enough to know he was a sweet, gentle man. To know the kind of pain it's caused Richard. That's all I need to know."

"We had a William Arcadian display in the front window for months after he died," Lynette said as she stirred her coffee unnecessarily. "I only knew he had been murdered then, not the particulars. One evening, the most incredibly handsome man stopped to stare at the display. Transfixed, he seemed unable to move away from the window. I went out to ask if we could help him with anything. He said, 'I knew the author.' 'Are you a relative?' I asked. He shook his head, telling me more with that simple gesture than most people say in hours. He asked for a

## A DIFFERENT BREED

hardcover copy of *Phoenician* because it had a picture of William on the dust jacket. He said he had no photos of him.”

“And you’re telling me this because...”

“I suppose because it touched me more deeply than anything had in quite some time.” Lynette gave him one of her rare, wry smiles and went on deadpan, “And if you break his heart, I will beat you like you stole something.”

Josh snorted on a laugh. Bone dry, Lynette’s sense of humor, but she had one.

“I guess my only real question is this.” Glory brought his attention back to her. “Why are you with him? Knowing who you’ve been, what you’ve been doing, and why, what changed?”

Josh stuffed a fry in his mouth to give himself a moment. “I came to kill him—”

“I knew it!” Tamara crowed in triumph.

“Shush, Tam. Don’t be stupid.”

“Thanks.” Josh drew a slow breath. “It wasn’t Richard that I was after, but the vamp my radar told me lived here. One vamp being the same as another, I thought. When I went after him, though, and I looked in his eyes, something...sparked between us. I don’t even know what to call it. Like I’d recognized something, or remembered something.”

Glory stared at him, one eyebrow creeping up.

“What?”

“That’s what Richard said, too. A spark of recognition.”

Josh shrugged. “I don’t know what else to call it. Then I talked to him and, well, all vamps aren’t the same. I’m not a hundred percent sure why I’m here. But Richard’s one of the good guys. I wanna protect him. To be here for him. To...shit, I know it sounds corny. To stand beside him.”

### A DIFFERENT BREED

Tamara shot him a sheepish grin, and then started to sing softly, “*Stand by your vamp...*”

It shouldn’t have been funny, but it took Josh a good two minutes to stop laughing.

\* \* \*

Miss Kitty sat on the rail, content to clean her paws as she watched crickets in the grass. Richard lounged in the chaise at the other end of the porch. As long as he stayed at least six feet away and refrained from sudden movements, the little cat tolerated his presence. She would most likely never purr in his lap as she did with Josh. As hunters with different niches, they could share territory, but her instincts warned her off such a large predator.

“*What did you do after...you know?*” Josh had asked late in the evening Richard had told him about his turning.

“*I did what heartbroken, lost soldiers have done for centuries. I made my way home to my mother.*”

He had not told Josh that he had gone home to beg his mother to have him killed. His pleas and his tears had done nothing to move her. She remained adamant.

“You live by the will of God, my darling.” She stood at the far end of the great hall, hands folded, since Richard would not allow her close. “If he had no purpose for you, you would not have survived.”

The family’s retainers bound him and took him unresisting up to his old room where they chained him down to the bed. Relief flooded through him. Taut muscles relaxed for the first time in days. If he lost control, he would be unable to do any harm.

That evening, she came to him and tried to feed him freshly

## A DIFFERENT BREED

slaughtered lamb.

“*Mutti*, please,” he whispered, unable to choke any of it down. “Let me starve. Let me die.”

“Nonsense. It is like an illness, what has happened to you.” She wiped her hands on a cloth and rose, taking the lamb with her. “We must see what your stomach will accept.”

She tried again with organ meats, both cooked and raw, and then with ox-blood soup. Richard swallowed the soup and became violently ill. Patient and undeterred, she cleaned him up and left for the evening. Dead faces haunted him all that night. He welcomed the day and the oblivion it brought.

The next evening, his mother came again, though not alone. A young man followed her, tall and lanky, his white-blond hair lending him an elfin air.

“My darling, this is Gerhard Brun.” She put a hand on the visitor’s shoulder to bring him forward. “He has some knowledge of your affliction.”

Richard looked him up and down, some instinct telling him that Gerhard was fully human. “And what would you know, you who have not endured this horror?”

“My lord.” Gerhard’s voice was soft as new leaves. “I served one such as you. *Vampir*. One come unwilling to the change, like you.”

“You speak of past service. What befell your liege?”

“He fell in battle, my lord. It was his wish, to die as a warrior.”

Richard’s mother managed a wan smile. “I will leave you to acquaint yourselves. Young men do not require an aging matron listening to their converse.”

As soon as the door closed behind her, Gerhard unbuckled his sword belt and set it aside.



## A DIFFERENT BREED

“What do you mean to do?” Richard’s chains clanked as he tried to raise his head off the pillows.

Gerhard stripped off his shirt, revealing a lean-muscled, smooth chest. “My lord, your lady mother chose me to come to you because she believes you have no interest in women.”

“I don’t need a bed warmer,” Richard snarled.

“You must feed, my lord—”

“No!”

“You must, or the hunger will consume you. Rabbit’s blood and such are well enough for a short space, but they will not keep the need at bay for more than a few weeks.” Gerhard sat in the chair by the fire to pull off his boots. “It can be done gently, my lord. The best way to learn is to do so during lovemaking.”

Richard gaped at him. “You intend to sodomize me?”

A soft smile tugged at Gerhard’s lips. “I had rather hoped it would be the other way round, my lord.”

“But...it’s sinful. To lie with another man.”

“So some would say.” Gerhard shrugged. “Our Beloved Lord said no word against it in all of his teachings. It is only in other verses that it is specifically forbidden. Though so was the eating of pork. I am fond of *schweinebraten*.”

“It’s not the same as eating pork.” Richard tugged on his wrist cuffs, his heart hammering. Desire stabbed through him when Gerhard stripped off his drawers to reveal long legs and a beautifully shaped backside.

“No, my lord.” Gerhard walked slowly to the bed, his erection jutting from his body like a proud battle banner. “It is infinitely more enjoyable.”

Richard gasped when gentle fingers pushed his nightshirt up to his waist. He trembled so hard the bed rattled when Gerhard

## *A DIFFERENT BREED*

straddled him.

“You will not hurt me. Please let me help you.” Gerhard stroked his stomach, his expression full of concern.

“I have not...” Richard turned his face away, shamed and anxious. “I have never lain with a lover.”

“Then that will be two things I guide you through this night, my lord.” Gerhard leaned forward to kiss his forehead, exposing his throat to Richard.

A soft whimper escaped Richard when Gerhard took his cock in hand and angled it toward his puckered entrance. The head encountered something cool and slick and Richard’s embarrassment increased as he realized his new companion had come fully prepared.

Shame melted into a spring thaw’s worth of pleasure as Gerhard sank down on him and lifted Richard’s head to his throat. “Take, my lord. Your teeth will pierce cleanly. Your tongue will close the little wounds after. Gently. Just at the pulse. Oh...dear God...”

Gerhard jerked and gasped as Richard’s teeth closed through his skin, but he did not pull away. He rocked on the shaft deep inside him and held Richard close as he fed, their orgasms crashing and tangling in a duet of deep, throaty moans.

It was much better than pork, by far.

\* \* \*

Richard surged up, torn out of his fugue by a sudden rush of unease. He clutched the porch rail, staring into the woods. Something...something...

A brush on his hand brought him around, fist swinging. A

## *A DIFFERENT BREED*

strong arm blocked his blow.

“Whoa! Hold up, big guy, it’s me!” Josh ducked the second swing before he danced back out of reach. “Jesus H. Christ on toast!”

Richard wrapped his arms around his ribs, panting. “Sorry, sorry. You startled me.”

“I did call you. You were zoned out big time.”

“No. That is, I was. But something disturbed me. I was...” Richard shook his head, the odd sensation of spiders crawling on the back of his brain gone. “Listening.”

“Yeah? For what? Look, I’m sorry I’m late. Had to deal with being interrogated by Richard’s Angels today and got kinda behind at work.”

“Richard’s Angels?”

“Three chicks. Different shapes and hair colors. Oh, never mind. Pop culture. Not your thing.”

Richard leaned back against the rail. “I understand the reference. I simply thought it was a poor joke.”

“Been a lot of that today,” Josh grumbled. “So you okay, or what?”

“It’s better.” Richard lifted his head to the trees, trying to recapture whatever had distressed him. “For a moment, I was overwhelmed by a sudden sense of dread. It’s gone now. Perhaps too much dwelling on the past.”

“Yeah, well, next time you dwell, don’t take it out on me.”

## CHAPTER 6

### DIRE BEAST

Richard hung up the phone. “I need to go to Glory’s for a bit.”

“Um, what about going out? You and me? What happened to that?” Josh folded his arms over his chest, amazed how hurt he felt by the change in plans.

“I won’t be long. We’ll go out after.” Richard reached for him, but he backed away. “You could come with me.”

“No, thanks, babe. I’m okay with weird, but watching you sucking on someone else? That’s just too weird.”

Richard blinked, and then snickered.

“What? What the hell’s so funny?”

With a hand on the wall, Richard fought to compose himself. “She asked me to come and help with a bear problem.”

## A DIFFERENT BREED

"I really don't wanna see Glory naked." Josh rolled his eyes when the statement brought on an uncontrolled fit of laughter. Great to see Richard in such a good mood; annoying to still be in the dark.

"Bear, not bare, my dear," Richard wheezed, swiping at his eyes. "Black bear. She thinks she hears one snuffling around outside her backdoor. They do wander close to town sometimes."

"Not sure I'm cool with you going out to tangle with a freaking bear, either."

"Black bears aren't generally aggressive." Richard took a deep breath and managed a straight face. "When it's happened before, it's only needed to catch my scent to warn it off. A bit around the house and the trash bins out back."

Josh wrinkled his nose. "Please don't tell me you're gonna mark your territory. God, that's just...ew."

"Ah, no. Interesting thought, but not something I've found necessary." A smile twitched at Richard's lips as he opened his arms. "My sweet hunter, please don't sulk. Half an hour. That's all I need."

*That gorgeous, uncertain smile, those incredible eyes...dammit, why's he have to be so hard to resist?* Josh relented, allowing Richard to fold him into a hard hug. "All right, big guy. But don't blow me off. Not if you want me to get you off later."

"It's been over three weeks," Richard said softly. He put a finger under Josh's chin to tilt his head up. "I could feed tonight."

"Yeah, yeah—" Josh cut himself short when he realized what Richard meant. His cock twitched when it caught up to where his brain had gone. "You mean from me?"

Richard leaned in to whisper close to his ear. "Yes, from you, my brave Joshua. Would you like that?"

## *A DIFFERENT BREED*

“Yes...oh, God, yes...” Appalled and amused at his own weakness, Josh still couldn’t help the little whimper when Richard licked his jaw. He realized he had melted against Richard’s hard body, those strong arms supporting most of his weight. He gave himself a mental shake and pushed back. “Get going, then, hot stuff. Sooner you go, the sooner you can get back.”

Richard gave him a little salute and turned on his heel to go.

“Hey! Car keys?”

“It’s a lovely night. I need a bit of a run. Nearly as fast as the car if I go through the woods.” Richard stared off into the trees just a moment too long, making Josh wonder what he was looking for.

“All right, babe. I’ll—” Josh cut off. Between one syllable and the next, Richard was gone. “Damn show-off vamp.”

At loose ends, Josh wandered the house. Richard didn’t own a gaming console, so he couldn’t destroy virtual zombie hoards or anything like that. Truth was, Richard didn’t own more than necessary in any regard. Spartan would have been a kind description of his house. No clever photographs or reproduction prints graced the walls. No loose carpets snagged one’s feet on any floor. Of the four bedrooms, only three were furnished. Richard’s room held only his double bed where he spent his dead-to-the-world hours and a mini-fridge with bottled water since he often woke up thirsty. He had explained to Josh that the while the blood was food, he still needed water. The “guest” room had the big bed and side table, the wing chair and a single dresser. The third furnished bedroom, Richard’s study, had only a computer table and a chair. No knick-knacks graced any surface. No clutter filled any floor space.

The living room at least had a comfortable couch, a TV, a couple of tables, and a bookshelf. Cozy surroundings, apparently,

## A DIFFERENT BREED

Richard could dispense with; books, he could not. Josh wandered over to the shelf, running his fingers along the spines. Hardbacks shared space with paperbacks in no apparent order. Then he spotted a section on the far right of the top shelf, which would have been eye level for Richard. Every spine displayed the same author's name, William Arcadian.

"There you are, bud." Josh had known, of course, that William's books would be in the house. Courage to look for them had been hard to muster. He reached up, and closed hesitant fingers around the one titled *Phoenician*. This was the one, the book published right before William's murder.

Josh drew a deep breath, not certain why he was so anxious about seeing William. Maybe because he felt like he was trespassing in what should have been someone else's life. He turned the book over and found himself staring into a pair of new-grass green eyes. *Great. A color photo. What publisher does that?*

He sat on the sofa with the book held out in both hands. The gorgeous eyes seemed amused, but in a gentle way. The handsome, even-featured face had high cheekbones and perfect, lush lips, parted in a slightly conspiratorial smile, a dimple evident on one cheek. Laugh lines surrounded the eyes; snow-white strands decorated the ebony hair.

A hard lump settled in Josh's chest. He had assumed William had died young. This man was in his late forties, at least. How long had he and Richard been together? He opened the book to the dedication and it only got worse.

*To my beloved*, it read. "Oh, great, I really, really don't wanna read this."

Of course, he did anyway. He couldn't stop himself.

*To my beloved, my inspiration and my rock. Thank you for all*

## ***A DIFFERENT BREED***

*the years we've shared, for your patience and your indulgence, for your passion and your insight. The next twenty will be even better.*

"Fuck...oh..." Josh put the book down next to him and buried his head in his hands. Twenty years, and hunters had destroyed it all. People like him. Had he been like that? Would he have gone along with it if he'd been there? If they had told him it was necessary? "I'm sorry, bud, I'm so sorry..."

The backs of his eyes stung, his throat constricted. *Dammit, I am so not gonna cry.* Pain settled in his gut, anyway, that horrible, churning sensation in his stomach and the sharp pain in his...leg?

*What the hell?*

A searing line ran up his right leg from knee to hip. He leapt up, certain he would see blood seeping through his jeans, but there was nothing. While he tried to calm his pounding heart, a terrible sense of panic threatening to overwhelm him, he became aware of scents he couldn't identify, flashes of sight not his own. Wet leaves, woods, blood...

A shot rang out and he knew it wasn't near the house. A spear of agony pierced through his chest. He cried out and fell to his knees. Again, no blood. The pain remained, but it wasn't...

"Richard. Oh, holy shit. Richard!"

He crawled for the door, then gained his feet and raced for the Jeep. The pain only grew worse as he slammed into gear and roared down the drive in a shower of flying gravel. "Hold on, babe, I'm coming. Just hold on."

Twice, he nearly blacked out. If it was still so bad, though, Richard was still alive. He knew this without needing an explanation, knew this terrible agony raced along the strange connection between them. He managed to tamp down on it, pulling back from the pain so he could concentrate on getting there. It was



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something like his vamp radar, but so much stronger, pulling him like some Hoover Dam sized magnet to Richard. While he knew where Glory lived, he wouldn't have needed the address, impossible to get lost if he tried.

As he got close to Glory's house, a legion of red and blue emergency vehicle lights punctured the night. He drove past, slow enough to see paramedics wheeling a gurney down the walkway. A small body with a halo of golden curls lay on the gurney.

"Shit," Josh spat out. At least Glory's head was uncovered. *That means she's not dead, right?*

He stopped on the next street over and slipped into the trees, taking the back way to the house. Had the bear forced its way in? Had Richard been wrong about black bears being nonaggressive? Or maybe it was rabid. Did bears even get rabies?

Richard wasn't with the paramedics or the police. He didn't need his hunting sense to tell him that since the man would have been a half-head taller than the tallest cop in the front yard. No, Josh's path took him away from the house, farther into the woods. He slowed as he neared the source of the lodestone pull. The pain had faded beyond any of his efforts to wall himself off from it. Richard was losing consciousness and fast.

A whimper reached him, followed by a low growl.

"Babe? It's me." Josh flipped on his pocket flashlight to locate Richard's body stretched out on his side in the leaves. Richard hissed as the light hit his eyes, so he snapped it off again quickly. "Don't bite me, big guy. We gotta get you out of here. You hear me?"

A rustling of leaves warned him a split second before Richard's hand closed in a vise-grip around his ankle. The growl grew in volume and then cut off abruptly. "Josh?"

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*Dammit, he's hurt bad.* The single word had rasped out, more brittle than the leaves underfoot. An ominous gurgling accompanied Richard's tortured breaths.

"I'm here, babe." Josh crouched down to stroke Richard's hair. "I'm gonna try to get you to the Jeep, okay?"

"They were..." Richard choked on a wet cough. "Wrong. Beasts...dire beasts."

"You can tell me all about it later. Shut up for now. Sounds like you're coughing up a lung." Josh took a firm grip on Richard's arm, lifted, got a shoulder under him, and heaved him into a fireman's carry. "Holy shit, you're heavy."

"Men...keepers...maybe," Richard persisted with his non-explanations. "Shot me."

"I know someone shot you, von Schaumburg. Now shut your trap. I don't want anyone spotting us while you yap."

That shut Richard up, for whatever reason. By the time Josh got him back to the car and eased him into the front seat, his respirations had deteriorated to hoarse wheezing.

*Freacking sucking chest wound...they shot part of his lung out.* With a human, Josh would have been frantically trying to get plastic over the entrance and exit wounds in an effort to prevent the collapse of the remaining lung. Field medic tactics for vampires, he reasoned, needed to take a different route.

He patted Richard's face. "Hon, I need you to take a few sips. Not so much so I can't drive. Just a little to kinda hold you over."

Richard's head lolled toward him, which he chose to take as agreement. With the penknife from his pocket, Josh sliced into his wrist, hissed at the sudden, sharp line of fire against his skin, and held the cut to Richard's lips. He shivered when Richard's tongue lapped over the wound, once, twice, and then he lay still, slumped

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in the half-reclined seat.

“Dammit, sweetheart, don’t die on me.” Josh stroked his face, trying to get him to take more by the proximity of his blood scent. “Big, bad vamp can’t die from one, stupid gunshot. Besides, William will be so freaking ticked at me if I let you die. He’ll haunt my ass forever.”

A single word whispered across his skin. “Drive.”

“Damn, stubborn, high-handed, blue-blooded motherfucker,” Josh muttered as he turned the engine over and eased away from the curb. The last thing he wanted was to attract attention by burning rubber as he drove past all those police and emergency vehicles. *Slow and steady, that’s the ticket.* The ambulance still sat in front of the house, though the doors were shut now, and the police and animal control officers still poked around the house. Good, everyone was nice and busy.

“God, I hope Glory’s okay,” Josh murmured as they eased by. He hadn’t wanted to like her, had wanted to be jealous and angry that she took up so much of Richard’s time and his thoughts, but her open, honest way of dealing with the world had struck a chord with him. He found himself genuinely worried for her, and not just for Richard’s sake.

His eyes twitched to the rearview every few seconds on the drive home, paranoia setting in. No headlights followed, no sign anyone watched, but the whole situation set off a five alarm clanging in his head. He couldn’t make sense of things yet, but a sense of wrongness prevailed.

Back home, he pulled the battered Jeep into the garage, a sad, mongrel heap next to Richard’s purebred Mercedes. For some reason, though, he didn’t want the vehicle, *his* vehicle, visible from the street.

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“Big time paranoid, yep, that’s me,” he muttered as he hoisted Richard up on his shoulders again.

The temptation to put his burden down on the sofa nearly won out, but once tucked in, he didn’t want to move his wounded lover again. The living room had far too many windows with only blinds to block out the morning sun. In Josh’s experience, vampires didn’t burst into flames in the daylight, but they did sunburn easily and some of them had severe, anaphylactic reactions to full sun exposure.

“Freaking stairs. You couldn’t live in a rancher, could you?” Josh kept up his muttered monologue as much to distract himself as to reassure Richard. “You been eating boxes of blood flavored donuts? Whole cases of blood chips? Why the hell are you so heavy? Freaking granite for bone structure, that’s what it is...”

His legs and back screamed by the time he reached Richard’s bedroom, but he still managed to set his burden down gently.

“Okay, you stay put.” *Like he’s going anywhere.* “Back in a sec.” Josh raced through the house, gathering shears, the first aid kit, and extra blankets. His heart nearly stopped when he returned to Richard, who lay so terribly still, his pale complexion edging toward gray.

He put two fingers to Richard’s throat and drew a full breath when he got a pulse. Not a pulse that would have sustained a human, at about five beats per minute, but his heart still beat. Josh worked quickly to cut Richard’s clothes off, stomping down on his emotions when his efforts revealed the bone-deep gash along his thigh and the silver-dollar sized entrance wound on his chest and considerably larger exit wound on his back from the gunshot. Blood still seeped in sluggish trails from the wounds, but not nearly at the rate he would have expected. With quick, practiced

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movements, he bound up Richard's leg and torso, hoping his own regenerative powers would do the rest.

"Babe, if you can hear me, I'm gonna lock us in. I'm all you've got right now and you've gotta use me or you'll die." Josh stripped off his T-shirt and jeans with shaking hands as he spoke. He slid the bolt shut on the door and climbed into bed next to Richard's body. *So damn cold...freaking Richard-scicle.*

He nicked his arm with his penknife, letting the blood drip between Richard's parted lips, trying to get his attention. When Richard's Adam's apple bobbed in a swallow, Josh figured it was time. As gently as he could, he slid an arm under Richard's shoulders and lifted to press Richard's lips against his throat.

"Come on, babe," he whispered. "You promised, remember? That you'd feed from me tonight. Don't let me down, big guy. Don't break the first important promise you ever made to me."

Richard's lips moved against his throat. Josh closed his eyes on a shiver. He knew it was coming, felt the sudden surge of desperation from Richard, but he still cried out when those needle-sharp teeth pierced his skin.

