



**A DEAD MAN  
IS THE WORST ENEMY  
TA MOORE**

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A Dead Man is the Worst Enemy is a prequel novella for *Dead Man Stalking*, the first book in the Blood and Bones series.

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To the Five, always, and my readers who put up with how odd I am in person!

## Chapter One

It wasn't the first time that the statue of Tepes Stands Defiant at the College of Providence been vandalised. The mortal residents of the town resented the hark back to the bloody old days when the only law was the fanged whim of the Blood Empire. and the saner undead ones preferred not to think about the old monster over the sea. Just in case he heard them and finally stirred himself to discipline them for touting democracy.

Luke didn't think any of the usual suspects was responsible for the current desecration.

He stood at the scabbed boundary of the blood puddle and shaded his eyes with one hand as he looked up into the sun at the carrion strung from the statue. The dead boy hung by his wrists from a rope lashed around Tepes upraised, clawed hand. He'd been opened up from clavicle to hipbone and his guts dangled below him like confetti. The third murder in the last month, although the previous two hadn't been so...attention grabbing.

It didn't reach the ground. The small intestine was foot long, unspooled, but the statue clocked in 25. It had been supposed to be 28, but the base piece of dismembered bodies trampled beneath Tepes spurred boots had been removed after the Accord was signed between the quick and the dead. It had been seen as a compromise at the time.

That was a long way to climb with a corpse for ballast. At least—Luke dropped his hand—it was for anything that breathed.

“Vamp attack, right?” the campus security guard--Officer Mark Clarke, he'd introduced himself as--asked with ghoulish eagerness over Luke's shoulder. “Not had one around here for twenty years—local bloodsuckers stick to the bank—but we did a

course. Had a profiler from VINE down to tell us what to look for, in case any of them forgot their place.”

It was the accent. Luke sounded Californian. He wasn't—he'd been born west of *here*, and east of there—but he'd spent enough time there to pick up the cadence. It made assholes think he wanted to hear their wetmouth bigotry.

Vampires—shit, *Anakim*, Luke reminded himself irritably—didn't exactly put him at ease, but he wanted to listen to beating heart propaganda he would have never left home.

That didn't mean he wouldn't use it if it was useful. He dropped his hand and turned around. His face fell into the sly, conspiratorial expression that Clarke was after, nothing overt just the approval of fellowship.

“Bet you make sure they don't,” he said.

Clarke chuckled. He was a thin man run to fat, recently from the way he carried it and the pinch of his uniform around his neck and thighs. His ginger hair was cropped down close to his scalp, thin enough to show the freckles that dappled the pale skin, and a gold chain tucked something under his collar.

Not a cross. Back in California, sure. It was more of a statement there not to wear one. Around here only the hardcore Pentecoastal sects in drymouth towns would go that far. Clarke was a garden variety bigot--he had nothing *against* vampires, just made loud jokes about garlic and fence stakes. He probably had an ichthys or some other secondary Christian symbol, something to provide comfort and deniability in one.

“I do my best,” he said. “Used to be easier to chase ‘em off campus, but bleeding hearts don't get it. I've got nothing against vampires, but this place has got to be like a meat market to them right? Like putting a whiskey in front of an alkie, you can't be surprised when he drinks it.”

“What about when he doesn't?” Luke said as he turned back

to the dead boy. It was Charleston in mid-summer, and the meat had started to turn. The sickly sweet smell of it hung in the air.

“What was the name of that VINE agent you worked with?”

Clarke stumbled over the agent. It wasn't a lie, he'd just not kept up. “Eh, I don't know. Wylie? West? I can check the files if you want. Why?”

The cop on duty at the barricade pulled it back and waved a black Viper through, followed by the coroner's van. The black car pulled up the quad and stopped. Kit got out first, model-pretty except for the scars, and then he opened the back door for his passenger in one of the oddly antique courtesies that betrayed a vampire's age.

*Anakim*, Luke reminded himself again.

Madoc got out the back, dark curls loose around his face and his body lean in black leather. The dead didn't sweat. He grimaced as the sun hit him and reached into his jacket for a pair of smoked glass shades. Kit followed suit, and then headed across the grass.

Behind the coroner and his assistant scrambled out of the van and grabbed what they needed from the back.

“That's the fucking Biters,” Clarke muttered under his breath. He took a step back and reached to fidget with the chain around his neck. “What the hell are they doing here?”

Biters. VINE's elite tactical response team. The best of the best. Most of them were vampires, hand-picked by the legendary Blood Cardinal Madoc himself. Not that any of them would call him that now. No one got to be the best by being that stupid.

“You've had three murdered students, why wouldn't we be here,” Luke said. *Most* of them were vampires, and then there was him. “And for your information, Officer Clarke, the one thing even a rogue values about humanity is our blood. A vampire crime scene can be horrific, but they don't tend to be messy. Your VINE agent should have taught you that.”



## Chapter Two

The local medical examiner was a few years past scaling statues to cut down corpses. He directed from the base, bloody white booties over his old sneakers, as one assistant hung off Tepes arm like a monkey and the other balanced on a ladder below.

“Did the local cops tell you anything useful, Bennett?” Madoc asked as he watched the show from behind his dark glasses.

“If they knew anything useful, they wouldn’t have called us,” Kit said irritably. He curled his lip at Luke to flash a fully extended incisor. “So I still don’t see what good our token breather is.”

Madoc tilted his head slightly. “I could have sworn I said ‘Luke’,” he said dryly. “Have I finally fallen into senescence, Kit?”

If Kit could have flushed at the reprimand, he would have. Instead he put his fangs away and tilted his head in a mute apology to Madoc.

Luke wished he had something good to report, just to rub the piebald vampire’s nose in it. After six months most of the other Biters had learned to work with the new human at Madoc’s back, but Kit still saw him as deadweight waiting to be dead. Unfortunately...

“If they knew something, they didn’t know they knew it,” he said. “I had their files sent through when we were called in, before our latest victim, and I’ll go through them again while the body’s being autopsied.”

“Finally, something useful for you to do,” Kit said. “You do that, I’ll just go catch the bad guy. The amount of blood he shed here, I can follow him back to his doorstep. Madoc?”

There was a pause before Madoc nodded his go-ahead, but he still did it. Most vampires--*Anakim*--had a good sense of smell, but

Kit followed a blood trail like a shark. Even in the daylight.

He bumped past Luke, shoulders jarred together, and loped off over the green. Luke watched him go, and managed not to flinch as Madoc put a hand on his shoulder. His hand was warm, almost mortal temperature, so he'd fed recently.

Not from the blood bank, although VINE maintained a contract with all of them. Madoc only drank from his personal supply. Luke tried to resist the temptation to imagine who it had been. He'd seen Madoc's boyfriends when they met him outside the VINE building, pretty young men with paint-stained nails or poetry readings. It would be easy to paint a mental picture of what his latest conquest looked like, and he could see if he was right about them later.

Except why would he want to?

Luke ignored any of the answers his too facile mind wanted to come up with in answer to that.

"Don't let Kit get in your head," Madoc said easily. "He'd just rather you stayed out of the field."

That made Luke snort. He'd dealt with more sophisticated attempts to undermine or manipulate him over breakfast as a teenager. If he could deal with that, from the people who'd installed his lever points, then Kit's jibes weren't going to give him a crisis of confidence.

"I didn't join the Biters to do paperwork," he said. "I'm an agent, not your secretary."

Madoc raised a dark, heavy eyebrow and gave him a quick once-over, head to feet.

"Prove it," he said. A tilt of his head indicated the body. "What's your read on this, Agent Bennett? Gut check."

Luke already had his answer. He turned on his heels to scan the scene anyhow, just to make sure he hadn't missed anything and to debate whether he wanted to go out on this limb. The assistant

hung off Tepes bronze arm cut through the rope as Luke glanced toward the statue. He gritted his jaw as he lowered the boy down to the men below in careful, steady increments.

“College thinks it’s a rogue attack,” he said. “But a rogue wouldn’t have had the self-control to *not* feed once the blood started to flow. Look at the puddle on the ground, it’s perfectly round. No signs that it was disturbed by anyone.”

“Fresh, even I’d want a mouthful,” Madoc agreed. “So it’s not a vampire kill? Hunters?”

The reminder of what Madoc was—which was also *who* Madoc was—would usually have given Luke pause. With most of his attention absorbed in the puzzle, he hardly registered it.

VINE would like it to be Hunters. It made things easier. The law-abiding citizens were already meant to be against them, and the agitators would assume whoever died had deserved it.

