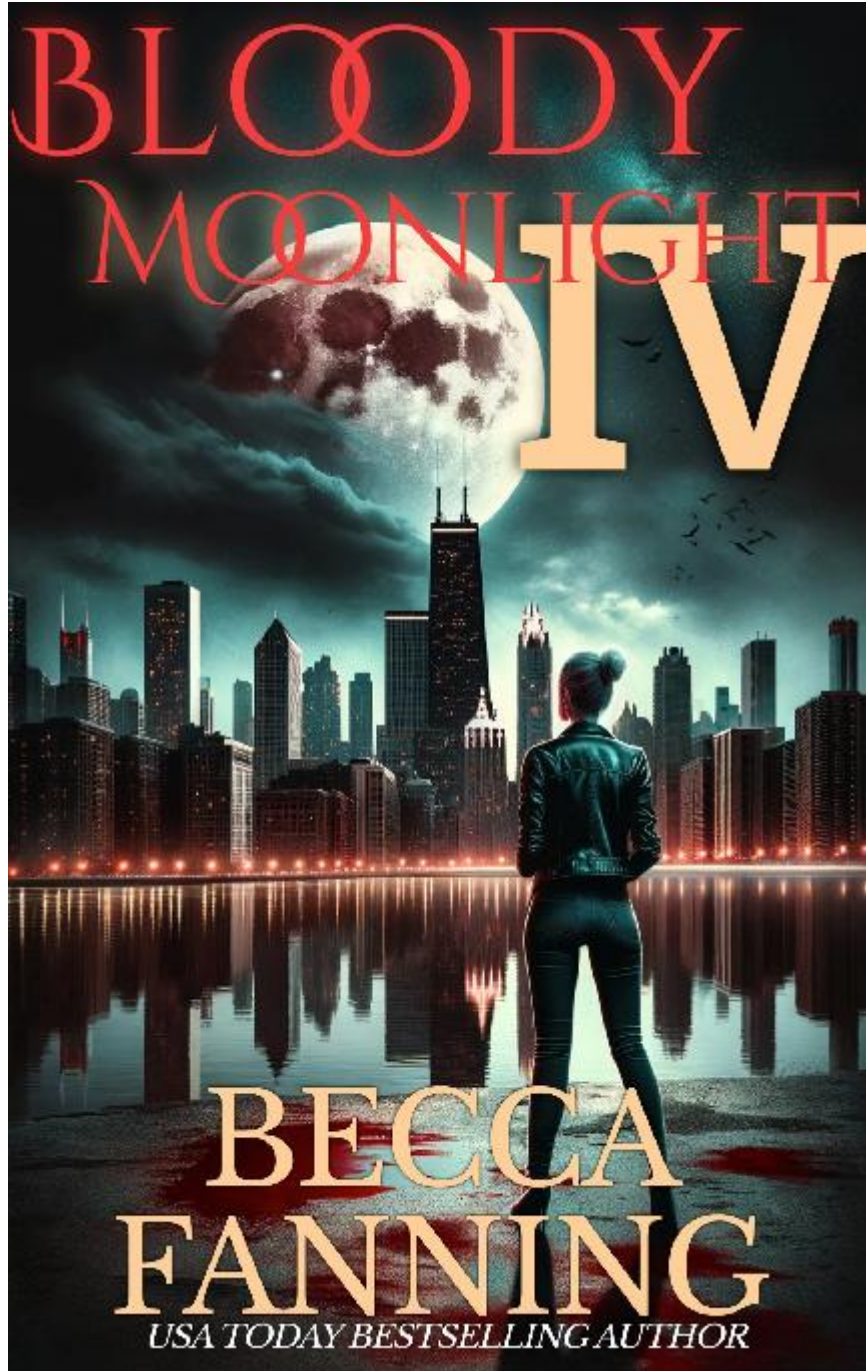


# BLOODY MOONLIGHT IV



BECCA  
FANNING

*USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR*



BLOODY  
MOONLIGHT  
IV

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FANNING  
*USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR*

# BLOODY MOONLIGHT 4

VAMPIRE PARANORMAL ROMANCE

BLOODY MOONLIGHT

BOOK FOUR



BECCA FANNING

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# UNTITLED

## Prologue: A Series of Short Messages

Stacey,

Where are you?

Well, whatever you're off doing, I hope you're doing well. I haven't seen you in days. Have you looked outside? Turned on the news? There are things out there, creeping around in the dark. I feel insane. The sky's been weird-looking for days. People leave their houses, and they don't come back. The Mayor and the local news are telling everyone to stay inside. I'm worried, Stace.

Tamara

## Council Group Email CC:

From: crimsonsun

This is Nagisa. Deadies have risen en masse. They're walking the streets in droves. Thankfully whatever this is doesn't appear to be transmissible via bite, but they're killing anyone who goes outside. The whole city's on lockdown. Everywhere you look outside, there are crowds of them. Bright lights and voices attract them. There are reports of larger

things skulking in the city's depths—even weird winged things perched and waiting to attack.

The Civil Wyrd Corps has been alerted, and officers are in the process of investigating potential causes. Thankfully, the humans are mostly in self-preservation mode rather than terrified, though I suspect we won't have long before things devolve into a panic. The feds have been contacted and told it's some kind of chemical leak causing mass-delusion. This time, small comfort—though no doubt the Regional Council will crack down on us if this isn't taken care of.

More soon,

Nagisa

Stacey,

I hope wherever you are, you're safe... and you should know that your job is on the line if you don't get footage of whatever this is. I told you we needed to focus on this story, and now that it's here, staring us in the face, there's absolutely no excuse not to. Keep yourself safe, of course, but this is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. I know you can do it!

Bradford

Stacey,

Hey, sending a follow-up email. Please, please, please. If you swing by. We really need toilet paper at the office. Badly.

Andy Brewer

Council Group Email CC:

From: crimsonsun

Guys—it's over. The Civil Wyrd Corps has been decimated. They've got something huge that's on the offensive. Most of my men are gone. I'm not going to last much longer.

Protect Hartshome at all costs! May the Goddess go with you!

If I never see you all alive again. It was a pleasure to know you.

Love,

Nagisa



## CHAPTER 1



The boat creaked and rocked around us. We had rolled up the nautical charts from the table bolted to the floor in the steering room. Vic, one of my boyfriends, had drawn in chalk a certain set of figures and diagrams on the exposed wood and was adjusting things, walking counter-clockwise around the table and occasionally tapping it with a forefinger here and there. A spark would run over the surface now and again, but ultimately it didn't connect. He waved a hand through his hair and sighed, taking off his glasses and pinching his nose.

"I'm missing something," Vic said, after a moment. "Doesn't surprise me, but it's frustrating."

"Your incantation isn't working?" Brother Al asked. He was the leader of the vampires aboard this boat—an older man with all the air of Count Dracula. Most of us were convinced he was the legend himself.

"No, the circuits won't connect. And they won't, not if I can't figure the symbolatry out. I never thought this spell would ever be useful again, if I'm being honest. Navigation spells—those were some of the first things I learned when I started studying—but the modern age—moving on from trapping—" Vic shook his head, pushed his glasses back up a bit from where they had fallen.

“Not much use for navigational spells when GPS is in every hand,” Brother Al said.

“Exactly,” Vic said. “Give me a minute. This memory lapse couldn’t have come at a better time.”

“I’ll give you some space,” I said quietly.

WE WERE RETURNING to Chicago by boat—from being held as captives in a merman citadel under the water for the past few days. We’d heard word upon surfacing that the undead had overtaken Chicago. We had about half an hour before we hit shore, and word was, we wouldn’t have much time at all to get our asses in gear before we were attacked.

We were trying to come up with a battle plan. Vic was trying to summon up a phantasmal view of Chicago, to help us with the planning, but it was taking a little longer than we needed it to. We were all nervous. You could sense the tension dripping between all of us.

Eddie, my other boyfriend, was quiet for once, shaking his head in the corner, tapping his foot. I wandered over to him. His bronzed forehead was dripping with sweat.

“Hey,” I said. “Thank you for laying off Vic.”

Eddie shook his head.

“I don’t see how it would help,” he said. He shook his head. “Stace. This whole thing was real bad timing. You think Vic’s off his game because of earlier?”

Eddie and Vic had a pretty epic fight under the lake. Both of them had pretty much exhausted all their vampiric strength. I had been dating both—and thought they’d be okay with it like they told me they were at first. Unfortunately, tensions

had come to a head earlier. They'd beat each other nearly senseless and now were barely able to keep their heads upright.

“Could be,” I said. “Look. For what it's worth. I'm not sorry that I like you both. But I'm sorry if I did anything to come between your friendship. That's not what I was intending.”

Eddie shook his head.

“I honestly think we've worked it out,” Eddie said. “Look, guys are competitive, okay. That's just our nature. And Vic and I are kinda the rookies on the Council. We've always been a little... head to head. You were just an excuse to get crazy and cut loose. We're creatures of the night, Stacey, but we're following Brother Al, and the Regional Council's orders. We're wild animals being taught to be civil. The inner beast wants to come out and play on occasion, and that's not anything you could have known.”

“Is there anything I can do?”

Eddie shrugged.

“I'm not sure. Me and Vic would have been the best bet at crowd control, but now...”

They were both exhausted. Eddie was paler than normal, face bruised and chunks of his hide torn out, his knuckles raw and his gait crooked. He was healing, but the process was slow. Vic, on the other hand, seemed to lose all mental focus. It was like he'd run out of mana, for lack of a better word—he looked scuffed, paler than usual, and a little foggy in the eyes. He'd barely managed to reform his body into being presentable looking earlier.

“I wish there was something I could do to help,” I said.

“You just being here to help us plan is more than enough,” Eddie said.

“When’s the last time you fed?” I asked.

“Don’t,” he said.

“I mean it. Did you eat at all when we were there?”

Eddie shook his head.

“I drained a gull. Don’t know about Vic. It was a light lunch, but that was before all the exercise.”

“Would human blood help?” I asked.

Eddie looked at me, in my eyes. There was something in his amber gaze—some yearning, some longing, and a deep hunger he seemed to have trouble keeping in check. He held his stomach and turned away from my gaze.

“Look, I don’t want to talk about this,” he said. “You know why that wouldn’t work.”

“I know what you guys have said. None of you can bite me. It’ll imprint on me—make me one of your Vassals, right?”

“Essentially,” he said. “We’d start getting territorial. There’s no sharing with Vassals. It’s an ecosystem thing, Stacey. We have transmissible proteins that gear and prepare the Vassal’s blood for our particular digestive needs. It can... go really wrong, when Vampires share Vassals.”

“So how do I get the proteins?”

“I bite you. Or Vic bites you. Or Brother Al. Or one of the other vampires on this ship.”

“So what if you don’t bite me,” I asked. “Could you still drink the blood?”

Eddie did not look at me.

“Stacey, you can’t tease me like this. Please. Just leave me alone and let me concentrate. I’ll probably have a little more energy by the time we reach shore.”

“I’m not teasing you,” I said.

“It’s just a bad idea, Stace,” Eddie said. “You’re... you mean too much to me. Can you imagine what it would be like if me or Vic offered to cut off part of our side and sautee it up in a sandwich when you’re hungry?”

“That’s different,” I said.

“It’s not that different,” Eddie said. “Look, there’s a lot of romantic nonsense with vampire lovers about the Embrace, about being a Vassal. The truth is. It’s a barbaric practice. It’s like keeping a sheep or a pig.”

“What about your ex-girlfriend?” I asked.

“I made a mistake,” Eddie said. His face looked pained. “Please. Don’t bring that up.”

“I won’t be a Vassal. I’ll just be offering what I have. It might be our only option,” I said.

Eddie did not look at me but continued clutching his gut and staring at his feet.

“Talk it over with the other two,” he said, his voice barely a whisper.

I nodded and left him alone.

“ALEISTER,” I said. I motioned to a far corner of the room. Brother Al nodded, following, leaving Vic to his muttering and tapping and adjusting.

“You required assistance, Stacey?” he asked.

“Any luck?”

“None. Vic’s on his last legs. I’ve never seen him this... out of sorts. They really took it out of one another.”

“I have an idea,” I said. I bit my lip. “What if... what if we collected some blood.”

He stared at me.

“I’m being serious,” I said. “Do you think that would help?”

A flicker over his face.

“You want to allow Vic or Eddie to... bite you?”

He looked upset. I couldn’t blame him. He and I had been locked up in a cell together, and both had a thing for one another. I wasn’t sure what either of us wanted—I already had two boyfriends—but our relationship was complicated, and this sure didn’t look like it was helping by the looks of things. He looked crestfallen.

“I know that causes issues,” I said. “I don’t want to cause any further issues between anyone. But Vic and Eddie both need to be fighting fit before we hit the shore. If that means we have to cut open one of my veins and share some in a cup with both of them...”

“Stacey. This is more than you think it is.”

“But if the proteins don’t mix—”

Brother Al spat over his shoulder, suddenly frustrated.

“It’s not simple science. You don’t understand. You are marked. Marked by the Divine. Whoever shares your blood—

their fates will become intertwined with your own. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

I sighed, frustrated, and sat on a nearby stool.

"You're all a mess," I said. "There's people dying out there on the streets. You've seen the messages. You've seen what the past few weeks have been like. You see how low on fuel each of them are. And you're worried about superstition?"

"There's an old magic behind blood sharing," Brother Al said. "It will escalate things further. You have to understand."