"God...Richard..." Josh eased down on his back as Richard fed in hard pulls, each suck sending molten rivers of pleasure straight to Josh's balls. He moaned and freed a hand to stroke himself, unable to think beyond anything but the incredible, world-tilting pleasure.

A soft growl from Richard was the only evidence of any awareness. His eyes remained shut, his body unmoving except for his greedily sucking mouth. Josh stroked harder, the feeding taking him up and over faster than any lovemaking he had ever experienced. His balls drew up in a painful rush. His seed shot from him with firework force.

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He moaned, panting, and when the bed stopped reeling, he realized Richard had stopped.

“Sweetheart?” Josh lifted his head to look down at Richard, still gray and too weak to open his eyes. “Keep going. You haven’t had enough.”

Richard whimpered and tried to turn his head when Josh pressed him back to his throat.

“I know. You’d say you don’t want to take too much. You’re scared you will.” Josh stroked his hair, pressing him closer. “But I’m saying it’s okay. That you need more. I trust you.”

Relief washed through Josh when Richard fastened his lips back over the little punctures and resumed his feeding. The room grew dimmer and his head lighter. Though he knew he was on his way out, he did trust Richard to stop in time. Even if he didn’t, it would be worth it. His own worthless life to save Richard seemed a small price to pay.

## CHAPTER 7

### A LITTLE HELP

Josh woke shivering and desperately thirsty. He huddled in the blankets, piecing together the where and why, memory slowly creeping back in flakes and chips. Richard lay beside him. He put a hand out and gasped when he encountered too-cold skin. *Oh, God, don't be dead. Please don't be dead.*

Time. What time was it? Josh fell out of bed and fumbled for his watch on the floor. One in the afternoon. "Okay...all right. Hibernating time. Sleep of death. Not dead-dead." Shivers racked his body as he fought to open the mini-fridge and snag some water. The cold water only made the shivers worse, but he needed it so damn bad.

Still, he was alive and not comatose. "You did it, babe," he

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said, though Richard wouldn't hear him. "You didn't drink me dry." He tried to stand and his legs crumpled. "Though I gotta tell you, I feel like crud."

In another couple of hours, Richard would probably wake up needing more. Josh didn't harbor any delusions about being able to feed him again and Richard would refuse. He checked the bandages, which were blood caked but dry, so the bleeding had stopped. They needed to be changed. Josh put his head on the mattress, dizzy and weak. He didn't have the energy.

"We need help, hon," he whispered and kissed Richard's shoulder. "Cell...cell..."

He crawled across the floor to his jeans and pulled on his boxers. He plunked down on his butt, and fished out his cell with trembling hands. Little men with jackhammers performed roadwork behind his eyes, making it hard to see as he scrolled through his contacts. He wasn't sure he hit the right one until Lynette's sharp voice came on the line.

"Muse's Retreat."

"Lynette?" he croaked.

"Yes? Who is...Joshua? You're three hours late calling in, young man. Just because you happen to have a rel—"

"I'm sorry, boss, please. Just listen." Josh stretched out on the floor since it refused to sit still. "We're not doing so good, Richard and me."

Her voice dropped in volume. "What's happened? Where are you?"

"Home. We're home. Richard's hurt. I gave him all I could." He fought a wave of dizziness. Lynette called to him over a vast distance. "I don't feel so great."

"Idiot," she snapped. "Stay put. I'll call Tamara and Glory



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and—”

“Glory’s...hospital...hurt, too...”

Lynette swore, something Josh had never heard her do. She said something about having a key and being there soon, but Josh lost the rest of it as he passed out.

\* \* \*

Pain preceded awareness. Richard’s slow climb toward waking told him he was in less than fighting shape. Human scent drifted to him amidst his own blood. Josh. Someone pounded on his door. Dear God, what had happened? Leathern wings and nightmarish screams fought for space in his memory.

He rolled far enough to see Josh sprawled on the floor in nothing but his boxers. His heart lurched at how pale his little hunter was, dark bruising along his throat from a desperate, rough feeding. The golden hair on his chest stirred though, he still breathed.

“Richard? Richard, open the damn door!”

*Tam?* He rolled out of bed. His right leg crumpled under him, so he crawled to the door and slid back the bolt. It was all he could manage. Panting, he collapsed against the wall.

The door flew open. “Richard!” Both Tam and Lynette stood there, their faces registering shock and worry.

“Josh,” he mumbled. “Help Josh.”

“Men. Bunch of morons, gay or straight,” Tam muttered as she dragged a blanket from the bed to cover Josh. “Couldn’t call for help last night. Oh, no. Had to do it all himself.”

“While I appreciate the need for self-reliance, one can take it too far,” Lynette added. “Get his feet, Tamara. He shouldn’t be too

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heavy.”

Richard could only watch them carry Josh away. Part of him wanted to scream, *No! Don't take him from me!* Rational thought seemed elusive, while speech remained painful and difficult. Instead, he dragged himself down the hall after them, one hand at a time.

“Just where do you think you're going?” Lynette's heels filled his vision.

“Josh.”

“Is being put to bed and Tamara will shortly be making him something to eat. He's a bit dizzy, but more sensible than you at the moment.”

“I want Josh,” Richard whispered, embarrassed by how childish and petulant he sounded.

She crouched down by his head, frowning. “You can't take any more from him.”

“No. No more.” Richard gained two more feet toward the larger bedroom. “See him. Have to get to him.”

“You're feeling guilty, aren't you?”

Richard rested his head on the floor so he could look up at her. His chest ached from more than physical wounds. “Yes.”

With surprising strength, she flipped him onto his back and took him under the arms to drag him down the hall. Lynette was obviously having one of her better days, fibromyalgia-wise. “You have realized that you *are* a vampire, I assume? That Joshua did what was required to ensure your survival?”

“Could have...killed him.”

“Since he has no qualms demanding steak, eggs, and orange juice from his sickbed, I believe the logical conclusion would be that you didn't.”

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“Yes, but—”

“Hush, Richard. He did a noble thing, knowing exactly what he did. Don’t diminish it by making him believe you don’t appreciate it.”

“I appreciate it,” Richard managed in a small voice.

Tamara had apparently heard the commotion and came to assist. Between the two of them, they managed to wrestle Richard onto the bed next to Josh where he curled up on his uninjured side, out of breath.

“Hey, hot stuff.” Josh stroked his shoulder with shaking fingers. “How’s it hanging?”

Richard lifted his head from where it lay by Josh’s hip to look up into those beautiful emerald eyes, now ringed with dark shadows. “I’m recovering. Thanks to you.”

The voice was hoarse and barely recognizable, but the crooked grin was all Josh. “Don’t get all mushy on me. You would’ve done the same. If you were me and I was...you know what I mean.”

“Yes.” Richard shifted closer to lay his head on the blankets atop Josh’s thigh. The spicy musk that was uniquely Josh steadied him and eased the pain. “I need a shower.”

Josh snorted. “It’s just blood, babe. The stuff you drink all the time.”

“How would you feel if you woke covered in dried egg and hamburger grease?”

“Good point.” Josh’s fingers combed through his hair and Richard nearly forgot the horror of the previous evening. “Tam said she’d feed you when she came back up.”

“I don’t need—”

“Shut up. Yes, you do. You can’t even stand up yet.” Josh’s fingers stilled. “Babe? What happened last night? All that stuff

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about dire beasts, what was that?"

It had all been so horrifying and unreal. In the soft afternoon light, he questioned what he had truly seen. "I'm not...certain."

Josh sighed. "No more half-assed answers. Stop shutting me out. I'm guessing it wasn't a bear."

"No, there was no bear."

"But something sure as shit slashed your leg open."

"Yes."

"Dammit, Richard!" Fingers tangled in his hair and yanked his head around to meet Josh's glare. "What the hell happened? From the top. You left me to run through the woods."

"I'd rather you didn't do that. My head aches."

"Sorry, babe, sorry." Josh relaxed his grip, his fingers returning to gentle strokes. "You just make me nuts sometimes."

"I'm not certain how to tell you what happened." Richard nestled closer. He needed Josh's warmth, even through the blankets Tam had piled on him. "I'm not entirely certain what did happen." He raised a warning finger when he felt Josh's impatience rise again. "I will tell you, but you have to give me room."

"I hope you didn't do this when you were giving Duke Henry reconnaissance reports. Poor guy probably got gray hairs every time he had to pull intel from you piece by piece."

"You're exhausted, my dear, so I won't take your foul mood personally." Richard wrapped an arm around Josh's waist. "I left you to run through the woods. I wasn't entirely forthright with you, since I went that way because I have been...feeling something from the woods for the past week. A glimpse, a scent, I hoped to pick up a more concrete reason for my unease."

"Anything?"

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“Nothing. Not in the woods. When I reached Glory’s house, though, I caught an odd scent. Not bear, not any animal I’ve ever encountered. It smelled...”

“What?”

“Wrong.”

“Very specific. Thanks.”

Richard heaved a weary sigh. “I can’t do better than that, I’m sorry. Do you want me to continue?”

“God, you’re touchy today. Yes, please, oh, great vampire lord.”

Touchy, yes. He felt as if all his nerves stood on end, raw and exposed. “Josh, this is deadly serious. I circled the house once, but saw nothing. When I went inside to Glory, I told her there was no bear. She asked me to stay a few minutes and listen. Then I heard it, a snuffling at her backdoor. It never occurred to me that it could be anything but an animal. Perhaps something escaped from an exotic collection or a zoo.”

Josh waited a moment, Richard had to give him credit, before he prompted, “So you opened the door like the brave protector of the weak that you are?”

“I did.” Richard shuddered and Josh slid down to wrap strong arms around him. “They rushed in. Two of them. The same scent, though they were...built differently from each other. Not animals. They stood on two legs. Their eyes were too aware. But they were nightmares, demons, things that should not have been. The one had huge, veined wings, its nose flat and wrinkled like a bat’s. It shrieked like a banshee and lunged for me with claws the size of fencing knives. The other, the one with fur, shot straight into the house and attacked Glory.”

He stopped and looked up at Josh. “Will she be all right? Do

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we know?”

“Lynette’s calling the hospital now. They were treating her like a live patient when I got there, so I guess you managed to protect her.”

“Glory’s no helpless damsel. She snatched a knife from her butcher block and slashed at the thing. I managed to pull their attention to me, but they were frighteningly fast. Difficult to do much damage. We fell back out the door in a tangle. That’s when the men came. They had nets. Weapons. Their goal seemed to be capture. I tried to get out of their way. One of them shot me.”

“You think they knew what you are?”

“Most likely. I was roaring, fangs extended, when they arrived. Hard to hear above the banshee shrieking of those things, but I did catch the phrases ‘collateral damage’ and ‘let it crawl off to die.’ Both of which I assume meant me.”

“Bastards.” Josh stroked his back in slow circles. “Let’s go back to the *wrong* part, hon. You said they had animal parts, but they weren’t animals. And the scent was wrong. Why? What was so wrong?”

“They...there was an undercurrent to the scent. It made the hairs on my neck stand on end and my teeth ache. It’s a peculiar reaction that I’ve only had before with other vampires.”

“You think it was just those two? Or maybe there’s more?”

“I can’t say. I only saw two.”

“And since those bastards with the nets think you’re dead, you’re safe for now.”

“A fair conclusion.” Richard waited, wondering where his little hunter was going.

“So I can rest up for a bit before I go out hunting.”

“No!” Richard surged up. Pain knifed through his chest and his

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head. He subsided and curled into a ball atop the covers.

"Might wanna take it slow, babe," Josh said in a dry tone. "You were just about mostly dead last night."

"You can't hunt these things," Richard whispered. "They will tear you to pieces if there are more out there. Please...Josh. Promise you won't."

"I'm not going out with a rifle in the middle of the night. Just wanna poke around Glory's house a bit. If they are some weird kind of vamp, I'll know it. If there're prints, I have to see them."

"You're depleted and in no shape to go anywhere." Richard tried for his best lord of the manor voice, ruined by a weak cough. "I forbid it."

"Funny guy. You can't forbid me things. Makes me go out and do them." Josh gathered him close to kiss him softly. "Not today, big daddy. I can't even stand up without blacking out. I'm staying right here with you to make sure you stay out of trouble."

"Who's in trouble?" Tam swept through the door, fully laden bed tray clutched in both hands. "Richard, sweetheart, scoot over for a bit. Let the poor boy eat."

Josh's eyes widened as he stared at the tray across his lap, groaning under the weight of steak, eggs, a carton of orange juice, bananas, a baked potato, and a huge slab of buttered bread. "This isn't all for me, is it?"

"All for you, tough guy." Tamara settled on Richard's side of the bed. "You need me to cut the steak up for you and feed you?"

"Um, no. Thanks."

"While your little hombre chows down..." Tam rolled up her sleeve. "You better have something, too."

"I'm fine. Truly." Richard pulled back from the offered arm.

"Like hell you are. Couple of freaks, the two of you, trying to

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play who's more macho." She pulled his head into her lap and he found to his disgust that he was too weak to resist. "It's been over two weeks, Richard. I know it's not what you normally like, but this is an emergency. Who else do you have? Anemia boy over there? Lynette, who you just fed from last Sunday?"

He conceded and soon the room was quiet except for the sounds of Josh devouring his meal like a winter-starved wolf and the soft sucking noises of blood feeding.

Josh glanced sideways at him. "Does this count as a threesome?"

While Richard managed to keep his reaction to a snort, Tam shook with laughter, to the point where he seized her arm to keep it steady so he wouldn't tear the skin.

"No," Tam managed when she could draw a full breath, her voice husky and low. "For a threesome, everyone has to touch at some point. You know, girly parts and all?"

"Ew." Josh wrinkled his nose. "Never mind."

Lynette joined them, phone still clutched in her hand. "Joshua doesn't like girls? Shocking." She settled in the wing chair, smoothing her skirt.

"What's the deal? What'd the hospital say?" Josh mumbled around a bite of bread.

"I'd rather wait until Richard has...finished." Lynette arched a brow at Josh. "And you're going to choke, young man."

With a last pull, Richard withdrew his fangs and licked at Tam's wrist.

"He's putting his utensils down. I think he's done." Josh pointed with his steak knife.

"She's in stable but guarded condition. From Richard's injuries, I had expected much worse. Concussed, several deep



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lacerations, but no damage to organs or major blood vessels, it seems.”

“Has she said anything about what happened?”

“She’s unconscious, Joshua, and therefore has not.”

“Oh. Got it.”

A strangled sound caught in Richard’s chest before he could silence it. Relief and guilt mixed in equal measures. She would live. He had been unable to protect her. His eyes stung. Josh reached out to stroke his shoulder but otherwise made no comment, continuing to eat until the moment of weakness passed.

Richard drew a shuddering breath and glanced between Tam and Lynette. “I want you both to stay inside after dark until we know more. Don’t investigate strange noises outside, don’t venture out of town.”

The snort he received from Lynette was less than encouraging. “Richard, we both have shops to run, and generally stay open after dark. Do you propose I close before the evening rush to ease your overzealous anxieties?”

“Then wait for me when you close and I’ll see you safely home.”

“Right.” Tam folded her arms. “You look like you could scare off maybe a fluffy bunny or two about now. Well, maybe not two. Two bunnies could probably take you.”

Josh choked on a laugh, fighting to swallow his mouthful of juice. Richard glared at him. “This is not a laughing matter. People may be in peril.”

“Yeah, but you being taken out by rogue bunnies is pretty hilarious,” Josh wheezed.

“A very Monty Python moment, I’m sure,” Richard grumbled, and then turned his head back to Lynette and Tam. “Promise me

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that you won't walk to your cars alone. At least until I know it's safe again."

"I'm sure we can arrange something." Lynette held up a hand to forestall Tam's protest. "For Richard's peace of mind. Otherwise he'll do foolish things."

"Like drag his handsome ass out of bed and stagger downtown to play escort." Tam rose from the bed, shaking her head.

"And probably do a face plant on the sidewalk somewhere," Josh muttered.

After changing Richard's bandages, making certain Josh had snacks and water at hand, extracting sacred vows that they would both rest, and tucking them into bed, the women left.

With a fleece blanket between them so he wouldn't cause Josh to chill, Richard wrapped himself around his rescuer. "You should try to sleep."

"I don't think I'm gonna have much choice," Josh said around a huge yawn. "Promise you'll stay with me? Rest for a bit?"

"I won't leave you." Richard lay with his cheek nuzzling Josh's shoulder, grateful for the steady rise and fall of his breathing. It was all so fragile, this moment, this beautiful life beside him, so easily taken from him. Could his heart bear it if death ripped another love from him too soon? Love...*Gott in himmel*...when had he fallen in love with Josh? Was it love or was it simply a desperate need to fill the void?

Another thought hit him and he heaved a resigned sigh. "You're going to go out hunting the moment I'm asleep tomorrow, aren't you?"

Josh opened his eyes to regard him seriously. "You want me to lie to you, babe?"

"Yes. Just this once."

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“Then, no. I’ll be right here twiddling my thumbs like a good boy until his lordship wakes up.”

## CHAPTER 8

### CONTROL

Richard shifted out of the beam of morning sun. Ten minutes in direct sunlight left painful sunburn. More than an hour of full exposure, and his skin blackened, cracking off in charred flakes. Not something he ever wanted Josh to see.

“Hey.” Josh stirred beside him, squinting against the light. “Morning already... damn, babe, why didn’t you pull the blinds? The light can’t be helping your head.”

*It hurts to move.* “I promised not to leave you.”

“Aw, such a romantic.” Josh kissed his forehead and levered himself up. He swung his legs over the edge of the bed and Richard knew he was testing his steadiness. “Come on, hot stuff. We’d better get you to bed. No way I could drag you there if you

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go all death-sleep on me.”

Richard stood on his own, pleased that his leg held him, but he accepted the shoulder Josh offered as they moved down the hall. “You should rest today. You’re still so pale.”

“I’ll have a big breakfast. I’ll be fine.”

“I’d rather know that you’re safe.”

Josh turned on him in the doorway to Richard’s room, forefinger stabbing at his chest. “I’m not the one who almost got himself killed. And I’m not going after anything, I’m just gonna see what’s what.”

“You’re barely steady. I’m not sure you should even be driving.”

“Now, look! How many years have I managed to survive without you?”

Richard hesitated. He didn’t even know how old Josh was. “Twenty-five?”

“Twenty-six! And you think I did that by being stupid and not knowing my own limits?”

With a sigh, Richard held his hands up in surrender. “I worry. Forgive me. It’s one of the many skills I’ve honed over the years.”

“All right. Fine.” Josh pointed to the empty bed. “Now get your ass in there before you end up sleeping on the floor again.”

Despite the twinge in his chest and back muscles, Richard seized Josh in a hard embrace and backed him up against the wall with a thud. He lowered his head, plundering Josh’s sweet mouth, his tongue exploring every dip and rill thoroughly while he ground against Josh’s growing erection. A moan vibrated in Josh’s chest, and just as he began to relax against Richard and respond with heat, Richard pulled away.

“Be careful, my dear.” He stepped into his room and closed the

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door on Josh's outraged expression. "I'll see you this afternoon."

"Fuck!" Josh shouted from the hall. A hard thud rocked the door, probably from Josh's hand striking it.

Richard smiled as he settled under the sheet. Josh's frustration would most likely play out in sinfully sensual ways later that evening.

\* \* \*

Josh fumed a moment longer at the bolted door, and then stomped off to the shower. Under the soothing caress of the hot water, he calmed again. Richard was infuriating sometimes, but so damn hot. He let his soap-slick hands glide down his chest and over his abs to cup himself. Relief would only be a few strokes away, but it wasn't what he wanted.

He left off playing with himself, determined to save the hard edge of his lust for later. For Richard and his hard body, his long, skilled hands, his incredible, luscious mouth, his gorgeous eyes... Josh stopped in mid-thought and turned off the shower. Those eyes had truly been worried for him; the worry had been sluicing off Richard in waves. As annoyed as he'd been about the whole mother-hen thing, it struck him that Richard *cared* about him.

"Guess maybe I'm not just a fuck toy, after all," he murmured. Being a comfort, someone to soothe Richard's broken heart, he could have dealt with that. Even the bizarre empathic connection between him didn't freak him out too much. But what if it was more? Could he deal if Richard suddenly broke out the L-word? Was that where this was going?

He shook himself impatiently. "Dammit, Kempiski, you've got shit to do. There's no time for all this squishy stuff now."

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After a decent breakfast of ham, grits and eggs, he drove back to Glory's. Her cul-de-sac sat quiet now, devoid of all the emergency vehicles and milling police officers. In the light of day, everything looked so normal.

Police tape still stretched across the backdoor, which hung on one hinge, swinging languidly in the breeze. Otherwise, the house appeared undisturbed.

Josh took one slow turn around the perimeter, eyes half closed, inner senses reaching. Richard's lingering presence smacked him in the face, no question where his own vamp had been that night. He was able to follow the path Richard took, from the kitchen, out the backdoor, and then into the trees where Josh had found him bleeding his life out.

A frown creased his forehead. Richard, yes, but no other presence reached him. Not even the hint of another vamp scabbled at his brain. If these monsters had been vampires, even some kind he'd never seen before, he should have been able to feel something. He crouched by the backdoor, hoping to spot a print, a claw mark, anything unusual. The ground was soft from recent rains, though, and a couple dozen pairs of booted feet had fouled the battle site.

"Damn stupid cops," Josh muttered. He cast out farther—too stubborn to give up just yet—but found nothing except a few unevenly spaced boot prints that marked Richard's stumbling, desperate flight into the woods. Frustrating, getting to a scene after the police. It wouldn't be the first time they'd obliterated a trail for him.

He wasn't out of options, though. With possibilities exhausted at Glory's place, he drove to the hospital. A few polite questions at the reception desk got him Glory's room number and that, yes, she

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could have visitors.

Hospitals always made him nervous. The disinfectants were only there to cover up the grief and fear. Maybe it wasn't that way for everyone. Maybe the floor where the babies were born felt different. But for him, death always seemed to be sitting in the waiting room, just waiting for his next assignment.