But.

“No,” Luke said. “Not any of the factions we’ve had an eye on anyone. Hunters kill to make a point. They don’t like vampires, they don’t like vampire lovers, they hate informers. When they have to kill a human it’s either it’s either clean, or we don’t find the body. They survive because people support them. This sort of mess? Out where some home-schooled Pentecostals kid could see it on the way to school? Unlikely.”

Madoc nodded at the statue.

“They hate Tepes,” he said. “Maybe they just wanted to call him a butcher?”

Luke shook his head. “Unless it turns out that the dead kid was a spy, why bother? No one has ever said Tepes *wasn’t* a butcher.”

That drew a chuckle from Madoc.

The rope slipped a few inches and made the corpse jerk.

A cloud of black, shiny flies lifted from the spools of

intestines and poured out of the gutted stomach. The noise of them in the evacuated quad was oppressive and then the dense, black mass of them settled on the blood soaked grass.

“Get samples of the flies,” Luke yelled the instruction to the ME. He pointed at the clots of insects that scabbed the ground to make sure they understood him. “They could tell us something.”

The ME glanced at the ground, grimaced, and passed the job on. Luke didn’t care, as long as the flies were collected and he didn’t have to do it.

“So if it’s not rogues or hunters,” Madoc said. “Who does that leave?”

Luke shook his head. “It’s not mission-oriented or hedonistic,” he corrected Madoc. “Whoever did this was in control enough to stage the scene and cover their tracks, but still thought it was a good idea to slaughter a teenager and string him up in the centre of a busy college.”

“A compulsion killer?” Madoc said sceptically. “Hoofbeats usually mean horses, Luke. Not zebras.”

Before Luke could press his theory Kit stalked back over to them. His face was set in a scowl that pulled the ragged scars on his face into a new pattern around his mouth.

“Asshole seeded the ground,” he said, and rubbed his sleeve over irritated eyes. “Saltpetre and garlic around the perimeter. He expected us.”

“Hunter tactics,” Madoc said. “Horses, not zebras. Just because they’ve not done it before, Luke, doesn’t mean they won’t start. Kit? Call Quick and see what the latest chatter is on cells in the area. Luke and I will go over the local cops report on the case. Make sure they didn’t ‘miss’ anything that might help.”



## Chapter Three

Luke splashed water over his face and rubbed cold, wet hands around the back of his neck. There was hot and then there was South Carolina hot. He'd gotten used to California's dry heat, that parched the moisture out of your mouth, not the oppressive sticky warmth that soaked his clothes with sweat the minute he put them on.

Six months.

He should be used to it by now.

Water dripped down Luke's face and into the sink. He looked up at his reflection and dragged his hand down his face. Short, gilt stubble prickled against his fingers.

At this point, he thought sourly, he should probably be used to a lot of things. He'd known when he accepted the promotion to the BITERs that he'd be the only human in the teams. It just hadn't occurred to him how odd it would be to work with monsters to *catch* monsters.

*Lie to the rest of the world*, his Dad's old advice popped into his head, *but don't lie to yourself. That's what will get you killed.*

Bennet exhaled and glared at his reflection. If there was one thing you should take his Dad's advice on, it was survival and lies. They were his wheelhouse.

Fine. It hadn't occurred to him that only *part* of his discomfort with working with monsters would be the monster part. That he could just ignore. No one said you had to like your colleagues, just work with them. It was the tug of unexpected--*unwanted*--lust he felt around SES Madoc that left him wrong-footed.

It was the last thing he'd expected. He knew what they were, under the *Anakim* and the nice clothes and the close-lipped smiles. They were fangs and blood, dead babies handed over by blood-drunk mothers, and hunger. Luke had made the reputation that got him this job off the back of monsters who'd left towns in mourning, so how the hell could he want to fuck one?

But he did.

The admission didn't make him feel any better. Luke gave his reflection an exasperated look and headed back into the bedroom. A fresh

shirt and tie lay on the bed, crisp, starched and ready to be sweated limp. Luke picked it up and shrugged it on. Before he could button it there was a sharp double rap on the door.

Housekeeping his clean towels. Finally. Luke raked his wet hair back from his face, wet curls behind his ears, and padded over to answer the door. He pulled the door open mid-knock, except instead of the housekeeper with fresh laundry it was Madoc with cups of coffee in his hands.

There was a pause as Madoc raised a dark brow and glanced down to take in the width of Luke's half-bared chest. He proffered the coffee in his right hand.

"I always forget how much Californians like their sunshine," he said. "Do people even sunbathe this side of the country?"

"Some do," Luke said as he took the cup. It was hot enough to scorch his fingers through the cardboard. His tan didn't really take a lot of upkeep, a few hours a month in the surf to top it up to golden. "It's not really a group activity. Something come up? I thought we were going to meet at the police station?"

Madoc took a drink of coffee. He didn't spit it out, so Luke was reassured that his wasn't the adulterated cup.

"We were." Madoc checked his wrist for the time. "We will, in half an hour. But you don't house a dog and bark yourself."

Luke narrowed his eyes and sipped his coffee. It was excellent. Of course. He doubted that Madoc would have truck with anything less than that unless it was to make a point. "Flattering."

"This is your chance, Agent Bennett," Madoc said. "Convince me."

There was an edge of challenge to his voice that didn't feel completely professional. Luke took another drink of coffee, his mouth dry, and stepped back. He waved his hand at the room--bed, office chair, and luggage--in unspoken invitation.

Vampires seduced.

Luke didn't bother to edit the word in his head. The bluntness of it helped. It gave him distance.

It was what they did, with blood and beauty that made people open the door and bare their necks. Madoc might dress it up behind a better mask than the gluttoned-like-ticks rogues that Luke tracked to trap houses and lairs, but it was the same lure. He was meant to notice it, but he didn't have to bite.

Maybe admitting the hint of lust he had for his boss had been a good idea after all.

Madoc looked amused at Luke's omission to offer official permission to entry. He didn't need it to step inside, despite the old pre-Drakul myths, a threshold was just lintels and courtesy. An invitation did mean something though. An invitation gave Anakim...influence...over what resided in the four walls. A spiritual keyhole to slip through at night.

Opinions varied on whether that worked with mid-price hotel rooms. Luke didn't care to risk it. They were here for a few days, at least, and if he had any nightly emissions he'd rather blame his subconscious than have to worry about visitations.

## Chapter Four

Once inside, out of the glare of the afternoon sun, Madoc plucked his glasses off his face. He folded the arms in and tucked them into his pocket as he glanced around the room. His eyes lingered briefly on the bed, a hint of amusement around his mouth, and then he decided to use the room's small desk as a perch. He shuffled through the stack of stapled reports the local cops had, reluctantly, provided with pale fingers.

"Three dead?" he said.

Luke nodded as he buttoned his shirt. It felt like putting on a uniform, his susceptible underbelly hidden under the crisp linen and neatly fastened cuffs.

*Dress for the job you want people to pay for*, that had been his Dad's advice too.

"The first was found by the river," he said as he grabbed the tie from the bed and strung it through his collar. "Loretta Johnson, a 33 year old swimming coach at the University. She died from severe blunt force trauma to the head."

"People do," Madoc said. He flicked the page and regarded the mess that someone had made of the pretty woman. "Almost anyone would die of that."

"Tomas Schmidt was the second victim," Luke said. "He was found in his bedroom with a broken neck."

"And then they found a boy strung up like meat to age," Madoc drawled. He paused as he caught up with Luke's point. He flicked back through the photos of Schmidt, his face slack and neck oddly loose, and the splatter of gore and curls that was all that was left of Loretta's head. "His neck was wrung, her brains bashed in--"

"Gaffed, that's what you do to a fish" Luke said. He'd done enough of it as a kid, sent out to scavenge a meal from the countryside because they couldn't go to the local store. A clean kill splattered, the fish dispatched with brutal quickness. "And today they field dressed the victim, and strung him up away from predators."

"A ritual," Madoc said. "Sorcery?"

Luke paused halfway through tying his tie. “The killer *thinks* it is,” he said cautiously. Technically even the suspicion of a sorcerer should be passed over to the Scholomance for oversight. “But the sacrifices hadn’t been starved or purified. And the sites themselves were high traffic areas, so there’s no way to consecrate and control them. This isn’t sorcery, it’s...”

“Compulsive?” Madoc interrupted. He still sounded sceptical, but there was a hint of interest to his voice. “Go on.”

Luke grinned. He left his tie to dangle, half-knotted, as he loped over to the desk to hunt through the paperwork.