"None of you have any sense," I said. I paused, chewing my lip, considered what I was going to say. "You're sure you're not reacting this way because you're jealous?"

Brother Al's face twisted.

"I cannot say that has no part of it," he said, voice stiff.

"Then I'll give all of you some of my blood," I said. "We're in this together at this point."

Brother Al sighed, put his hands in his face, and then lifted his head.

"Vic. Eddie. We need to convene and discuss this."

"Discuss what?" Vic asked.

"Stacey has offered her blood, for the three of us."

Vic met my eyes. His piercing blue eyes seemed to flicker over me.

"It would work," he said. "I don't like it, but it would work. I'm just out. I'm tapped. Drained dry."

"You don't think it's a stupid idea?" Eddie asked.

“No, I think it’s stupid,” Vic said. “But I’m also a realist. We have limited options coming up. Keeping ourselves weak and hoping we’ll find someone to feed on before we hit a mass of Deadies is really exposing our throats.”

“I’m terrified,” Eddie said. “I’m scared I’ll crave her. I’m scared I’ll want to mark her afterward. To throw everything off.”

“I share that concern,” Brother Al said. “You must understand, Stacey. You are... different.”

“It’s just a birthmark,” I snapped. “This is not the Moon Kiss. This is not a divine splotch planted on me by the Gods. This is just a deformed patch of pigmentation caused in the womb. That’s it—that’s all. The three of you are so worried about a future issue that may not even have a chance to manifest. Here’s the situation as I’m seeing it: You can either be recharged and head into battle, or you can endanger all of us for sure by allowing yourselves to remain weak when we hit the shore. One option ensures we make it to the future. The other option ensures we have no future.”

A blistering silence between us all.

“I hate that you’re right,” Eddie said, voice soft.

“As much as I don’t like the idea of being bound to you two, this is the only thing that makes sense,” Vic said.

Brother Al sighed, a gargantuan, tremulous sigh.

“Stacey,” he said. “You realize that at some point. It’s neither Eddie, Vic, nor myself that will pay for this decision. It will be you.”

“I’ll deal with it when we get there,” I said. “Come on!”



JOHN STEELEY, one of the navigators onboard—one of the only other humans—had a pocketknife on him. He held a lighter under the blade. Someone else found a wineglass from a hidden cupboard. The three vampires—all men interested in me—watched with cat-like obsession at the knife-blade as I dragged it over the Venus mound on my left hand. I hissed. I could sense predatory eyes and intentions, staring at me, muted with compassion. I had a sudden sense of being a little lamb in front of three powerful lions.

Still, there was nothing else for it but to continue forward. I squeezed my left fist over the glass. Blood splotted and splattered out—little more than a mouthful, I thought.

“We’ll need a bit more,” Brother Al said, voice remorseful.

“You’ll have to mark deeper,” John Steeley said behind me.

I stared at him.

“This is how my wife feeds,” he said.

I nodded, breathed in, and opened my fist. A wave of nausea seemed to hit me. My palm was coated in blood, a ragged scratch opened and dripping. I shoved the pocketknife in the wound and dug, hissing. It felt like... well, like there was a piece of cold metal nearly popping the ball of my thumb bone out. More and more blood spilled out, and I tried to aim as best I could, but I dropped the knife, nearly dropping to my knees with the pain.

Almost at once, they moved. Brother Al had grabbed the blade. Eddie and Vic were holding each of my hands. With a horrid look of rapaciousness, Brother Al licked the knife blade clean, slowly, savoring the taste. Vic and Eddie shared tentative swallows, passing the goblet back and forth, and then

finally to Aleister, who greedily drank, blood smearing the sides of his face.

“It’s done,” Brother Al said, and his voice sounded... sad.

“Get out of here, Stacey,” Eddie said.

“Go patch yourself up on deck,” Vic said.

“I might need some help,” I said.

“That is something we cannot give you,” Brother Al said. He seemed to be shuddering. “Get yourself gone from our sight. Do not return until you have stemmed the wound. The bloodlust from a feeding is not one easily reconcilable with our softer traits.”

I took the steps, holding my wound with my other hand. I felt... empty, somehow. I had meant to solve everything... but all I seemed to do was awaken some evil beast in each of them.

John Steeley caught me on the top deck. I was sitting and staring at the far shore, where the city itself loomed up large in my sight, revealing itself through a heavy mist.

“That’s what it means to love a vampire,” he said quietly. “I know... I know how it feels. What you’re going through. How can something so... demonic... live in someone that you love? I have struggled with that question since my wife and I have been together. If you ever need to talk, I’ll be here.”

“Thank you,” I said.

## CHAPTER 2



I had staunched the bleeding. Alone I sat at the edge of the ship and watched as we drew ever-closer. The streets of Chicago were soon to be open to us—awash with who knew how many deadies running rampant. This might be the last look I ever had at water, at ocean, at everything.

John Steeley popped his head back out.

“You done bleeding?”

“Pretty much,” I said.

“They’ve managed to rein themselves in,” he said. “It’s safe to come back down.”

I didn’t want to, but if anything was going to happen, it might be sooner rather than later. I felt a sudden sense of shame at my younger self—willingly hopping in bed with these men I knew nothing about—ones who promised love and intrigue and mystery, new ways of perceiving the world around me. I was attracted to their good traits—Brother Al’s serious, considerate nature—Eddie’s passion and strength—Vic’s curiosity and way of perceiving things—but also to the hidden danger I could sense in each of them. Now that it had grown real—now that it was shown to me, in all its dangerous glory, I felt like a hypocrite.

What was this feeling in my chest? So deep and so dark, so trembling, making my fingertips quiver and my wound ache and my chest flutter?

I was scared walking down to see my three vampire lovers.

THEY LOOKED... well... normal again. I did not see any sign of the slaving, barely-held-back monsters that had reveled in my life's blood. Here again, there were three individual men. Still, a little part of my mind on repeat kept hysterically wailing. These men had drank of me—took from me that which I had offered—fallen on it like wild animals.

I kept seeing my blood pooling down Brother Al's cheeks as if he were quaffing some ale... watching his tongue lick the knife blade clean, a rapturous look on his face... all on loop in my mind's eye...

“Thank you,” Vic said quietly. “We wanted to wait for you.”

“Oh?” I asked. I forced myself to stay quiet, stay still, not turn, and run from the room.

“Yes,” Vic said. “I figured it out. Watch.”

He strode around the table, twice, three times, bending and touching here, scribbling in the margins there, moving ritual implements here or there minutely. After some time, he seemed to complete whatever arcane circuit he was trying to—for he stood, and with a simple gesture of three claps, there was a flickering of static in the air over the table like so much invisible television snow and before us, there was the city of Chicago in miniature, translucent yet innately recognizable from its skyline.

“Well done,” Brother Al said. “We could not have done it without your sacrifice, Stacey.”

“Please don’t remind me,” I said.

The three of them looked at me, hangdog expressions the lot of them. Was this guilt? Did vampires feel guilt? In a way, it helped me humanize them.

“We have the map now,” I said. I folded my arms over my chest. “What’s the plan?”

“We had a rollcall for all those aboard the ship,” Brother Al said. “At current we have five additional vampires, three human Vassals, a geriatric witch, and some small number of Living Impaired—approximately five.”

“What’s their combat readiness look like?” Eddie asked.

“The Living Impaired are all in no state to fight. Nor is Glynfelda—she is little more than a busted hip waiting to happen. Of the vampires, three are fledglings, with limited development of their powers. Two of them are enforcers—guards I sent as part of the escort operations before everyone got kidnapped and waylaid. This means we have limited offensive capabilities, and a number of vulnerable people to transport.”

“What’s the situation on shore look like? Do we have eyes on the ground?”

“We could,” Vic said. “Let me just do some...”

He bent down, waggled his fingers, and knocked on the table. A number of shadows appeared on the streets. It was... a lot. Like, a lot a lot. Like a mob.

“That is not good,” I said.

“No,” Brother Al said. “And I worry about what those things are inside the city grounds.”

Two large black shadows, looming at least five or six times the size of the rest of the deadies. It did not look good.

“I have guys waiting at the docks,” Eddie said. “They’re supposed to have my bike and a transport van for us. We can load the vulnerable into the back of the van. I have other men still available for escort.”

“I have heard word that Hartshome is safe,” Brother Al said. “Perhaps a detachment of your men could escort the van to Hartshome.”

“My wife is there,” John Steeley said. “She says they’re doing okay right now but could use some backup.”

“That sounds like a plan,” Eddie said. “Here’s another problem. Nagisa’s stuck at Penn Square Mall with his guys... whoever’s left. They’re surrounded. The bottom floor of the mall is teeming with the undead, and they’re trapped on the top floor.”

“So we need at least two groups,” Brother Al said. “A defense team for Hartshome and the survivors, and a rescue team headed Nagisa’s way. Do you have the men available, Eddie?”

Eddie shook his head.

“No. Most of my guys ran—don’t blame ‘em, either—most of them have friends and family they needed to get out of the city. I have just enough guys left to escort the transport van to Hartshome.”

“And they’ll need to stay at Hartsome as backup,” Brother Al said. “This presents an issue.”

“My brother’s gang—up north. If I could break through these big things up here, I could meet up with them at HQ—I need to see if they’re okay,” Vic said. “There’s a possibility—remote, but it’s there—that we could rally enough of my brother’s people to come back and rescue Nagisa’s folks.”

“You don’t want to go straight to the Mall?” I asked.

Vic shook his head.

“I’m powerful, but I’m not stupid. A horde of Deadies like this—they may not eat vampires, but they’re strong. They’d tear me apart. And Nagisa’s gang is no slouch. If Nagisa by himself can’t take down a big crowd of these things, and he’s stuck—there’s not much I can do to get him out of the situation myself.”

“We’re forgetting a big thing here,” I said. “Where’s this coming from? And why?”

“It’s not a Worm Moon,” Vic said. “That’s been over for a while. I could... theoretically... tweak the leyline structure for these... see where the power comes from... maybe.”

He crouched down again, and muttered some things, knocking again on the table and closing his eyes. After a moment or two, little spider-webs of energy began coalescing around the city. Individual strands of translucent energy began to thread their way back to massive spots in the groundwork.

“Look,” Vic said. “Most of these Deadies—big guys included—their energy sources seem to be coming from these three spots. Anybody familiar with the topography?”

“A funeral home, a hospital... and another funeral home on the other side. Oh, and look. A meat processing plant. That’s fun.” Eddie said this last sentence devoid of any mirth.

“Guys,” I said. “I know this sounds weird but hear me out. Look at where these places are all located.”

I ran my fingers through the translucent figures, tracing a pattern between each structure. Right in the middle of it, there was a familiar building.

“Why Headquarters,” I said.

The others looked at me quietly.

“What?” I asked.

“I know that seems related, but you’re a little off,” Vic said. “Technically dead center would be the coffee shop here.”

Le Bean Caffeine. I knew the owners. It was a nice gay couple that seemed to fight constantly. One of them liked to wear extravagant wigs. Either of them being behind this seemed to make even less sense to me.

“Okay, but that makes even less sense,” I said.

“Are you suggesting it was someone at your office?” Brother Al asked.

I went through the list of people I worked with. Bradford, Gabriel, Andy, Peggy... none of them seemed capable of mass necromancy. Even if some of the interns back at the office seemed pretty sickly most days of the week.

“No idea,” I said. “But I think it’s suspicious at least. Worth checking out.”

“We lack the resources for a search mission,” Brother Al said. “Nagisa has requested Council assistance. Right now they are in deliberation with the Federal Government on how to contain this issue and scrub it from records. Our job is not to stop this—merely to protect as many people as possible.”



“But why shouldn’t we try?” I asked.

“We don’t have the people,” Eddie said. “Our priority is keeping you and the people we know safe.”

“This is stupid,” I said. “So you took my blood, and you’re not even willing to fight at full strength?”

“It’s not that simple, and you’re being ridiculous,” Brother Aleister snapped, and his voice was heavy with a reprimand. “The Council has many decisions it must make before it can move forward to come help us. This will be a waiting game for survival. There is no guarantee the cavalry will arrive. We are on our own. We must preserve our energy as long as possible.”

“So who am I going with?” I asked.

Eddie and Vic both didn’t want to look at me.

“I asked a question,” I said.

“I was assuming you would go in the back of the transport van,” Eddie said.

“Because I’m one of the vulnerable ones,” I said.

There was a silence between everyone then.

“Stacey, it’s for your own good,” Vic said.

“That’s bull,” I said. “You can’t just... you can’t just put me with the women and children.”

“Stacey. What can you do in battle?” Brother Aleister asked.

I stammered.

“Uhhh... I could...”

“Die,” Brother Aleister said. “You could die, Stacey. I’ll say it again. You are in danger of losing your mortal life. You

want the truth, young one? It is likely you will not survive. This is not an adventure. This is not some fanciful little game we've been drawn into, or some mystery to untangle and unweave. You are vulnerable. You cannot fight. You cannot protect yourself."

"You can't just treat me like I'm useless," I said, voice heaving.

Brother Al, Eddie, and Vic all seemed to be struggling against something, and then Brother Al snapped and gnashed his teeth. His eyes became red as he opened them. Veins on his flesh stood out at attention as he spoke.

"In battle, you will be less than useless. You will be a distraction. You will be a target. You will go in the back of the transport van with the others who cannot fight. I will not continue to argue with you about this."

The words stained and reverberated through the air like a hiss, and I fell back as he said them. The words he'd said—I don't know why—but they felt like a dagger straight to the heart. After all, I had given them... and they wanted to treat me like... like...