He poked his head around the door to Glory's room and smiled to see her awake.

"Hey, handsome," she called softly.

"Hi, gorgeous." He took the chair by her bed. "How're you doing?"

"Headache the size of Montana, but other than that, not so bad." A dark bruise covered her right temple. She ran her fingers over it, winced, and sighed. "How's our brave Richard? Lynette said some idiot shot him?"

"He wasn't doing so hot that night, but he's lots better today. All overbearing and overprotective again."

"More himself, then." Glory chuckled. "Do they know who did it?"

Josh reached out and took her hand gently. "Richard said something about men with nets and guns. He wasn't sure about much else. I was kinda hoping you could tell me what you remember. Anything at all."

Her brow furrowed. "I don't remember more than bits and pieces. The doctors say that's not unusual with a head injury."

"It's okay. Any little bits and pieces might help." He leaned forward, urging her on. "You thought you had a bear visiting your garbage. You called Richard."

"Yes." She nodded, lips pursed in a frown. "Richard searched around the house. He came back in. He was standing in my kitchen



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telling me he couldn't pick up any bear scent. There was a...scrabbling. Like a cat clawing at the bottom of the door. He waved me back..."

Josh waited, but she remained silent. "And then?"

"And then...I'm not sure. I think I remember Richard bellowing something. I had...a knife in my hand..." She shook her head, clearly frustrated. "That's all I have, Josh. I'm sorry."

He smiled for her, tamping down on his frustration. "It's okay, beautiful. You got smacked on the head pretty hard. It happens. Lemme know if you remember anything else?"

"I will."

"What did you tell the cops?"

"I told them a bear was outside the house and it must have forced its way in."

"Did they ask about Richard?"

Her frown deepened. "No. And that's strange. I thought it must have been a police officer who shot him."

"Any idea who called the police?"

"I...don't know. Richard couldn't have. I don't think. I know I didn't." Anxiety crept into her eyes. "Josh, what's going on?"

"That's what I'm trying to find out. Richard said stuff about some mutant things. *Dire beasts* he called them. But he gets kinda drama queen sometimes."

"I'm sure he'd prefer *poetic*," Glory said with a hint of a smile.

"Right. Either way. But he said something about them feeling like vamps, too." Josh dropped his gaze to their joined hands. "I didn't see any prints outside your house. And I didn't feel anything that set off the vamp alarms in my brain."

"What are you saying?"

"Nothing. Not yet." He gave her what he hoped was a

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reassuring smile. “Don’t know enough yet. But I do know I’d better be home when he wakes up, or he’s gonna have kittens worrying.”

“Oh, that’s an interesting visual.” Glory gave his hand a last squeeze as he rose. “Josh, be careful.”

“Never.” He winked. “I’ll just be smarter, faster and better armed than anything out there. Works way better than careful.”

Back at Richard’s house, though, he sat on the back porch feeling a hell of a lot less confident than he’d pretended. Nothing fit together. None of it made sense.

A horrible scenario kept playing out in his mind. Richard scenting bear, the scent of another large predator throwing him into a territorial frenzy. What if Richard had lost control and attacked Glory? What if the gash on his leg was from Glory trying to defend herself with a kitchen knife? What if the cops shot him and they just weren’t talking about it?

A shiver prickled up Josh’s spine. *Stupid*. Here he was, feeding into Richard’s own anxieties instead of keeping to the facts. Puzzles weren’t solved by jumping at shadows. Richard was a predator in the strictest sense, but Josh had never met anyone with such iron-willed control. It made no sense that Richard would suddenly lose it.

Though everyone had a breaking point...

Josh pulled out his wallet and flipped to the faded, dog-eared picture behind his license. The wheat-haired girl still smiled at him. She would always look the same, no matter how old and wrinkled he became some day. “Wish you were here, Jen. It was always easier thinking things through when I could talk to you.”

No single born person could ever understand the loss of a twin. *Like losing half of yourself*. Maybe that’s what made the

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connection with Richard so sharp and intense, that need to fill the gaping hole left by half a heart. Maybe that terrible need colored all of his perceptions where Richard was concerned, and kept him from being objective.

Maybe he was talking himself around in circles. He seemed to be doing that a lot these days. The hunts, William, Richard...his nice black and white world suddenly had gray paint splashed all over it.

“You would’ve told me, Jen. If the shit I’ve been doing for the past few years was wrong.” The bastard who had killed Jen, killing him had been right. He didn’t question that. Arrogant, handsome, and a walking construct of self-absorbed evil, he needed to be put down. The next kill, too, that one was clear for Josh. She lured young artists to her, pretending to be interested in their work, promising patronage, and then she slaughtered them like the poor little lambs they were. There had been others, evil creatures who regarded humans as cattle.

Some he hadn’t known anything about, though, except that they were vamps. Beings that might have had some faithful lover waiting at home, who might have created beautiful things and lived quiet lives. Until some hunter came along and dusted them.

“Dammit...” Josh wrapped his arms around his ribs, unable to stop his shaking.

Sudden warmth caressed his mind. Richard was awake, the emptiness filled again by his awareness. Josh’s breath caught on a sob, trapped between wracking doubt and relief.

“Joshua?” Richard knelt behind him in only the boxer briefs in which he’d slept. He had arrived without a sound and still Josh knew exactly when he had bolted from his bed to rush out to him. Strong arms wrapped him close. “What is it? What hurts you so?”

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“It’s...” Josh shook his head. “Nothing. Just being stupid.”

“Is that Jen?” Richard’s finger traced the edge of her picture.

Josh snapped the wallet shut, a trickle of resentment racing over his shoulders that he would touch uninvited. “Yeah.”

Richard pulled back, his expression guarded. “Did you find anything today?”

“Not a damn thing.” Josh rose to pace the porch. “Cops had fouled the ground. Glory doesn’t remember anything. And there wasn’t any freaking vamp trail.”

“What conclusion do you draw from all this?”

Josh’s irritation grew at Richard’s too-careful question. “Bunch of things came to mind. One, you’re a liar and made the whole thing up as a cover. Two, you’re crazy and don’t remember what you really did. Three, there’s something really weird going on, and I need more info.”

He watched Richard’s reactions as his jaw clenched, then twitched, though otherwise he appeared relaxed.

“Which do you feel is the most likely?”

“Sweetheart, I don’t go on likely. I go on what I know. I don’t think you’d lie on purpose. You’re not good at it. I don’t want to think you’re crazy, since I’ve been screwing you for the past few weeks.”

“And the last possibility?”

“I’m going back out tonight. See if anything turns up.”

Richard rose, towering over Josh. “It’s far too dangerous. If there are more—”

In a sudden, shrieking blaze along his nerves, Josh’s temper snapped. “I’m not some fucking, limp-wristed pansy, you arrogant bastard! I’ve taken down more powerful vamps than you and came out without a scratch!”

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“No need to shout.” Richard spread his hands in front of him. “I’m just concerned—”

“Maybe it’s time you stuck the concern where the sun won’t shine!” Josh stalked into the house, back into the living room, and shoved the sofa up against the wall. “This ends now, von Schaumburg! No more treating me like your grandmother’s goddamn china teapot!”

“Joshua, please. I meant no offense.”

“You think it’s easy to take me down?” Josh reached back to claw his T-shirt off over his head. He dropped into a crouch, beckoning with one hand. “Come on, then. Come get some.”

“I don’t want to hurt you,” Richard whispered as he eased the backdoor shut.

“You won’t.” Josh snarled. *Maybe you will, hon, but then I’ll have my answer...* With a bellow, he rushed Richard, who sidestepped.

“Joshua, stop this!”

“Maybe your other lovers bowed and scraped to you, your highness!” Josh aimed a kick at Richard’s midsection, knowing his vamp lover was too fast. Sure enough, his foot met air, but the rabbit punch follow-up to the stomach caught Richard by surprise. “But I fucking won’t!”

Richard backed up, gasping, arm wrapped around his midsection. Josh didn’t give him any time to recover. Without any warning, he came in low and hurled himself at Richard, hitting him at groin level with the full force of his charge.

Even vampires had to obey certain laws of physics. The collision toppled Richard and they hit the floor together with a solid thud. Still Richard refused to defend himself. He stared up at Josh, his expression full of shock and pain.

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*Not good on so many levels.*

Josh pulled back and punched him. When Richard still didn't react, he let loose, raining down blows on his chest and stomach. *Fight back, dammit. Show me you won't just roll over when they come for you. Show me you can do it and stay sane...*

The fist aimed at Richard's jaw suddenly met resistance. Richard's hand had shot out to catch Josh by the wrist. A growl rumbled in Richard's chest, and he surged up, a wall of fluid power so overwhelming, Josh felt a rush of fear. Before he could counter, he found himself slammed facedown on the floor with his right arm twisted behind his back.

The low, ominous rumble continued from Richard's chest. The waves of sudden rage and lust pouring out from him washed over Josh hard enough to steal his breath. He stilled, excitement and anxiety thrumming over his skin in equal measures as Richard's free hand hooked into the back of his jeans. With a hard yank, the denim and the cotton underneath tore as if Richard ripped through tissue paper.

The cool air so suddenly on his butt raised gooseflesh along his arms. He waited, trying to relax his muscles for what he knew would be a fierce, rough entry. Richard's panting breaths drifted over the back of his neck. Sharp teeth scraped his skin.

Suddenly, the weight on his back was gone. "No," Richard got out in a strangled whisper. "Not like this."

He stumbled down the hall, leaving Josh aching in several ways.

Josh got his arms under him and took his time levering himself up. Grunts and thuds came from the front room, he assumed from Richard beating on the workout bag.

"Probably a good idea to let the big guy work off some steam,

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you jackass,” Josh muttered. He struggled out of his ruined clothes and grabbed the blanket off the back of the couch since he shivered hard enough to rattle his bones. Part of it was reaction to how close he had played things, but part of it was relief.

Once he got going, Richard could handle himself in a fight, thank you very much. And Richard, despite being provoked beyond what any normal person could have withstood, had held back and not given in to the violence surging through his blood.

Josh waited until the thuds subsided to one every few seconds before he wandered down the hall. The poor bag had holes in it by the time he got there, and Richard’s nearly naked body gleamed with sweat. He sat by the wall, letting the blanket pool around his waist.

Richard finally stopped, panting hard, one hand clutched on the chain that held the bag to the ceiling. “Why did you do that? Have I made you so terribly angry?”

“Oh, I’ve got anger issues, babe. About two dozen shrinks have said so.”

“I could have killed you.”

“Could’ve. Yeah. But you know what?” Josh leaned back against the wall. “You didn’t.”

“And this proves what? That I’m not a mindless animal?” Richard sank down to the floor as if his legs wouldn’t hold him any longer. “I almost raped you.”

“There’s a big difference between rape and rough sex.”

Richard buried his fingers in his hair. “I don’t *want* to treat you roughly. You’ve had enough of that over the years. I want you to feel cherished with me. Cared for.”

“Babe, I do.” Josh scooted over to sit beside him. “I’ve never felt so cherished. Nobody else has ever stocked his kitchen just for

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me, or stayed with me just to watch me sleep, for God's sake." He tucked a stray tendril of hair behind Richard's ear. "But I'm a fighter, hon. I like it rough sometimes. I like a little sparring with my sex."

"I...know," Richard whispered.

"Has it always been this way, babe? Being able to feel stuff from your lovers?"

Still tense and miserable, Richard shook his head. "It's never happened this way before."

"This way? You gotta do better than that. I can feel stuff from you, but I can't read your damn mind."

"It was almost...immediate. Almost from the first moment our eyes met."

"So it's happened before. Just not so fast. How long did it take with Gerhard?" Josh felt Richard's first lover would be a safe place to start. Talking about Gerhard didn't usually upset him.

"It was a full year before it reached this sort of intensity. A decade or so, I believe, before we heard each other's thoughts. He was my Renfield, as the hunters would say. My only source of feedings, my only companion for many years."

"Hon, how long was he with you?"

"Until the day he died."

Josh tried to be patient; hoping Richard would get the hint. He nearly fell over when Richard went on without prompting.

"Gerhard lived until the age of ninety-five, still strong and lucid to the end."

"Wait. We are talking twelfth century and shit, right? I mean, wasn't the average age, like forty or something then?"

"It was." A shiver ran over Richard's skin. He cleared his throat, twice. "It's a peculiar, ah, side effect of being a vampire's



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lover. One does not need to be turned to have one's life extended, free of illness and infirmity,"

"So did someone whack him?"

"Truly inelegantly put. But, no. One afternoon he said he was tired. He went to bed, drifted off to sleep and died. Gerhard was...an unusual man. Very much in tune with his own body and mind. I believe he simply felt it was time."

"Oh." Josh wanted to continue, now that Richard was talking, but the question *was anyone else ever with you that long?* would remind him of losing William too soon. He figured he should limit how many times he upset Richard in one day. "We're both idiots, you know."

"Are we?"

Josh took his hand. "Yeah. Stubborn, walking egos. All I had to say was, 'Hey, bud, come with me tonight.' Then you wouldn't have gotten all worried and demanding, and I wouldn't have gotten all bent out of shape."

"You are a strange bundle of contradictions, Joshua. Towering rage one moment and calm sense the next."

"I know, babe. I'm a Pisces. Blame it on the stars, right?" Josh shifted to straddle Richard's lap and took his face gently between his hands. "Before we go out, I need you to do one thing for me."

"Anything in my power."

Josh stroked his thumbs over Richard's black eyebrows. "I want you to let go."

"Pardon?"

"Hand over the reins, let someone else drive, give up the tiller, whatever other clichés you wanna pull out."

Richard's eyes never left his but he swallowed hard. "You're asking for...top?"

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“That’s the idea, hot stuff. Let me take care of you.” A smile tugged at Josh’s mouth. “Don’t tell me you’re a virgin?”

A short bark of laughter leapt from Richard. “A nine hundred year old virgin. Now there’s an interesting thought. No. I am not.”

“Okay, so you’ve done it, but not a lot. And maybe you didn’t like it?”

“It’s...difficult for me.” Richard wrapped his arms around Josh, nuzzling at his chest.

“I know, sweetheart.” Josh’s heart melted. He could feel Richard’s hesitance and arousal in an endearing, heady mix. “But I’m not used to always being bottom. I’m the one that usually does the chasing and the tackling.”

“So I would assume. You’re so fierce.” Richard kissed along his collarbone. “For you, I’ll do my best.”

“Nothing you don’t want, babe. Anything you don’t like, you say so, okay? Lie down on your front for me.”

Richard stretched out on the mat with his head pillowed on his bent arms. His long, chiseled body sent sparks of desire ricocheting around Josh’s midsection.

“Relax, babe. I won’t hurt you.” Josh caressed Richard’s taut shoulder muscles and cringed inwardly when he realized the unintentional lie. “Any more, that is. I won’t hurt you now.”

“I know,” Richard murmured. “I trust you.”

Those three words slid into Josh’s heart and made him feel twenty feet tall. A soft smile tugged at his lips as he kneaded Richard’s shoulders. No lover had ever...

He shook his head, laughing inwardly at himself. Richard brought out the sap in him, big time. The rock-hard muscles relaxed under his fingers. Richard’s eyes drifted shut on a contented sigh and Josh let his hands slide lower, kneading the

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long muscles on either side of his spine. A few bruises darkened spots along Richard's ribs, but his vampire constitution had already gone to work, the bruises fading around the edges from purple to amber. Only an angry red circle remained from where the bullet had torn a ragged hole in his back.

Josh leaned in to plant a tender kiss at the base of his neck. "You're so gorgeous."

The vibration in Richard's chest sounded suspiciously like a purr. Josh took his time, pressing and kneading the tension from that beautifully sculpted back, working his way downward until he reached the perfect mounds of Richard's muscular ass. Gently, he coaxed the hard thighs apart and settled between, stabs of desire racing through him at every shiver of pleasure his caresses elicited.

He licked a wet trail down Richard's spine, over the dimple at the top of his glutes, and on down the valley between his cheeks.

"Josh? What...oh, dear Lord." Richard gasped, his thighs spreading wider as Josh ran his tongue around his puckered entrance.

The scent here was so different from a human male, the spice of Richard's arousal writ large. He teased mercilessly, watching the pale star flutter under his attentions while his thumb pressed rhythmically into the smooth skin behind Richard's balls. When he received a hoarse moan, he finally plunged inside, his tongue penetrating again and again where he so ached to have his cock.

"My sweet Joshua." Richard ground his hips back against Josh's face, his fists clenched tight. "I need..."

Josh lifted his head to nuzzle at Richard's hip. "You need what, babe?"

"You," came the whispered reply. "Now."

*Probably too much to expect the big guy to beg for it.* Josh rose

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up on his knees, peppering kisses over Richard's back. He took his erection in hand and angled himself at Richard's backdoor, now ready and waiting for him. Still refusing to rush, he eased the head inside and hissed at the incredible, cool constriction. Holy shit, Richard felt so damn good. Like they were meant to fit together.

He kept his strokes slow and gentle, even when Richard thrust back hard against him, obviously wanting more. So many times, they'd hammered at each other like starved animals. He was in the mood for something tender, and finally, after their bit of physical combat, he had the control for it. Without losing his steady rhythm, he eased down until he lay atop Richard's back. He slid his arms under Richard and curled his hands over those broad shoulders, pressing them closer until they melded together, pulling Richard back into him with every thrust.

The struggles and growls ceased. He felt the wave of tenderness wash from Richard as he rolled up to meet him in languid pulses. His knees nudged Richard's thighs wider, his thrusts hitting deeper until he buried himself to the balls, wrapped tight in the embrace of Richard's body.

Heavy breaths rolled over into soft cries. Richard twined the fingers of their right hands together. "Joshua, I—"

"Hmm?" Josh felt his hesitance and wondered what Richard couldn't say.

Then Richard let out a shuddering gasp. "I can't...I'm..."

Josh rolled his hips, grinding against Richard's sweet spot. "It's all right, sweetheart, relax." He wrapped his arms around Richard's chest, nuzzling at his shoulder. "I've got you. You're safe. Let go, babe. Just let go."

With his eyes squeezed shut and his jaw clenched, Richard looked anything but relaxed. Through their bond, Josh felt his

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desperation as he tried to hold back his orgasm. He smiled against Richard's skin. The big guy had always made sure Josh came first before he took his own pleasure. He understood where the tension came from, but he wasn't letting him get away with it. His thumb caressed Richard's bottom lip, coaxing his teeth apart. When he could slide it in to the first digit, he turned his hand so the pad of his thumb could stroke the back of one of Richard's fangs.

A hard groan tore through Richard's chest, his sudden rush toward ecstasy crashing into Josh in a storm surge. He sucked hard on Josh's thumb, his bucking hips lifting Josh's feet from the floor. The first vise-grip constriction of Richard's orgasm sent Josh roaring over, holding onto Richard as if he might drown while pulse after rapid-fire pulse rocketed up from his balls.

When the spots cleared from his vision, Josh sprawled limp on Richard's back. "Babe...fuck..."

"I believe that's what we just did."

"Funny, funny guy."

Richard only grunted in answer, apparently content to lie still and replete for a bit. Finally, he said softly, "Joshua, that was wonderful."

"Good. So from now on, we wrestle for top, right?"

"Perhaps. Sometimes." Richard turned his head. "But you will lose."

"So full of yourself." Josh leaned in to capture his lips in a sweet kiss.

"Actually, full of you at the moment." Richard's smile was so tender, Josh thought his heart might crack. "But you should probably get up."

"Oh. Sorry, hon. I'm getting too heavy?"

"Never. You should eat something, though. If we're going out.

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You're still depleted."

After a quick clean up and a hasty dinner, Josh changed into whole clothes and shrugged into his denim jacket. With the familiar feel of his weapons lying in their pockets in the lining, he felt more himself than he had in some time. He met Richard on the back porch, his handsome profile silhouetted against the sapphire blue of the evening sky.

"You catching a scent, babe?"

Richard shook his head. "Not at the moment."

"Kay. We're going back to Glory's for now. I'm driving."

"Oh?" One black brow arched.

"Don't get all bristly. Your car's silver, dude. Too easy to ID."

"Ah."

"Couldn't buy a black car like a respectable vamp, could you?"

"Rather cliché, don't you think?"

Josh snorted and allowed himself to be pulled into a hard embrace before he sauntered out to the Jeep. Richard slid in the passenger's side, looking a hundred times better than the last time he'd occupied that seat.

At Glory's, Josh repeated what he had done before, parking in the next street and walking through the trees. Once there, he made Richard run through the details of the evening, in order.

"Okay. So here's where you were tangling with the things? When the...keepers came?" They stood at the backdoor, Josh pointing to the unholy mess of boot tracks on the damp ground.

"Yes. Closer to the steps. But, yes."

"Can you still scent them here?"

Richard's nostrils flared. He drew in a slow breath, his brow furrowing. His lips parted and he drew in another breath, obviously scenting with both mouth and nose as felines did. He paced to the

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back steps. “Yes. Here...the scent is still here...faint...but...”

One slow step at a time, he stalked the scent’s trail, Josh following in his wake. “Here we fought...” After a few steps more, his head came up. He pointed through the grass toward the road. “The trail leads that way.”

Bent low, flashlight dancing over the grass, Josh searched the ground. “Look here. Something big was dragged through here. Grass is all flattened. Could’ve been police equipment...”

Richard knelt, taking in long sips of air. “No. Them. They were dragged. There is...fear? Difficult to unravel.”

“Lead the way, babe,” Josh urged. “Show me where they end up.”

With a feeling of following the world’s oddest and deadliest bloodhound, Josh searched the trail through the grass for anything out of place. A bit of fur, a broken claw tip, a bit of netting, any one of those things would confirm what Richard had seen and maybe give them something more to go on.

“The trail ends here.” Richard stopped abruptly, crouching on his haunches by the road’s gravel shoulder.

“There’re tire tracks. Just in the grass. Big vehicle. Panel van, maybe,” Josh murmured, as much to himself as to let Richard know his thoughts.