“The accepted theory on compulsion killers is that they’re rare,” Luke explained. That was an understatement. Five confirmed in the US, chronicled extensively in true crime, fiction, and academic papers...including one by Quantico’s most successful profiler, and ten in Europe. *Maybe twenty* if you believed some of the odder stories that filtered out of remote spots in rural Russia or Ireland. He caught his thumb on the edge of the paper and hissed absently as it slit under his nail. “And that they are frenzied, berserkers who kill until they’re killed. Like foxes in a henhouse.”

“I do read,” Madoc said. “You don’t agree?”

“Yes and no,” Luke said. “They won’t stop killing until they’re killed, but they aren’t necessarily out of control. To them what they are doing makes sense, and if you accept that framework they function normally. Look at this. Two years ago a teenage girl was kidnapped from a nearby pig farm, found with her throat slit and her stomach full of acorns. Six months ago there was a poisoning in a local cafe, it was called accidental but the dead man was a CI for Vice.”

“You poison a rat,” Madoc said. He hesitated for a second and then made an exasperated noise. “This sounds like a folk tale, Bennett. If you’re right, why haven’t we seen more of them?”

Luke pushed damp curls out of his face and gave Madoc a surprised look.

“Apex predators don’t share territory,” he said. “These people function on the outskirts of society, they stalk their prey, and they probably don’t have a lot of use for anyone who isn’t part of their framework belief. No friends, in other words. What does that sound like to you?”

They both knew the answer. Madoc reached out and tugged Luke’s tie free with a precise yank. His fingers, already cooled from their earlier heat,

brushed Luke's chin as he reknotted the strip of silk. A firm yank snugged it up against Luke's collar, a little too tight as he swallowed.

“An easy meal,” Madoc said, with a slow smile.

## Chapter Five

For a second Luke felt the lust catch between them, sharp and electric, and he was surprised to find himself torn between the urge to lean in and the need to pull away. It wasn't the sort of decision it should be hard to make.

Then Madoc let the tie slip from his fingers as he stepped back. His expression flicked to thoughtful so sharply that Luke, his throat tight and his nose full of the musk and salt scent of Madoc, wondered if he'd just imagined the tension. He tugged the tie loose so he could swallow as Madoc picked up the file to flick through the dog-eared papers. "You put this together on the plane? And pulled these other files?"

Not exactly. Luke cleared his throat and, without the temptation right in his space, had the good sense to put some space between him and Madoc. Not enough to look like he was in flight, but enough he didn't *taste* the vampire when he breathed.

*Anakim*, the mental correction kicked in from habit. Luke silently cursed it as he picked up his gun and shrugged the shoulder holster on. The weight of the weapon nudged awkwardly against his ribs as he adjusted it. A glance toward the mirror showed it black and deadly against his light blue shirt.. He picked his jacket up from where he'd hung it to air and pulled it on.

If he wanted to fuck a *vampire* -- he deployed the term mentally with sharp annoyance at himself -- then he could scratch that itch. It would probably be a bad idea and the schism with his family would, finally, be set in stone, but what was new there?

His *boss*?

Madoc was hot as hell and, yeah, Luke wanted to crawl under him to see if it would be as good as his imagination thought it would. He wanted to be a BITER too, to prove he'd made all the right choices even when they were hard. End of the day, he could get fucked anywhere but the BITERS were the only game in town.

It really should have made it an easy choice.

"I had already been tracking the other cases," Luke admitted. "They were unusual, and that interests me. Then I saw the pattern, and that

interested me.”

“And you didn’t warn anyone?” Madoc asked curiously. “Tell them that someone else was going to die?”

“Someone else is always going to die,” Luke pointed out. “That’s not much of a warning without a victim, a time, and a motive. I needed more cases.”

“And more corpses?”

“Yes,” Luke admitted. He felt a twinge of guilt for a second as his conscience caught up with his brain. It wasn’t that he forgot his puzzles were people, just that sometimes it seemed less important than the chase.

“Unfortunately. They were going to die anyhow, though, and this way it will be useful.”

Madoc looked exasperated, or amused, for a second.

“Make that argument to Kit sometime,” he said. “OK. Kit will stay on the Hunter angle, that makes sense. You find me a compulsion killer, if he’s real.”

Jamie Needham.

The dead boy on the stainless steel slab in the local morgue had a name, a major, and a shell-shocked roommate who’d identified him. Parents too, somewhere in Savannah. The police had gotten in touch with them, but they still thought it was a mistake. One that they’d uncover when they flew in and, with a mixture of pity and relief, explained it was someone else’s son.

Except it wasn’t.

19 years old. It hadn’t taken long for Luke to put together a Cliff Notes biography for him. Jamie hadn’t really had the time for anything else. So far a bad grade in Computer Science 101 that had almost left him on academic suspension was the worst thing that Luke had turned up.

Whatever had made the killer decide that Jamie was the perfect slaughter stand-in, it probably wasn’t that.

“Most people,” the coroner—Pear he’d introduced himself as, with no explanation for whether it was first or second name—remarked as he fished in the wet cavity of Jamie’s opened stomach, “Get squeamish around this bit.”

Luke shrugged. “I’ve a strong stomach,” he said. “And I’ve seen dead

bodies before. Anything I don't want to wait on the autopsy report for?"

Pear shrugged and pulled his gloved hand out empty. He wiped it on a bleached-thin, still stained towel.

"He was dead when they started cutting. So that's some mercy" Pear said. He grabbed the corpse by one pallid shoulder and lifted it up off the slab to point at a black mark on the freckled back. Low and to the right. Pear poked the spot with a finger. "Looks like he was shot in the back, small calibre. It would have probably punctured his lungs. Death wouldn't have been immediate, but relatively quick."

"Probably?"

Pear let the body drop back down onto the table with a meaty slap. "It's empty. Liver and lights, all gone. Only thing left was the intestines. And between the bugs and the sun, they aren't in a state to tell us much. Once the tox screen gets back, maybe I'll have something definite to tell you. Until then? Probably is what you get.."

Now that was where Pear was wrong. He might not have realised it, but he'd given Luke something useful.

Maybe.

"Let me know if there's anything else," he said as he turned to leave.

He got halfway to the door when Pear called after him. "There's one thing."

Luke turned around. The soles of his boots squeaked on the tiled, scrubbed floor.

"What?"

Pear pulled the video camera down on its flexible neck to focus on Jamie's hands. The white, loose-skinned digits appeared on the long monitor hung from the ceiling on two brackets. He had bitten fingernails, chewed down to the quick, and faint purple stains around his knuckles.

"He fought his attacker?" Luke asked.

"I doubt it," Pear said. He swung the camera up to point it at Jamie's face. There was a split in his lip and more bruises stained over his mouth. "This bruises had time to develop before he was killed. An hour or two, at least. It might have been whoever who killed him—it might have been why they killed him—but it happened before he died."

Two useful things.



## Chapter Six

One of the local detectives, Martlet, had given up his desk for Luke. The drawers were still full of his clutter—old notebooks and chewed pencils, a dust-dulled rosary, and old candy wrappers—and a thin woman with a disapproving mouth kept an eye on Luke from the frame at the corner of the desk.

As Luke cross-referenced the police reports with anything that the victims had in common—bars they all went to, connections at the university, coffee shops tagged in on their social media posts—he couldn't help but feel the disappointment that canted the lady Martlet's mouth was aimed at him. There were a dozen potential, casual, connections between the various corpses. Once Quick came back after his trawl through the victims' financials there would be more.

It had looked like a good start, but once Luke pinned them down the connections were too tenuous to be relevant. That didn't mean the killer hadn't picked his victims, out of everyone in the fifteen-mile radius Luke had assigned him, because they all drank at the same coffee shop. Back in LA sure, that would mean something, but this was a college town. Everything, and everyone, butted up against everything else.

Frustration crawled under his skin, sharp as thorns over the clenched muscles of his neck and shoulders. Luke clenched his fist around his pen and resisted the urge to throw it across the room. This was the job. Hours of nothing that mattered, until he found the pattern that the killer moved in. It was just Madoc's permission to hunt this down that had turned up the stakes on it.

Apparently if he wasn't going to fuck the man--and he wasn't, Luke reminded himself dryly--he was going to get his approval.

Probably not by beaming one of the local cops--either relieved to be off the hook or resentful that VINE had dropped in to take glory--in the back of the head with a pen.

Luke leaned back in the office chair--it creaked under his weight as he stretched out--and half-closed his eyes. He made himself relax joint by joint, until he was all loose bones and slack muscle. Then he turned his brain down

to a low static hum.