Like cattle, I thought. Like a precious resource, they mustn't lose.

A tear escaped my eye, and I ran out of the room, gasping and heaving as I hit the top deck. The fresh saltwater air stained my face, and I cried into the breeze, hugging myself.

Eddie came above-deck soon afterward. The clouds were heavy in the sky. I could feel him—smell him—feel the way his glamour reached out to touch me. I didn't turn.

"Hey," he said.

I said nothing, just stared at the horizon.

“Look. Brother Al—you don’t understand it, because we haven’t told you yet, but. Now that we’ve drank from you. The offer you gave us—it affects us differently. Brother Al had to get mean. Otherwise he couldn’t fight the effects of it.”

“He didn’t have to be such an asshole,” I said, trying not to sniff.

“He did, Stacey. You’ve got a glamour over us now. Whatever you say. It seems like a really, really great idea. I can’t describe it to you... it’s almost like a compulsion.”

“Then why didn’t it work?” I asked.

“Aleister is old. Ancient. Extremely powerful. He knows how to fight against his compulsions.”

“You could have just said that in there,” I said.

“Maybe,” Eddie said. “Hey, will you look at me? Please?”

“Just go away, Eddie,” I said.

I heard him turn and walk away.

“Seriously?” I called. “Come back here.”

He turned back around, swiveling in place.

“Please stop commanding me,” Eddie said. “I’m getting seasick with all the turns.”

“You’re joking, right?”

“I am not,” Eddie said. “This is extremely uncomfortable.”

“You’re saying that whatever I tell you—no matter what—you have to listen to me?”

“That is what I’m saying.”

I smiled really big.

“And when will this wear off?” I asked.

“I’m not sure. Maybe when I process the blood you’ve given me.”

“Great,” I said. “Then when we hit shore. I’m riding behind you, on your bike.”

“Nobody else will agree to that,” Eddie gasped. “I mean, I have to let you, but Brother Al will fight it.”

“He won’t fight it if he doesn’t know it’s me,” I said.

“Stacey,” Eddie whined.

## CHAPTER 3



We hit the harbor with a whine of the engine dying, and everyone's energy seemed to spike. On another yacht, there were a few Deadies lumbering around with no real concept of time or space in the distance. A dead body was bobbing in the waves—when we nudged it with the boat, its pale, bloated hands began scrabbling at the metal hull of the ship we were on.

“Diaz, Mercury!” Eddie said, rushing out to meet two vampires I'd never seen before. “You two are definitely getting a promotion!”

The three Flames of Hell members all hugged and slapped each other's backs.

“We gotta move,” Diaz said. He was the squatter of the two, built like a brick, or a dwarf.

“We passed a gym on the way here. An undead Crossfit group is heading this way,” Mercury said. “They move pretty fast.”

“Glynfelda's riding with me,” Eddie said. “Let's move!”

The survivors all scooted, scraped, scurried, or sloped up the loading ramp to the moving truck. It did not look comfortable in there. Brother Al spoke with my doppelganger,

who remained quiet and sulky in the corner. I sighed. From a distance, I realized just how terrible my dress was. Then again. I had been captured in a merman citadel for the better part of the last week. And why was my ass so flat from this angle?

In truth, Glynfelda was a smart broad. I explained the situation as the boat docked, and she agreed to do a minor illusion charm to swap our appearances. No matter what, she'd be in the back of the moving truck. She even gave me something useful.

“What is this?” I asked. “A tarot card?”

“Yes,” she said. “There's not time for more than this. Just hold onto it and tap it if Eddie needs some assistance.”

“What do you mean tap in?” I asked.

“Close your eyes. Breathe. Feel your soul reach into the card. Pull out what's there. It's simple, really.”

“That doesn't sound simple, it sounds complicated,” I said.

“You'll get it,” doppelganger Stacey said to me suddenly.

“That's so weird,” we both said at once.

I SLID one geriatric leg over the back of Eddie's bike.

“Hang on,” I said. “Not used to this. Oh, my hips...”

“There's still time to get in the van,” Eddie said.

“No,” I said. “Let's just go already!”

“Mercury, Diaz,” Eddie said. He banged on the cargo truck's driver side door. Another gang member honked from behind the wheel. Vic leered out at us from the passenger seat,

hands in the casting position. “We’re headed to Hartshome. This truck must be protected at all costs!”

“Got it, boss,” Mercury said.

“On it!” Diaz said.

The van started to life with a diesel sound, rumbling down the street. Mercury and Diaz followed close behind. Eddie revved his bike engine. It started even as a group of athletic undead in spandex burst from the next corner. A pale, scrawny human was running in front of them.

“You’ve got to help me!” he sobbed.

“Jesus,” Eddie snapped. He kicked on the throttle, and the engine revved. “Let’s go!”

“You have to save him,” I snapped.

“Stacey, don’t do this,” Eddie said.

The man was gasping. Only about a hundred yards away now...

“I can grab him,” I said. “Just stay here until he gets closer...”

“We can’t balance three people on a bike!” Eddie yelled, over the engine.

“I know! We just need to put him somewhere safe.”

“Stacey, this is insane,” Eddie said.

But the issue solved itself for us. The man tripped over his own feet, rolling, and the pack fell on him. He screamed. I can’t describe the rest of it—the way they tore into him.

“Let’s go,” I whispered.

Eddie revved the handlebars, and we squealed out of there.

THE TRUCK WAS HEADING down another avenue. The roads were nearly empty. Whatever this was, it had taken people by surprise, in their sleep. Diaz and Mercury were at 9 and 3. I wondered how long it would take for Grynfelda's spell to wear off...

A great number of somethings unfurled themselves from a nearby building eave, diving past us in streaks of black and green feathers. They hit Diaz with all the force of a tractor, as if in a suicide dive. Spots of gore and flesh from where they hit concrete splattered the street like gory paintballs. He swerved, over-corrected his fall on the other side, and lost control of his bike. He slid under the van. There was a nasty thump noise as the truck ran over him. I turned, terrified, watching the flock descend upon his body.

"Oh, fuck. Diaz!" Eddie cried.

"What are those things?" I asked.

"Not sure," Eddie said. "There's a crowbar in my sidepack, and a sawed-off shotgun a little ways behind that. Have you ever used a shotgun before?"

"Yes," I said. Well, it was a hunting rifle, and it was nearly a decade back, but a gun was a gun was a gun, right?

"If those feathery bastards come back around, aim that shotgun and get as many of them as you can."

"There cannot be more of those," I said.

"Duck!" Eddie hollered.

I did so. The bike wobbled. Something feathered hit a billboard near me.



It was a duck. Literally.

“They’re exploding kamikaze ducks,” I breathed.

“No shit,” Eddie said. “Keep that gun aimed, girly.”

He sped up and took the 3 position where Diaz was. The van window rolled down. Vic leaned out, staring.

“What happened? I couldn’t see in the rearview mirror.”

“Exploding ducks got Diaz,” I yelled.

“Stacey?” Vic asked. “I thought you were in the back!”

“Long story,” Eddie shouted. “If you guys take the expressway entrance up here it’ll be easier on everyone—it heads right over to Hartshome.”

“Aleister is going to be pissed,” Vic said.

“Just focus on putting a shield up,” Eddie said. “Or whatever it is you do.”

“Got it,” Vic said. “Stace, you look great with a gun.”

“Are you into it?” I asked.

“Maybe there’s a better time for this,” Eddie screamed into the wind. “Duck!”

I turned and hit both triggers on the shotgun as a malignant mallard grew in my sight. The gun jerked and knocked me right in the chest. Next thing I knew, I was ass-over-end, rolling, the whole street revolving around me. My wrist was aching. I tried not to scream. My ankle throbbed—the skin on my legs was screaming at me, and hot gun metal was touching my face.

I blinked, getting my bearings, sitting up. The van was headed up the highway entrance in the distance, rapidly disappearing. I had fallen—must have fallen off the back when

the shotgun went off. There was blood—road rash on my legs. I tried to get to my feet, but my legs wouldn't carry me.

“Fuck,” I said. A number of shadows in the eaves of buildings around me looked down. Shambling shadows were gathering around me. I tried to steady the shotgun again, but my wrist was screaming. I hissed, lifting it up. Trying to position myself again. The last time both shells had knocked me clear off the bike. This time, I'd probably fall right on my ass.

“Come on, mother fuckers,” I snarled. “Come get some! Taste my ass!”

I turned at the sound of something shrieking. A massive, grotesque bat-winged thing swooped down at me, clutching me with its talons, and taking off.

“Let go of me!” I snapped.

Immediately I dropped. I watched the pavement underneath me grow larger again, and with another snarl, I felt sharp claws grab around my waist.

“Not another word,” I heard in my ear. The bat-thing stretched and flapped, powered as if by some infernal strength inside. “Unless you want me to drop you again. I told you, Stacey.”

“Aleister?” I asked.

“Who else would it be?” the bat-thing snapped. “I'm defenseless carrying you. I need you to fend these flying things off while we catch up with the van.”

“I'm so sorry,” I said.

“Duck!” Aleister snapped. I turned and shot. It exploded. I spat feathers out of my mouth. “I suppose you're not too

useless.”

“Yeah, imagine that,” I said.

“Duck! Duck!” he snapped. I aimed, closed my eyes. Pow, pow. Shrapnel and demonic quacking. And then before I could peel my eyes open again, I heard his voice in my ears, confused: “Goose?”

A woman astride a long-necked goose. And then more and more of them, surrounding us, flapping all around. They were chanting, tossing what looked like firecrackers and small smoke bombs down that exploded with glittering effects. A force field arose around us. These must have been the Civil Wyrd Corps Nagisa had been talking about.

“Keep going to Hartshome,” one of the women said.

“They need your help,” another one said.

“Hey!” I called. “Are you going up near 36th St?”

“I am,” one of the dumpier witches said.

“Can I get a lift?” I asked.

“Stacey, what are you doing—” Aleister growled.

I jumped just in time. Aleister caught an up-draft that forced him up, just as the fleshy face of something large and foul-smelling arose from another alleyway. I wasn’t sure what it was, but there was no way we could have avoided it had I not moved. A huge hand grabbed the side of a building, and some fleshy pseudopod extruded itself forward. Half of the geese turned, scattering, and me and my new ride kept on going up north.

“Name’s Clemenza. Where are we going?” the dumpy witch asked.

“My friend Tamara’s house,” I said. “And maybe Feedworthy afterward.”

“Oh, hey, you’re that writer girl,” the witch said. “The Moon-Kissed.”

I sighed against the wind. “Yup,” I said.

“Why are we headed this way again, exactly?”

“I need to rescue a few people,” I said.

“Always a good thing,” she said. “Hold on tight.”

## CHAPTER 4



We sat down on the rooftop of Tamara's building. I could see her parking garage from here. The streets in this area seemed abandoned. If we were quick, we could theoretically dart down to the ground level and go from there. If she was alive. If she was safe, still.

I bit my lip.

"Thank you, Clemenza" I said. "Can you hang on here for a little bit? There's a chance my friend is..."

The dumpy witch shook her head.

"I'm sorry. I'm headed over to Penn for backup."

"That's just around the corner, right?" I asked.

She scratched her head.

"Yeah, but they're facing something bad. Look, we're all hands on deck," she said. "I'll get kicked off Civil Service if I don't make my appointment time. Because there won't be a Civil Wyrd Corps left if they don't have everybody there."

"What all's been happening?"

"Near as we can tell, a series of Hellgates popped up all over the city," Clemenza said. "It's bad. The dead are coming

back to life, and most malicious-by-nature creatures are being take control of.”

That explained the ducks.

“What’s causing it, do you know?”

“We can’t pinpoint the magic,” she said. “It is magic. It’s just magic like we haven’t seen in centuries. I heard someone got a lead on who it was, but he can’t say the name. Whoever it was got ahold of him and sealed his throat shut.”

“Can you reverse it?”

“Once we find out who all is behind this, sure,” she said. “Until then. It’s every witch for themselves.”

“What about the dead?” I asked.

“They stay dead,” Clemenza said. “I have to go. If you need us, we’ll be at the Mall. If you can catch me, I can give you a ride back.”

“Thanks Clemenza!” I said.

She smiled and nodded at me.

“Sisters supporting sisters, am I right? Hey, you should come hang out at one of our coven meetings sometime. I heard word that you may be a little talented.”

“I don’t think that’s true,” I said.

“Stacey. Magic isn’t just channeled into spells, you know. Magic is in the sky. It’s in the air. It’s in the water. It’s in the words we say, the things we write, and the monuments we leave behind. Most of us use it without even realizing what it is.”

“Really?” I asked.

“Really,” she said. “Why do you think so many idiots get into positions of power?”

“I wondered about that,” I said.

“Ta,” she said, and she and her goose got a running start off the edge of the building. The goose honked unhappily, and they flapped off awkwardly into the night.

“Gotta find Tamara,” I said.

The door to the roof escape was open. That... well... it was something. Something good or bad, I wasn't sure yet.

I DESCENDED down the roof access stairwell one step at a time, trying to make as little noise as possible. The power seemed to be out. Faded yellow emergency lights were flickering on and off in the hallways. I could hear my own breath in my ears. In, out. In, out. I kept thinking about the card in my pocket—watching carefully behind me, in front of me. As I hit the top floor—a sign helpfully let me know this was the eighteenth floor—I did some quick calculations. Tamara's apartment was on the fifth floor. I'd have to go down thirteen levels.