“So they were netted, perhaps sedated, dragged to a truck, and tossed inside,” Richard grated out.

“Dude, you make it sound like that’s a bad thing. Don’t we want those things off the streets?”

“The men who took them...” Richard trailed off, staring into the woods.

“Right. Not necessarily friendlies. And I’m pretty pissed at them for shooting you without asking questions.”

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“Joshua.” Richard’s voice was soft, almost apologetic. “You would have done the same, once.”

“I know, babe. Probably. Maybe.”

Silence fell between them, both of them staring out at the night into memory.

“How did you kill your first?”

The sudden question startled Josh. “What?”

“Your first kill. Your first vampire. It was before you joined the hunters, before you had any training, how did you manage such a thing?”

“Oh, got it.” Josh shrugged. “Wasn’t so hard.”

“With a being ten times faster and stronger, with senses far surpassing yours?”

“Gets your dick all in a knot that a mere little human could do that?”

Richard sighed. “No, my dear. I had just wondered.”

“Sorry, babe. Didn’t mean to snap at you. Just don’t like thinking about it.” Josh chewed on his lower lip a moment. “I went down the street to the pawnshop and bought a gun. Tracked the bastard by the radar in my head. Found him while he was feeding. Blew his kneecaps out. Even a vamp has trouble moving with no kneecaps.”

“Ah.”

“Even writhing on the floor in pain, he tried to seduce me, the fucker. Promised me eternal life, eternal youth, told me I’d be powerful beyond anything I could imagine. Sound familiar? Yeah, well, probably what he told Jen, too, right before he ripped her throat out. When I told him to fuck off, he changed his tune, started to beg and cry. He was just a lonely soul. He needed someone special. Someone like me. I asked him, so why did you kill Jen?”



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He said, ‘Who?’ and I said, ‘Wrong answer’ and blew his brains all over the walls.”

Josh gasped when Richard’s arms closed around him in a rough embrace. He hadn’t even seen him move. “Babe, you’re shaking. You shouldn’t ask me about stuff that’s gonna make you so upset.”

A strangled sound caught in Richard’s chest. He whispered, “It’s your pain that upsets me. So much below the surface. I want...I wish I could make it stop for you.”

“Shh, shh.” Josh reached up to wrap his arms around Richard’s neck, holding tight until he felt the powerful body pressed to his beginning to settle. “Maybe it’ll kinda fade. Eventually. But it doesn’t really get *better*, does it? You’ve been in pain for pretty damn close to a millennium.”

“That’s not entirely true.” Richard kissed the top of his head. “It fades when I have someone to...to focus on. It sharpens again when I lose them.”

There it was again, that hesitation, that thing he wouldn’t say. “Sucks being immortal, huh? Kinda amazing how any of you stay sane.”

“Yes. Yes, it is.”

\* \* \*

“...intake still limited to water. Subject exhibits no interest in normal feeding. Vocalization has diminished to two to three times an hour...”

Una blinked against the harsh lights. The white coat droned on and on into his little box. She hated him. He stank of cold metal and unnatural things. She wanted to tear his head from his neck. They had taken Quattuor from her. She wanted to tear them all to

### *A DIFFERENT BREED*

bloody shreds. But the collar was back. The fastening was different. Her claws no longer fit in the space to open it.

She flexed her wing. It ached, but the tear had mended. The untainted one had been so strong. Quattuor had been injured, keening with pain when they took him from her. She should have been with him to lick his wounds. She needed to be with her pack. The collar-man had separated them. She hated him, too.

Una tilted her head back and howled. It pleased her that the white coat cringed and covered his ears. Tomorrow, they would bring her the blood of an untainted again. She was meant to lust after it, meant to hunt them. Yet, the untainted she had fought...he was so fierce. So strong. She could not stop her thoughts from turning to him again and again.

## CHAPTER 9

### DOUBT'S SLOW POISON

Mick paced, hands clasped behind his back. "So even with two of them, you're saying this vamp was kicking their asses?"

"He was holding his own." Jenner tapped his pen on the table, obviously irritated by the line of questioning. "Doing damage. They would've had him with a third. Sure as hell wouldn't have stood up to the whole pack."

Through the one-way glass, he could see them all from this room, the culmination of his decades-long project, his pride and joy. The pack, these six mongrel creations were the answer, the final solution. While each effort had been more refined than the previous, a last puzzle piece was still missing.

"Russ." Mick stopped and turned to face his security chief.

## *A DIFFERENT BREED*

“Why didn’t you bring him in?”

Jenner held up a hand. “I know, I know. You want your Alpha to keep her in line. But we were having enough trouble securing the muties. Doug put a hole in his chest, at any rate. He might be dust.”

“Might be? Didn’t you make sure?”

“I’m not stupid enough to go running after a wounded vamp alone in the dark, Mick. By the time we checked the site, the body was gone. Blood all over the ground, but no vamp. Either he died and disintegrated, or someone whisked him away.” Jenner held his gaze, those cold, gray eyes holding secrets. “There’s something else, Mick.”

“Great. Wonderful. What else?”

“Kempski’s involved.”

“You saw Josh?”

“Our man watching the hospital saw him. He visited the McMahon woman.”

“What are you saying?”

“He lied to us, boss. Told you there was no vamp in Ithaca. There’s no way he would’ve been able to hide from Kempski’s radar. Not only is there a vamp, but it’s an old one, one strong enough to take on Una, and, I hate to say it, a damned handsome one. And he goes visiting a known associate of this vamp? What do you think I’m saying?”

Mick ran a hand over the side of his face. “So our Josh may have gone Ren, after all. Ten to one he’s the one who rescued our Alpha vamp.” He shook his head, regrets piling on regrets. “We should have brought him in on the project. Should’ve kept him close.”

“Loose cannon, Mick. I know you liked the kid, but he always

## A DIFFERENT BREED

was. Always wanted to do things his own way.”

“Too late now. The boy wants to play games, he’s gonna find out he doesn’t even know the rules pretty damn quick.”

Jenner leaned back, cracking his knuckles. “Kempski does seem to have settled in pretty well, even seems to have a job. And it does appear to be a pretty tight-knit community.”

Mick regarded Jenner with narrowed eyes and stabbed his unlit cigar at him. “Something’s going through that twisted brain of yours.”

“I think we can answer all your problems at once, Mick. All we need is a well-baited trap.”

\* \* \*

“Joshua, L generally comes before O,” Lynette said on a snort as she reshelfed books. “A bit off today?”

“Sorry. Yeah.”

“Richard’s not recovering?”

“What?” Josh dropped a box on his foot and bit back a string of cussing. “Note to self: no sneakers at work.” He straightened and came around the shelf to Lynette. “He’s good. I mean, *physically*, he’s perfect.”

Lynette’s eyebrow crept up. “Yes. That he is. But?”

“He’s...” Josh shrugged. “I dunno...distracted? Lots of staring out into nothing. Lots of spacing out. Mumbles to himself.”

“Hm. He’s always done that. I think this has more to do with the other night than Richard’s odd communication habits.”

“Maybe.”

“You still don’t know what happened?”

Josh ran a hand back through his hair. “I know what Richard

## A DIFFERENT BREED

*thinks* happened.”

She frowned. “You don’t believe him?”

“Oh, hell, yeah. I mean, I know he’s telling me what he sees as the absolute truth. I’m just not sure it happened the way he remembers.” He shifted uncomfortably under her stare. “Maybe he’s...I mean, he hasn’t been dealing with stuff too well since William died, right?”

Lynette craned her head around, apparently making certain the store was empty. “The fact is, he hasn’t been dealing with anything at all. Richard has lived in a state of suspension, his life a shrine to William, as if it were a shop display. He has been stable, until you came.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Josh fought the heat rising up his chest.

“Stable, but trapped in amber. I think you have forced him to feel again.”

“Oh.” He chewed on his bottom lip. “Maybe that’s not a good thing, huh?”

She let out a little chuckle. “Of course it is. He can’t go through life like some prehistoric mammoth trapped in the ice. I’m sure it’s painful for him, but it’s not as if he hasn’t been through this before.”

“Right...before. Lynette? Do you know, um, how many *befores* have there been?”

She went back to shelving books. “Hasn’t he told you about them?”

“He’s mentioned, um, some. I mean, I know all about Gerhard. And William, of course. I kinda figure the guy who taught him glassblowing was probably one, too.”

“Yes, Tonio. He lost Tonio during the Inquisition, to a terrible,

## A DIFFERENT BREED

violent death. Those deaths haunt him, the violent ones. He blames himself, believes he should have been able to save his lovers somehow.”

“Kay. That explains why he didn’t wanna talk about the whole glassblowing thing. But, I mean, how many has he lost like that?”

“Four.” She quirked a brow at him again. “He doesn’t take lovers often. One or two a century. From everything he’s told me, he tends to pick gentle souls, men he believes he can live alongside quietly, men he can shelter and protect. It hasn’t always been so. His first loves, Duke Henry, Gerhard Brun, they were warriors, men born to fight. I think part of him fears his attraction to fighting men. That such a love will surely be torn from him violently.”

Josh laughed at her expressive look. “He doesn’t love me. I’m just a nice way to warm up the crypt.”

“Lovely.” She rolled her eyes. “And you think *he* might be delusional.”

“Whatever.” His comfort level with the conversation was decreasing by the second, even if it was damn good Richard intel. He shifted the subject slightly, “So how do you know all this stuff? Half the time he answers questions with one word. When he’s not pretending like he didn’t hear, that is.”

Lynette gave him a little smile. “I got him drunk.”

“Um...you can’t...I mean vamps don’t...”

“If he were to simply drink a glass of whiskey—”

“He’d puke his guts up.”

“Yes. But if I drink, and then he feeds from me...”

“You’re shitting me.”

“Language, Joshua, please.”

“Sorry.”

“And, no, I’m perfectly serious. I didn’t set out to get him

## A DIFFERENT BREED

drunk, but I was not having a particularly good day. As you would say, it sucked.”

Josh snickered.

“So by the time Richard came to feed, I’d already had three quarters of a bottle of wine. He fed from me and became rather tipsy.” Lynette went back to shelving. “It just so happens he is a *very* talkative drunk.”

“Huh. I’ll have to remember that.”

Josh seriously considered it, even though it was a colossally bad idea. Richard might babble when he was drunk, but Josh knew enough about himself to know *he* was a morose drunk and often a mean one. He’d only ever slept with one other hunter, and that relationship ended badly when he got drunk and punched Stuart’s lights out. Stuart forgave him, and they’d still been friends, but he said the sleeping together had to stop.

God...Stuart. He needed to call him. He’d know what Mick had told the others, and the boy was probably worried. Maybe Mick hadn’t said anything, still confident he was coming back. That would be more like him. Arrogant bastard. Right, that made more sense, since Stuart hadn’t left any anxious *where are you Josh, do you need me to come out there?* messages.

He stayed until closing and walked Lynette to her car, as Richard had requested. Tam emphatically refused the escort, claiming she had a date that night. She didn’t want “Mr. Toughie” anywhere near her newest flame. “You’ll either scare him off or steal him from me, Josh. Either way, it’s a no win, so, no, thanks.”

\* \* \*

White coats with long sticks came to drive Una from her



## *A DIFFERENT BREED*

solitary room. If the sticks touched her, pain would shoot through her. They drove her down the hall, though, toward her pack, so she went willingly.

Once the men with the lightning sticks left the room, Una spread her wings and shrieked her greeting. Her pack answered in chorus, in howls, screams, and hisses. It was good to be back. She felt stronger with them. It was better still to run under the stars with them, scenting the wind. For now, the gray room the white coats called the “den” was better than being apart.

Dua came to her first, delicate, tufted ears half-flattened, her sideling approach unsure. Her claws extended and retracted. Her golden eyes blinked twice. Una spread her arms and let her come close. She allowed the nuzzle under her chin as she nipped at Dua’s ear.

When the pack second had reconfirmed Una’s dominance, the rest gathered close. Tres, with her green scales, forked tongue flickering, glided to her. Quintus knelt and nuzzled his gray and white furred head against her thigh. Sextus hung back until Una reached out to pet his leathery head. Quattuor reached her last, still limping.

She wrapped both arms and wings around him protectively. He rested his gray-furred muzzle on her shoulder with a contented sigh as she licked his pointed ears.

*We hunt tonight*, she told them, speaking mind to mind. *The Maker has promised.*

\* \* \*

When Josh got back to Richard’s, he’d already shut himself in the basement. Josh leaned his forehead against the wood with a

## *A DIFFERENT BREED*

sigh. "I know it's good for you to work, babe," he muttered. "But I really wanted to talk to you."

He slouched off to the kitchen to make himself a sandwich, resigned to a lonely evening. With all the time he'd already taken from Richard, it would be wrong to interrupt him when he hit his creative stride. Occasional clanks and clatters rose up through the vents and Josh contented himself with this evidence of Richard's presence. The soft sounds lulled him while he read the paper; so much that he missed the moment when they stopped. Footsteps dashing up the stairs startled him. The basement door crashed open.

Alarmed, Josh stood and turned to the doorway in time to see Richard careen around the corner with a huge grin on his face. "Joshua!" he cried out and pounced. He swept Josh up in his arms and twirled him around the room. "You're home!"

"Whoa, big daddy!" Josh laughed. "Yeah, I'm here. Been here a few minutes. What's up with you?"

The grin hadn't faded. "I heard you. Over the work, through the haze of concentration. I heard you."

"What're you saying, hon?" Josh smoothed the hair back from Richard's forehead. "You heard...what? My pulse? Me being sulky? My...did you hear me thinking?"

"Not your thoughts." Richard's smile slid. "But the shape of them. The shades of thought that are you. This is making you uncomfortable."

"No, it's not." Josh wriggled free to gain some space.

Richard retreated to lean against the counter, arms crossed over his chest, staring hard at the floor.

"Trying out your X-ray vision, babe?" Josh had the sudden, terrible desire to pack his things and go. The sex was fantastic,

### *A DIFFERENT BREED*

Richard was wonderful, but he had a bad feeling things were about to go three shades of sideways way too fast.

Instead of answering the smart-ass comment, Richard asked softly, "You haven't had many real homes, have you?"

Josh shrugged. "Never really thought about it much."

"The foster homes, the uncertainty...I suppose the only real home was Jenny."

"We managed."

Richard still stared at the floor. "What did you do after she died?"

Still not sure he wanted to know where this was heading, Josh twirled a pencil on the table. "I left town. Didn't know if the police would be looking. Moved around. Slept rough. Was living on the streets in Detroit when the Guild found me."

He heaved a slow breath around the memory. It had been such a relief, to find other people who knew vamps were real and who hunted them as he did. "I've...lived in the Guild barracks the past few years. But I've been on the road, mostly, one cheap motel to another. Not there too much."

"And it never felt like home..." Richard let the sentence trail off to hang between them.

"Guess not," Josh spoke carefully, feeling as if he walked through a field of glass-shard mines. "More like base camp. A place to start again from."

Richard nodded. His head came up slowly, uncertainty shadowing his eyes. "Joshua...I'd like this to be your home."

"It is, babe. I live here."

"Not simply for now. Not simply because of the need of the moment."

Josh swallowed hard. This couldn't be happening. Everything

## A DIFFERENT BREED

had been so damn perfect. He couldn't make promises, couldn't be tied down. The old panic gripped his heart. *When someone says they love you, that's when they hurt you. That's when everything goes all to hell.* "Maybe you better stop talking around stuff, hon."

"I want you with me always." Those sad eyes searched his face. "For as long as you live, I want you beside me. Josh, I lo—"

"Don't!" Josh took a step forward, his fists balled. "Don't even think of saying it. I can't do it, babe. Can't give you what you want. I'm not William. I'm not Gerhard. I'm not 'ever after' material. And if you can't accept happy for now and you need a fucking happy ever, you need to keep looking."

The stricken look on Richard's face might have been funny if it hadn't been so heartbreaking. "But...you've...I've felt you..."

"Yeah, well, maybe you're just a little delusional, big guy. I'm sorry. You're gorgeous and hot as hell, and it's great being here with you. But I'm not a pet. Not some tame little human to settle down with. I can't make promises that have words like 'forever' in them."

Richard whirled away from Josh, both hands gripping the counter so hard the granite creaked. Misery radiated from him in heavy, gray waves.

"Babe, don't do this. Please. What we have is incredible. Can't we jus—"

With a sharp gasp, Richard's head snapped up. He half-turned, his eyes wild. "So wrong," he whispered. For a moment, he stood still as marble. Then in a sudden blur, he was gone.

Josh blinked in shock. The terrible pain and then sudden anger from Richard had pounded into him like physical blows. The backdoor slammed.

"Oh, shit." He grabbed his coat as he ran. "Richard! Dammit,

## *A DIFFERENT BREED*

can't we talk about this?"

The moonlit field behind the house was empty by the time he reached it. Serpents of autumn mist crept through the grass, creating silver islands in the dark. Richard was nowhere in sight, no shock there. Like cheetahs, vamps could sprint over short distances at incredible speed. Unlike cheetahs, vamps had been clocked at over a hundred miles an hour.

"Doesn't much matter, babe," Josh muttered. "No place you can hide from me." His Richard-radar led him into the woods, the full moon providing plenty of light. Any other lover, he would have let work through their hurt, wait until he'd calmed down, at least. But the wild escalation from hurt to feral desperation that Richard broadcasted now had Josh frantic. What the hell did he plan on doing?

A terrible image ambushed him of Richard flinging himself from a cliff. Uncertain if the thought had risen from his own anxieties or had come from Richard, he ran faster, willing his feet to fly over the uneven ground. He leaped fallen logs and leaf-strewn rocks, feeling with every step that he drew closer, praying he would be in time.

"Richard? Richard! Dammit, don't do anything stupid!"

The trees opened up into a leaf-strewn clearing. Josh stopped at its edge, heart thudding against his breastbone. A brittle chill ran through him, threatening to shatter him from the inside. Here, in this silver-gilt clearing, lay the answer he needed and had so dreaded.

Sprawled on a flat rock in the clearing's center, a woman's body formed the center of the tableau. A young man lay crumpled against a tree on the far side. Worst of all, a large figure crouched over the woman, face pressed against her neck, growling softly.

## *A DIFFERENT BREED*

*Richard...*

Josh's eyes stung with unshed tears. So it was true. His brave, honorable Richard had gone headfirst off the deep end. Maybe it had taken years to build up to this. Maybe Josh had been the catalyst that drove him over the edge. Maybe all vamps, even the good ones, went nuts after enough centuries of loneliness and pain.

He approached quietly, thinking hard about falling snow to keep his anguish from reaching Richard. He reached into his jacket for his spike. No. He couldn't do it. Not that. He grasped the blackjack instead.

Too engrossed in his prey, Richard seemed unaware of him until Josh stood right over him. Then he turned his head, fury in his eyes, blood on his lips.

"I'm sorry, babe," Josh whispered as he brought the blackjack down hard across the back of his head. Three more times he struck. Vamp skulls were hard and Richard clung to consciousness until the fourth blow fell. When he finally faded out, the loss of his presence in Josh's mind was like the last candle winking out in an endless black tunnel.

Josh dropped the blackjack and stumbled forward to check the woman. Her pulse beat, slow and steady. He shivered when she rolled her head toward him. Tam. Had Richard sensed her out here in the woods with her date? Had it been some bizarre possessive reaction? He made his way over to the man by the tree, relieved when he also turned out to be alive. At least he'd come in time.

With his breaths shuddering, he returned to Richard, pulled the cuffs out of his jacket, and got his arms secured behind his back. He collapsed to his knees and pulled Richard's unconscious body into his arms, rocking him gently.

"I should dust you, sweetheart," he whispered miserably.

## A DIFFERENT BREED

“You’ve gone rogue and you’re gonna kill someone. And I know you don’t want that. But I can’t. I just can’t. Shit...I don’t know what to do...”

He needed to get Tam and her date some help. That came first. Then he needed to get Richard secured somehow. He kissed his forehead and smoothed the soft hair. “I’ll...I’ll take you away. Somewhere people don’t live. Not so many people. Somewhere safe. Maybe...maybe we can find a vamp shrink or something. I mean, Internet’s got everything these days, right?”

The practical part of him knew this was madness, that there was no solution. His heart couldn’t bear the thought, though, that he might have to destroy this compassionate, brilliant soul, put him down like a rabid dog. *Even if you love the dog, you still have to do it. But Richard’s not a damn dog.*

“I’m so sorry. Dammit, I’m so sorry,” Josh choked out as he gazed down at that handsome face. Nothing good ever lasted.

An eerie howl suddenly yanked him out of his miserable reverie. Josh’s head jerked up. The howl came again, closer, on the right. A nightmare scream answered from the left. Josh leapt to his feet, gun in one hand, spike in the other, scanning the trees for any sign of movement.

When the hunting pack of nightmares burst from cover, a terrible realization hit him. Richard’s supposed delusions were real and Josh had made a deadly, stupid mistake. He twisted in a desperate circle as they rushed out of the trees from all sides. It was just as Richard had said. These things shouldn’t have been. Human-sized, with limbs reminiscent of arms and legs, otherwise they were parodies of the human form, horrific meldings of human and animal.

The one directly in front of him wrinkled its flat nose and

## *A DIFFERENT BREED*

charged with a banshee shriek. Huge bat-like wings spread to either side, dagger-long, curved claws flexing. Horror thrummed through his veins, but he managed to get a shot off, aimed dead center at its chest. The thing was so fast it dodged the bullet.

He put a round in the green, snakelike one's shoulder, but it kept coming. Another shot managed to hit the one with the badger head, but it didn't even pause. As he fired round after round, Josh knew death had finally found him. A sharp pang of regret bit deep. If he hadn't brained Richard, they could have died fighting side by side. It would have been a good way to go. A warrior's death would have suited them both.

The bat creature stopped ten feet away, crouched, and launched, closing the impossible distance between them in a single leap. Josh dropped the empty pistol and shifted his spike to his right hand, determined to make his death count and to protect Richard as long as he could. He managed to evade the reaching claws and ripped a ragged line down the thing's brown-furred arm. It shrieked and backed a step, giving him a precious second.