The therapist that VINE insisted they all see once a month--to make sure they didn't snap from the worst things they saw, either because it was too horrible or too tempting--called it 'weaponized meditation'. He said it wasn't healthy, that the benefits of meditation came from the work it took to get to that state. But then he worked in an office and saw people who'd never been honest with him once every few weeks.

Luke didn't have the time to put the work in when he'd already worked out the shortcuts.

"Sleeping on the job?" Kit asked, his voice abrasive with the usual irritation as he tossed something heavy onto the desk.

Luke opened an eye to peer up at him. Office gossip--or what passed it for it around the BITERS--had it that Kit had gotten on fine with Luke's predecessor. Henry Cade had been seconded from the Scholomance, an old man who'd been stuck in a young body for nearly seventy years. When he'd retired last year Kit had signed the card -- a starkly weird little bit of normality. Maybe he didn't like Luke because he'd replaced Henry.

Not really fair. On the other hand Luke knew exactly why he didn't like Kit, and that was nothing to do with Kit.

"At least I haven't died on it," Luke shot back as he straightened up.

"Not yet." Kit stood next to the desk, his thumbs hooked into his belt. He pointed at the stack of stapled papers set on top of Luke's files with his chin. "I need you to talk to the room-mate."

"I thought you could sniff the bad guys out all on your own?" Luke said absently as he flicked through the sheets. He highlighted things he wanted people to look at, Kit scrawled a line under them in black biro. It made Luke squint as he followed the pattern of deposits from a N. Kares from monthly to weekly. "Jamie's?"

"Kares is Anakim," Kit said. He pulled his phone--the back battered and scarred--and thumbed across the screen until he found what he needed. A picture, it turned out as he turned the phone to show Luke, of a small, beige woman with black clothes and a sullen look around her mouth as she glared at the camera.

"Someone's daughter?" Luke asked.

Kit gave him that look, the one that wanted Luke to prove he knew what he was doing. "Why do you say that."

“She’s plain and I’ve never heard of her,” Luke said bluntly. “Without beauty or brilliance, that leaves family.”

“That leaves money,” Kit corrected him, his voice smug that Luke had missed something. “She’s of Russian descent, one of the Tsar’s favourite lines. When she got sick her father had enough money to send her here for treatment, and for the Kiss when she didn’t respond. Two hundred years ago.”

“So someone’s daughter,” Luke said. He smirked as Kit glared at him. “What’s your angle?”

“Does it matter?” Kit asked. “I want the truth, not your angle on it.”

“Angles get you the truth,” Luke said. “Everyone goes into a conversation wanting something, the trick is to recognise when you won’t get it.”

Kit grunted and held up his hand. “Enough. I have work to do, and I don’t care how you justify your worth. Blackmail. And he got greedy.”

It was a theory.

“I thought you’d decided Hunters were our culprit.”

“That’s what the evidence says,” Kit said. “But just because Kares is a vampire, doesn’t mean she’s the killer. Maybe Jamie was meant to collect the cash, and ended up spending it himself. If Hunters are involved, they don’t like traitors.”

True. Anakim were predators to be exterminated, human traitors were an embarrassment. Most Hunter cells were also usually short of money for weapons and equipment, their funding cycle was tied to the erratic atrocities of rogue vampires.

Luke grinned at him, all humor and edge. “The roomie won’t know,” he said. “They got on, but the room-mate’s a law student on a football scholarship. He doesn’t have enough time on his hands to know what Jamie was up to behind the scenes. You’ll need to go straight to the source.”

“Kares?” Kit asked with mock-surprise. “Well, I guess that simple option never occurred to me.”

“Which you knew,” Luke said as he held the files out. “What do you want?”

“She’s rich, Russian, and reputedly randy,” Kit said. “And older than me.”

“So if you turn her down--”

“It’s an insult to her, and to the Russian who still sponsors her family,” Kit finished for him. “He’d rather have let her die than sire her himself, but the opportunity to protest an insult by VINE will stir up those old protective instincts. You--”

“Am human,” Luke said. “So I don’t count.”

“You don’t,” Kit agreed. “You also only like men. In the old days that didn’t matter so much, but these days it’s...gauche...to force someone against their orientation.”

And god forbid, Luke thought with a flicker of old, home-grown contempt, that an Anakim look anything but woke in their atrocities.

## Chapter Seven

“Call me Nina.”

It wasn't a request. Nina Kares perched on the edge of her black leather couch in her bright clothes and looked like a woman who didn't make many requests. Her entire appearance was a fierce attack on the blandness that would have sentenced her to death if not for her father's connections. Red painted lips and a stark cropped hairstyle--not much she could do with the colour, the undead didn't take dye well--clashed with her elegant, intricately embroidered silk lounge-wear. None of it helped.

It wasn't so much the way she looked. That could be embraced or countered. Nina had grown up as a beautiful man's plain daughter in a court that would have been kinder if she'd been ugly, and had been left to die because she wasn't interesting enough to save.

That hadn't left her in the two hundred years since she'd been made. It probably never would. Psychology, in general, didn't take any better than dye for the undead.

Luke altered the strategy he'd agreed with Kit on the way over. It was true Nina craved attention, but she didn't trust it. If Luke slathered on the honey it would put her on edge, he needed to make her chase it.

He sat back against the sticky leather and gave the handsome young man Nina had called in an appreciative smile. “Actually, I'll have a coffee. Thank you.”

The man nodded. The motion made his collar shift and flashed the raw edges of a bite mark on his throat. The Kiss had started to heal over, the bruises shrunk back down under the skin, and that blurred the details. It looked like more than one person had their teeth in him, although Luke would have had to measure the injury to be sure.

Or stare, and he didn't want Nina to think she had anything he wanted. The point was just to take sex off the table as one of the ways she could win his approval.

“So?” Nina said expectantly. “What does VINE want with a simple cloth merchant like myself?”

Her accent was thick. After all these years it was also more an

affectation than anything else. Luke ignored it.

“Jamie,” he said and waited.

He usually tried not to *expect* a reaction. The key to a good interrogation was to shift with the suspect and follow their direction. If they thought they were leading, then they usually took you right past what they wanted you to miss.

Still, he wouldn't have been surprised by guilt or anger. The amount of money that Nina had deposited into Jamie's account was significant. Not enough to be worth killing for--not for a woman whose family still had the Tsar's favour back home--but still enough to sting.

The shifty embarrassment that made Nina fidget with her cuffs and a bit of fluff on her knee wasn't the direction he thought she'd take.

“Oh for--” she blurted out, then reached up to fiddle with her hair. Her fingers flustered around her jaw for a second when she found it gone and finally hooked into her earrings to mess with. The thick accent dropped to a burr on the edge of her words. “Did that silly boy report Darren to you? I admit things went too far, but it was hardly worth a report to VINE?”

Luke glanced after Darren. “It's illegal for more than one vampire to Kiss a human. That's how ghouls happen.”

Nina looked truly offended for a moment. It cut through the miasma of plain she clung to and gave her face a fierce cast.

“I lost my mother to a ghoulish infestation,” she spat out. “My little sister. My *leg*.”

She reached down and yanked the loose leg of her trousers up to expose a jointed porcelain prosthetic. If it had happened before she was Kissed, it might have grown back. Probably. Maybe. Significant tissue loss like that could go either way. Since she'd been reborn with it already amputated, she'd spend her undeath without it.

Luke didn't let his surprise, or his irritation with Kip for not bringing this up, show on his face.

“I work for VINE,” he reminded her. “Every gluttoned vampire we've dragged out of their nest with sixteen mindless concubines in tow would have sworn they'd *never*. Until they did.”

Nina spat at him. The goblet of frothy spit landed on Luke's sleeve. He grimaced and reached into his jacket for a handkerchief to wipe the fabric clean.

“Never.” She pushed the leg of her trousers down and stood up. Two hundred years of practice and undeath had erased any hesitation from her stride, but now Luke knew he could hear the faint difference as her feet hit the floor. “I nearly died from this. My father he wept to the Tsar, he begged for me to survive. His only child. But I was plain and the taint was in my blood now. Who knew what biting me would do. So the Tsar, in his kindness sent me away to die where my father would not have to watch, and my father found an American who loved money enough to take the risk.” She grabbed a bottle of vodka from the dresser and poured herself a shot with careless, practiced haste. Threads of blood hung in the vodka like pink veins. “I have never sired a child. Never given the Kiss. If that’s the lie that Jamie told, then it’s easily disproved. None of my lovers *can* take the Kiss, they’re all mules or they’re already Anakim.”