Thirteen levels. My calves were aching already from my earlier spill, and the awkward iron-vise thigh-hug I gave that goose threatened to disturb my chastity. This lady's gams were toast. I wanted to sit back and cry, but there was nothing for it but to trudge on.

A bloody handprint against one wall smeared over and around another corner. I tried not to look at it—tried to avoid that corridor at all costs. I could hear some people whimpering and whispering behind closed doors. There was a building blueprint next to the fire escape. Theoretically, as I traced it, I

realized I could take the fire escape outside all the way down and avoid interior traffic.

I considered it. Considered my legs. There was a chance there'd be stairs and grates and awkward walking. With my luck, I'd pitch off it when my hamstrings gave out and hit the ground with a splat.

Maybe I shouldn't have stopped here, after all, I thought. Stupid friendship. Stupid savior complex. Stupid Stacey, thinking she could spearhead everything herself. No wonder Al and Eddie and Vic thought I was acting like a child. One fall off a bike and I was practically out of the game already.

Dark thoughts swirled in my head. There was a mirror in the corridor. I paused and looked at it. Looked at my ugly birthmark. The Moon-Kiss, the undead all said. Some high and mighty sign that the divine had marked me. Well, bully on that! The divine hadn't marked me. Cursed by the devil, that seemed a bit more appropriate.

For some reason, this was a comforting thought. If I was cursed—if that's what this was, a sign of misfortune—then that meant I had something to fight against. Something unfair. Something to prove myself against. I didn't know why, but it sat with me in a good way. I could feel my inspiration flowing. Feel my guts readying themselves. I could do this, I thought. I bounced back and forth between weak legs that were getting a second wind and punched the air a few times. I could do this. I could do this.

“I got this. You got this. We're gonna go down thirteen flights of steps, find your friend, take her car to the mall. Nice and simple.”

I turned and headed toward the corridor. A pale-faced man with half of his face missing turned the corner, groaning and



staggering towards me, his hands smearing more blood on both sides of the wall. No way around him—but he seemed off-balance. If I got in close, I could walk backward, jump out of his way...

“Blagh,” the zombie said and vomited. A thick, tarry crust of black liquid splashed out. Worms crawled around in it.

“I thought I could do this, but I can’t,” I said. “And there’s no shame in running from a situation you’re not strong enough to face yet.”

The zombie vomited again.

I turned and ran toward the fire escape, sticking my head out and looking down. The ground looked far away, and the iron latticework on the outside did not look the most in-shape, but it was either this or wormy extrusions from dead people. I took my chances.

The wind blew as I swung myself out over the window. I wanted to shut it behind me—but there wasn’t a latch or anything but cold dew on this side of the smooth glass. The only thing I could do was leave it alone and crouch, quickly stepping down the iron steps, watching through the windows on apartments as I passed.

Someone pumped their fists as I went down. Someone else was staring from their window, their eyes missing in their sockets, their forehead smearing the glass with what I hoped wasn’t brains. I had no idea how many turns meant a floor. I just kept going and going.

I heard a moan and a cry, and the whole fire escape jerked. I looked back up. The zombie from the floor I was on had squirmed his way out the window and landed on the floor

above. His arms were stuck through two steps. He couldn't seem to move.

"That was lucky," I said.

And then I heard him vomit again. A cold splatter of wormy putrescence hit a step next to me, and I shrieked. There was another open window as I rounded the bend, and I made it inside just as a bit of sludge hit my shoe.

I pulled the shoe off, staring at it with horror. It was covered in—I tried not to, but I couldn't help it. It smelled like hazelnut creamer. What? Worms danced as they gasped for air.

I threw the shoe back out the window, and then my other one, because why not. The apartment I was in was dark. Judging from the linoleum touching my toes, I was in the kitchen. I had no idea where I was—no idea what floor I had made it to. A slight bit of light came in from the air outside. Just enough for me to see where I was going. I tried to remember the layout of Tamara's kitchen and crept my way over to where I thought the light switch was. I flipped it.

With a zap, the lights dimmed on and then snapped back off because of the power. I sighed. Okay, I thought. That's fine.

I had passed a stove earlier. Tamara's was gas—she had bitched about it enough to make that memory stick in my brain. I hoped beyond hope, this one was an auto-light. I flicked the nearest burner on, picking up the skillet that was on it, and waited until the blue flame flickered up.

Just enough light came on for me to see a scented votive near the window I'd crawled in. At least this was something. I grabbed it and lit it, then turned with it in my hand.

A row of very mean-looking mallards were perched on the island that looked into the living room.

“Good duckies,” I said. “Maybe I wandered into the apartment of a nice duck-keeper. Maybe you’re good ducks, and I won’t have to bash your brains in.”

One of them quacked restlessly, its beak nibbling at something under a wing. They seemed content, just sitting there. I dared not turn my back on them—just made sure I turned the gas knob off on the stove behind me. The darkness reclaimed the kitchen, save the single candle I had sat on the side of the stove. I slowly picked it up and walked, barefooted, through the living room. Candle in one hand. Skillet in another.

The ducks swiveled, turning but seeming uninterested. Maybe they were only trained to attack fast-moving things...

I backed into the living room. A sharp pain hit my foot. I tried not to make a sound. I looked down, shaking my already-hurt foot. A plastic building block piece skittered from the sole of my foot into the kitchen, making noise against the tile. The ducks seemed to train in on it.

My back hit what I assumed was a door. I carefully turned, trying to balance the skillet in the crook of my arm as I tangled with the locks.

“How many fucking locks do you need, lady,” I whispered.

Seriously, there were at least six in a row. This wasn’t a bad side of town, either. Still, I got through most of them. And then the latch was last. I tried to press the skillet between my breasts and the door, and use a free hand, but there was a horrible scrape of metal as the skillet slowly lost its grip on my boobs.

Angry ducky grunts were happening behind me, and feathery flaps. I finally abandoned all caution and ripped the door open, bending down and grabbing the skillet and slamming the door behind me. There was a series of bangs and thumps on the door. The wood cracked right where my head had been—a duck’s bill, bloody and broken, protruded from the broken door.

“Jesus,” I said.

And then something grabbed my shoulder. I turned and screamed, slamming whatever it was in the head with the skillet.

“Stop, lady!” a man said. “I’m not one of them!”

I held the skillet back, and sanity reset itself. What I had assumed was a zombie grabbing me was—well—I mean, he looked like a zombie...

“Hey,” I said. “You’re not going to eat my brains, are you?”

“That’s offensive,” he said. “You’re stepping on my finger.”

I reached down and picked it up. It was slimy. I handed it back to him.

“You’re, uh. Living Impaired,” I said.

“Yes,” he said.

He was a zombie, then—not that I should say that, but it’s still a useful phrase. He just turned differently. Or revived. Or came back. With his mind in-tact. Look, I have to admit, I was anything but a cultural ambassador for the undead. Apparently, Living Impairment happens in a variety of fashions and means.

“What are you doing here?” I asked.

“I happen to live here,” he said. “Name’s Joey DiMarco. I’m on 7D.”

“Is that the floor we’re on?”

“Yeah,” he said. “Seventh floor. Hey, you’re that newspaper lady, aren’t you?”

“Yup,” I said.

“Oh, sweet nips,” he said. “I’ve heard a lot about you. You’re kinda a celebrity. Can I see it?”

“See what?” My voice felt arctic.

“The Moon Kiss,” he said, his voice glowing. He coughed.

“I’m kinda busy. Do you know a lady named Tamara that lives here?”

“Black lady. Nurse, right? Yeah, she’s cool. We’ve met a few times when she’s grabbing her mail.”

“Is she still here? Is she alive?”

Joey blinked a few times.

“I think,” he said. “I’m patrolling the corridors when I can. There’s not much activity up here.”

“There’s a puker on the fire escape,” I said.

“Oh, gross,” he said. “I heard all this has something to do with tainted food.”

“Tainted food?”

“That’s what some of the other guys at the church were saying. Some kind of food poisoning or something. I don’t know—just some theories we been throwing around.”

“I’ll keep it in mind,” I said. “Are the next few stairwells clear?”

“Yeah,” he said. “I’ll walk with you, just in case.”

I was a little flattered. I had not had a man offer to escort me in some time. And to his credit, Joey was pretty handsome. There was a grayish sheen to his skin, however, and dark black circles under his eyes that let me know he was off on some fundamental level. It wasn’t enough to make me not consider him handsome, but I wasn’t sure about how any of that worked. Vampires were one thing. Vampires at least breathed and were warm and weren’t, well. Rotting in place. The Living Impaired, however... I just wasn’t sure.

“Where’d your shoes go?” he asked.

“The puker got ‘em. I tossed them out the window after that. There were worms or something all over them.”

“Yuck,” he said. “You know, a healthy GI tract clears a lot of that up. I mean. Look, it’s not hard to culture an environment where that stuff doesn’t grow. It’s not hard to pass anymore. Not when we have kombucha and probiotics and just about any supplement under the sun.”

“Good to know,” I said.

“If you get going quick enough, it’s almost like nothing happened,” Joey said. “Turn here.”

Finally, the fifth floor.

“Okay, this should be your stop,” Joey said. “Need anything else?”

“No,” I said. “Thanks.”

“Maybe you could introduce me to Tamara?” he asked.

I tried not to roll my eyes.

“Look, Joey—”

“Look, I know,” he said. “You don’t have to give me that look. But I’m still a person, you know. I still have feelings and emotions and crave human contact. I take good care of myself.”

I nodded.

“Yeah, you do,” I said. “I’m just not sure she’s... you know.”

“Into dead guys,” he said. His voice was flat.

“I was gonna say ready to date. But since we’re on the subject, we are in the middle of a zombie apocalypse,” I said.

His face reflexively squeezed.

“You don’t have to say it like that,” he said. “I’m not asking you to be my wingman. I’m just wondering if you’d introduce us. If she likes me, she likes me. If she doesn’t. I can take a hint.”

“You know women have a hard enough time dealing with living men as it is.”

“I didn’t ask for a feminist lecture, but if we’re on the subject of minority representation and equality, you really need to think about the way you talk about the Living Impaired. It’s a fact that the Living have a prejudice about dating the Dead. We’re just seen as non-sexual entities or threatening. It’s offensive.”

“Nobody has to date you,” I said.

“Here we go. Another living person telling me I don’t know what prejudice is like.”

“Jesus Christ,” I said. “You know I’m dating undead people, right? Vampires.”

“That’s different. And that doesn’t mean you can’t have prejudiced attitudes.”

“Look, I know there are people out there who actively seek people like you—”

Joey made a face.

“Chasers?” he asked. “Yeah, big turn off. Would you want to date someone that was only into you because of a sexual fetish?”

I paused.

“I hadn’t thought about it that way.”

“Clearly,” he said. “Look, I just want a normal relationship. Being Living Impaired doesn’t mean you can’t go on and have a normal life.”

“Tamara wants kids,” I said.

“We can adopt,” he said. “Or, heck. We can see if these guys are still kicking.”

He honked his shorts and then made a serious face.

“What?” I asked.

“Making sure everything’s still attached,” he said.

“Alright, fine. No crotch-grabbing and no creepiness. I’ll introduce you two and if you hit it off, you hit it off. But you’ll have to tell her at some point.”

“I was going to,” he said, voice waspish.

We walked down another corridor or two. Now that I was here, I had my bearings about me again. I led us to Tamara’s



apartment, then knocked twice.

Silence. Nobody answered. I started getting nervous.

“What if she’s not home?” he asked.

“Shut up,” I said. “There’s a key under the mat.”

I removed it and then unlocked the door. The handle slid open easily. There weren’t any lights on here, either.

“Tamara,” I called out. “Are you here? Are you okay?”

“Stacey?” I heard. “Watch out!”

She rushed Joey from the shadows. He screamed. She screamed. I screamed.

“He’s good,” I said. “He’s not one of them.”

“He’s missing a finger!”

“I knocked it off with a frying pan earlier,” I said.

Tamara looked at Joey with suspicion and then switched her cellphone flashlight on at us.

“Say something,” she said to him.

“Something,” he said.

Her face flickered.

“Oh, hey, I know you,” Tamara said.

“Yeah. Joey from the mailbox.”

“Yeah.” Tamara cut a glance at me and back at him. “You know him?”

“Bumped into him in the stairwell,” I said. “Are you okay?”

“I was just fine until you came in and unlocked my door. Get your asses inside and let me make you some coffee or

something.”

She slammed the door and locked it behind us, then motioned to Joey. The two of them hauled a heavy dresser in front of the door.

“You got anything a little cooler than coffee?” Joey asked.

“You get what you get,” she said. She slammed a knife down in the kitchen and started messing around with the coffee maker. “Stacey, I’m pissed off at you.”

“What? Me?”

“Yes, you. You ignored me when I said this was a problem and then you went dark when it started. You better have a great excuse for scaring me to death. Bitch, I thought you were dead.”

“I was kidnapped,” I said.

Tamara blinked. “Well, that’s a start. Why are you here? Why didn’t you call?”

“Cellphone went dead. Been kidnapped, as previously stated. Just got back and the whole town is a mess. I got a ride here to check on you. And... I kinda wanted to ask you for a favor.”

“Bitch,” Tamara said. “Bitch bitch bitch. You better not ask me for the motherfuc—”

“Keys to your car, yes, you know why I’m here.”

“I told you to get a car, didn’t I?”