Sudden pain ripped down his back. He turned to slash at the thing with the gray muzzle and wolf ears that had raked him with its claws. Josh's strike went wide. A line of fire seared down his hip. He whirled again to face the one with the crocodile snout. Something hard slammed into his skull. The world tilted, but he kept his feet, the closing circle of nightmares still held at bay by his wild swings.

From what seemed a hundred miles away, he heard a voice shouting, *No! Get back! No harming humans! Bad! Down!*

Piercing shrieks and howls followed him down into the dark.



## CHAPTER 10

### GRAND DESIGNS

Richard gave a half-hearted tug at the chain around his right wrist. Thick enough to secure a small elephant, the links bit into his skin at both wrists and ankles. The misery of being fastened down so cruelly, spread-eagle to a concrete floor, was a distant irritant, buried under the agony in his heart.

Josh had betrayed him. No matter how hard he tried to shove the thought aside, the fact remained. His beloved Joshua, perhaps in some mistaken bid to protect Tamara, had knocked him out and delivered him to the hunters. The reasons hardly mattered. In the end, Josh had rejected him, hadn't believed in him enough to let him explain, and had betrayed him.

A number of people over the centuries, both humans and other

## *A DIFFERENT BREED*

vampires, had warned him this day would come, the day when he no longer wished to live. He had never denied it would, but the bleak desolation, the yawning void where hope had been, still filled him with a dull sort of horror. When Gerhard had reached the end, he had simply gone to sleep. This wasn't possible for him.

He assumed he was still alive for experimentation purposes. Once in awhile, one heard whispers of such things, vamps taken alive so that hunters could dissect them, try new weapons and techniques on them. He found himself unable to muster any fear or anger over the possibility. If Josh had said he loved him, had remained constant, he might have summoned these emotions, might have fought to escape.

*Nothing matters anymore. Let them do as they please.  
Josh...dear God...Josh...*

Only the fact that cameras monitored the room kept his tears back. His heart lay shattered but he retained at least that much pride.

\* \* \*

A low moan registered. From the vibration in Josh's chest, he figured it was probably him. He cracked an eye, squeezed it shut against the light, and then tried again. A metal bedrail bisected his line of sight. *Okay, you've done this before. Bedrail, IV pole...hospital room.*

He lifted his head. It felt like someone had stuffed it full of fiberglass insulation, so he let it clunk back down on the pillow.

"I feel like crap, therefore I am," he muttered. Pain, as one of his favorite fictional characters liked to say, was how you knew you'd survived.

## *A DIFFERENT BREED*

Bandages wrapped his middle. He lay on his left side with an IV line in his right arm and a...what the hell? A metallic clank sounded when he moved his right foot. Not good. Someone had cuffed his ankle to the bedrail. Whoever had patched him up probably had something to do with the voice that had called off the monsters. Probably not in friendly territory, probably—

He surged up, panic-stricken. “Richard!”

Medical alarms shrieked and a hot, prickling rush up the center of Josh’s back warned him he was going back out. *Goddamn, stupid blood loss...*

One of those strange fainting dreams overtook him. He thought he saw Stuart bending over him, dark eyes filled with concern, mouthing words without sound.

\* \* \*

The door to Richard’s cell opened. At first, he didn’t turn his head. They had come for him and he didn’t care. He expected voices, perhaps taunts and questions. Instead, the first sound to reach him was snuffling. He rolled his head to look despite his resolve to remain disinterested.

She stood in the doorway, the one he had sensed for weeks, the one with whom he had fought. Indoors, she appeared even larger, broad shoulders filling the doorframe, huge wings framing her powerful form.

A tobacco-ruined voice spoke behind her, “Go on, Una. You can go see him. He’ll be yours soon.”

A thick, metal-lined collar circled her throat. She flexed her claws with a growl and then jerked back with a whimper, pawing at her neck. Shock collar, Richard realized with a surge of nausea.

## *A DIFFERENT BREED*

She was as much a prisoner as he was.

“No biting or scratching. Gently, atta girl.”

She approached slowly, head cocked to one side, oversized ears swiveling. With fluid grace, she crouched beside him, and her disturbing scent assailed him, animal and vampire, undercut by something sharp and strange.

“What are you?” he whispered.

Though her black eyes met his directly, he couldn’t tell if she understood him. She bent her head to sniff at his throat, then his stomach and his crotch, as if she sampled his scent. When she straightened, she reached toward his face with one paw.

“Dammit, Mick, stop her!” a second voice shouted from the hall.

“Simmer down. Give her space. She likes him,” the deep, raspy voice replied.

Una combed a single claw back through his hair, smoothing the stray strands from his face with delicate precision. *::Mine::*

Richard’s eyes widened as that determined thought invaded his mind. *::I hear you...::*

*::Mine,::* she repeated, though this time a note of sorrow tinted the thought. *::After the blood tainting::*

*::What is that?::*

Men in lab coats swarmed the cell before she could answer, though; waving what looked like cattle prods to drive her out. Then they left Richard alone again under the fluorescent lights. The sequence held a terrible familiarity, the betrayal, the capture, the threat of some dire change visited upon him that he barely understood.

Blood tainting...what was he about to become now?

## A DIFFERENT BREED

\* \* \*

Josh's second waking arrived in fits and starts. People came and went, voices, sounds. Hands turned him, working with IV lines and dressings. When he swam back to full awareness, the pain had receded to a dull ache. *Probably on some killer meds.*

"You awake, bud?"

*Oh, damn. Mick.* So he was in the Guild infirmary. At least he knew that much. "Hey."

"There you are." Mick appeared in his line of vision as he pulled up a chair. With his salt and pepper hair, barrel chest and walrus mustache, and the ever-present unlit cigar tucked in the corner of his mouth, the man had always looked like a TV stereotype of a police captain to Josh. "Been worried about you. Didn't return my calls. And when we did find you, you were bleeding your life out."

"Yeah, well, sorry, Dad." Josh hated the weak, quavering of his voice, but he couldn't gather any more volume. "Didn't know there was a curfew."

"I'd tell you not to be a smartass, but that'd be like telling you to stop breathing," Mick growled. "Maybe it's time to explain what the hell you've been doing these last weeks."

"Nope. Don't work for you anymore. Don't have to explain anything." Josh tugged on his cuffed ankle to rattle the chain. "And since I'm already being treated like a POW, I don't need to give you a damn thing besides name, rank, and number."

"The cuff's to keep you safe, bud. You tried to take a walk a time or two there, mostly unconscious, down to your last pint. Always were a stubborn little cuss."

"Look, Mick..." Josh trailed off. He realized suddenly why he

*A DIFFERENT BREED*

was calmer. Richard, he felt Richard. Not a happy Richard, not by a long shot, but his favorite vamp was alive and nearby.

“Josh? Josh!” Mick gripped his shoulder, shaking him.

“What?”

“You zoned out there, kiddo. Feeling light-headed again?”

“Yeah, a little,” Josh hedged. “Sorry.”

“I’ll be straight with you,” Mick eased back into his chair. “I’ve always been straight with you, haven’t I?”

“I guess. Mostly.”

“Your boyfriend’s here, in custody.”

“My what?”

“Don’t play stupid. You lied to me to protect him. You’ve been hanging around the same town with nothing to hunt, so you had to have stayed for a reason. You’re the one who shows up when we’re finally closing in. The only thing I don’t get is why you whacked him over the head and trussed him up.”

“Extreme S and M?”

Mick snorted. “Hilarious. Wanna tell me what happened out there?”

“No.”

For a moment, Mick stared at the wall chewing on his cigar. “There’re some folks here who say we can’t trust you anymore.”

“Oh, gosh, wonder who?”

“Shut up a second, kid. Just listen for once when someone tries to tell you something important.” The unlit cigar stabbed in Josh’s direction. “Always trying to be so hard, such a freaking badass. I’m the one who pulled your sorry, starving butt off the street, remember? I know the scared kid under the hard shell, so just put the act away for a few minutes.”

Josh settled back onto his pillows, recognizing Mick in

## *A DIFFERENT BREED*

exposition mode. At least he'd abandoned the interrogation. "I'm listening."

"Better." Mick settled back again, arms crossed. "I've been doing this a long time, bud. Lost a lot of family, a lot of good friends over the years."

"I know. I'm sorry." One of the reasons he had joined the Guild in the first place was because Mick understood. His father, his older brother, his fiancé, they had all been hunters, and all died on the job.

Mick waved a hand. "I know. It's okay. But with all those hunters dying, especially in the bad old days when we didn't have the weapons and the training, I got to thinking. What if there was a better way, a safer way to dust vamps? What if we could find a way to do it without risking human lives?"

"Um, yeah. Can't argue with that. You building like mech suits or something?"

A smile crept under Mick's mustache. "Nothing like that. Something better."

"What?" Josh's curiosity bubbled up despite his wariness and his worry for Richard.

"Think you're up to a little trek?"

"I think my face is gonna meet linoleum if I try to stand up."

Mick chuckled. "I'll get you a chair, how's that sound?"

"Sure. I think I can fit you into my busy schedule."

Within moments, Mick came back with a wheelchair and one of the infirmary nurses, a new one Josh didn't remember. Not surprising since it had been almost a year since his last stay in a hospital bed. She got him unhooked from his IV and his monitors without a word, her face set in lines of disapproval. Then she helped Mick ease him into the wheelchair.

## *A DIFFERENT BREED*

The world pitched and spun while they got blankets tucked around him. He sipped deep, slow breaths, trying to will himself to stay conscious. Mick wouldn't do this if it wasn't important, and Josh was determined to see the little mystery to its end.

The nurse tried to walk with them, but Mick waved her back. "No, Irene. Just me and the kid."

"Aw, Mick wants some alone time," Josh got out in a hoarse whisper. "That's sweet."

"Yeah, yeah, keep it up, smartass, and I might change my mind."

Josh leaned his head back, too exhausted by the simple act of getting out of bed to offer a retort. Shit. How much blood had he lost? No medical type had come to explain the extent of his injuries, but from the crushing lethargy alone, he knew he'd cut it close.

The familiar corridors of Guild headquarters rolled past, central comm, the canteen, the conference rooms. Mick stopped in front of a gray steel door, one that Josh had always assumed led to maintenance access panels since it had always been locked. When Mick opened it, he saw a long hallway, not lined with electrical boxes and HVAC equipment, but with more bare steel doors.

"Mick? What is this?"

"The experimental wing, bud. Don't look like that. I won't leave you here."

With a quick look left and right, Mick took the wheelchair's handles again, shoved Josh inside, and locked the door behind them. He proceeded down the gray, unadorned hallway, cold cinder block without so much as a memo or room marker taped to the walls. Finally, he stopped at one of the many identical doors and opened it.



## *A DIFFERENT BREED*

Josh breathed a little sigh of relief. Visions of a room filled with incomprehensible lab equipment and gruesome specimens had assailed him. This room, though, just had a round conference table, a few chairs, and a dark window taking up most of the far wall. Mick rolled him over to the window.

“I don’t want you to freak out...”

*Never a good way to keep someone from freaking out.*

“...but the glass is one way. They can’t see you. And it’s shatter proof. You’re completely safe in here.”

Mick flipped a switch and the glass lit suddenly. The room beyond held six people. No, not people.

“Mick? Why are they here?” Josh gulped a breath, unsure what to think. “You caught all those monsters?”

“I didn’t catch them, kiddo. I made them.”

“You...what?” *Made them? Out of what, Play-Doh?* The blood sang in Josh’s ears, his heart racing as he watched the beast things move about on the other side of the glass.

“You all right there?”

“I don’t...feel so good,” Josh forced out.

“Put your head down, bud.” Mick pressed a broad hand between his shoulder blades. “You look a little green.”

He concentrated on breathing, ignoring everything else until the floor stopped pitching. “Those things in there. Those things that almost killed me, attacked an innocent woman, maybe two, maybe more, I don’t know, those things are *yours*?”

“They are.”

“What the hell *are* they?”

“The lab boys call them Enavs. Experimental necro-mutagenic animal vampire subjects.”

“Thanks. That explains everything.” He chewed over the words

## A DIFFERENT BREED

a moment and came to a terrible realization. “You’re saying they were, before whatever you did, they were vamps?”

Mick nodded, watching him. “They were.”

Vampires. No wonder Richard had scented vamp. But not vampires anymore, so they didn’t register on Josh’s radar. He stared at them, a cold pile of stones growing in his stomach. Bat, wolf, snake, lynx, crocodile, badger...these had all been human, maybe not too long ago for some of them. Then vamp, sure, but that didn’t mean the same thing it used to for him. Thinking, feeling beings turned into feral beasts...*dire beasts*.

“What did you do to them?” Josh whispered.

“Re-engineered them. We train them to hunt vamps.” Mick leaned back against the glass. “To serve the greater good instead of killing humans.”

“Um, we’ll go back to that in a sec.” Josh ran a hand over his face. “But I mean *how* did you do this? You just woke up one day and said, hey, let’s splice some life forms?”

“You gonna faint on me, kid? You’re not looking so good still.”

Josh shook his head, not sure if he was or not.

“Years ago, I was digging through stacks in one of those used bookstores. You know, the kind where they don’t sort anything and everything’s in goddamn boxes and piles?”

“You read?”

“Yeah, smart guy, but not the fairies and dragons stuff you ruin your brain on.” Mick let out a snort. “I came across a journal, old, faded, in that thin, slanted writing you see from late nineteenth century stuff. It was a necromancer’s journal...”

“Oh, hell, no. You messed with that shit?”

“Not all of it was about raising the dead. He’d tried some

## *A DIFFERENT BREED*

interesting things with the undead. Transformed vamps into things he hoped would serve him. His experiments didn't go so well. His subjects disintegrated. But I started thinking, maybe with a little modern science tossed in, it might work."

"So you did this using black magic?"

Mick waved his cigar. "It's only black magic if you hurt someone. A little magic, a little gene therapy. The first ones didn't work, of course. It took years to get the incantations and the combinations right."

"The combos seem to work pretty good, but your training sucks, man." Josh shivered as the bat creature cuffed the lynx one for getting too close. "They don't seem to have much problem attacking humans."

"Working on it. We're getting there." Mick turned to the window and pointed to the bat thing. "Una was the first successful transformation. Bat and wolverine DNA spliced onto her vamp. Sounded good at the time, but she turned out too aggressive, too stubborn. Each one after that got better. And adding males to the pack made Una more protective, more willing to do things for the group. The shock collars have helped, too."

"But she still attacked a woman, or one of them did."

"Una's a clever thing. She figured out how to get the collars off. Got away from her handlers one night with her favorite male. They didn't have the collars on when they got into the McMahon woman's house."

"Maybe I'm missing something here. They're still dangerous to humans."

"I told you, we're still working on it. New collars, new training, and soon a new pack leader."

"And that'll help, how? Mick, this is insane. You wanna fight

## *A DIFFERENT BREED*

monsters, so you make worse monsters?"

Instead of answering, Mick pulled up a chair, leaning forward so his hand rested on Josh's arm. "I need you to give me a straight answer, bud. That vamp we found you with, you were seeing him, weren't you?"

Josh searched his brain for a reason to lie, but it didn't make sense anymore. They already had Richard. "Maybe. Yeah."

"And did you go over for him? Let him make that mind to mind connection?"

"I'm not Ren," Josh snapped. Though he had no idea what to call the connection he and Richard shared.

"I didn't think so. You're too clear-headed still. Not distracted like all the Rens I've seen. Good. That's good." Mick patted his arm and sat back.

"Why?"

"Because if you were Ren, we'd have to wait until you recovered. Two of the Enavs had Renfields. One died of a stroke during the procedure. The other killed herself afterward. Obviously, we kept them sedated during, but it's still hard on them."

The last piece of the puzzle snapped into place. "Holy fucking hells." Nausea gripped him hard. "You're planning on using Richard. Making him into one of those things."

"Right. He's the best candidate we've ever had. Big guy, natural Alpha, smart enough to keep some intelligence through the change, not so aggressive he won't be trainable. He's what we need to make the pack work, to keep Una in line."

"Don't do this, Mick. Please. It's wrong. It's evil. He's not what you think. Doesn't hurt people. Makes glass animals and shit for a living."

## A DIFFERENT BREED

“He’s a vamp, Josh. Aren’t you the one who told me the only good vamp’s a dead one? Maybe he’s had a quiet couple of years, but it never lasts, you know that.” Mick patted his shoulder. “If we don’t change him, make him useful, someone’s going to have to dust him. At least this way he gets to live, right?”

“Right,” Josh choked out. A show of temper, of defiance, was just going to get him locked up, which wouldn’t help Richard. He swallowed the rage and sorrow, though he wanted to scream, *Then let me do it! I’d rather give him a clean death than watch him turned into one of those things!*

“I’m sorry, kiddo. Life just keeps tossing you under the wheels, doesn’t it? But you’re back with us now, and we’ll take care of you, help you get back to normal. It’ll be all right.” Mick rose and moved behind the wheelchair. “I better get you back to bed.”

Josh slumped in the chair, battling despair. He had to fight against shutting down, had to keep thinking. There was always a way out. He just had to find it.

## CHAPTER 11

### THE PROCEDURE

The man with the cold eyes was back. Richard couldn't say he liked any of his captors, but this one made the hairs on his arms stand on end. Men in lab coats had been in and out periodically, taking measurements and samples of his blood, hair, and skin. But the ice-eyed man only came to stare at him, never lifting a hand to assist the lab workers.

The sun had risen. His cell had no windows, but he could feel its weight behind his eyes. Soon he would sleep. He prayed this time he would not wake again.

"Wait until it goes into day hibernation. Then move it." The man spoke for the first time, his voice as frigid as his eyes.

"But it needs to be awake—"

## A DIFFERENT BREED

“For the procedure, yes. Stake it down now. We’ll wait to start until it wakes.”

“Blood loss—”

“Will be minimal while it hibernates. Just do what I tell you. This one’s too dangerous.”

“Yes, Mr. Jenner.”

Richard pulled in a slow breath. So it would happen this evening, whatever they meant to do. He turned his head to meet Jenner’s gaze. “Just kill me. Please.”

A slight twitch in Jenner’s jaw was the only reaction. He turned and left the room as if Richard hadn’t spoken. This wasn’t surprising, since the lab workers had ignored his questions and pleas as well. Everyone seemed under instructions to pretend not to hear him. But this man, with his chill air of authority, had met his eyes and deliberately disregarded him.

Somewhere nearby, Josh was in pain. It had been difficult to sense him through the concussion. With the head injury healing, the presence in Richard’s mind had filled back in with agonizing clarity. Physical pain, anguish, guilt, all of these trembled through his link with Josh. Despite what had happened, he still wished he could comfort him, go to him and take him in his arms, tell Josh he forgave him.

*It was my fault, my love. I pushed you too hard, too fast. I knew better and still forged on, my own selfish needs driving me. I’m sorry...my Joshua...*

As he slipped into the dark, a single tear slid down his cheek.

\* \* \*

“Shh, it’s okay, Josh, you’re safe now.” Stuart’s forehead

## *A DIFFERENT BREED*

creased with worry.

"No, hon, listen! I'm not crazy. I know what I saw!" Josh grabbed his arms and shook him, though he couldn't manage much of a shake.

Stuart took his face between his hands and kissed Josh softly. "There's no monsters, Kempiski. You got smacked on the head. They have you pumped full of pain meds. I don't know where you've been or what you've been through, but it must've been bad." He wrapped his arms around Josh carefully, speaking softly as if he comforted a child woken by nightmares. "You're safe, Josh. It's all right now."

Frustrated, exhausted, Josh bunched his fists in Stuart's shirt, fighting tears. Stuart could ride emotional currents, but he couldn't read minds. *And if I can't even convince a friend about what's happening, what the hell chance do I have?*

"You're such a mess, Josh," Stuart whispered into his hair. "What am I going to do with you?"

The soft rattle of a cart announced Irene's presence. "I'm sorry, Mr. McIntyre, it's time to go. Doctor's orders. Josh needs to rest and he's supposed to have some help doing it."

"Good." Stuart gave him a little smile as he backed off. "Let the nurse give you a sleeping pill or whatever it is. You'll feel better in the morning, and I'll be back then, okay?"

"It'll probably be too late by then," Josh said, but he relinquished his death grip in Stuart's shirt and lay back down. "Just...ask Mick. Do that for me? He never was good at dodging direct questions."

"If it makes you feel better, I will. I'm glad you're safe, Josh. Good to have you back."

Josh heaved a shuddering breath after Stuart left. No brilliant



*A DIFFERENT BREED*

plan had come to him, no last minute rescue materialized. “What’s that?” he asked Irene as she injected something into his line.

“Just a nice sedative. You’ll sleep for about twelve hours.”

This was it, then. He had no illusions about where the order came from. Mick wanted him out during the change, just in case. By the time Richard woke that evening, Josh would be dead to the world. When he woke up again, Richard would be gone. He wouldn’t even have a chance to say goodbye. A leaden feeling already gripped his limbs.

He looked up at Irene. “Tell Mick...tell him to say goodbye for me.”

“To who, sweetie?”

“Never mind.” Josh gripped the sheets when the world seemed to drop out from under him. He floated, though, rather than falling.

“Count back from a hundred for me, Josh.”

“One hundred...”

*I’ll never see him again...*

“Ninety-nine...”

*Never have those strong arms around me...*

“Ninety-eight...”

*Never look into those gorgeous eyes...*

“Ninety-seven...”

*Never hear his laugh...*

“Ninety-six...”

*I don’t know if I want to wake up again...*

“Ninety-five...”

*I’m such a jackass. Why couldn’t I just say the stupid words?*

“Nine...”

*Goodbye, Richard...*

## A DIFFERENT BREED

\* \* \*

Pain hurled Richard back into the waking world. He arched and cried out, his writhing only increasing the agony, his body trying to find escape before he could reach full awareness.