She tossed the vodka back and wiped her mouth.

“He’s dead,” Luke said to watch her reaction.

If she’d been human she’d have choked on the vodka. As it she spluttered, slammed her glass down, and looked as disoriented as a two hundred undead could muster.

“Dead? No, you have the wrong boy,” she said. “He was here last night. That’s when he--”

She caught herself and pressed her bright red lips together.

“Over you?” Luke asked.

Her eyes dilated and shifted position. Her porcelain foot scraped against the floor and she went for him.

Fuck.

Luke threw himself off the couch. He hit the ground hard with his shoulder and grabbed his gun. Nina slapped it out of his hand and it went sliding under the table. She grabbed his throat and dug her fingers in until he couldn’t scrape a breath past the constriction. The blood trapped in his head thumped against his ears and pulsed against his temple.

Red lipstick smeared Nina’s teeth as she peeled her lips back. She hadn’t shared her lovers with another Anakim. Two sets of fangs jutted from her blanched gums, oversized and oddly spaced. Drool strung between them as she bent down toward him.

“VINE agents die,” she muttered, blood flicked onto Luke’s face as her fangs shredded her tongue. “Or disappear. Especially human ones. I still have

friends who can make that happen.”

Luke twisted his fingers in her jacket, the embroidery rough against his fingers, and twisted his mouth as he scraped words through his crushed throat.

“...bite...”

Shame made Nina flinch and fold her lips back down over her teeth. She masked it quickly with anger and lashed at him, a crack of her palm across his face.

“Don’t worry,” she spat out. “I won’t bite you. Just kill you.”

Luke swallowed blood and bared his teeth at her. “Not what...I said,” he forced out. “BITER.”

Her hand loosened slightly.

“The Cardinal?”

Luke drove the heel of his hand up into her jaw. Her mouth snapped shut and her fangs sheared through her lips. She squalled in shocked pain and reeled back. Luke pulled his knees up and hammered both feet into her chest to get her off him. If she’d been braced the move would have just ruined his knees, but she was still preoccupied with her bloody face. She lurched back and fell onto the couch. Luke grabbed her prosthetic leg by the ankle, porcelain cold under his fingers and snapped it with a hard kick.

For some reason that made guilt pinch at him. He rolled away and grabbed the gun. Nina scrambled toward him on her hands and knee, her shattered prosthetic dragged behind her.

“BITER rounds,” Luke said as he snapped the gun up and aimed at her head. The weight of it was familiar and reassuring against his palms. “Hollow point and silver. I’m a good shot.”

Nina hunched back in on herself. She looked feral, trapped. “They’ll send me to the Salt.”

“I’ll send you to hell.”

She smiled with torn, terrible lips. “I’ve been there.”

She coiled in herself and lunged for him. The hollowpoint took her in the chest and then, because Luke had been trained well, in the head.

Her body flopped to the ground.

From the doorway Darren wailed, bereft, and dropped the coffee he’d finally brewed.



## Chapter Eight

“Henry stayed out of the field,” Kit said harshly to Madoc. “And he, at least, had magic to fall back on.”

The door to Nina’s house opened and the coroner’s assistants carried her out, wrapped in black plastic and padlocked down with silver to the stretcher. Just in case. Silver would kill a vampire, but something would occasionally move into what was left. It might mimic who they’d been before--whatever it could piece together from the brain tissue left--but it was generally agreed the revenants were *other*.

Luke rinsed his mouth and spat green and pink froth into a bowl. The wintergreen didn’t mask the taste of blood so much as mix with it, sharp and potent like salt on minted lamb. He rubbed his jaw and pressed on the tender points around his jaw. It was jarred, but not dislocated.

“If he had a year to prepare, he could bring a dragon to tinkle on them,” Luke said. “Maybe.”

It was unfair. Slightly. By repute Henry had been a dangerous man, but sorcery was high investment for small returns. It was why the scholomance existed despite sorcerers being as community minded as a spoiled house cat. Five sorcerers could bundle their spells and flood a city to execute a man they’d arranged to be stranded there with a woman he couldn’t resist. It would still take a year.

“You could have been killed,” Kit said. He grabbed the back of Luke’s head and shoved him around to look at his reflection in the mirror. The shadows of fresh bruises bloomed grey and red over Luke’s jaw and cheek. “Are you really so arrogant you can’t *see* that.”

“*Enough*,” Madoc said icily. “Go and make sure Nina’s consort doesn’t do anything foolish.”

“I need to speak to him,” Luke said as he scrambled up off the tailgate of the ambulance. “Before he goes to the hospital.”

Madoc put a hand on his shoulder and pinned him in place. “He doesn’t want to see you right now.”

Probably not, Luke supposed, but... “It’s important.”

“Give him time to grieve,” Madoc said. “Kit? Go.”

He waited until Kit grumbled and stalked off. Then he put his thumb

under Madoc's jaw and turned his head around to study the bruise. "You'll ache tomorrow."

"I ache now," Luke said. He swallowed and moved away from the too-careful touch. "I know how the killer is."

"Dead, surely," Madoc said as he glanced after Nina. "She choose her own punishment."

"It wasn't her," Luke said. Habit made him check his holster and he hissed in annoyance as his fingers found empty leather and nylon. The local cops had taken his gun when they got there. It wasn't how they did it, but it generally wasn't a good idea to argue with anxious, trigger happy police officers alarmed that you'd blown off someone's entire head. Madoc reached around and pulled a gun out of the back of his jeans. He offered it up on the palm of his hand. "She was just..."

Scared. Angry. Threatened.

Luke took the gun. He checked it over briskly, made sure it was loaded and the safety was on, before it holstered it.

"I made a mistake," he said stiffly. The words felt like gravel in his throat. "I pushed when I should have pulled, and she caught me off guard. It shouldn't have been necessary to kill her."

"But you did," Madoc said.

Luke gave him a puzzled look. "At *that* point it was necessary."

"Why not here?" Madoc asked. "Jamie got over-possessive, thought a midnight snack meant a commitment and pressured her. She'd lived here for a long time. Anakim that entrenched can react extremely to any threat to their nest."

"I got that," Luke said. He rubbed his jaw. "But what about the others?"

"Senescence," Madoc said. Vampire senility. "Maybe she didn't have a reason."

Luke shook his head. "No one kills without a reason," he said. "We might not think it is a good reason, but it's still a reason to them."

Madoc looked exasperated. "So you came out, executed the daughter of the Tsar's favourite, and it was all for nothing?"

"No," Luke said. "Nina was involved, she just didn't know how. When can I talk to Darren?"

"Tomorrow."

Luke made a sound of protest in his throat.

“Fine, when he’s ready,” Madoc conceded. “Let him grieve first.”

Luke shrugged an apology. “That might be too late,” he said. “I need to talk to him now.”

Not that he’d be able to if Madoc decided to stop him. He waited and, after a second, Madoc shook his head and stepped aside. Luke jogged over to where Darren, coffee all over his trousers, sat under Kit’s awkward sympathy. When Darren saw Luke he snarled and tried to lurch to his feet. Kit pushed him back down and gave Luke an exasperated look.

“Jamie,” Luke said. “Alice, Bray, Loretta”

“What about them?” Darren asked bitterly. “Are you going to shoot them too?”

Luke bit the ‘someone beat us to it’ off the tip of his tongue. “They were all mules, right?”

Colour pinched Darren’s cheeks. “UnKissable,” he said bitterly. “Resistant. Mules are animals.”

“You all met at a support group right?” Luke said. He barely waited for Darren’s resentful noise before he pressed on. “And someone there introduced you to Nina right,, you and Jamie both?”

It took a moment for Darren to answer. When he did, he sounded wary. “We don’t talk about who we meet there.”

Of course not. Being a mule was somewhere between being a saint and being a leper. The Pentecostals saw them as souls too pure to be condemned in life, the rogues saw them as nothing but cattle, and the Anakim pitied them. Any of the above was an awkward place to live. So first names only, and if you had the means you’d attend a support group away from where you lived.

“So yes.”

Darren glared at him but, after a quick wary glance at Kit, reluctantly nodded.

“Who introduced you?”

“Why do *you* care?”

Luke changed direction. “You were her favourite, the consort. She gave you somewhere to live, she let you drink her blood, she let you love her.”

Most mules found out what they were when they tried to court the Kiss, and it didn’t take. It usually ended badly. The Anakim didn’t care to love

anything that would die centuries before they did. Darren took a shaky breath as the grief pinched him again.