“Yeah, you did,” I said. “But this is an emergency. I was kidnapped, Tamara. Come on.”

“I told you to stop hanging out with those weirdos,” she said. “Ohhhh, you have got some nerve coming here. Stacey, I

mourned your ass. The last three days I've been sitting here thinking about how the last thing I ever said to you was something smart over coffee. Best friend in the world dead. Zombies on the street walking around. You have no idea what I've been through."

"She was very inconsiderate not to have called you," Joey said.

"Yes, she was," Tamara said. "You want some creamer?"

"I'm good," I said. "It's not the same as the shop."

"I bought some when I was there the other day," Tamara said. "They've been delivering all over town."

My frustration peaked. I couldn't help myself. "You're here talking about coffee when there is a horde of deadies outside. Tamara, the city is in trouble."

"Let me guess. You're the only one that can help save it."

"No," I said. "There's other people. But I could help."

"So why not let them do it?"

I paused. Maybe... maybe everyone was right. Wasn't that what everyone was saying? I would just get in the way. And so far, they were right. So who was I? Was I some girl with a birthmark, or a girl with a destiny? Did any of it matter?

"Look, you're right," I said. "My phone's been dead. I ignored you. You were right, Tamara. Okay? But it's a little hard to get reception when you're 2000 leagues under Lake Superior!"

"What, you're going to tell me you were lost in Atlantis?"

I paused.

"So here's the thing," I started.

Tamara shook her head.

“Stop with the bull right there. I’m done. I’m out. I want to sit here and watch my soaps with what little data coverage I got left. I want to hunker down. I have a knife and some supplies. I have had a long few weeks avoiding this at my work when people started moving around and crawling out of the morgue. I deserve another day or two to be by myself and sit this one out.”

“Tamara,” I said. “You have every right to be upset.”

“Every right,” Joey said.

“And what gets me is you want to go right back into danger. You’re alive, and it’s like you don’t even give a shit. About how much it would hurt to everyone else if you were gone. It’s selfish, Stacey. Childish.”

“Selfish and childish,” Joey said.

“Shut up!” the both of us women said.

I paused, considered how to respond. “Look. I was not a good friend to you. I want to be. You know how I am though. I need to get into trouble or I start causing it. Look, we’ll chill out here for a bit. I could use a bit of a breather anyway. And then I can charge my phone and think about things. If they have everything under control, I’ll stay here. If they don’t...”

“I got a backup charger in the bedroom,” Tamara said. “I’ll be right back.”

## CHAPTER 5



I watched the numbers on my phone climb. It was an agonizingly, slow wait. After a few minutes, I went ahead and clicked it on.

Tamara and Joey were having a conversation about their shows. I rolled my eyes. Tamara could read me like a book... and I knew she knew I was annoyed. I felt handicapped. Why had I come here again? Just to have my hands tied? Well, I was trying to make sure she was safe. Wasn't I?

"You'll just get in the way." I had heard that from so many people in the past few days. Who was I supposed to be again? What was I supposed to be? What was it people expected from me?

A series of texts flashes across my screen.

"Just got all seventeen of your texts," I said to Tamara. "Sorry!"

A text from Brother Al, then: "Call me."

I stepped into the next room and dialed. The phone rang and rang. Then Brother Al answered.

"Stacey?" he asked. His voice was frantic.

"Yeah, it's me."

“Where are you?”

“My friend Tamara’s apartment. What’s up?”

“Firstly. We need to have a talk about leaping from my arms in mid-air. Secondly. I’m happy to hear you’re alive, at least.”

“Where is everyone? What’s the latest?”

“We’ve heard no word from the Regional Council. Hartshome is safe, but we’re fighting a losing battle. Whoever is behind this seems intent on knocking out our safe haven.”

“What about Eddie and Vic?”

“Eddie’s here. Vic took the van back out and disappeared up North. I’m not sure where he is.”

“What about Nagisa and his guys?”

“The Civil Wyrd Corps roused troops to go check out Penn Square. I haven’t heard word from them. There are suggestions that... they may not have survived.”

“Is the Mall that bad?”

“I’m not certain,” Brother Al said.

“What do you want me to do?”

“Stay safe,” Brother Al said.

“I’m not exactly safe here,” I said. “I mean, I might be, but I keep finding ducks everywhere.”

“I’m not going to ask.”

“Did you not see them?” I asked.

“No. I did see Flittering Trazmynes. Flying beasts. Take the form of the thing one is most terrified of.”

I thought about this.

“Eddie says he saw ducks too.”

“Perhaps it’s psychic transference from our earlier blood sharing,” Brother Al said.

“I’m not even scared of ducks, though,” I said.

“Stacey, is this really the time?”

I sighed.

“Alright. Hear me out. You guys need more reinforcements. Vic is out. What if I went to the Mall?”

“I would advise against it. If the Civil Wyrd Corps hasn’t survived, there’s no hopes for you.”

“But you said Nagisa is in trouble. If he’s wounded, I could do the same thing for him that I did for the three of you.”

“It’s a bad idea, Stacey. All of us want to see you survive this.”

“Are you sure this isn’t jealousy, again?” I asked.

“Stay sheltered. Stay in place,” Brother Al said, after a moment or two. “I’ll not hear another conversation about this.”

The phone line went dead. I stared at my phone in my hands. I kept getting work emails from Feedworthy. I sighed and stuffed it back in my pocket.

“What’s up?” Tamara asked me when I went back into the living room.

“Okay, so hear me out.”

“NO,” she said. “I’m done. You aren’t leaving this house.”

“I have my license. Just let me borrow the keys.”

“Stacey, I don’t have you on my insurance.”

“Look, there’s a lot of people in trouble and I could really help out if I get there in time.”

“What can you do?” Tamara asked.

“I don’t have time to explain,” I said. My face was red. I had promised Tamara that I would never share blood with the vampires. And then I’d gone and done it, after all...

“You won’t tell me how you can help, or who you can help, and you expect me to just say. Hey, sure. It’s the apocalypse, but yeah, take my keys and my only means of transportation.”

“Okay. Hear me out. The three of us leave. In your car. We head over to the Mall. You drop me off. The two of you keep going into the distance and leave this cursed city behind.”

“That’s actually not a bad idea,” Joey said.

“Barricades aren’t up yet,” I said. “I don’t think, at least. You could just go. This might be your only window.”

Tamara rolled her eyes practically back into her head.

“Get your shoes on,” she said finally. “We get to go on a roadtrip.”



## CHAPTER 6



We bundled nearly everything into the car. It was an eventless walk. Even still, the drive on the main streets was scary easy. Except for the sound of thunder in the distance, and a quiet rumbling that seemed to go on and on...

“You’re lucky,” Tamara said. “Lucky, lucky, lucky.”

“Maybe we’re luckier together,” I said.

We passed through abandoned stop signs. Cars on this side of town were crashed here and there. Tamara slowly drove through the ruins until we inched within sight of the Mall. It glittered in the lights. A throng of dead bodies were surrounding it, banging at the door.

“Oh, that does not look great,” Joey said.

“No, it doesn’t,” Tamara said.

At the sound of the engine, a flock of shadowed things lighted on a nearby gate. I stared at them and then coughed.

“Real carefully,” I said. “Do you guys see that?”

“Ugh,” Tamara said. “What are those? They look like... medusa heads or something.”

“I’m not seeing Medusa,” Joey said. He sounded hysterical. “That looks like Fran Drescher’s face, on all of

them. What the actual fuck?” He started screaming hysterically as they took to wing. “Just drive!” he shrieked.

Tamara floored it. I stared out the side-view mirror. Sure enough, now that he’d pointed it out, they did resemble a certain TV star... and I could hear them honking their annoying laugh as they flapped behind us.

“Pass that way,” I said. “I’ll jump out at the next light. Just keep going!”

“Fuck that shit!” Tamara said. “I got weapons in the back. Open that big black case.”

“I thought this was your cello. You’re a nurse, Tamara,” I said, and my voice was accusatory.

“And I’m not stupid. I’ve been preparing for this ever since I saw my first Code Blue wave at me as he walked out the door. Joey, grab a gun. Stacey. I know your Dad hunted. How’s your shot?”

“Not the best,” I said. “What are we doing?”

“In for a penny, in for a pound. You two are gonna shoot these bastards away from us. You find anything you like in there?”

I dug around. There was more ammunition and guns in this thing than I’d ever seen.

“Joey, you’ve got to take a look at this.”

“I wondered why it was so heavy,” Joey said. “Hand me a revolver.”

Something glittered under the streetlights. Tamara made a hard turn, and I rocked with it, then plunged in and came out with my prize. It was a scoped rifle.

“Tamara, I’ll never doubt you again,” I said.

“Shut up and start shooting the Nannies,” she said.

Joey and I rolled down our windows. He leaned his head out, and I leaned my head out.

“Umm,” I said. “Can you not shoot me in the face?”

“Opposite window, Stace,” Tamara snapped.

“I knew that,” I said. I scooted over behind her and rolled the window down. Again with the manual handle. “Child lock’s on. I can only get it halfway down.”

“Improvise, bitch!” Tamara snapped.

I opened the door, leaning out. Aimed through the scope. BLAM. A short sharp shrill, nasal laugh before one of the Tazmynes exploded. I aimed and scoped another one. Another flock took to wing from yet another lamp post. Outside, the crowd near the mall was breaking in two. One of the groups was slowly shuffling toward us...

“This isn’t going to work,” Joey panted.

“Shut the door, Stacey,” Tamara said.

“What?” I pulled my body in. The street bobbed before me. “What are you talking about—”

We veered, wheels and brakes shrieking, and the door was ripped off by a pole.

“Holy shit,” I said.

“I just finished payments on this thing! Nothing for it now,” Tamara said. “Look. There’s enough of an opening there. You see that tasteful tiered garden veranda over the Tio’s at the corner entrance to the mall?”

“Yeah,” I said.

“I’m gonna drive through the crowd. We’re gonna crawl out the windows and up the shutters and hit the second floor.”

“Why?”

“I forgot to fill up the gas tank,” she said. “E light’s been on since we took off. This is now our safest option. I’m gonna need the two of you to get those guns ready. And maybe fasten your seatbelts. I’m gonna try to get the driver side flush against the building.”

“I’m gonna need a foot’s worth of clearance,” I said.

“You get what you get. Hold on!”

She hit the gas. Bodies flung themselves onto and off the windshield. A disembodied hand latched onto my boob. I knocked it off. In the back, I could hear multiple Fran Drescher’s laughing as they splattered against the pavement. There was a swerve, and then all I saw was a brick wall and the sound of screeching of metal...

A window crashed. Joey was screaming as undead hands grabbed him... Tamara reached into the back and grabbed a gun, and all I could do was climb what was ahead of me...

I cracked the Tio’s window open with the butt of the rifle and held a hand down for Tamara to climb. Joey had been dragged into the crowd. We watched, but there was nothing more it seemed we could do.

“You owe me,” Tamara said. “I don’t think insurance is going to cover that.”

“Put it on my bill,” I said.

We climbed in the window. This was beginning to be a habit, and I wasn’t a fan of it...

## CHAPTER 7



The inside of the restaurant was quiet. We walked, side by side, paranoid as rabbits.

“Should have brought some food,” Tamara said.

“I haven’t eaten anything but pelican for the last few days,” I said.

“I had food at my place.”

“I could really go for some coffee right now,” I said.

“Are you coffee drinkers?” I heard from the shadows.

“Are you turned?” This was another voice.

Tamara and I froze.

“Who’s there?” I asked.

Two armed vampires—a man and a woman—stepped forward. They were dressed with bandanas on their foreheads.

“Drop your weapons,” the woman said.

“No,” Tamara said. She leveled her gun and aimed at the man’s head. “You drop your weapons.”

“Tamara,” I said quietly.

One of them shone a flashlight on us.

“Oh shit. The Moon Kiss! Check it out!” This was the guy.

“Oh, righteous. That must mean... you’re that journalist girl, right? You investigate all the weird things in town?”

“How are you so famous?” Tamara asked.

“I honestly don’t know,” I said. “Yeah, it’s me. Stacey Adams.”

“We’re Nagi’s troops. Name’s Methuselah. This is Rhonda.”

“Nice to meet you guys,” I said. “Where’s Nagi?”

“In the back,” Rhonda said. “Seeing you might perk him up.”

“What happened here?”

“Civil Wyrd Corps came. There was something huge waiting a few alleys over. It took out most of them. Nagi’s drained. We have human survivors here, but... Nagi’s in his feelings about killing more innocents, so we’re screwed.” Rhonda looked concerned.

“Hey, we’re both humans, so watch it,” I said.

“Oh yeah,” Rhonda said. “Come on. He’s back in the toy store.”

THE WHOLE SECOND floor of the Mall was cordoned off from the first floor. The escalators and elevators and stairs were guarded. A few staggering deadies roamed about aimlessly downstairs. Men and women in bandanas—undead and alive—checked nearly every entrance. There was a crowd of people—human people—huddled in places here and there. Looked like a good majority of survivors were stationed here, holing

up somewhere safe. Someone was manning a pretzel stand. Everyone seemed to have movie-sized soda.

Something in my stomach cramped, and I grabbed my stomach.

“Oh my God,” I said. “I have to have food, like now.”

“You are not gonna go get a pretzel,” Tamara said.

“I might.”

“Look at that line, though.”

“We’ll get you food here in a minute,” Rhonda said. “Methuselah. Get these ladies what they want.”

“You got any coffee anywhere here?” I asked.