*St. Michael, help me, what have they done?*

A dirt floor had replaced the concrete one at his back. His position had not changed but the fastenings had, his chains replaced by metal stakes driven through his palms and ankles into the floor. Incredibly long stakes, he realized when he tried to wriggle the one through his right hand. The stake stayed firmly anchored. He only managed to rip his own flesh farther and spill more blood.

He panted, searching the brightly lit room. The now-familiar lab workers milled about at various tasks. One crouched nearby with a straight edge, painting lines around him on the floor in red.

*In blood...*

Richard lifted his head carefully, enough to make out the shape. Pentagon. They were about to engage in devil's magic.

*"Vater Unser im Himmel, geheiligt werde Dein Name ..."*

"What's he saying?" the one with the paintbrush whispered.

Another turned toward him, head cocked in an attitude of listening. "Lord's Prayer. In German."

*"Wie im Himmel, so auf Erden..."*

"Oh. Should we gag him? I mean, will that interfere with things?"

"Let him go. He won't have much breath left after the last stake goes in."

A third man approached with a three-foot metal stake and a mallet.

## A DIFFERENT BREED

“Watch the lines, Greg.”

“Yeah, yeah, done this before.”

With cool disinterest, the man with the mallet set the point of the stake against Richard’s chest, just to the right of his breastbone, between the fourth and fifth ribs.

“This is evil, what you’re doing,” Richard said softly. “You don’t have to go any farther. For the sake of your own soul, your own conscience, please d—”

The man drove the mallet down hard. A scream ripped from him, cutting off his words. The stake inched its way downward, stroke by agonizing stroke, until it, too, was embedded in the floor. The searing pain stole breath and sense. The metal had ripped through his lung and pressed against the side of his heart. Instinct kept him still, some grain of self-preservation insisting that he must, that if he thrashed, the stake would rip into the heart muscle.

“Oh, good.” A man with a thick mustache leaned over him. “He’s all ready for us. Where’s Jenner?”

“On his way.”

Richard squeezed his eyes shut. Scenes from his long life skittered through his mind, unable to settle. The unbearable pain made it impossible to reach for calm thought. In desperation, he reached out for Josh, only to feel him slip away. *No! Joshua!*

Muted feelings still reached him, though. Josh slept, a deep, unnatural sleep, but he still lived. A whimper of relief escaped. He had no idea why, but somehow he felt he might bear what was to come better if he could still touch some part of Josh. Nothing else mattered. There would be no salvation.

He found a place for his mind to rest between pain and despair.

\* \* \*

## A DIFFERENT BREED

Josh woke with a gasp, his heart slamming a tarantella beat against his chest. His head pounded, his pulse raced. A rustling caught his attention.

He whipped his head around. Jenner stood there with his Arctic smile, injecting something into his line.

“A little adrenaline, Kempski,” he said. “The panic reaction will settle in a minute or two.” He stepped away to dispose of the syringe. “Mick wanted you to sleep through tonight’s change. I think you need to be awake.”

*Richard.* He was in terrible agony. Shit, what were they doing to him? Josh panted, gripping the sheets as he tried to think through the pain.

“You hear him don’t you?” Jenner said softly. “Filthy little Ren. Mick wants to take you back. Wants to believe your lies. We know better, don’t we?”

“Fucking psycho,” Josh spat out. “What the hell do you want?”

“I want you to suffer. I want you to feel everything your vamp master goes through tonight. By the time it’s done, you’ll be dead or a drooling vegetable and I won’t have to worry about you stabbing us all in the back someday while Mick coddles you.”

“Go fuck a broom handle.”

Jenner laughed, a sound like a shiver of falling icicles. “Always a class act. It’ll be a pleasure not to hear your mouth anymore.”

Rivers of fire tore through Josh’s veins. He gasped, writhing on the bed. *Richard...dammit...*

“Hurts, doesn’t it? Your new master’s been staked to the ground. Five stakes to match the five points of the pentagram. He’ll roar and rage. It won’t help. Never does. Then they’ll hook up the IV with the serum, probably what you’re feeling now. We’ve picked bat and wolf for him, won’t that look nice? Another

## *A DIFFERENT BREED*

bloodsucking demon transformed to serve humanity.”

“Not...a demon. You don’t know anything. About him. Kindest...person...even if he took down...that couple...in the woods...still didn’t kill them...”

“Poor Joshy,” Jenner said softly. “That explains things. You thought he attacked the Banks woman and her escort. That must be why you secured him. Was nice of you, I’ll admit, but probably not necessary.”

“He didn’t...how do you know?”

Jenner shot him a ghastly smile. “Because I did it. Not him. She was bait. We knew she was one of his feeders.” He grabbed the front of Josh’s hospital gown and hauled him up to snarl in his face. “Did you think we didn’t know, Joshy? Did you think we wouldn’t find you? Didn’t know everyone you’ve talked to, everyone you’ve associated with in the last few weeks? Did you think you were *safe*?”

*No. Never that.* Josh hung in Jenner’s grip, too shocked to react, too agonized to think. Jenner dropped him and stalked to the door.

“Well, that just makes my day, knowing his little Ren whore was duped into netting him for us. Have a wonderful evening, Kempski. I’ll see what’s left of you later.”

*Richard, God, Richard...what have I done?*

He had led the hunters to him, and put him in danger even as he tried to protect him. He had broken Richard’s heart, not given him the benefit of the doubt at the only moment when it truly mattered, and delivered him like a freaking Christmas present to be tortured.

With shaking hands, he removed all his lines and leads. He had no idea what he was going to do, but he lowered the bedrail and swung his legs over the side. His first step pitched him to his

## A DIFFERENT BREED

knees.

“Good start, jackass,” he muttered. *No wonder they never cast you in a superhero movie.*

Jenner knew more than he should, but he didn’t know everything. He had no idea how much pain Josh was capable of enduring. The adrenaline roaring through his body only jumpstarted his resolve. With the IV pole as a rolling crutch, Josh limped into the hall and down the evening-quiet corridor toward the experimental wing. Cussed stubbornness got him halfway there before his injured leg collapsed under him.

Sprawled on the floor, staring up at fluorescent lights, Josh fought against the helpless rage boiling in his chest. What the hell was he planning on doing, anyway? Without help? Without the strength to fight?

“Josh?” A heart-shaped face framed in black curls suddenly leaned into his vision.

“Lucy?”

“Back off, Luce,” a cavern-deep voice broke in. “Mick said—”

“I know what Mick said, you big jerk. He said not to contact Josh in the field. Josh is here, and he’s on the darn floor.”

A second face joined Lucy’s, this one larger, male, with a familiar, permanent scowl.

“Hey, Roark,” Josh whispered.

“What the hell are you doing back here, Kempski?” Roark growled, his blond eyebrows drawing together.

“Right this second? Thought I’d take a little walk—”

For the second time that evening, Josh found himself hauled up by the front of his hospital gown. *This is getting old.*

“You know what I meant, you little shit!”

“Roark, hon, stop it.” Lucy put a hand on his huge forearm.

## *A DIFFERENT BREED*

“I’m sure Josh has reasons for whatever he’s been doing. And maybe you should be a little more benefit-of-the-doubt ready, don’t you think? Two words, hon. Warehouse. Ambush.”

With a grunt, Roark put him back down, looking everywhere but at Josh.

The words shoved up unbidden memories for Josh. The electric storm in his radar of vamps gathering, seven of them in one spot. Racing to the warehouse. Finding Roark on the floor, out cold, with both arms broken. Four vamps still standing. Josh still wasn’t sure how he’d gotten them both out alive.

A large hand patted his chest. “Fine. So I’m listening. So give, little man. What’s up with you?”

Josh looked from one face to the other. He had fought beside them, bled beside them. “Need to show you something. Need some help getting there.”

“We’ll help you.” Lucy gave a firm nod. “Roark can carry you.”

Roark wrinkled his nose. “You think we could get some pants on him first?”

\* \* \*

The man with the mustache and the gravelly voice paced a slow circle around Richard. He read aloud from a leather bound book, its binding cracked with age. The words were harsh, ugly, in no language Richard had ever heard before. He let them wash over him, meaningless, formless. The stakes were points of agony, the serum dripping into his bloodstream a river of fire, but everything had grown distant. Perhaps he would die, after all. If death came for him this time, he would go willingly.

## *A DIFFERENT BREED*

The ice-eyed man had come in with Josh's scent on him. Not that it mattered. He had no claim on Josh, not now. But if he had found someone new so quickly, Richard wondered why he chose someone so cold and seemingly heartless.

He closed his eyes again. He had only himself to blame.

The first man stopped his reading. "It's not working. There should be some reaction by now. I should feel something by now."

"Nothing?" the iceman asked.

"No. Not a damn thing. We've done everything just like the last time. What's gone wrong?"

The iceman crouched by Richard, head cocked to one side. "I think it's him, Mick."

"What do you mean *it's him*?" mustache-man, Mick, snarled.

"All the others fought and screamed. They were furious or terrified." He snapped his fingers in Richard's face. "This one's checked out. No ranting, no threats, no tears."

Mick chewed on his mustache. "So the subject's emotional state's a key part of it. Maybe even the catalyst that starts the change."

"Maybe." The iceman rose, cracking his knuckles. "What we need to do is make him mad."

"Great. How do we do that when he's given up?"

"Hold tight a few. I've got just the thing."



## CHAPTER 12

### DARK ANGEL

“Josh, this is the maintenance access,” Lucy frowned at the door.

“Yeah, I thought so, too, until Mick opened it.” Dressed in hastily acquired hospital scrubs, Josh was less than happy about being carried like a toddler in Roark’s arms. “So can you pick the damn lock or not?”

Lucy rolled her eyes. “Please. Who’re you talking to? When’s the last time a lock beat me?”

“Maybe now.”

“Don’t push her, Josh,” Roark said softly.

Josh glanced up at him in surprise. “You’re not afraid of Luce, are you?”

## A DIFFERENT BREED

“No. But she’ll take it out on me later.”

Lucy went to work on the lock with a crazy piece of metal she pulled from her hair, while Josh pieced things together. “You’re, like, a couple now?”

Roark blushed to the roots of his blond hair. “Yeah.”

“Mostly. When I can stand the sight of him,” Lucy amended as she opened the door. She stared down the long corridor a moment, open-mouthed. “Holy crap! Josh, what is this?”

“This, I was told, is the experimental wing. We lowly hunters never got told about it. Mick didn’t tell me why.” Josh took a deep breath. Richard’s pain had receded, making it easier to think, which meant either the big guy had distanced himself from it mentally or he was fading out. He desperately hoped the first one. “Go down the hall. Third door on your right. It’s probably open.”

They entered the darkened conference room, obviously puzzled. Roark put Josh down on one of the chairs. “Okay, so what are we supposed to see here?”

“There’s a light switch. Over there by the glass panel. There’s kind of a shocker on the other side of the glass, but it’s one-way and shatterproof, so don’t freak out.” *Oh, damn, I just did it, too.*

Lucy flicked the light on and staggered back with a gasp.

“Shit,” Roark whispered eloquently.

“What are they? Josh...what the hell?” Lucy turned to him, her dark eyes huge with shock.

“Mick made them. Cute little things, aren’t they?”

“Not the word I’d use,” Roark said. “But what *are* they?”

“He calls them Enavs. They used to be vamps. With a little weird gene splicing and a little black magic and some unholy stew of God knows what else, he got these things. For some fucked up reason, he seems to think he can train them, control them, and

## *A DIFFERENT BREED*

teach them to hunt vamps so humans don't have to."

"You don't think so, though," Lucy prompted.

"Got my doubts, yeah. Those things attacked me."

"But if they're supposed to attack vamps..."

"There're some glitches in their software still."

Roark approached the glass, chewing on a thumbnail, a sure sign he was processing something. "So you brought us in here to do...what? To kill them for you?"

"No." Josh shook his head, his throat closing up. "It's not their fault, what they are. That wouldn't be right. No, see, tonight Mick's making another one. I want you to help me stop him."

"So, let me see if I've got this." Roark rubbed at both temples with his fingers. "Mick's turning vamps into weird-ass, ultra dangerous monsters who're supposed to hunt vamps, but can't be controlled and you don't want us to kill them because they didn't want to be monsters. To top it all off you want us to *save* a vamp from being turned into a monster because..." He looked over at Lucy. "Did we get a why on that?"

"No, we didn't." Lucy put a hand on Josh's shoulder. "I think I know, though. Josh, hon, you fell hard, didn't you?"

"Yeah." Josh's voice stuck in his throat. He met Lucy's eyes, praying she would understand. "I'm no Ren, though. He's not in my head. He's too careful feeding—"

"Fuck, Kempski!" Roark threw his hands up. "You've been screwing one?"

"He doesn't like the word, but...yeah." Josh licked dry lips. "Look, it's not easy to explain. I attacked him. Our eyes met, and bam! This thing happened between us. And he's, Christ, I know this sounds corny, but he's not like the others. The evil vamps who don't care who they hurt. He helps people. He has human friends.

## A DIFFERENT BREED

He makes these beautiful glass things. He...he reads fantasy novels. And drinks tea."

Lucy sang softly, "*One of these things is not like the others...*"

"Dammit, Luce! He'd still be a bloodsucker!" Roark's face flushed crimson, a sure sign he was going off on a tirade. "What difference does it make if he—"

Apparently unaffected by a raging, two meter tall wall of muscle, Lucy put a hand on his chest. "Shh, hon. Deep breath."

Josh watched in astonishment as Roark swallowed hard and drew in a slow breath. No one had ever been able to calm him. *The things you miss when you're out in the field too long.*

"I've been wondering about how we do things for awhile," Lucy said. "And so have you."

"No," Roark got out in a choked growl.

"No? Oh, that was someone else crying in my arms a couple weeks ago?"

Roark glanced sharply at Josh. "I didn't."

"Yes, he did. All upset because he dusted a vamp and her Ren went into the next room and shot himself. And then he finds the poetry this vamp's been writing—"

"Stop! Dammit, Luce!" Roark tore away from her, his face buried in his hands. "Enough already. It doesn't mean...I still had to..."

"Maybe it does, hon. Maybe it means we've been going full steam ahead, killing every vamp we come across without any investigation, just because of what they are. And maybe we shouldn't have been."

"No," Roark repeated, but this time the word was a strangled whisper.

Relief washed through Josh. He wasn't the only hunter who

*A DIFFERENT BREED*

had been struggling with this. If even steadfast, stay-the-course Roark had doubts, there was a good chance things could change.

"Nobody told us, bro. We didn't know," Josh offered. "Always keeping us in the dark so we find things out the hard way." He waited until Roark's hands returned to his sides. "So. About my problem tonight? Do I get some help?"

"Yes. We'll help you. Roark, shut up, we're helping."

"I didn't say anything!"

Lucy snorted, and then turned to Josh. "Any idea where Mick's doing this godawful thing?"

"I don't know which room, but somewhere in this wing," Josh answered.

"There are a lot of doors." Lucy began. "Roark, stay with Josh. I'm getting Stuart so we're not leaving Josh alone. Then you and I are breaking down these doors one by one until we find them." She didn't give them a chance to argue or protest as she swept from the room.

Roark leaned back against the wall, arms folded over his chest. "You don't really need a babysitter, do you, Kempinski?"

"Hell, no."

"And she'll be back in a minute anyway."

"Yeah."

He clapped Josh on the shoulder. "No need to wait, then. Tell Luce I'm starting at the far end. She can start up here and meet me in the middle."

"Coward."

Roark gave him a spare smile. "Only with her."

He was on his way out when Josh called to him, "Roark?"

"Yeah?"

"Thanks."

## A DIFFERENT BREED

“Save it for later, Kempski. We haven’t done anything yet.”

“Kay, check. Big, sloppy kiss for you later, then.”

Roark left the room, muttering something that sounded like, “Damn freak.”

Left alone, exhausted and hurting, Josh stared through the glass. Una, the bat-wolverine one, paced the room. The others stayed out of her way. He remembered reading somewhere that pacing behavior in a caged animal meant stress because it wasn’t allowed to do the things it did naturally. He wondered if that could be the case with Una, or if something else caused her restlessness.

She whirled suddenly to face the window and seemed to be looking straight at Josh. Not possible, of course, she couldn’t see through the glass...

*::Hunter::*

Josh rubbed at the side of his face. Now he was hearing things. He needed to get a grip.

*::Hunter,::* the soft voice in his head repeated.

He stared at the Enav through the glass. “Am I hearing you?”  
*::I hear you...::*

*::Yes. Your mate despairs::*

*::I know...my mate?::*

*::The Maker said he was for me::* Lonely sorrow tinged the voice. *::He does not want me. He thinks only of you. And will die because he cannot change::*

*::He...no. I’m going to stop it::*

*::Fierce little hunter, it is begun. It does not stop::*

Josh tried not to think about the possibility that Richard had to change or die. He was going to have Richard back, dammit. *::Do you talk to everyone like this?::*

*::No::*

## *A DIFFERENT BREED*

*::You talked to him?::*

*::Yes, to the untainted. He is—::*

“Now why did I know you’d be here?” Jenner’s frigid voice cut through whatever Una meant to tell him. “How are you feeling?”

“Fan-fucking-tabulous,” Josh muttered. “What now? You just finish your arch villain how-to-gloat correspondence course and come to practice?”

“Missed your calling, Kempiski. Should have been in standup.” Jenner gave him a smile that made Josh fight a shiver. “But, no, don’t have time for things like that. Imagine how worried I was, though, when I found your empty bed. And then found that bonehead, Roark, wandering this wing. Subtle as a bulldozer, that one.”

Josh glanced down at the length of pipe Jenner clutched in his hand. “Shit. What did you do?”

“He’ll be out for an hour or two. Thick skull, don’t worry. Him, I have no use for.” He dropped the pipe with a clang on the conference table. A dark stain marred one end. “You, on the other hand, have one last thing you can do for me. One last service to the Guild, to Mick, to humanity.”

Quick as a cobra’s strike, Jenner shoved him face-first onto the table, one hand tangled in his hair, a knee on his back to keep him still. The pressure on recent wounds made the room lurch.

“What? You want a pity fuck?” he gasped out.

His head connected hard with the wood in payment for his smartass remark. His sight blurred, a nightmare hum buzzed in his head as Jenner jerked his arms behind his back and cuffed him.

“Oh, I’m going to enjoy this.” Jenner hissed as he hauled Josh off the table and dragged him out of the room by his hair and the back of the scrubs.

## *A DIFFERENT BREED*

\* \* \*

Richard drifted. A distant part of him wondered if he still had a soul. Soon, it would be soon, and then he would either find out or find oblivion.

A sharp tug on his mind yanked him from his morbid thoughts. Josh was coming. Josh was...

The door burst open and the iceman stood there, Josh dangling from his grip. Badly injured, half-conscious, Josh gave a weak moan when the man tossed him to the floor. A growl rumbled unbidden in Richard's chest.

"Russ, what the fuck?" Mick asked, his face darkening with anger.

"This is it, Mick. There's your Septimus, your pack lead. You want this to work? We need to take every practical step we can to make it happen."

"Practical? Dammit, the boy's in no shape to be here! Put him back to bed!"

The iceman approached with deliberate steps. "Decades. We've worked for this for decades. I've watched you coddle those monsters. Rather give them rewards than beat them when they don't do what you say. And I've stayed out of it. But this? You're telling me you're going to lose your nerve, be a candy ass, and not do what you have to because of your soft heart?"

He stalked back to Josh and flipped him onto his stomach. "Read, Mick! Now! Before you lose him, before he turns to dust and everything we've worked for with him!"

"But, Josh—"

"Is this one's little whore! Get it through your head!" The iceman ran a hand over Josh's backside. "What do you think,



## *A DIFFERENT BREED*

vamp? Think I should fuck him right here while you watch? I'm not usually partial to boys but Joshy's almost as pretty as a girl. I think I could manage."

Richard's growl grew in volume. His lips pulled back from his teeth.

"Go, Mick, now! He's getting mad. Read, dammit, don't think about what I'm doing, just make it happen."

His voice shaking, Mick began to read the terrible, guttural words again. He resumed his pacing but Richard only had eyes for Josh and the iceman.

"Richard!" Josh called out, his voice hoarse and weak. "Don't! Whatever they want you to do, don't!"

The iceman backhanded Josh hard across the face and his head clomped down on the floor.

"I know," the iceman said softly, a chill smile twitching at his lips. "Let's start taking pieces. See how long you can stand to watch. Hmm, what should we start with, do you think? Hands? Eyes? Maybe his balls."

Richard yanked hard at the stake holding his right hand and roared in frustration.

"No, I know. We'll take a foot first. What do you think of that, demon?" He pulled a metal object from his pocket, which unfolded into a saw blade.

*Hands, eyes, feet...* Suddenly, Richard knew. He knew who this man before him was, this man whose soul had turned into a tainted glacier. This was the man who had systematically tortured William, who had murdered him. Josh hadn't found a new lover; he had found a new tormentor.

"Drop it, Jenner," a soft voice ordered from the doorway. A young man with raven dark hair and coffee eyes pointed a pistol at

## *A DIFFERENT BREED*

the iceman. “Step away from him.”

Mick continued reading, apparently lost in the spell, his slow steps a ceaseless circle around the pentagram. Fire leaped through Richard’s veins. A burning itch began behind his shoulder blades. It only served to feed his rage.

“MacIntyre, good man. You came just in time to help,” Jenner said smoothly.

“Not here to help. Here to stop you. Lucy showed me the Enavs. We found Roark on the floor, you bastard.”

“You only have half the story, boy.” Jenner turned and Richard saw the movement but couldn’t find his voice to call warning. Faster than most men could think, Jenner reached back, pulled a handgun from his waistband, and fired. The impact hurled their would-be rescuer off his feet and into the hall, where he lay still.

“Stuart!” Josh cried out. “Fuck...oh, fuck...”

“Stupid kid,” Jenner muttered. Then he planted a knee on Josh’s back, bent his left leg up, and braced it against his chest while he set his saw against Josh’s ankle.