“But she liked variety, so then Jamie came along. Nina gave him money to keep himself nice, to come and see her. More money. More visits. Until you and Jamie fought over her. He wanted to take your place?”

“I didn’t kill him,” Darren protested. He stiffened under Kit’s hand as his voice pitched up an octave from nerves. “Jamie was...After he left Nina told me she loved me, that she’d not replace me!”

Except she would have. Eventually. She’d been willing to kill for Darren today, but one day he’d have been too old to be beautiful, then too old to be fun. She might keep him, a fond friend and ex-loved, but someone new would be in her bed. Even if she’d stayed with him when he was old, he’d die and she’d need to find a new mule to love.

“What if she had?” Luke pressed. “What if Nina had gotten tired of you, replaced you with someone younger and prettier. Would you still have loved her?”

“Of course!”

“Would you be willing to do anything to get her back?”

They both knew the answer. Darren stared at Luke for a second as the idea dawned on him. Then he shut down as he clenched his jaw and looked away.

“Fuck you.”

“Who introduced you?” Luke pushed.

“You killed her!” Darren spat furiously. He lurched up out and tried to grab Luke’s shirt, but Kit dragged him back. “I hope you’re next to get strung up.”

“More likely to be you,” Luke said. “The old wether. Like Jamie was the rutting stag and Loretta was the fish.”

Grief crumpled Darren’s face like a tissue. “I don’t care,” he said. “I can’t do this again.”

Shit. Luke grimaced as he tried to think how to drag the truth out of Darren. Before he could change tactics, Madoc put a hand on his shoulder.

“Wait,” he said. He moved Luke out of the way and crouched down in front of Darren. He smiled at him, a disarmingly pleasant expression.

“Darren, right. Darren Voight-Kares.”

Darren fired a bleak look of triumph at Luke, as if that changed

anything.

“Yes.”

Madoc put a hand on Darren’s voice and dropped his voice slightly, a hint of his old accent furred over the words.

“You’ll be the executor of her estate, there’ll be a lot of things to sort out. We’ll help you with that, if you want,” Madoc said. He nodded and Darren nodded with him. Then Madoc grimaced. “If we can. Until we find this killer, there’s not a lot of time we can give up.”

Luke shifted his weight uncomfortably. He wasn’t sure he didn’t agree with Madoc’s plan, or was just uncomfortable at seeing that charm turned elsewhere. Kit gestured him to silence.

“I..need help,” Darren admitted. “Her family. The Russians.”

His hands knotted anxiously in his lap, twisted painfully together.

“What was his name?” Madoc asked, his voice suddenly hard and thick with something that caught in the back of Luke’s throat. “The man that introduced you. Tell us.”

“Mark,” Darren said obediently. Then he stalled. “I don’t know anymore than that. Just Mark.”

Luke shifted again and glanced askance at Madoc. After a glance at Darren’s face, Madoc gave Luke a nod of approval to rejoin the conversation.

“He’d been a soldier, right?” Luke said. That fit his profile. Someone who was willing to kill, but who balked at the hot gore of butchery. “That’s where he found out what he was?”

There was a pause and then Darren nodded. “He was wounded, lost half his stomach. One of the medic Anakim tried to turn him, save his life, but it didn’t work. They thought he’d die, but he survived. Discharged. Came home. Nina helped him put his life back together, set him up in a job.”

“What job?”

Darren shrugged. “I don’t know. A security company or something? It doesn’t matter because he messed it up anyhow, lost everything. Nina had to step in again, get him a job as a security guard somewhere.”

The pieces slotted together. “Mark,” Luke said. He remembered the ginger security guard, wiry muscle under a fresh layer of indulgent flab. But still there. “Mark Clade?”

Darren made a helpless gesture. “I don’t know. I guess,” he said. “Nina called him last night about Jamie, told him that she didn’t need the support

group anymore. She had me.”

And that meant Mark only had one thing left. So he wasn't going to give that up.

## Chapter Nine

“Well, I wouldn’t say I’m surprised,” Mrs Boyd sniffed as she led the way around to the back of the house. Her house slippers scuffed over the dead, sere grass as she kicked a sun-faded, abandoned kid’s plastic toy out of the way. From inside the house a small dog barked with shrill, furious repetition as it tracked them on the other side of the wall. “I told my husband, ‘Harold,’ I said, ‘We’re going to have the cops at our door about him one of these days.’”

She sounded smug to have been right.

“And yet you never called them?” Madoc asked dryly as he hunched into his coat. Dark glasses covered his eyes and he glanced around the yard.

Mrs Boyd gave him an uncomfortable glance and edged away from him, even though there was a good distance already between them. Her hip nudged against Luke.

“Well, he never *did* anything,” she said defensively. “He was just, you know, odd. Creepy.”

“How?” Luke asked. He gave her a warm smile when she squinted at him. “It could help us with the case.”

Mrs Boyd pursed her lips as she pulled a set of keys from her pocket.

“Just *odd*,” she repeated. “Always kept to himself. Never talked to us, even when we crossed paths coming in and out. *Muttered.*”

Kip grunted his opinion of that.

“Did he show any interest in anything in particular?” Luke asked. He glanced up as the dog’s piercing yap-yap-yap went up an octave. A poodle stared at him through the window, one eye blind and blue and the other beady with judgement in grey fur. “Like you dog?”

Mrs Boyd sniffed at the question. Her fingers sorted the keys on autopilot as she headed for the moss-damp stairs that led down to the basement flat door.

“He said it was a sin to keep him,” she said. “That dog eats better than my husband, you know. He’s got more toys than my kids needed. Sin my ass. That was something he did. Mr Clade. I caught him trying to feed Jangles raw meat. Told me it ‘natural diet’ or something. Jangles had hives for a

month. I had to get him some Queen Bee pollen until it finally calmed down. Natural my ass.”

She jammed the key in the lock and rattled it about for a moment.

“Mr Clade,” she said loudly, with a smug glance at Madoc that she’d remembered. “It’s Mrs Boyd. There’s a leak and I need to come in and let the plumber if there’s a problem down here. It’s an emergency.”

Luke nodded and gave her a thumbs up in approval. It made her beam smugly and Madoc gave Luke an amused look from behind his smoked lenses.

“Go wait over the road,” Luke mouthed to Mrs Boyd. “We’ll tell you when it’s safe.”

She wouldn’t. The promise of gossip was too tempting, but that was her choice. He waited for her to slap-slap back up the stairs and then pulled his gun. The weight of it had a comfortable familiarity as it settled against his palm, his fingers sure as they wrapped around the butt.

“Hang back,” Madoc said softly as he pulled his own weapon. He held it low against his leg as he reached up to his ear to murmur a soft order to Kip who was at the other side of the house, beneath the small, propped open window with the cheap AC unit mounted in it.

Luke snorted and opened the door. The smell of shit washed out over him. It was thick and meaty, ripe as the lion house at the zoo.

“Ugh,” Madoc exclaimed as he lifted his arm to cover his mouth and nose. Luke doubted that it did much to protect his vampire sharp senses from the reek. His sternly handsome face creased in an unexpectedly human expression of disgust. “Did he break open a sewer?”

Luke breathed through his mouth, short and shallow. It didn’t particularly help. The smell coated his tongue and crawled up his throat into his nose. He’d smelled worse.

“I think this is just how he lives,” Luke said. He ignored Madoc’s hiss and slid around the door into the room. “Like an animal.”

Madoc snorted. “Any predator that stank like this is a dead predator.”

From the back of the apartment there was a heavy thud and then Kip’s voice echoed through to them, half muffled. “Fuck me, what died?”

Luke hit the light switch with his elbow. Flies rose up from the piles of empty, bloody plastic parcels that littered the kitchen. Fat and sluggish they hung in the air for a moment and then settled again, a black crawling blanket

of bodies on the counters and walls. Chunks of yellow gristle, halfway to tallow, lay on the small, plastic table. Chunks of splintered bone, marked by teeth marks, were piled on the side.

“He found out he couldn’t take the Kiss when he was injured. Lost half his stomach, Darren said,” Luke said. The smell ripened the further you went into the basement. It had a heat to it. He gave in and lifted his free arm to cover his mouth. It didn’t help. “That must have impacted what he could eat, if he could eat at all.”