There was a resounding silence in which the word ‘coffee’ seemed to reverberate through the food court. Most everyone looked at us, suspicion in their eyes.

“What?” I asked.

“Coffee,” Methuselah said. “That’s kind of a four letter word these days.”

“What are you talking about?” I asked.

“From what we can tell, people only get infected if they have a heavy history of coffee drinking,” Rhonda said.

Tamara and I looked at each other. Wordlessly, we realized we weren’t going to admit to a goddamn thing.

“Good to know,” I said.

“Very nice to know,” Tamara said, nodding. She turned her face to me and mouthed ‘Holy fuck!’

“Come on,” Rhonda said. “Methuselah, we’ll be over that way.”

He nodded, and we walked off.

“What do you think about that?” Tamara hissed in my ear.

“That one guy did throw up hazelnut-scented worms,” I said.

“I don’t remember that.”

“You weren’t there for it,” I said. “Got all over my shoes.”

“I wondered why you were barefoot.”

“He’s in there,” Rhonda said, gesturing, and Tamara and I stood on the threshold.

The building was a niche tabletop gaming store—Board games and comic books, video games and video game accessories everywhere. A man was lying on the floor in the back on a pile of old comics and—well—I say man, but he was half of a man if that. He was leafing through a comic book with an air of dejection.

At least, his remaining arm leafed through it.

“How are you still alive?” I asked.

“A creature that never was alive never can be alive again,” he said. His voice was mercurial—fluted, high, and sardonic along the edges. “A creature such as I never was alive. Even when I was but a small babe.”

“Nagisa?” I asked.

He tossed the comic book away from him with a world-weary sigh. I stared at him. A splatter of blood had congealed on the ground beneath him. Despite what little was here of him, I got the strong impression of some ethereal being—a half-dead Prince, surrounded by a throne of his final belongings.



“Alas, it is I. And you... are Stacey. Where are the others?”

“Hartshome,” I said. “I’m backup.”

He laughed at me. His peals of mockery rang through the air like little bells.

“Girl child. You are no way, shape or form any kind of backup. I think we both know that.”

“Look, you need to heal up.”

“There is no healing. What’s the point? Even were you able to bring me enough of the braying sheep outside, it would be fruitless. What am I but some creature of the night? I have tried so hard... and yet nothing I could do ultimately mattered.”

“He’s given up,” Rhonda said. “I can’t blame him. He’s not half the man he used to be.”

“Poor taste, Rho,” Nagisa said. “Come closer, so I can slap you for your insolence.”

Rhonda just shook her head.

“Why are you here?” I asked.

“Why are any of us here?” Nagisa asked. “I was born in an internment camp. My parents were a Japanese soldier and the Chinese woman he raped. That is why I am here. Cursed from birth. Seed spilled from a crime. No wonder I would grow up and find all of my efforts fruitless.”

“You are a real downer,” Tamara said.

“Perhaps my happiness organ was left behind when I was torn in half today,” he said, voice snitty.

“Look, I know things seems a little grim right now—” I started.

“A little grim?” Nagisa blinked at me. “I’m naught but an arm and a torso. Were I even to regrow myself, the Regional Council would put us on trial and burn us to death when they arrive to rescue us. I have surrounded myself by the things I used as a goalpost for my development. These stories... these fictions all around us. They make our inner worlds so beautiful, and yet perhaps that makes the world around us all the more grotesque. Wouldn’t you agree?”

I didn’t know what to say. Nagisa and I didn’t know each other at all. I had seen him in passing; heard lots about him, of course, but there was little substance to the knowledge I had about him. He was an enigma—and that meant I wasn’t sure where to even begin here. This was going to be a struggle, getting him going again... and I wasn’t sure if I was going to handle it right.

“I brought food,” Methuselah said behind us.

Tamara and I turned. By the look on her face, she was expecting a person, I guess... but instead, there were pretzels. And two huge bucket-sized sodas. My stomach growled.

“Carbs,” I said, my voice dreamy. “Come to me you bucket of corn syrup.”

Tamara and I grabbed our food and then turned again. Tamara stared at Nagisa.

“I can’t eat like this,” Tamara whispered to me. “He’s throwing me off my appetite.”

There was a loop of his intestines lying on the ground, so I couldn’t blame her.

“It’s fine,” I said. “Just meet me at the food court later. This is going to take a fine touch.”

“You really think you’re going to get him motivated?”

“I have to try,” I said.

“This is Daytona Beach all over again,” Tamara said. “Good effing luck.” She bit into her pretzel with a huge chomp and shook her head as she walked out of the shop.

I picked at my pretzel, slurping my soda. Nagisa was quiet, staring at the ceiling, eyes glazed over. If not for the steady rise and fall of his chest, I would have assumed he was dead. Or. Permanently dead. Whatever it meant when a vampire couldn’t regenerate. I had never really asked for the word before...

I got to the end of my soda and continued slurping as the ice melted. The noise echoed in the empty room.

“Can you not,” Nagisa asked.

I slurped again.

“Rhonda, please kill her,” Nagisa said.

Rhonda sucked on her vape, shaking her head at me.

“She left,” I said.

“Can you come tilt my head to the door so I can see if you’re telling the truth?”

“No,” I said. “Which one’s your favorite?”

There was a pause.

“What?”

“Which comic book is your favorite?” I asked. “You came here to die for a reason. Which story’s your favorite?”

“I am a fan of the Man-Spider,” Nagisa said. “He’s quite quippy.”

“He’s my favorite, too,” I said. “Tell me about when you first got into Man-Spider.”

“It was the sixties,” Nagisa said. “I was a teenager. He first came out and Li Stanley had created this amazing creature—a person hiding a secret, who tried to fit in.”

“What was your favorite arc?”

“Too many to count.”

“Your favorite villain?”

“Orpheus the Undead Professor,” Nagisa said. His shrunken face looked rapturous. “His experiments had taught him to rewrite genetic structures. He harvested the genetics from a fruit bat, and thereafter he found himself a creature of the night, with a terrible compulsion for strawberries and other such sweets.”

“I liked the gritty eighties version better,” I said.

“I admit, the strawberry craving was a tad odd. Yet I could not help but see the resemblance. Orpheus was a strong role model for when I was turned.”

“When did that happen?”

“I was sixteen, hence my youthful look.” He waved a taloned, elongated hand over a face that looked like old leather wizened in the sun.

“That was a rough sixteen.”

“It was the sixties. We did not have the same preservatives as you do now-a-days.”

I paused, took another long slurp of my soda.

“Okay. Look. Do you remember the Armageddon arc?”

“Of course. It was a hallmark of Velmar’s Continuity Crisis in the late nineties.”

“Exactly. Lord Tyrannus gains control over the entirety of the Mormagains and their Cradle Kingdom. The Man-Spider and his villains were trapped there through a one way Interdimensional Plothole and wind up getting stranded. Possibly forever. So they do the only thing they can do.”

“They do their best to fight back against Lord Tyrannus and his terrible army.”

“Exactly,” I said. “And what did Orpheus have to do to face the Dragonbelcher when he was laid low by the Big Cat-Apult?”

“...Princess Berryshine,” he gasped. “I’d forgotten entirely. What are you implying?”

“Princess Berryshine sacrificed her lifeblood to give Orpheus fruit juice, enough to power himself up. And even though everything seemed hopeless—like they would never be able to go home—even though Orpheus wanted to give up on everything, he fought. He took that sacrifice. Powered himself up. And he fought and laid low Lord Tyrannus’ frontlines so the other heroes—Man-Spider and all—could win the war. And what happened afterward?”

“They found an extraneous Plot Device in Lord Tyrannus’ fortress and made it home,” Nagisa gasped.

“Exactly,” I said. “They didn’t know how they were going to get out of it. But they did it.”

“You tempt me, seductress. If I had yet genitals, they would be enflamed with my desire at your grasp of the graphic novel and plot mechanics as an art form. And yet... I am only

half of a man.” He sighed. “If only there were some Princess Berryshine nearby, with fruit juice sweet enough to quench my thirst.”

I slurped on my soda again. Nagisa made a face.

“Hey so do you have a knife?” I asked Rhonda.

She grinned, wielding a huge bowie knife from an ankle sleeve. I reminded myself never ever to try and ambush her. I dumped my drink ice in the trashcan and then sat my soda cup on the counter. Wedged the tip of the knife into a soft bit of flesh on my palm.

Rhonda stared at me. Nagisa sniffed the air.

“What are you doing?” Rhonda asked.

“Turn away,” I said.

“You... you mustn’t,” Nagisa stammered.

“It’s the only choice we have,” I said. “But you have to promise me. You’re not going to give up. Don’t let this be in vain.”

“I am not worthy of your sacrifice,” Nagisa said.

“Probably not,” I said and gasped as the knife entered. I groaned, digging it in, and squeezed my palm like an orange. “I see you sniffing around, Rhonda, please give me some privacy.”

“Yeah, yeah,” she said, voice glum. The front doorbell jingled as she left the shop.

“I already tried this with Brother Al, Eddie, and Vic,” I said. “Here you go. Drink your drink.”

I sat the cup, straw tilted, near him, and turned away.

“I... I cannot...”

“Yes, you can,” I said. “You have to.”

“No. I meant. I can’t hold the drink and grab the straw with one hand,” he said. “I’m an invalid. You must hold me to your breast and nurse me, my Berryshine.”

“How about I just angle the straw at your lips.”

He pulled himself to an upright position, his guts splotching as he sat upright. It looked incredibly painful.

“That is an acceptable compromise,” he gasped.

His tongue stuck out, testing the air, and I angled the straw into his lips. He licked the straw. It was like watching a gerbil drink from a water bottle.

“Have you seriously never used a straw?” I asked.

“I do not often drink human drinks.”

“Jesus Christ,” I said. “Move your tongue. NO, out of the way. Alright. Make an ‘O’ sound with your lips. Now breathe in.”

He sucked in air and then began to choke. I patted his chest, and he gasped, hacking, and coughing. His eyes grew red—almost as if he were asphyxiating—and he gasped, then fell still. A coiled loop of his intestines started to beat against the ground like a tail. He sat up, gasping. His whole body was vibrating.

“I’m sorry, Stacey,” he said. “Leave me. This will... not be pleasant to look at.”

“It’s already not pleasant to look at.”

One of his arms exploded into a wash of tendons and muscles, slapping against a wall right next to my face.

“Okay, I’m out,” I said.

“Leave the drink,” he said. “I need more.”

I paused on the threshold to the door.

“How long is this going to take? Just ballpark, I mean.”

“I’m not sure,” he said. “I feel like I’m going to explode, possibly. I’ve never had to regenerate this much of myself before. Come check on me in twenty minutes.”

“Got it,” I said.

There was another splatter of viscera against the door behind me as I closed the door to the shop. Rhonda was out here, vaping. She tried not to look at my dripping fist. I clutched it a little tighter.

“Does that do anything for you?” I asked.

“What?” Rhonda asked. A huge cloud of vape juice exploded from her nose.

“Check in on your boy,” I said. “He’s growing his body back.”

“Really? Already?”

“I guess?” I asked.

Nagisa was alternating between screaming and slurping as I walked back to the food court.



## CHAPTER 8



I found Tamara at the food court, talking with another couple of humans.

“Hey,” she said, nodding at me. “Any progress?”

“Maybe,” I said. “He’s starting to regrow himself.”

“Why are you clutching your hand like that?” Tamara paused. Then I could see her face harden. “Didn’t I tell you not to do that?”

“Tamara, listen, we didn’t have any choice—”

The couple Tamara had been talking to was staring at us. I caught their eyes. They seemed to be a little concerned.

“Everything okay?” the wife asked.

“Yeah,” I said. I beamed a quick smile at them. “Should have some reinforcements coming soon.”

I pulled Tamara over to an alcove next to an abandoned pizza restaurant. My stomach growled again. I guess giving blood twice on top of cross-city cardio had upped my appetite.

“Look, Tamara, I had to do this,” I said. “I’m dating vampires. I mean. This was going to happen at some point. They need to eat, they need to thrive. Sometimes this stuff happens.”

“I’m not worried about that,” Tamara said. “I don’t care about what vampires eat. I do care about you, my best friend. And I care about the fact that you are dangling what has to be their drug of choice in front of them to get them going again.”

I tilted my head, confused.

“What?” I asked.

“You’re not the only one who knows vampires,” she hissed. “Stacey, I know undead people. I’ve known them. You’re God, girl. You’re too much.”

“What is it that’s crawled up your ass?”

“You are an addict’s choice of drug,” Tamara said. “I’ve worked in the medical field for a long, long time. I have seen how addicts act. They all act like you’re a walking brick of cocaine whenever you enter a room. You’re... I don’t know. Their favorite blood type or something. Didn’t you say they were religious?”

“They do have a code,” I said.

“And what does the code say?”

“It’s about ethical hunting,” I said. “No women or children. Only the sick, or the feeble, or those who are a threat to the ecosystem.”

“You are like a blonde that walks into a Sex Addicts anonymous meeting in a tube top and giggles at everyone’s jokes,” Tamara said.

I felt something in my heart snag.

“Is that really how you feel about me?”

“Sometimes,” Tamara said. “You can’t just offer your blood to every vampire in the world. Is that what we came out

here to do? So you could ensnare the last important vampire in the city with your magical lifeblood?" She did air quotes with the last two words, and they were savage looking. Savage enough to hurt.

"Tamara, that's really unfair," I said. "And really mean. How did you even hear about the others?"