The cry of pain that Josh tried to muffle against the floor stole the last of Richard’s reason. His own pain no longer mattered. He hardly felt it. Josh’s agony screamed along his nerves. Muscles straining, he inched his right hand up along its stake. An enraged bellow leaped from him when the flesh caught on the flange at the top. Blood ran down his arm. The scent drove him on. He jerked his hand up toward the ceiling, tearing skin and flesh, the sickening crack of bone drowning out Mick’s spell.

The humans slowed, their movements creeping at the speed of frozen mud. Richard’s damaged hand still had a working thumb and two fingers. He reached over and grasped the stake pinning his chest. He pulled. The stake worked free inch by agonizing inch, yet

### *A DIFFERENT BREED*

in the eternity of its journey, Mick only moved half a step. The burn behind his shoulders leaped to concentrated points of searing pain. No matter. His pain no longer had any meaning.

He made quick work of the remaining stakes, blood pouring from the wounds. The lab workers had turned, reaching for rifles on the counter by the wall. Too slow, they had no chance. He broke the one rifle and bent the other before they could load the tranquilizer darts.

Mick had turned toward him now, his mouth still moving. Richard heard no sound. Perhaps his spell had sucked the sound from the world. No more music, no more laughter, all stolen by this misguided man. Richard slammed a bloody fist into his jaw. Mick crumpled to the floor.

Richard whirled to face Jenner. A strange sensation tugged at his back and knocked him off balance. He twisted. Something dark followed his movements. He tried to strike at it, but it turned with him. In frustration, he clenched his fists and roared. Wings snapped out behind him, huge, black wings.

Snarling, he turned to find Jenner with his saw blade at Josh's throat. He was faster than the other humans were, but nowhere near fast enough. Richard pounced, ripped the blade from his hand, and seized Jenner by the throat. The world sped again when Richard stood still, time catching him as he squeezed Jenner's windpipe and watched with feral glee as his eyes bulged.

"Richard." A soft voice broke the terrible silence. "Richard, don't do this. I don't care what they've done to you. You're still my paladin, my Richard. You're better than this, babe. I love you so."

The last words snapped Richard's head around. Josh lay on his side, gazing up at him.

## A DIFFERENT BREED

“You heard me,” Josh went on. “Not gonna repeat myself right now. Put the bad man down, sweetheart. I trust you to do the right thing.”

With a little whimper, Richard forced his mangled hand to unclench. Jenner fell to the floor in an unconscious heap, but Richard had no more attention to spare for him. He dropped to his knees beside Josh and curled up by his feet so he could lick the deep gash on his ankle.

\* \* \*

When Richard’s head whipped around, Josh nearly despaired. His beautiful, gray eyes were bloodshot, glittering with animal ferocity. Relief shivered through him as the feral glint faded, replaced by a more familiar Richard expression of anxious uncertainty.

The fierce male standing over him was still Richard, despite the increased speed and the damn wings. Josh had been sure the wings heralded the beginning of a more drastic change, but it seemed to be over, the process arrested in Richard, as it had not been in any of the other *subjects*.

“Josh!” Lucy cried out from the doorway, her .45 pointed at Richard’s back.

“It’s all good here, Luce. Put it away. Richard’s just doing a little, um, first aid.” Josh tried to lift his head to see out into the hallway. “Stuart?”

“Couple cracked ribs, probably.” Lucy shrugged. “He’s okay.”

“He—what? Jenner shot him from six feet away! Did he have like that elvish chainmail on or something?”

“*Mithril* was dwarvish, you doofus,” Lucy said on a snort.

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“And, no, Kevlar. You know, body armor? Some boys have the sense to prepare going into a bad situation.”

“Since when does Stuart have a bullet proof vest?”

“We all do, hon. You really need to come in out of the cold more often.”

“Roark?”

“Sitting out by the door, whining about his aching head.” She searched through Jenner’s pockets and came up with the key to remove Josh’s cuffs.

“Freaking head wound and she accuses me of whining,” Roark growled as he staggered through the door. He clutched at the frame and sat down hard. “Damn.”

Stuart joined him on the other side, leaning heavily against the door. “Josh...oh, Christ. We were too late...”

Richard had curled into a ball by Josh’s knees, his huge bat wings covering most of his nakedness.

“Somehow I don’t think so.” He reached down to stroke Richard’s hair. “Sweetheart, these are my friends. Lucy Inkebe, Stuart Macintyre, and the big guy on the floor is Roark Arnulfsen. Folks, this is Richard von Schaumburg, knight of the order of St. Michael and freaking incredible glass artist.”

Richard lifted his head to give them a brief nod of acknowledgment.

“Babe?” Josh said softly. “Aren’t you speaking to me anymore? I mean, not that I blame you if you’re not.”

The silence stretched to painful. Then Richard did something so familiar, so Richard, a rush of warmth suffused Josh’s body. He cleared his throat, twice. “I’m simply pleased to still have the ability to speak. Could we possibly leave it at that for now?”

“Got it. No heart to hearts yet.” Josh frowned when Richard

## A DIFFERENT BREED

curled into a tighter ball, shivering. His throat tightened as he looked up at Lucy. “He’s hurt pretty bad.”

Lucy considered and then let out a gusty sigh. “He needs to feed. Give him Jenner.”

Richard shook his head, burrowing farther under his wing.

“He won’t take anyone’s blood without permission.” Josh tried to move the wing. The veined surface had a silken texture, like rose petals. “Richard, you need some dinner.”

A soft whimper escaped from under the wing.

“Babe...what is it?”

“Hideous.”

“You’ve gotta be kidding me. All of a sudden you’re worried about your looks?” Josh edged closer and took his hand. “Those are some killer wings, babe. Make you look like some gorgeous dark angel.”

One gray eye peeked out from under the wing. “Lucifer.”

Josh let out a weak laugh. “No, babe. Not what I meant. More like wrath-of-God, fierce, avenging angel. Shit, the way you pulled Jenner off me, that was hot, sweetheart.”

“Do you *mind*?” Roark grumbled. “Maybe save that shit for a nice, private moment?” He rose with a grunt and staggered over. “He can have some of mine.”

“Roark!”

“Shh, Luce. He’s fed from Josh, and the little guy’s still the same smartass, right? How bad could it really be?”

“Talk to Richard,” Josh insisted. “He’s right there. Not nice to talk around people.”

Roark blinked, and then nodded. He reached out to tap Richard’s shoulder. “I’m offering, if you’re hungry, va—Richard. You’re bleeding all over the floor and Kempiski’s worried.”

## *A DIFFERENT BREED*

The dark wing lifted, Richard leaned up on one elbow, shaking hard enough to rattle his teeth. "There is a moment's pain. I won't take more than I truly need."

"You don't need to, you know, do any other things for it to work?"

"No. Though you may feel a certain, ah, euphoric arousal."

Obviously shy feeding with so many eyes watching, Richard let his hair fall into his face and raised a wing to obscure the arm Roark offered. The big man hissed softly when Richard's teeth sank into the crook of his elbow, but his eyes glazed over immediately. His head fell back, his lips parted, and Josh couldn't help a snicker at the little moan rumbling in oh-so-straight Roark's chest.

He tore his attention from them despite the rush of blood to his groin. "How many do we have at base?"

"Not including you, we have eight back in," Stuart answered. "Jack's due back late tonight. He should be bringing Tara with him. Why, Josh? What's the plan?"

"First we need to secure Jenner and Mick. No doubt they've got holding cells in this wing. Just leave Mick locked up somewhere, but Jenner's gotta be trussed up all the time. I don't care if he has to lie in his own piss for a while. Too damn dangerous to leave him loose even in a locked room. Then we need to call everyone in for a Hunters' Quorum."

"What do we tell them for the reason?" Lucy asked, her dark eyes narrowed.

"Impeachment proceedings," Josh answered softly. "We'll hold it in the conference room with the Enav window, just so everyone can see. Everyone comes to it. Medical, lab, tech, security. Either we figure our way out of this together, the question of hunting, the

## *A DIFFERENT BREED*

Enavs, who should lead us, or the Guild gets dissolved.”

Stuart cocked his head to one side. “I’m not sure our Josh came back from the field. I think this might be someone else.”

“Oh, why?”

“All these sensible suggestions. A whole speech without a single swear word.”

Lucy chuckled. “Yeah, well, if the pod person’s an improvement, we’ll keep him.”

With a little sigh, Richard pulled off Roark’s arm and curled back under his wing.

“Babe? You can’t be done. That wasn’t even a snack.”

“Roark is injured. It’s enough for now. The bleeding has stopped,” Richard’s voice came back muffled and subdued.

Roark sat staring at his arm.

“Hon, you okay?”

He started when Lucy put a hand on his shoulder. “That was...amazing. Never felt anything like it. My...my head doesn’t even hurt much anymore. He’s so damn polite and so gentle...” His words trailed off on a suspicious hitch of breath.

Lucy edged closer and let him bury his face against her stomach. “It’s okay, my iron Viking. We didn’t know. We’re learning.” She went on in an all-business tone. “We need to get you boys to bed. I found a room with cots down the hall. Richard, can you walk?”

Soon the four of them found themselves tucked into bed. Roark and Stuart took cots on one side of the room, while Josh and Richard shared the larger air mattress on the other. Lucy pulled the handy accordion partition shut between the two halves of the room and promised to lock the door to the wing behind her. She had dragged both Mick and Jenner into separate holding cells and



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shooed the traumatized lab techs to their quarters with a warning. They would be called to the Quorum when the hunters were all home.

Josh lay with his hand clutched around Richard's, fighting to keep his eyes open. He desperately wanted Richard to say something, to be angry with him, but he lay silent, staring over Josh's head.

"Babe," he said when he couldn't stand it anymore. "I don't know how to tell you I'm sorry. For everything. For not trusting you. For bringing all this to your doorstep. For...it's my fault this happened to you. I understand if you can't ever forgive me. But it's—"

"Shh, go to sleep," Richard weary voice cut him off.

"But I—"

"You're exhausted and I'm...unspeakably tired. Go to sleep, Joshua." Richard rolled toward him, one wing easing forward to drape over Josh.

*Goddamn, it's soft, and...warm. All right, all the speeches and stuff will have to wait.* The waves of sorrow and unease from Richard brought the sting of tears to Josh's eyes, but at least he had Richard in his arms again.

## CHAPTER 13

### HUNTING REVISITED

“So your vamp lover is running around loose in the building? And I’m supposed to just accept this?” Jack leaned against the counter in the canteen, considering the apple in his hand.

“No, not loose. He’s in the locked wing.” Josh tried to stay calm, but Jack was yanking on his last nerve. Lucy had wheeled him down to the canteen, plunked a sandwich in front of him, and then deserted him, leaving him to explain the situation to every hunter who wandered in.

“The maintenance closet.”

“No, it’s not a closet. It’s a whole wing.”

“And he’s killed Jenner.” Retired marine, ex-FBI, Jack was worse than a pit bull when he wanted intel.

## A DIFFERENT BREED

“Almost killed him.” Josh ran his hands back through his hair. “Christ, Jack, haven’t you been listening?”

Tara took the chair beside him and placed another glass of orange juice in front of him. “Of course he was.” She turned to her husband. “Jack, he’s been through it three times. The boy’s hurt and exhausted, so stop the interrogation. You want to play FBI, there are other witnesses to back him up.”

Jack shrugged and finally took a bite of his apple. The Guild’s senior hunter chewed slowly, apparently considering. “I knew Mick was into something weird. Think he almost told me once or twice.” He pointed the apple at Josh. “I want to meet this mutant vamp of yours before the Quorum. He needs to be properly secured, of course, and—”

“What kind of tea do we have?” Roark growled as he appeared around the corner.

“Tea?”

*God, this sounds familiar.* “You didn’t leave him alone, did you?” Josh set his hands to his wheels, prepared to hurry down the hall if he had to.

“Nah, Lucy’s with him. But he woke up from his not-really-dead sleep and he wants tea of all the damn things. And not regular tea, oh, no. Something that doesn’t have caffeine.”

Jack’s eyebrows threatened to meet his hairline. “We *are* talking about the vamp?”

Roark stopped rifling through cabinets, his frown deepening. “Richard. We’re talking about Richard.”

“Now I really have to meet him.” Jack shook his head. “If even Roark’s gone all gay for him.”

“Shut up!”

Tara stepped between them, laughing. “Roark, sweetie, there’s

## *A DIFFERENT BREED*

herbal tea in here somewhere. Let's see...there's lemon or rosehip...peppermint...chamomile..."

"Chamomile," Josh said softly.

"Great. He even has a favorite," Roark grumbled as he got out a mug. "At least Sir Richard knows how to say please and thank you, unlike some people."

"Hey! I said thank you!" Josh protested. "Didn't I?"

"No. Too damn busy making googly eyes at him."

"Oh. Sorry, bud. Thank you. For last night."

Jack sputtered, and then laughed so hard he dropped his apple.

"Shit. That wasn't what I meant." Josh felt the heat rise up his face.

"I know what you meant, little man," Roark said with a glare for Jack. He handed the now-steaming mug of tea to Josh and took the handles of his wheelchair. "You done here? Wanna go see him? He asked about you first, tea second."

"Oh. Was he mad that I wasn't there?"

"Mad? No. Concerned, but he insisted he could wait to see you until after you ate. Worries you don't eat right."

Tara slid an arm around Jack's waist. "We go out in the field, hon, and the world turns upside down. I guess next we'll be hiring vamps as nannies."

"Let's not get carried away," Jack said. "I said I'd give this one vamp a hearing. Might not change anything."

Josh understood that. A hearing was all he could expect.

They found Richard in the little break room, sitting at the table, and talking softly with Lucy. Someone had brought him a pair of scrub pants, though the shirt would have been impossible to wrestle over the wings neatly folded against his back. He still looked gray and exhausted, but the desperate, wounded light had

## *A DIFFERENT BREED*

cleared from his eyes, replaced by his normal calm.

He even managed a wan smile. "There you are, my dear." He broke off to look up at Roark. "Oh, thank you. Chamomile. Much appreciated."

"You're welcome," Roark said in such a way that made it obvious Richard had made another conquest. Not of the heart, but it was easy to imagine men following him into battle.

"Lucy has been telling me the last of the hunters will arrive this evening. I understand there are things to accomplish before then," Richard spoke softly, sipping at his tea.

"Yeah, some. Not too much you need to do, babe, but Jack wants to talk to you." Josh kept his hands to himself, though he wanted to crawl into Richard's lap.

Richard nodded. "Of course. I would, in his position." He stared into his tea as if it held some arcane answers. "Lucy, Roark, there is a possibility that I won't survive this evening—"

"Don't say that!" Lucy cried out.

Richard held up a hand. "I know, you both wish for the best outcome. But I am tired of running and hiding. Nine hundred years is quite enough. I will stand my ground this time, whatever the outcome tonight. With that said, could Joshua and I have a moment, please?"

"Of course." Lucy squeezed his half-healed hand as she rose. Her eyes glistened as she let Roark tuck her under his arm and walk her out.

When the door closed behind them, Josh asked, "How do you do that?"

"What's that?"

"Get people to believe in you so fast."

Richard shrugged, his wings falling open. "Not everyone does,

*A DIFFERENT BREED*

you know.”

“Just good people.”

“Possibly. How do you feel?”

Josh searched his face for some sign of what he should say, but Richard had shut down. “Better than yesterday.” He chewed on his bottom lip, fighting a storm of emotions. “I won’t lose you tonight,” he whispered. “I don’t care what they decide, what they say. I’ll fight for you. Beside you, if I have to. But I won’t stand by and watch you die.”

“It shouldn’t come to that. The hunters I have met are reasonable.”

“But if it does, you need to promise me you won’t just roll over. If they want you and the Enavs exterminated, we fight our way out of here.”

“You’re in no condition...”

“Promise me!”

Richard blinked, and then drew in a slow breath. “I...if you’re in danger, I will fight for you. That I can promise.”

“Better than nothing, I guess,” Josh reached over to take Richard’s hand. He didn’t miss the little flinch.

Richard stared off into the distance. “I need to speak to Una, as well.”

“Isn’t that...dangerous?”

“Perhaps. It’s only right, though. I am what was promised them. And I need to understand them if I’m to speak for them.”

“Okay, let’s go see the pack, then.”

“No, my dear.” Richard leaned forward to plant a tender kiss on his forehead. “You will stay here. I’ll have no arguments. This, I have to do alone.”

“Dammit, Richard...”

## *A DIFFERENT BREED*

"I am their Septimus. Either I can take control of the pack, or their last chance for survival evaporates. Do you think the hunters will let them live if they continue to threaten humans?"

Josh swallowed hard. "Babe...they're not natural. They shouldn't exist. Do you really think they should survive?"

The connection between them slammed shut. Josh gasped, dizzy at the sudden loss. Richard stood, his jaw tight. "Yes. I really do think so." His wings flipped and settled, whether out of agitation or to make a point, Josh wasn't sure, and then he was gone.

"Dammit, babe. I didn't mean it like that," Josh whispered to the closed door.

\* \* \*

The key to the Enavs' den lay cool and heavy in Richard's palm. Lucy had procured it for him from one of the two remaining lab techs. Greg, the one who had driven metal stakes through his flesh, had run off during the night, perhaps afraid of reprisals.

He stood on the cusp, between one world and another, neither one thing nor another any longer. But the feeling was a familiar one. He had lived on a borderline for centuries now. The border had simply been redrawn.

They were aware of him, felt him near. He pulled in a deep breath as he unlocked the door and slipped inside. The dim light suited their nocturnal eyes and his, making it easy for him to follow their movements. The pack crouched by the far wall, huddled together in a show of solidarity.

Una stood, arms folded over her chest. *::You are...changed. But not::*

## *A DIFFERENT BREED*

*::The change was interrupted. The spell impeded, :: he answered her. ::The tainting only went so far.::*

*::You are still Septimus. As the Maker promised.::*

She took a wary step toward him, then another. He approached with equal caution as they circled, wings extended.

*::No!::* Quattuor snarled. He leaped up and charged, sharp teeth bared. *::Mine!::*

Una roared her displeasure but Quattuor dodged her and barreled straight into Richard, hitting him mid-chest. They crashed to the floor, a whirlwind of snapping teeth and flailing limbs. Quattuor had the advantage of momentum and claws. Richard had size and several centuries of fighting for his life.

He kicked Quattuor off and flung him down onto his back, Richard's forearm against his throat, knee pinning his gray-furred torso.

*::Mine,::* Richard told him as he stared into wolf eyes. *::You are all mine.::*

Quattuor whimpered. His ears flattened against his head. Richard moved his arm and fastened his teeth around Quattuor's windpipe. He relaxed beneath Richard, his clawed hands falling to either side. While pack etiquette was new to him, Richard recognized submission. He lowered his head to nuzzle at Quattuor's belly, and got a little squirm and a whine.

*::Good. Much better.::* He stood again and found Una beside him, licking the bleeding claw marks on his shoulder. *::Una...I cannot be your mate.::*

*::I know. You do not take females as mates.::*

It surprised him that she would be perceptive enough to understand. *::Who were you? Do you remember? Before the tainting?::*



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She pulled back, her black eyes glittering in the dark. *::None of us remembers. We have only now.::*

Only now. These were the resilient souls who had survived the change, only these six out of what he gathered had been decades of attempts. These six had fought to live, had decided life was too sweet to abandon, for whom “now” was enough.

*::For you, I am Septimus.::* He reached out to stroke her cheek and she leaned into his touch. *::I will lead, but you must listen.::*

The others had crept closer. The one with the lynx ears looked up at him. *::The Maker lets us hunt tonight?::*

Richard shook his head. *::The Maker no longer decides when you hunt. We will decide. There will be no more collars. No more men with cattle prods.::*

The pack threw back their heads as one, shrieking and howling their approval. Richard snapped his wings open and roared. *::Quiet! You must listen!::*

They settled, dark, animal eyes fixed on him

*::The hunters decide tonight whether you live or die. It is because you have attacked humans.::*

*::Prey,::* the little one with the badger head protested. *::They are easy prey.::*

*::And we are fierce and strong, made for hunting much more dangerous prey,::* Richard countered.

*::Some of the humans were stronger,::* the snake female said. *::The one who fought for you...::*

*::Yes. The hunters. You were made to run with them. Hunt beside them. Not to prey on them.::* Richard swept a hand through the air to cut off further argument. *::You must not hunt humans. If you do, you'll die. Tonight, we must convince the hunters that you understand this. Or you will die.::*

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Several eyes blinked at him, blank stares. He whirled to face Una.

*::Tell me you understand. Una, for the pack, for their survival, tell me you understand!::*

She stroked his wingtip. *::For the pack.::*

\* \* \*

Richard sat at the end of the conference table, his chin in his right hand, his left wrist cuffed to the table leg. Jack insisted on this precaution not, he said, because he didn't trust Richard, but because he knew edgy hunters were trigger happy and dangerous. A blanket covered his wings, but he wished he could have pulled on a shirt. He felt terribly exposed.

The hunters occupied the rest of the table, most of them sitting conspicuously far away from Richard's end. Lucy and Roark sat beside him, Josh in his wheelchair nearby, staring morosely at the darkened Enav window. The rest of the Guild staff occupied chairs along the walls.

Jack took his seat at the head of the table and pitched his voice over the hum of separate conversations. "All right, boys and girls, let's get to this. We have a guest with us today..."

Various grumbles and snarled remarks greeted this comment.

"Why the hell is a prisoner at the conference table?" a young female hunter shouted.

"Guest, Tiff. Pay attention." Jack waved a hand toward the other end of the table. "Folks, this is Richard von Schaumburg. He's here at my request and I think by the end of this meeting, you'll understand. By now, most of you have heard all or part of what's been happening here, so let's put the rumors to rest..."

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Jack related the details about the experiments going on without hunter knowledge, the kidnapped subjects, the suspicion that Russell Jenner had tortured and murdered vampires' human associates for years, and finally, why Josh had been incommunicado for so long.

"So Kempski falls off the face of the planet, doesn't tell anybody jack shit about what's going on, and now we're just supposed to take his word for all this?" This came from a lanky young man with a scar that ran from hairline to jawbone.