And if an Anakim had been on hand and willing to offer the Kiss to Clade in the field, then the man hadn’t been a grunt. His military records were sealed, even to Madoc, so he might not have been a Biter but he’d been part of something more than rank and file. Someone like that would probably have a lot of their self-image tied up in their physicality. How many hot dogs you could eat was usually fairly low on the list of things people took pride in. Until you lost that along with your job, your health, and your hope of immortality. Then it could be the last blow to an already fractured self-image.

Down the hallway Kip gagged, a dry retch that sounded like it started in his stomach. Luke wondered for a moment if Anakim could vomit. Or rather, since the essential mechanisms were still there, if they ever *had* to vomit.

“Great, case closed,” Kip said as he joined them. “Looks like he exploded into shit. We should leave. Go smell some roses. Or rotting corpses. How the fuck can even a crazy live like this?”

“He has to,” Luke said. He was caught between nausea and fascination. No-one had actually studied a compulsive killer mid-spree this century and the last eye-witness record had been the stilted, quietly distressed police notes of a London bobby out of his depth. “You know that, Kipling. Last time you went undercover, did you like the person you were?”

Kip spat on the floor. “That’s different,” he said. “If I slip up I get killed. I don’t choose to live like that.”

“Neither does he,” Luke said. He opened the fridge and glanced inside. A small, sensationalist part of him hoped for slices of human and jars of eyeballs. Instead it was just empty sleeves and a faintly musty smell. A block of moldy cheese and a big bottle of pepto were all that was in there. “To him this is what is going to keep him alive. If he slips up, if he falters, then he’ll die. It might be twenty years from now, not twenty minutes, but he’ll die.

Immortality is a hell of a drug.”

Madoc toed a t-bone over and grimaced as maggots dropped from the green bits of sinew that stuck to the chipped surface.

“We’re not immortal,” he said quietly. It had the cadence of habit, something he said as much for himself as Luke and Kip. Regret, Luke wondered as he glanced at the dark Anakim, or vendetta? Self-immolation or homicide? Madoc turned as if he could hear the gears turning in Luke’s head and met his eyes. “And Clade isn’t here. Where is he going to go next, Bennett?”

That was a good question. Luke closed the door to the fridge to buy himself a moment to think it through. The result was that, “I don’t know,” he said. “We’ve disturbed his pattern. Interrupted whatever ritual he thought he was following. What he’ll do now is...unpredictable.”

Madoc scowled. That obviously wasn’t the answer he wanted, or the answer he kept Luke around to come up with. Before he could protest the door creaked and Mrs Boyd sucked in a shocked breath that turned into a coughing fit.

“What has he DONE to my basement?” she demanded as she hung onto the door frame and retched.

Cops carried the detritus of Clade’s life into the station in sealed bags, faces averted. Filthy clothes, bloody hooks and rope, and a desktop computer that dropped maggots out of the keyboard when it was moved.

“You took a swing,” Kip said as he pulled his jacket on. His piebald hair curled wet around his ears, fresh from the station shower. “And you missed. Better luck next time...once you’ve sorted through all this shit.”

He slid his glasses on and walked out of the station.

Luke scowled at the breadth of Kip’s departing shoulders. A cool hand slapped his shoulder a moment later.

“Ignore him,” Madoc said as he signed the last form and passed the folder off to a uniformed cop. “It was a good call.”

“We didn’t catch him.”

Madoc shrugged as he slouched back in the chair. He was all long legs and lean muscle, out of place elegance against the worn office chair under him.

“You can’t win them all, Bennett,” he said. “That’s what people say.”

“Not in my family,” Luke said. “Not in the BITERs either.”

A dry smile tucked the corner of Madoc’s mouth. “He’s not dead yet,” he said. “Maybe you’ll get another chance. Go back to the hotel, Luke. Get some rest. We’re leaving for Philadelphia tomorrow.”

He swivelled the chair back around.

Luke wanted to argue. What was he going to say, though? He’d no idea what Clade would do now. Well, that was a lie. Clade would kill again, he needed to and he’d taken his weapons with him when he ran. That, Luke was sure about. It was where. Or when.

Of course, he didn’t *have* to know. His Dad had always said, people don’t know what they want until you tell them.

“Give me twenty four hours,” he said.

Madoc glanced around at him. “Why?”

The truth wouldn’t go over well. Luke already knew that. “If Clade hasn’t left town, he is going to have strike again soon. Maybe—“

Madoc narrowed his eyes in suspicion. There was a hint of lines at the corners. Not quite wrinkles, but almost there. Most dhampirs were turned by their Anakim parents when they were still dewy. Madoc had wear on him.

It was distractingly attractive, and still a bad idea.

“Tomorrow evening,” he offered. “That will give Quick time to crack Clade’s computer for the local PD and turn up anything useful.”

## Chapter Ten

The main reason Luke had picked Gwen Elliot, local DJ and aspiring shock jock, for the interview was that she was an Anakim groupie. The main problem was that she was an Anakim groupie.

“You have to tell me,” she said as she leaned in to the microphone. “Is Pally as dreamy as he looks on the news broadcasts.”

Luke thought of the slim, blond undead with the dead shark eyes. He trusted Pally at his back—more or less—but he’d never considered how hot the man looked on TV. Or, if he had at some point, he didn’t want that opinion broadcast for the world—or at least the local affiliate audience—to hear.

“That’s the sort of thing that makes shared locker rooms uncomfortable,” he said. “He’s certainly a valued member of the team.”

“Of course, more than you,” Gwen said. She laughed when Luke raised an eyebrow at her. “I mean, you’re new, right? The only current human BITER. For now.”

There it was.

“Well, actually,” Luke said as he shifted in the chair. “The Kiss isn’t part of my employment package.”

“Oh, right,” Gwen said. She reached over and flicked a button to cue up the sound of waves. “You’re Cali born. No heartbeat, no service, right?”

“As a VINE agent, I can assure you that sort of prejudice isn’t acceptable there either,” Luke said smoothly. “The Anakim citizens of California are as valued members of society as any other.”

Valued, but watched.

“No,” he pressed on. “I’m actually immune to the Kiss. So this is the only life I get.”

Gwen gave him a stunned look, like he’d just admitted to a terminal illness on the air. He supposed, like Clade, he had. Life was a slow way to die, but inevitable

For some.

“Oh.” Gwen said as she realised there was dead air. “I’m sorry. That

must be...wow...that's amazing that you're a BITER with that on your file."

"I'm very good," Luke said. The back of his neck itched with discomfort, and he decided that was enough honesty for one day. It made for a better lie, but there was no need to get carried away. He offered Gwen the chance to change the topic. "I might not be Anakim, but I'm as good as anyone else on the team. Agent Madoc expects nothing less."

Gwen was uncomfortable enough she jumped on the opportunity to talk about something else.

"Now that is a terrifying man," she purred. "The stories he could tell, so does he...?"

At the end of the hour Luke took his leave of Gwen, collected his coat from the reception, and checked his phone. Five calls from Madoc. He hesitated as he headed out into the heat-scented night. It wasn't a conversation he could avoid, but...

Before he could decide whether he wanted to listen to his messages or not, the phone rang. Luke grimaced and swiped to answer.

"I know what I'm doing—" he started.

"So do I," Madoc interrupted him voice harsh. In the background Luke could hear Kip swearing at the other cars on the road. "You think you can tempt Clade into attacking you?"

"He needs a final sacrifice," Luke said. "And I think it needs to be someone he identifies as another predator. That's what the Anakim do, prey on other predators."

"Why would he risk it?"

Luke shouldered the door to the radio station open. "Because he's ill, and he doesn't want to die. If I'm wrong—you can make Kip's day and ship me back to Los Angeles"

The voice on the other end of the line, cold and precise, was what Luke imagined the Blood Cardinal had sounded like.

"Don't expect to get off that easy," Madoc purred. "Your ass is mine."

Luke swallowed the tickle of inappropriate heat in his throat. The heavy glass doors clicked shut behind him and Luke fished in his pocket for the rental keys. He headed across the dark car park toward the pale blue Toyota.

"Hang back," he said. "If Clade is going to met a move, I don't want to

scare him off.”

He thumbed the fob to open the car doors. The lights flashed twice and the bomb underneath went off with a ragged thump of noise. The explosion lifted the car off the ground as it punched up through it, the inside full of flames, and blew Luke off his feet.

His back hit another car. He felt the metal buckle under his shoulder-blades and then the world greyed out around him. When it came back Luke was on the ground, tarmac hot under him, and he ached dully. His back twinged as he moved and his face felt hot and tight, sunburned. A high pitched whine rattled dimly in his ears under the static of the explosion.