"I didn't have to. You just told me. Because why wouldn't you give your blood up to vampires? You seem to let every vamp you see in your pants."

Her voice curled out, striking my heart like a thrown dagger, and we both realized what had been said out loud. I could see Tamara's face move from shocked, to 'oh shit,' to belligerent. As if she were daring me to say something back.

"Tamara," I said. My voice was quivering. "You'd better stop now. I want an apology. You and I are really good friends, but right now I don't like you."

"Stacey, you're just too much sometimes," she said.

"I'm trying to save the city!" I said. "I'm trying to save these people!"

"You're just trying to get over your shitty childhood by letting everyone else prop up your ego," she said. "I'm so sick of you, Stacey. You just waltz in to the city and you get everything you want."

"What did I do to make you mad?" I asked.

"EVERYTHING," she snapped. "You dismissed me back there. Like I couldn't motivate anyone, like I was some bit player. I'm a nurse. I could have looked at his wounds. You sent me away like a little kid."

“I have blood that helps vampires supercharge,” I said.  
“Besides, you yourself said, you couldn’t eat in there.”

“Yeah, well, sometimes maybe I get mad because I feel like you don’t need me anymore.”

I blinked.

“What?”

“You heard me, don’t act like that. I need you to need me, Stacey. Okay? We’re friends, but you’ve always been the hot mess. You’re still a hot mess.”

“Tamara, come on.”

“Say it. Say you’re always a hot mess.”

“I mean, I am. You’re always there to help me when I get in too deep. My God, that’s why you’re my best friend. You watch the stupid shit I do and let me do it and then patch me up afterward. That’s... that’s never going to change, Tamara. I couldn’t have made it out here without you.”

“Yeah and you owe me for the detail work on the cruiser.”

“Tamara, it’s just bad timing right now. Especially for an argument.”

She cursed to herself.

“I know that, damnit. Let me see your hand.”

I extended it out to her. She hissed at the wound size.

“There’s another one from this morning,” I said. I showed her my other hand.

“You should have shown this to me earlier.”

“There was a lot going on,” I said.

“Yeah, well. You have to take care of you, you idiot. Come on. Let’s get this patched up and disinfected. You know, there’s about a thousand smarter ways to draw blood. I can teach you how to set up an IV...”

But there was a voice down from the bottom floor. Someone was hallooing up to us. Tamara and I stared at each other and then leaned over the edge.

There, in the crowd of dead people, was someone holding what looked like a cello case.

It was Joey. Alive—well—at least, as alive as he had been before.

RHONDA AND METHUSELAH lowered a tow rope. Some of the other mindless undead began to try and slap at the rope, but Joey yelled at them and slapped their hands until they let go.

“Now pull!” Joey said once he got the rope attached to his belt.

“That’s not how this is going to work,” Rhonda said.

Joey sighed and started to climb.

“OH, I’m so glad you guys are safe,” Joey said.

“I’m glad you’re safe,” Tamara said.

They hugged.

“You have entrails on your back,” Tamara said, knocking them off. Her voice only quivered a little as our eyes met. She looked like she was trying not to panic.

“They’re not mine. Yeah, it’s kind of a long story,” he said. “Apparently being Living Impaired gives you a certain immunity to deadies. They took one sniff of me after I got all my screaming out, and after a few slaps and protestations they sort of shrugged and wandered away.”

“Maybe we should have stayed a little longer to see what happened,” Tamara said.

“No, it’s okay. I understand why you’d just leave me down there,” he said. He seemed earnest as he said this, instead of shitty. For some reason, it made me like him and feel sorry for him at the same time. “Anyway. I brought the weapons. Which is the good news.”

“What’s the bad news?” I asked.

“There’s something huge headed this way,” he said.

“Huge?” I asked.

“Could be the Big Guy that got Nagi,” Methuselah said.

“What Big Guy?” I was remembering the huge shadows on the magical display board that Vic had summoned earlier—remembered seeing a giant hand in an alleyway gripping the top of a building.

“Huge thing. Hungry, mean, and a little more vicious than your average deadie,” Methuselah said. “Nagi tried to take it man to man. He would have had it—he’s quicker—but it snatched him up and impaled him through the stomach on a nearby steeple. We barely saved his top half before we holed up here. Then the Civic Wyrd Council came to intercept it. No amount of magic seemed to be able to penetrate whatever weird aura it was protruding. It ate half of ‘em. The other half scattered.”

“Did you see a plump witch anywhere?” I asked.

Methuselah was saved from replying by the door to the toy store, flying across the walkway, and slamming into the banister. It tipped, falling into the crowd of undead below. A man walked forth, the air rippling around him.

“Fucking dramatics,” Rhonda said. “He’s back in full form. Christ.”

“To arms,” Nagisa cried, extending a hand.

Everyone stared at him. His newly formed lower half had a decided lack of clothing.

“I said, Two Arms,” he snapped. “Leftie and Rightie. Get your asses over here!”

“Busy requisitioning supplies,” Rhonda called, puffing on her vape. “Em, can you take this? Take Stacey with you, she seems to be good at pointing him in a direction.”

The humans huddled in the food court; all seemed unsure how to take this. One person was shielding their child’s eyes. On the scale of things, seeing some vampire wang was small potatoes compared to everything else the kid had probably seen... but on the other hand, nothing about this situation was natural.

“Come on, Stace,” Methuselah said. “Our Lordship requires attending.”

“Is he always like this?”

“Pretty much,” Methuselah said. “He has his down days. I’m not sure which is worse—a pompous windbag or a shriveled little pile of vampire with self-esteem issues, to be honest.”

“Is it... a bloodline thing?”

“I’m pretty sure it’s just a Nagi thing,” he said. He raised his voice as we drew closer. “Come on, Sir. Let’s get you some

clothes.”

“No,” Nagi said. He turned to face us, his face serious. There was something to the way he’d filled out now—his skin was practically golden-hued, his soft eyes so dark blue they were almost purple. He turned, pointing with one elegant arm behind us. His third arm flopped against his leg, nearly down to his knee.

I’m not going to lie; I was a little impressed—more than a little impressed.

“What’s the battle situation?” Nagi asked, in all his brazen naked glory.

“You need clothes, Sir,” Methuselah said.

“Clothing is for mortals,” Nagi said.

“I think you’re just a little hopped up on the gogo juice,” I said. “Seriously, let’s get you dressed.”

“Tell me what our battle situation is,” Nagi snapped.

“Second floor of the Penn Square Mall, sir. We’re safe up here with some mortal survivors. Reports from some recent arrivals indicate the Big Guy is heading back this way.”

“My old foe,” Nagi said. His face was lost in thought as if calculating odds. “You, woman. Escort me to the Lingerie store. I need something form-fitting, supportive, and slimming. Something in silk, perhaps. Something that will allow ease of access and movement, yet also something fitting for my regal frame.”

“Whatever it takes to wrap all this up,” I said, motioning with my hands.

“You. Prepare for battle. I will face the Bruiser. This time, I will prevail. You, and any other non-mortals will gather



around and disperse weapons—anything you can use. Keep the humans in your circle. No doubt when the Bruiser comes again, he'll tear down any reinforcements we have and allow his lesser forces access to our safe haven. We must defend this position at all costs.”

Methuselah closed his eyes, seemingly comforted again.

“You might be insufferable, but I'm sure glad to have you back, Sir.”

“Yes. It is a pleasure to be back.”

Nagisa grabbed me by the hand, and we walked away from Methuselah, who was shouting orders to everyone else.

“Are they within hearing distance?” Nagi asked.

“Not anymore,” I said.

His shoulders sagged.

“Thank God,” he said. “That's such a hard bit to pull off. I feel like I'm gonna crap myself and without underwear I'm not sure I can duck walk without looking like an idiot. I thought I saw a bathroom at the Penny's at the far end of this wing. Can you just, walk behind me? I feel really exposed.”

“Seriously?” I asked.

“What? That obnoxious windbag bit? You really thought that was me being me?”

“Who the fuck are you?” I asked.

“I'm an Actor,” Nagi said. “The guys hear my battle bit and know I'm being serious at least.”

“They all seem to think you're really dramatic and obnoxious.”

He looked into my eyes.

“All life is drama, sweetie, and I’d rather be obnoxious and dramatic than be seen as weak,” he said. “Let’s hurry. I don’t need any extra weight during this next battle. That was my problem last time.”

He started running, and I tried to keep up.

## CHAPTER 9



A toilet flushed, and Nagi walked out, hands dripping wet. He dried them off on a cashmere sweater. He held a sleeve up with his fingernailed hands.

“Look at this fabric,” he said. “By the way. You could market that stuff like an undead colonic.”

“I don’t know how or why, but that feels really disrespectful,” I said.

“It wasn’t meant to be. I feel like a brand new person, to be honest. Like I flushed all the toxins out of my system. Like I drank jet fuel or something. I could punch a brick across the city if I tried. Maybe.”

“What’s your plan here?” I asked.

He looked up from the clothes and turned to face me. The rest of him flopped, again, against his leg. I could not help but stare.

“I’m going to kill the Bruiser,” he said. “And we’re going to do our best to protect the survivors here. That thing’s going to pay for what it did to the witches. And to me. I don’t take bowel penetration without consent very gracefully. The last man that did that to me wound up with his head up his own ass. Literally.”

“Do I want to know?”

“It is a pretty great story, but I have to set it up first, and we probably don’t have the time for that,” he said. He nodded at me and then down at his dangling member. “You like?”

“I’m just impressed,” I said. “I mean. There’s just so much of it. How can you not look at it?”

“I know, right. I was blessed.”

“I don’t know why but the cockiness seems to work for you,” I said. “You’re like a cartoon character. I hate that it works. On any other guy I would be repelled, instantly.”

“Yeah, I know, right.” He sauntered up to me, placing a hand on a rack behind me. I could feel the heat of his body against my own. “You want to fuck? We could both die in a bit.”

I pushed him away.

“Come on,” I said. “You were just talking about bowel penetration. Aren’t you a little. You know.” I waved my hand. “Dramatic?”

“Honey, gender’s a Living construct, and the Living are all hands at it,” he said. “I can do things to you that’ll leave you a gasping pile of boneless flesh.”

“Literally or metaphorically?”

“Depends on what you’re into.” He smirked at me.

“You’re kind of a freak,” I said, grinning.

“All nerds are,” he said. “You want an express ride on the weird train?”

“I don’t think we have time for some nasty Cenobite sex,” I said. “But I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t intrigued. Can I

pencil you in on my dance card? When all this is over... I'll have to talk to Eddie and Vic about it."

"There's a chance we won't survive," he said. "Do you really want to take that chance? You could miss out on all of this."

I closed my eyes. I was lying if I said he was any good at this. I would be lying if I said his attempts at seduction weren't creepy, bizarre, and probably fueled by whatever my blood had done to him. I would be lying if I said I found him anything but attractive. Maybe it was adrenaline—maybe it was the weird situation, maybe it was his braggadocio, or maybe it was that I was hard-wired to want to fool around with weirdoes. My dating history was filled with guys way worse than him. But my libido had suddenly spiked, and with it, my desire to completely and utterly become enmeshed with his repellant nature.

I leaned forward to kiss him. He moved into it.

"What's your biggest fantasy?" he asked in my ear.

I don't know why I said it. It just popped out of my mouth.

"I've always wondered what tentacle sex would be like," I said.

"Watch this," he said.

I found myself repulsed, turned on, and horrified as he began to change.

"Wait a minute," I said. "Hold on."

"You already said it. No backsies."

He began to grow... and grow... and grow... and soon enough, there was less Nagi than there was some weird

muscular octopus-Nagi. All of the tentacle ends looked like... like...

He wagged two of them in front of me. They wavered in the air like snakes.

“Oh yeah,” he said, bouncing back and forth. “One, or two? One, or two?”

“Alright,” I said. “I’m done. I’m sorry. This went from a ‘Woah’ to a ‘No’ real fast.”

His tentacles withdrew, shriveling, and he shrank back to his real self, his face dejected.

“Did I gross you out?” he asked.

“No, I think I grossed myself out,” I said.

“Man,” he said. “I’ve always wanted to try that, too.”

I patted his shoulder.

“Look, when this is over—if—and this is a big if—I survive, and change my mind, and we’re not surrounded by dead people on every side. And I can get my boyfriends to agree to it. We can have whatever weird shapeshifter sex you want to have. I’m intrigued, I’m not going to lie.”

“Great,” he said in a quiet voice. “Okay. Can you. Leave. I need to find some clothes and this is awkward now.”

“I’m going to go stand over there and look in the corner,” I said.

“Thank you,” he said, his voice dejected.

“If it helps,” I said. “I was right there. Just about to take you up on it.”

“I’m not sure it does,” he said. “What do you think about the cashmere? It’s calling to me.”

“Do they have it in purple? Purple’s pretty regal.”

“I guess it won’t matter much when I shred it,” he said.

“What do you mean?” I called out.

“I’m going to have to get as big as the Bruiser to take it out,” he said.

“Seriously?”

“We’re about to Kaiju through this mall,” he said. “You better saddle up.”

10.

NAGISA HAD DRESSED in that cashmere sweater from earlier. It was maroon. Somehow, it just worked, even with a pair of mustard-colored corduroys. It was revolting—like looking at a ketchup and mustard themed color scheme. And yet, the bastard pulled it off.

“Troops! Are you in position?” he thundered.

There were cries of assent.