"Actually, Jet, no," Jack said calmly. He strode over to the wall and flipped the light switch to illuminate the Enav window.

The sudden silence made Richard's ears itch. Chairs scraped as people left their seats for a better look. Those who already knew watched the others, gauging reactions.

"Fuck me," Jet whispered.

"Maybe not today, dear," Tara said dryly. "Come on, folks, back to your seats. We're not done here."

A great deal of heated debate followed, and then charter-defined proceedings as the hunters voted both Mick and the iceman, Jenner, out of the Guild. Mick, they decided, would be allowed to retire. His long and distinguished service couldn't be set aside. Jenner's actions, however, were more traditionally criminal.

"We can't go to the cops," Roark pointed out. "Not without exposure."

Jack made a quieting gesture. "Don't worry. The Bureau has a special unit for these unusual sorts of cases. I wouldn't be surprised if they have Mr. Arcadian's murder in their files already as one with possible paranormal ties."

Richard ducked his head, holding his breath so he wouldn't growl. Lucy put a hand on his arm.

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The question of indiscriminate hunting came to the table next. Several of the hunters related stories similar to Roark's, tales of kills that left them with the feeling of pogrom rather than public service. Richard drifted off at this point, distracted by Josh's sorrow. His little hunter had been silent throughout the meeting, letting others tell his story and make the arguments he should have made. Several times, he nearly reached for Josh's mind, but each time decided against it. If the source of Josh's sadness lay where he thought it might, he would know soon enough.

Despite his brave words, Josh obviously found him repulsive now, like one of the Enavs he watched with such morbid intensity.

"Richard?"

His head snapped up. "I'm sorry, Jack. Was there a question?"

"Yes. We were talking about vampires with creative rather than destructive tendencies. Devon, ask again."

Richard looked up the table to the hunter in question, an older, brown-haired man with wire-rimmed glasses. "Do you have a profession, Mr. von Schaumburg?"

"So formal." Richard managed a smile. "Currently, or in my original life?"

"Currently."

"I'm a glassblower. Both one-off pieces and pieces for commission."

Josh broke his silence. "Incredibly fucking beautiful pieces. Like Sistine Chapel beautiful in glass."

"Thank you, Joshua," Richard murmured, stunned.

Their eyes met, Josh's defiant and angry, but Josh looked away again and the conversation drifted off around them. He tried to pay attention, but it was difficult with Josh so close and so distant. The hunters resolved to end kills without investigation. Tracker/killers

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like Roark would be paired with hunters like Jack, who had prior investigative experience. No kills with an unsecured Renfield in the vicinity. No more captures for experimental or interrogation purposes.

Finally, they came to the question for which Richard had waited.

“Last piece of business, folks.” Jack gestured to the window. “What do we do about those things?”

“Why’s that even a question?”

“We put ’em down, Jack. What else can we do?”

The calls for extermination went on for some time. Josh sat with his fists clenched, obviously fighting an angry outburst. Richard beat him to it. He slammed his free palm on the table, though he kept his voice soft when he had their attention.

“No. The Guild made them. The Guild is responsible for them. They are your children—”

“What right do you have to dictate?”

“They hunt humans! What the hell are we supposed to do?”

“They’re monsters, dammit! Look at them!”

Richard stood slowly, letting the blanket fall from his shoulders. Gasps and swears rang out as he unfurled his wings. Chairs overturned. Weapons glittered in several hands. Josh staggered from his wheelchair, a huge knife in his hand he’d pulled from God knew where, to put himself between Richard and the rest of the room.

A hand on Josh’s shoulder to steady him, Richard went on, “I was made a monster, too. Twice now, I have been changed against my will, made into something human society cannot bear to look upon. Once, nine hundred years ago. And now again.”

He glanced up and down the table. “Yet I retain my ability to

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reason. To create. To love. Is this not what makes our lives worth living, all of us? I cannot sleep. I cannot have children. I cannot eat as you do. I have these cursed, clumsy wings now. But how else am I so different from you? How can you blame someone for what circumstance and cruelty has done to them?"

"But, Richard," Roark began. "Those things in there..."

"Are not beasts! They were human once!" Richard shouted him down, desperation taking hold. *St. Michael help me, they're not listening. They let their eyes rule them, their childhood fears.* "Una!" He called aloud as well as in his mind, so everyone would know what he said. "Una, come to the window! Please!"

Una turned her head and cocked it in a listening attitude.

*::Please. We must show them. Una...::*

She unwrapped her wing from around Quattuor and stalked to the glass.

"Jack," Richard said softly. "Would you go to the window for me?"

Jack arched a brow but did as Richard asked.

"Una, do you feel Jack? Do you see him from what I see?"

*::Yes. I see him. Their pack leader...::*

"Can you speak to him?"

*::Yes...::*

"Shit." Jack's head jerked back, his eyes wide. "Was that her?"

"In your mind, yes. She can speak to you, to any of you sensitive enough. Una, do we hunt humans?"

Una hesitated while Richard's heart pounded against his ribs.

*::Septimus says we must not,::* she said finally. *::Humans are not prey...::*

"Dear Lord, I hear her plain as day," Jack breathed out.

*::The Hunters will run beside us someday. We are all one pack.*

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*Meant to hunt together.:*

Jack sat down hard in the nearest chair, pale and breathing hard. In halting phrases, he related what Una had said.

“They are reasoning beings,” Richard concluded as he guided Josh back into his chair. “Once, perhaps long ago for some of them, they were human, like you. They didn’t ask for this. They’ve been badly abused and kept as animals. If they have been lost and without guidance for their new life, it wasn’t their fault. They are unique, each of them. To destroy them would be to destroy the only one of that being ever to exist.”

Knives returned to sheaths, handguns to holsters. Stunned, the hunters took a few moments to recover.

“Well, shit,” Tiff finally said with shaky bravado. “Whatever happened to having everything nice and black and white?”

Tara chuckled. “That’s the nice thing about real life, sweetie. It comes in all sorts of colors.”

\* \* \*

Josh sat on the bed in his quarters, trying to recover from the emotional rollercoaster. The Quorum hadn’t resolved everything, but it had answered the big questions. Mick was out. They would turn Jenner over to the authorities. The Guild would go on, though not as before. Richard and the Enavs would live.

His heart had swelled with pride to hear Richard speak to bravely, so eloquently, and then it shattered again when Richard put him to bed and left him there without a backward glance. He’d screwed up too many times. Done too many unforgiveable things. The crack about the pack not being natural had been the last piece of stupidity, the final one that would ensure Richard would leave

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him.

“Dammit.” He buried his face in his hands, wishing he could take all the stupid things back, wishing they were back home in the big bed, oblivious to the outside world.

He wasn’t going to make a scene, though. If Richard wanted to end things, fine. He’d take it like a man and not make it tough on the big guy. He owed him that much, at least. There’d been plenty of breakups before, nothing new. Before, though, he’d managed to be angry, to make it someone else’s fault. Depressed afterward, hell, yeah, but he’d never had this feeling of scorched-earth devastation before. He curled into a tight ball. If Richard ended it tonight, how would he face tomorrow without him? And the tomorrow after that? For the rest of his life...

His chest constricted despite his promise to himself, a sob burning there that he refused to let out.

A gentle hand fell on his shoulder. “I should take you to medical if it still hurts so badly.”

“I don’t need medical,” Josh murmured.

Richard cleared his throat. “Perhaps...I should find someone for you to talk to? Lucy? Stuart?”

He rolled over to stare at Richard. “Why the hell would I want that?”

“Because you’re in such obvious distress.”

“Yeah, well.” Josh sat up slowly, arms wrapped around his ribs. “Look... I know it’s probably too late. I know I’ve screwed everything all to hell. But I just...” He stopped to take an impatient swipe at his eyes. “I wanted you to know. I didn’t whack you over the head to hand you over. I thought you’d lost it. I wanted to protect you, to take you away. Didn’t know the pack was out there with Jenner. Didn’t mean for any of this to happen. Didn’t



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mean—”

Richard seized him by the upper arms, his face closed and guarded. “So many things you didn’t mean. Did you mean what you said, or were you simply trying to prevent me from committing murder?”

Josh’s tired brain took a moment to process this cryptic question, but then he realized it was the only obvious one. “Of course I was.” Richard turned his head away. “But I meant it, too. I do love you, von Schaumburg. I have loved you for longer than I wanted to admit. I’m stubborn and kinda dense about relationships. So I couldn’t say it when it counted and almost lost you because of it.” Josh hitched a breath. “And I’m losing you now, because I’m such a jackass and I’ve hurt you too much.”

“Say it,” Richard demanded.

“What?”

Richard gave him a little shake, his fingers tightening painfully on Josh’s arms. “Just say it!”

Josh looked into those gray eyes and the words leapt out. “I love you, Richard.”

“Even like this? Even though I’m not your Richard anymore?”

“You’re still the same Richard. Shit, you proved that today a hundred times. Honorable and compassionate and brilliant. You haven’t changed. You just have extra...accessories. I love you. With every scrap of me. God, I love you.”

“Then I can forgive nearly anything.” A smile softened Richard’s expression and Josh thought his insides might melt. The wall Richard had thrown up between them tumbled down and Richard’s warmth flooded Josh’s mind. “I love you, too, my fierce, brave Joshua.”

“Well...good,” Josh got out. He had been so close to despair a

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moment before, the sudden change made him dizzy.

Richard opened his arms and let him snuggle close. "Do you feel better?"

"Just so damn glad to hold you." Josh wrapped his arms tight around Richard's neck. The wings might have been warm, but Richard's skin was still cool, soothing his headache. "I'm tired and aching, but I don't care."

"Josh..."

"Shh, just hold me, dammit. Tight as you can."

Gentle arms wrapped him close, but soon Richard apparently sensed his mood. He crushed Josh to him, his breaths ragged. His wings snapped open and swept forward to envelope him in a double embrace, secure, inescapable.

Josh reached up to stroke his fingers over Richard's face, tracing his eyebrows, his cheekbones, down along his jawline. His lips followed the path his fingers traced. Richard shivered, his wingtips caressing Josh's back.

With an impatient tug, Josh yanked the scrub shirt off over his head. Now the soft wings stroked bare skin, an incredible, blanketing pleasure arms could never match.

"I need you, babe. Please."

"Now?"

"Whenever you want."

A soft growl rumbled in Richard's chest. He lowered his head to fasten his lips on the side of Josh's throat in a hard, sucking kiss. With an arm under Josh's butt, he lifted and tugged Josh's pants off. "Wrap your legs around me."

"Can I still?"

Richard twisted as if he could look at his own back. "I...think so. The wings only attach at the shoulders."

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Heedless of the pull on his injured hip, Josh eased his feet around Richard, under his wings, until his legs wrapped around his waist. "Hey, look at that. Works pretty damn good."

The wings held him steady and held him tenderly, leaving Richard's hands free for other things.

"I don't suppose you kept anything in your room here?"

"What, like dildos? Cuffs and spreader bars?"

"Ah, no."

"Lube's in the drawer, babe," Josh whispered between licks around Richard's nipple.

Richard reached under his wing to rummage in the drawer. One dark brow lifted as he read the label. *'Bangin' Cherry'*? A little unsubtle, don't you think?"

"Don't want subtle." Josh took the nipple between his teeth and got a hard moan. "Want you. Now."

With both hands free, Richard ran gentle fingers over Josh's erection while the well-lubed fingers of his left hand teased at Josh's puckered entrance. Josh leaned back into his wings' embrace, panting. They held him easily, strong enough to lift him a bit so Richard could slide a finger inside. Josh gasped, his fingers digging into Richard's shoulders. The relief of having Richard touching him again washed over him, making his cock jump.

A second finger joined the first and Josh rolled his hips, writhing in Richard's lap as he was impaled and stroked.

"Please," he gasped out. "Take me hard. I need you."

Richard licked along his pulse point. His wings lifted Josh again to replace fingers with the smooth head of his cock. "Not this time, my dear."

Josh fought a sob of need. "What? Dammit, Richard!"

"This time I won't hammer into you like some crazed animal.

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When you're better, we can wrestle and make love with tempest ferocity. But right now, you need someone to take care of you."

"I don't need—"

"Shh." Richard put two fingers over his lips. "Of course you don't. You're perhaps the most self-reliant person I know. But you don't have to be so strong, so hard all the time when someone loves you. Let me take care of you."

Josh swallowed hard, his brain short-circuiting to pause on that single, beautiful moment as he drowned in Richard's eyes.

With gentle nudges and rolls of his hips, Richard buried himself inch by excruciating inch. His free hand stayed cupped around Josh's cheek, their eyes locked. Josh tangled his fingers in the silk of Richard's hair and simply let the sensations wash over him. Richard filled him like no other lover ever had, so completely, so perfectly, the sheath forged just for Richard's sword.

He moved in slow undulations, matching Richard's rhythm. Wings and hands caressed his back, his shoulders, and his thighs. The tenderness edged him up just as quickly as any hard pounding. He shivered and moaned with every touch, every slow stroke deep inside his body torturous ecstasy. Pressure built behind his groin wall in a gathering firestorm.

"Richard...kiss me." He moaned. "I'm almost there."

A purring growl rolled from Richard. He lowered his head and caressed his lips over Josh's, down-soft. His lips returned for a more serious foray, circling and pressing, his tongue sliding along the seam of Josh's mouth. Josh melted against him and opened for him, letting his eyes slide shut as their tongues stroked and parried. He backed off only far enough to lick the back of one of Richard's fangs, extended from arousal.

Richard let out a hard groan. The vibration against Josh's body,

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the trembling in the wings holding him, shot him over the wall, his orgasm shooting from him hard enough to make him see sparks. Richard rushed over after him, his hips jerking, and his body taut in his fight to stay gentle. The hot rush of Richard's seed deep inside him sent aftershocks through Josh's body.

Panting, they clung together as if they might otherwise shatter. Eventually, Richard recovered enough to shift them farther onto the bed where they could both stretch out in each other's arms.

"Josh?"

"Hmm?"

"Will you stay with me? Live with me until one of us has to leave this life?"

Josh stroked the hair back from Richard's eyes. "You're sure about this? I'm not the easiest person to live with."

"I'm certain." Richard caught his hand and kissed his fingers. "I want you with me. Beside me. To be with you every day."

"To fight beside you when you need me?"

"Yes, that as well."

Josh tapped a finger on his chin, pretending to think. "Well, okay. But we're gonna have to do something about your bare walls."

"Whatever you need to be comfortable."

"I'll probably buy a gaming system."

"Anything you need."

"I think I want to paint the kitchen mauve."

Richard's brows drew together in an endearing way. "Don't push it, little man."

## EPILOGUE

“So what do you want me to bring?” Glory asked from her end of the phone.

“Why does everyone keep asking that?” Josh said in exasperation. “Can’t you just bring yourself?”

“This is how it’s done, handsome. I ask the question, you say, no, no, you don’t have to, I insist, and then you come up with something I can help with.”

“Oh.” Josh ruffled a hand back through his hair. “Haven’t given too many dinner parties. Guess it kinda shows, huh?”

“Yes. Now what’s everyone else bringing?”

“Um...Lynette said something about cheesecake. And Tam’s bringing the rest of the shirts she tailored for Richard. Stuart’s just bringing a case file he wants us to look at. Roark’s bringing some

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kind of fancy tea. He said it's not fair that Richard won't have anything. Lucy's bringing this killer chutney she makes."

"Oh, good." Glory's smile came through in her voice. "No wine yet. I get to bring the wine."

"Probably a good idea," Josh grumbled. "His lordship kinda sighed over the one I bought. He tried to pretend like it was fine..."

"But he's a terrible liar. Such a good man. Speaking of which, how's his pack?"

By now, of course, Richard's friends knew everything. They had fussed over the two of them when they returned home, insisting that both Josh and Richard needed rest after, as Tam put it, "the ordeal." Glory and Lynette shopped and cooked for Josh. Tam demanded measurements from her hospital bed. Once she had recovered from her concussion, she re-engineered a number of Richard's shirts with wing-holes and buttons and snaps along the side seams so he could work around his new accessories.

"They're doing good." Josh glanced out the open window to watch Richard place an extension ladder against the side of the house. "We make the drive once a week. Richard takes them out hunting for deer. It's weird. They don't need human blood the way he does. I mean they're hemavores and shit—"

"Oh, big word, there, cowboy. Don't hurt yourself."

Josh snorted. "Anyway, they're learning to play nice. Not to try to bring down everything that moves. Humans are not prey and all that. Though, they had to learn last week that cows are also not prey. That had Richard all in knots, lemme tell you. He wasn't happy until Jack promised that the Guild would pay the dairy farmer for the, ah, collateral damage."

Glory laughed. "Poor dear. Though, I think it's good for him to

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be involved in something meaningful again. He—” She broke off. “Good Lord, is he singing ‘The Lusty Month of May’? From *Camelot*?”

“Ah, yeah. Something like that. Been singing show tunes all day.”

“Josh, that’s...”

“I know. Really gay.” *But damn, it’s good to see him so happy. And he has a kick-ass voice.*

Glory was still laughing when she hung up. It was good to hear her well and happy, too. Warm fuzzies settled in Josh’s chest as he listened to Richard’s beautiful bass voice and to the joy nestled inside his head. He leaned his elbows on the windowsill to watch Richard climb the ladder, wings spread a bit for balance, his gorgeous ass on mouthwatering display in a pair of worn jeans. Some of the shingles had come loose in the last rainstorm and Richard was determined to have the house looking its best before guests arrived. The fact that the sun was already setting and no one would notice didn’t seem to matter.

Josh had to be content with the feelings he received from Richard when he climbed out of sight. It was still bizarre, having someone else nestled inside his head, but incredibly comforting, too. The bond between them had reached the point where Josh no longer lost contact when Richard hibernated. He was always there, that strong, soothing presence.

Richard’s thoughts purred in contented preoccupation for a few minutes, obviously happy working with his hands. Gradually, anxiousness tugged at the corners of happiness. An odd sort of anticipation soon joined it.

“Shit.” Josh rushed outside just as the anticipation rose to a moment of sheer jubilation, followed swiftly by panic.



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“Richard!”

A large, Richard-sized object plummeted past the ladder and landed on the ground with a heavy thud. Josh reached him just as he was sitting up with a groan, his left arm clutched to his chest.

He looked up at Josh through his tangled hair. “Please don’t bellow at me, love.”

Josh counted to five, took three deep breaths, and managed softly, “You okay?”

“Mostly. I believe so. Sprained wrist, perhaps.”

“Then what in all hells did you do?”

Richard stared at the ground. “I—”

“Babe.” Josh crouched down beside him. “I won’t yell. Promise. What was that all about? You’re scaring me.”

“I was trying to fly.”

“Fly.”

“Yes.” Richard sighed and spread his wings. “I thought these must be good for something besides threat display.”

“Didn’t work so good, huh?”

He shook his head, frustration radiating from him. “I couldn’t...flapping. In unison. That didn’t work.”

“Hmm.” Josh considered, straightening the right wing gently. “You know, babe, I’m not a flight expert or anything, but these look more like glider wings to me.”

A little shiver ran through the wing muscle. Josh let go as they swept open all the way. “Gliding. Like a...a flying squirrel?”

“Yeah, I guess.”

Richard rose abruptly, eyeing the roof.

“Um, sweetheart, I didn’t mean to try it right now.” Josh put a hand on his arm. “Let’s get some ice on that wrist, get it wrapped up...” Richard’s need and his determination telegraphed loud and

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clear, though. “Dammit.”

With a soft kiss, Richard pulled away and swarmed back up the ladder. He gained the roof beam and stood. His wings snapped open; his silhouette against the deep indigo of evening invoking the dark angel Josh had named him.

He gave Josh a little salute and leaped, taking Josh’s heart with him as the air caught under his wings. Richard’s bright elation washed over him. The wings held in a steady glide down toward the woods.

“Holy shit, sweetheart, you’re doing it,” Josh whispered.

The elation lasted only until Richard realized where he headed. With a little cry of dismay, he attempted to lift his right wing to bank left, and abruptly crashed into the branches of the nearest pine tree.

Josh raced to him, biting down on panic. When he reached the offending tree, he peered up to find Richard sprawled in the third tier of branches. His frown could have sparked thunderstorms as he struggled to disentangle his various extremities.

He spotted Josh and cleared his throat. “I suppose this will take some practice.”

“I’m gonna need a doctor’s appointment, then.”

“Oh?”

“They’ll have to put me on some serious happy pills if you expect me not to have a heart attack while you practice.”

Richard swung down and dropped the last few yards, landing cat graceful on his feet. “Forgive me, my love. I don’t want to worry you so.”

“C’mere you gorgeous slab of beefcake,” Josh said on a sigh. He waited until Richard had wrapped strong arms around him before he went on, “There’s no way either of us can lead a

### *A DIFFERENT BREED*

completely safe life, I know that. It's just not who we are. I could ask you not to use your wings but you'd still be itching to try. You could ask me never to go on a hunt again, but it's who I am. I'm a fighter, babe. So are you. It's not all we are, but we can't keep pretending we're just a glassblower and a bookstore clerk."

The late autumn wind tugged at Richard's hair. He stared off into the woods while his hands caressed Josh's back. "I suppose we'll have to keep our mild-mannered professions to protect our secret identities, though."

Josh blinked at him, thrown off-balance by the odd turn in the conversation. "What?"

"Our superhero identities. Septimus and the Littlest Hunter."

"Hey! Tiff's way smaller than me! And Stuart's not much bigger!"

Richard threw back his head and laughed. Not so long ago, Josh had believed he had lost that beautiful sound forever. He snuggled deeper into Richard's embrace and vowed to be grateful for every laugh, every touch, for the rest of his long life.

## **ANGEL MARTINEZ**

Angel Martinez is the erotic fiction pen name of a writer of several genres. Her experiences as a soldier, a nurse, a banker, and an underpaid corporate drone give her a broad view of the world and a deep appreciation for the astounding variety of people on this small planet.

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