*Up. Move.*

He ignored the sharp pain in his back as he rolled onto his and shoved himself awkwardly to his feet. One arm wasn't working. It dangled uncooperatively from his shoulder, full of ground-glass pain that scraped at the affronted joint.

*Ignore it.*

Luke shook his head to try and clear his ears. He'd not expected Clade to act so soon, but this was what he'd wanted. More or less. He gritted his teeth and pulled his gun.

His rental car sat in its own small crater in the middle of the car park, still smouldering inside. The cars nearby had broken windows and blistered paint. The stuttered flash of lights suggested the alarms were going off, even if he couldn't hear through his muffled ears.

There was no sign of anyone nearby. Luke, gun held low in front of him, turned around to scan the outskirts of the area. Inside the radio station he saw a man peer through the shattered doors, a phone pressed to his ear.

Despite everything Luke grinned to himself, a quick, hard grimace of an expression. He'd been right about Clade.

A flicker of something in the corner of his eye--deliberate movement in the chaotic flash of broken lights and fire--made him turn. A man froze, halfway out from behind a car, as Luke raised his gun to point it at him, eyes frightened and his face filthy.

For a second Luke thought it was someone who'd been caught in the explosion, but then his brain caught up that it wasn't filth it was paint. The face under it had familiar lines, too.

“Darren,” Luke said. His voice felt too loud in his throat, but he could

barely hear it. “What the--”

“You killed her,” Darren spat. His mouth contorted like he’d yelled it. Tears cut through the camo smeared over his face and he pulled his lips back from broken teeth filed into ghoulish points. “Now we’re going to kill you.”

We. So Luke hadn’t been wrong about Clade, just about him working alone.

Darren lunged at him, mouth open and his own blood smeared over home-made fangs. He looked like a monster, but he was still human. Luke over-ruled the muscle-memory of years of training and dropped his aim to the centre of mass. He fired twice. The first bullet hit Darren in the shoulder and obliterated it in a spray of blood and bone. The second blew through his stomach.

Surprise flickered over Darren’s face and he staggered into Luke. Blood dripped out down Luke’s front, soaked through his shirt, and Darren chewed at the air.

“Not...not fair,” he gargled out. “I don’t want to die.”

Luke lowered him to the ground and stripped off his jacket. He wadded it up and shoved into the hole in Darren’s stomach.

“Hold onto that, and maybe you won’t,” he said. It hadn’t occurred to him that a compulsive killer could have their own Goat. The assumption was that killers like Clade were too disorganised to work in groups, but Luke should have considered that was wrong as well. “Where’s Clade?”

Darren smiled.

Fuck.

Luke threw himself to the side. His shoulder screamed with pain as it hit the tarmac, but the bullet that would have taken his throat out skimmed a hot line over his cheek and punched into the heavy rubber of a car tyre.

“We’ll...burn...out the weakness in our blood,” Darren rasped out unevenly. “Then we can be, like them.”

Luke scrambled into the shelter of a nearby car. He blotted his face on his sleeve.

“Mr Clade,” he yelled. “Anakim don’t kill with guns. It’s hand to hand, tooth to throat, death magic against the living world. It’s only us unrisen monkeys that need tools.”

He worked his jaw to pop his ears. The rattled hid died down enough that he could hear the hoarse snort of laughter nearby.

“I’ll kill you by hand,” Clade said. “But I’ll run you down first, bleed you out.”

Luke shifted his gaze towards the direction of Clade’s voice. “You know this isn’t going to work,” he said conversationally. “It’s just your madness.”

Another shot rang out. It splintered the window over Luke’s head. Glass splinters rained down on him. He shook them out of his hair.

“You’re wrong,” Clade yelled. His voice cracked as reality fought with what he *needed* to believe. “I’m different now. Stronger. Faster. When I take the Kiss, I’ll be found worthy.”

“Who’s going to bite you?” Luke asked. He exhaled, gritted his teeth against the pain, and dashed across the car park toward the shelter of an oversized SUV. Bullets pocked the tarmac at his heels. He stumbled once, a sharp cry of pain rough in his throat, just before he lurched behind the heavy bumper of the truck. “I blew Nina’s brains out.”

Clade laughed.

“He’ll bite me,” he said. There was something like worship in his voice. “When he sees how I’ve elevated myself. The Cardinal himself will open my throat and make me...*his*.”

Luke shuddered. He leaned his head back against the SUV and took a deep breath of the air, smoke and burnt gas smell thick on his tongue. As attractive as he found Madoc, the thought of the man’s teeth in his throat still made Luke’s skin crawl in a mixture of instinctive fear and learned distaste.

“I don’t think you’re his type,” he said. “The only reason Nina wanted you is because she restricted her prey pool. A man who’s got a choice from all the gourmet restaurants in the world, isn’t going to decide to pick a dried out cheese sandwich.”

The comparison made him laugh. It was as much adrenaline that snorted out of his nose as humour, but it served to inflame Clade’s temper.

“I was beautiful,” Clade screamed. Closer now. “He loved me, Benedict *loved* me. It’s only because I was like this that he left. When I’m beautiful again--”

Luke stepped out from behind the car. He’d been close in his estimation of how close Clade was, maybe a few inches off. Clade flinched as he stared down the barrel of Luke’s gun--if he’d been the rank that Luke thought, he knew that the bullets would kill whatever Clade imagined himself to be--and

licked his lips. His hands tightened around the gun he carried. It was a simple hunter's rifle, that was the point after all.

"Put the gun down, and your hands behind your head," Luke said. "Or I'll send you to join Nina."

Clade smiled and his chapped lips split. "Death is for humans," he said. "The dark god of the forest has promised me more. He came through the doctors and whispered in me ears. He offered me freedom from the insult of my blood."

"No," Luke said. "He didn't. Put the gun down."

"You're just prey," Clade said. "Just a firefly, born to die."

He raised the rifle. Luke pulled a sour face at the loss to the asylum and fired. This time he didn't fight his instincts and the bullet sheared through Clade's eye and blew out the back of his head. Clade grinned lopsidedly at him with what was left of his face, as his eye dripped down his cheek.

"The dead don't die," he slurred out and tightened his finger on the rifle.

Luke inhaled, but before he could do anything the shadows cast by the flickering fire tore open and Madoc stepped out. He grabbed Clade's head in elegant hands and ripped it off his shoulders with a sharp twist and jerk. This time Clade dropped like Luke had expected.

"That," Madoc said precisely as he put Clade's head down into the dead man's lap. "Is why Anakim don't kill with guns, Agent Bennett."

Kip grabbed Luke under the arms to prop him as the adrenaline gave up the ghost.

It was two days later before they got onto the plane to Philadelphia. Luke sat in the plush leather chair, his arm--which had been a cracked collarbone as well as a dislocated shoulder--strapped over his chest and a pad of gauze taped to the side of his face. He had wrenched his knee too, which he hadn't noticed in the confusion of the night, and had minor burns and blisters that had just been left to heal.

"If you do anything like that again, I'll make sure you never go into the field again," Madoc said as he finished his blistering dressing down. "I don't train my BITERs to lose them. Understood?"

Luke nodded. He reached for his glass of soda. "It did work though."

On the other side of the plane, supposedly engrossed in his next mission's briefing, Kip snorted out a laugh. Madoc gave him an exasperated look and then let the corner of his mouth tilt in a half-smile.

"One way to describe it," he said. His drink was whiskey, threaded with blood, and he sipped it as he studied Luke. "Was what you said the truth? You're immune to the Kiss?"

It had always been something to be proud of, a family trait and an immunity that the other Western VINE agents envied. For the first time in his life Luke felt a twinge of regret as he confirmed it.

"I am," he said. He drowned the weird, conflicted feeling with a gulp of icy cola and crooked a smile at Madoc. "Just one life. It's enough."

Madoc studied him a second longer and then nodded. He reached over and gripped Luke's good forearm in a cool hand.

"Then we'll just have to make the most of you, while we have you," he said.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



TA Moore is a Northern Irish writer of romantic suspense, urban fantasy, and contemporary romance novels. A childhood in a rural, seaside town fostered in her a suspicious nature, a love of mystery, and a streak of black humour a mile wide. As her grandmother always said, ‘she’d laugh at a bad thing that one’, mind you, that was the pot calling the kettle black. TA Moore studied History, Irish mythology, English at University, mostly because she has always loved a good story. She has worked as a journalist, a finance manager, and in the arts sectors before she finally gave in to a lifelong desire to write.

Coffee, Doc Marten boots, and good friends are the essential things in life. Spiders, mayo, and heels are to be avoided.

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