“This battle will be hard. It will be difficult. It will be a pain in the ass. These deadies are relentless. They will eat whatever they can get ahold of. That means you, your loved ones, and your children. If you do not stay inside our circle of protection, you will get eaten and messily devoured. Your entrails will be pulled from your still-pulsating sphincters. Your limbs will be pulled from their dripping sockets. Your skulls cracked, the delicious—”

Methuselah grabbed him and whispered in his ear.

“Perhaps a bit much, sir.”

“Sorry,” Nagisa said. “Point is. This will be dangerous. If you do not listen to us, you may lose your life. If the Food Court falls, you will escape to the upper levels of the Penny’s and await reinforcements.”

“What reinforcements?” a man asked. “Who’s coming to rescue us?”

“Possibly no one,” Nagisa said.

The crowd booed. Someone threw a soda. It splashed all over Nagi’s face. He blinked, shocked, wiping the dripping liquid from his air and gasping like a fish.

“This is cashmere,” was all he said.

“I can still see the price tag!” someone else snapped.

“Just be careful out there,” Nagi said. “Stick together, no matter what!”

“Who is this fruit loop?” someone in the crowd asked.

Joey stepped forward, uzi over one arm, and let off a barrage of gunfire into the roof. Humans screamed in the crowd.

“Listen up,” Joey hollered. “This man is insane, but he’s our only chance at making it out of here in-tact. You would do well to listen to him.”

The crowd looked angry.

“I thought our worst enemy would be the dead people, not the living,” Tamara said. “They do not look happy. Some of them are saying they’re going to take weapons and run.”

“Morons,” I said.



“You can’t blame them,” Tamara said. “This is a weird situation, and nothing feels safe.”

“I guess you’re right,” I said. “I still don’t like this.”

“Let’s just hope the Bruiser gets here before they bolt,” Tamara said. “I’d rather things go crazy with everyone here than everyone get scattered.”

There was an air of concern over everyone as we waited for our fate.

NAGI WAS CHEWING HIS NAILS.

“He should be here by now,” he said. “Ugh. Look at my cuticles.”

“Nagi,” I said. “What’s your plan?”

“The Grand Dragon Cross,” he said. “It’s my only option.”

“What is the Great Dragon Course?”

“Grand Dragon *Cross*,” he said. “It’s. You ever watch Super Sentai?”

“Like Ultima-Man?”

“Exactly,” he said.

“That’s kind of it,” he said. “Only I turn into a dragon. One of the Eastern ones—the Shen Long type, you know. I have one chance to surprise him with it. Hopefully my strength will hold out enough to reach in and grab his nervous system.”

“Nervous system?”

“Most deadies have a central ganglion,” he said. “It’s a center control system. Guys his size, though... if it’s normal

sized, it's like pulling a grape out of a cow's guts through its ass. Messy, painful, and it might take a bit of sorting."

"That seems like a really precise analogy."

"I've done this a few times. More than a few."

"What was that you said about your strength?"

"Might not hold out. I lost a lot of energy rebuilding my body. I could use a top-up."

"I'm not a gas station," I said.

And that was when the windows exploded around us.

"DUCK!" someone screamed.

An explosion of quack noises against the ground. A blonde woman was screaming as something flapped in her face. The wall behind them crumbled, huge fingers meatily fumbling as bricks fell around it. In the distance, a putrid-looking massive face, teeth glistening with saliva.

The floor shook. The giant reached out and scooped up a group of people in its massive hands. A flash—and then gunfire from below.

"There's men in suits on the ground floor," Tamara said. "They look like mobsters!"

"Vic's men!" Nagisa said. "Thank the Goddess!"

I turned back around. There was a blur of motion—a splatter of dark ichor from the giant's fingers, and the people in its grasp fell, screaming. A vampire on the ground caught them. Where the giant's fingers fell, the individual goop began

to gather together, forming itself into protoplasmic tentacles that reached out and snagged at people.

“Focus on getting the humans away from that hole in the wall,” Nagisa said to us. “And stand clear. Two Arms! Grand Dragon Cross!”

He ran forward, almost comically slow. Rhonda and Methuselah went parallel to him. When Nagi reached a certain point where they would meet, he jumped—and some kind of fleshy something snapped forward and scooped each of them up. I watched, unblinking, as their flesh combined—stretching taut over bones that seemed carved from ivory, gruesome dripping organs rearranging themselves.

“Come on,” Tamara said. “You heard the man!”

We ran forward towards the scattering humans even as something vast rolled over us in the air. Nagi and his—well, subordinates—had become some massive scaled beast that launched itself and tore the air as it hit the giant. The floor shook as they collided.

“This way,” Tamara screamed. “They’re clearing the undead out below.”

We moved people away—reaching in and grabbing people’s outstretched hands from the flesh remains of the giant that had been severed, pulling them bodily away from the slime—and ran back towards a blocked off-escalator. Vic was standing at the bottom, a cadre of men with machine guns behind him.

“Stacey!” he screamed.

I waved people down, looking over my shoulder. The giant roared in the distance. I turned and watched as the Nagisa-dragon sank its teeth into the monster’s neck. Dragon talons

were slamming it in the face repeatedly, trying to break its defenses.

“Nagi might need your help up here,” I screamed, back down at the floor.

“What the hell are you doing up there? I mean—why are you here?”

“It’s a long story,” I yelled.

“She thought she’d be a hero,” Tamara screamed.

“Damn it, Stacey!” Vic snarled. He gestured at one of the vampires near him, and then practically leaped up to the second floor, grasping at the edge of the escalator. “You don’t make things easy on yourself, do you?”

“Is this the time?” I asked.

He pulled himself up, gasping, and then flopped over the railing.

“I don’t know why I try using my vampire strength,” he muttered. “I’m just as clumsy as I used to be. I figured out what’s going on. I’ve seen Brutes like that before.”

He got to his feet and gestured at the thing Nagi was locked around.

“Well? Where?”

“There’s only one line of Necromancy that can give birth to things like that,” Vic said. “My old mentor knew it. William Corcoran.”

I blinked.

“What? That guy we read about in the note? At Tremblay Manor? I thought he died.”

“I don’t have time to explain,” Vic said. “Long story short—we fucked up. Get yourself hidden. This is going to get a whole lot worse before it gets better.”

Vic cut himself, splashing blood in a wide circle around him. He muttered, put his hands together, and then fell to his knees. A huge phantasm crawled up from the ground, moaning, and soared off. It picked up pieces of scaffolding with it as it went.

“Go!” he screamed.

Tamara and I got swept up in the crowd of running people. Down the escalator, we went out and through the crowd of vampires in mobster outfits, out into a packed school bus that smelled of spaghetti sauce. I stared out the window. Debris fell all around us. A little kid was crying somewhere else on the bus.

“I can’t just stay here,” I said.

“Girl—you can’t do anything,” Tamara said.

I watched them struggle. From the ground, this looked terrifying. I watched the giant rip Nagi off his face and slam him through an apartment building. The axels on the bus groaned and rocked. The phantasm swung with the scaffolding, trying to pierce deep into the giant’s hide—and then Nagi recoiled again, leaping up and down again, tearing putrid flesh.

Something glittered in the night sky, and Nagi sank in deep, gnashing with his serpentine fangs. Something dangling protruded from the wound, and Nagi pulled, exposing what looked like nerves, but there was a cracking sound—the giant reached up with a third hand and seized on Nagi’s neck and arms, and then pulled with a roar.

There was a flash—a gout of flame—and then the Grand Dragon Cross was gone, and three tattered bodies fell from the air like stones. Then the phantasm struck deep—the scaffolding piercing the ganglion like a rapier, and with a great shuddering gasp, the giant fell, dissolving into black slime as it fell against the pavement.

“Drive!” Tamara screamed.

The vampire at the wheel jerked his head up, turning the engine over. But it was too late. The wash of putrescence hit us and carried us along, a tidal wave of gore, and the whole bus teetered. The kid screamed louder—and I was screaming.

Wheels screeched over chunks, and we made our way to pavement. The bus driver was speeding. And I didn’t blame him.

Out there, in that toxic pool of slime, a brave vampire was now floating, possibly lifeless. My heart broke in two as I stared out the window.

“Nagisa,” I said.

I was crying. I hadn’t known him long, but he was a hero in my book.

11.

WE ARRIVED AT HARTSHOME. Vic’s men came sometime after. They escorted Nagi’s body in reverential silence, long after the humans were escorted off the bus.

Brother Al made a holy symbol over his corpse and then nodded his head.

“Stacey,” he said. “Thank you for your help.”

“It wasn’t enough,” I said. “Not enough by far.”

“You did good,” Brother Al said.

“Have you seen Eddie?”

“No,” Brother Al said, voice terse. “His men said one of the giants got him. Tore him straight in two. Right down the middle.”

I fell to my knees, clutching my head. My heart felt like whatever was left was being squeezed. I couldn’t breathe. I gasped. Inhaled. Exhaled a long wail.

Tamara held my shoulder as I lost it and hugged me as I sobbed.

I WAS STARING at the Crucifix over the entrance. Cursing God. Telling Him in various ways, means, and fashions that I would like for Him to do to himself.

The front doors to the Cathedral opened. Vic staggered in. He looked fried—his hair was a mess, and he was much the worse for wear. He grabbed me by the arm, grip like steel.

“Leave me alone,” I said.

“No,” he said. “Not yet. You and I aren’t done.”

I slapped at him, but he ignored me as I struggled, pulling me along like I was made of straw, dragging me down and away, deep into the depths of the Cathedral. We took basement stairs I’d never seen, heading down and down and down.

“Nagi’s dead. Eddie’s dead,” I said. “I can’t. I just can’t go on. They’re gone for good, aren’t they?”

“You want blunt and honest, or kind and misleading?”

“I don’t care at this point,” I said.

“Good. You and I made a mistake we can’t remember. This—all of this—is our fault. I didn’t have time to talk to you about it earlier, but there’s a chance we can nip this thing in the bud. If we stop Corcoran, we can stop all of this.”

I stopped, pulled away from him. He let me go and continued down the steps.

“What do you mean we did this?” I called after him.

“Not us. Another us. Come on, we don’t have time.”

I hurried down after him. He finally hit a door at a landing. Still, more stairs went down into the depths. I stared down them as he fumbled with some keys.

“This is going to be a mess,” he said. “You’re not going to understand half of it, but you just need to keep up a little. You and I. We created a paradox. I noticed it for a while. Managed to grab it—located it years ago when I first made it here. Paradoxes cause all sorts of havoc in the ether, so we make it a point to sort of... lock them up. Magicians, I mean.”

“What are you talking about, Vic? Have you lost it?”

“Stacey, for once I just need you to shut up and listen to what I have to say,” he snapped. “Look. Brace yourself. It’s not pretty.”

He opened the door. I stared. There was a glittering spike sitting inside an open safe. It glowed like a beacon.

“Don’t touch it,” Vic said. “Not yet. This is our ticket to fixing things. Fixing everything.”

“What is this?”



“It’s two things. A withered land wight named Richard Tremblay. And a Paradox. And we’re going to harness it to go back in time and try to sort most of this out.”

“What are you saying?”

“We’ve already changed the past once,” Vic said. “That spike is the Routshammer. It’s a cursed item that bestows the soul of its wielder to become nailed in perpetuity to where it’s nailed to. Because another you pulled the Routshammer out of this safe in the past, you changed the past. What should have happened was that Corcoran passed the Routshammer to Tremblay and then died for good. What actually happened was you created two Paradoxes. Tremblay himself, which you’ll note is the safe sitting before you. And Corcoran himself, who didn’t die when he passed the Routshammer to Tremblay. You pulled the Routshammer, which circumvented the curse, and made Tremblay essentially cease to exist and returned the curse to Corcoran. But since we were there to do the things already, the actions stay stuck. Does that make sense? We were there, and we did the thing, and then the thing is done because it’s been changed. But the old timeline from before is still there.”

“You’re losing me, Vic.”

“I know!” he snapped. “Jesus! Twenty five, twenty six times we’ve been through this already, and you can’t keep up in any of them. Paradoxes happen when magical spells fail in one reality. Serious curse—divinity—demonic stuff. You screw with time and it resonates with the old timeline, where it happened before. The corpse of the thing creates a Paradox, through which the power of the old timeline passes through like a trickle. It’s just enough to go back and cover our asses.”

“You said you’ve done this before,” I said.

“Yes,” Vic said. “So I know from experience what will and won’t work about the process. So trust me. Turn the rest of your brain off. Our only hope is to go through and fix everything.”

“So we’re going to go stop ourselves?”

“Jesus Christ, no,” Vic said. “We’d be stuck in the loop forever. Then there’d be no way to go back. No. We can’t stop any of this from happening at all. It’s just going to create even more Paradoxes which will cause more weird shit to happen.”

“Then what are we doing?” I asked.

“We’re going to go be our own backup,” Vic said. “If we go back to the beginning of today—we can sneak around and make sure each of us survives. And then we find and corner Corcoran. And deal with him. For good this time.”

“Saving people’s lives doesn’t create Paradoxes?”

“You ever get Déjà vu?” he asked. “Those are mini paradoxes you go through every day. That’ll sort itself out. We just have to go back, not be seen, and then finish the job the rest of us haven’t done.”

“So where is Corcoran?” I asked.

“You’re gonna laugh so hard when you realize,” he said. “Okay. Grab my hand with your right hand, and pull the spike with your left. Ready? On three...”

One...

Two...

I grabbed the spike with my left hand and felt my soul split in two.

FIN

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