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"The Glass Vampire"

By

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Prologue: In the Dark

Stinging pain flared across the side of Richard Colchester's face as a second rock hit him in the jaw. He staggered away from the alley and pressed his back against the worn bricks of his apartment building. His heart crashed against the inside of his ribcage, a sensation that had once been a rare occurrence but which now happened all too often. Vampires were not meant to have a measurable pulse.

Even as he entertained the possibility that these disgruntled youths had kidnapped or killed his missing vampire brethren, he dismissed the idea. Their harassment had been blunt and ill-planned at best. Despite that, they still posed a threat.

A strong wind shook the skeletal branches of the maple trees that lined the street in front of him causing them to rattle like unsettled bones. He blinked and looked first left and then right,

frantically searching for anyone who might be able to help, but the sidewalk was empty, the shops closed for the night and the apartment buildings seemingly devoid of life.

“Bah,” he muttered. No one would lift a finger to help him. The average person hated his kind.

"What's the matter, vampire, you afraid of the dark?" The teenager's voice, loud and overconfident, came from the alley.

Richard rubbed his bruised face and looked at the dark, gaping maw of the alley. At this angle, he could not see inside, but he knew with certainty that his enemies lurked within, waiting for him like the pathetic curs that they were. It never ceased to amaze him how little mankind had changed over the past one thousand years. It was true that technology had advanced, women had gained equal rights, wars had been fought, land had changed hands, but there was very little difference between the teenagers who terrorized him and the French peasants who had hunted him during the Middle-Ages. Humans were always eager and willing to pick up their proverbial pitchforks and torches.

He sidled up to the corner of the opening and risked a quick look, squinting against the darkness within. In the ambient light provided by the buzzing streetlights behind him, he could just make out several large crates and a dumpster resting against the brick wall near the middle of the alley. Beyond that, a single door led into his apartment building and safety. As a vampire, it was the only portal through which he was allowed to enter. His manager, Lyle, had been kind enough to rent him a room at all. If he wanted him to be discreet and use the rear entrance, he would do just that. He sighed. Once, liveried servants would have come running to greet him. His lip curled into a sneer at the thought of how far he had fallen and at his own weakness in

dwelling on that which he could not change. He shook himself. There was no time for self-pity or for thinking about the ‘Good Old Days.’

He pulled back, sniffed the air and listened. The salty tang of the ocean tickled his nostrils and he heard water dripping from somewhere ahead, but of his would-be attackers he could detect nothing. He clenched his fists. Once, he would have been able to sense their body heat, their movement and the very beating of their hearts from half a mile away; now he could barely see in the dark. He looked up at the black, roiling clouds hanging low in the sky. The universe could not even provide him a moon to see by.

He gritted his teeth, careful to keep his fangs sheathed, and wondered what other humiliations they would come up with for tonight. If only he had a sword, his sword, he might have been able to present a more formidable front. At the sight of his long lost blade, they would probably soil themselves. He smiled for an instant, but it quickly slipped into a frown as his anger swallowed any good feelings he might have had.

Damn the Agency for tying his hands and preventing him from even defending himself as any human could. Should he attempt any violence against these youths, the Agency would toss him back into the vampire camps. His throat tightened at the thought. He had been free of that mud-soaked hellhole for nearly two years, but the tortured memories of the pain he had endured there would never fade. He closed his eyes, pressing away such hideous thoughts. He could never go back there. Death would be preferable.

“No...” he cursed under his breath. There could not be an Alamo for him, no last stand against his enemies. If he perished, then he would never know who SHE was, never free her from whatever terrible fate had befallen her a millennia ago. He had to survive, had to continue to search.

"Come on, blood sucker!" A second young man yelled, his voice quaking with excitement. "You can't stay out forever."

Richard discarded his thoughts, crouched low and opened his eyes again. He instinctively reached for his powers, but found only cold disappointment. He could feel his supernatural energies lurking just beneath the surface, tickling his soul from beneath an invisible barrier. He continued to reach into the core of his being, calling to the energies within. His body shook and sweat beaded on his forehead. And then something different happened.

A thin wisp of fog drifted past, so small that he might not have seen it if he hadn't been looking directly at the cracked pavement where it appeared. A sliver of hope blossomed within him as he realized he had breached the wall and for an instant had touched his past and his power. His momentary joy quickly vanished, however, as the mist evaporated as quickly as it had appeared.

"Damn." He slammed his fist into his open palm. That simple manifestation of his abilities was more than he had been able to do since they had striped him of the supernatural attributes of his nature. Perhaps something had changed; perhaps the virus' hold on him was weakening. He held his breath as the epiphany settled into his consciousness. Given time, he might eventually be able rend a hole in the viral shield.

A baseball bounced off the ground near his feet and rolled into the street. He gasped, his shoulders tensing as they always had before battle. His assailants had hurled insults at him in the beginning. Later it had been water balloons and rotten fruit. Then rocks, but they had never used anything as big or as potentially dangerous. Their increased weaponry lent credence to what he already knew. If he did not face them soon and give them bloody noses, they would eventually

resort to more serious violence and possibly do him great harm. He had to find a way to defeat them, without hurting them.

He frowned and ran through the options in his head. He could call the police for an escort knowing that they would probably ignore his request or he could simply step into the alley and allow them to pummel him. Facing such an attack and surviving it, often achieved the same goal as the bloody nose, although it was a good deal riskier and more painful.

Glass shattered against the alley's worn cobblestones as they switched their weapons of choice yet again. Richard tensed. He might be just one of the boys now, but he had centuries of experience and skill to draw upon. He doubted the teenagers could truly be prepared for that. All he had to do was show bravery in the face of their onslaught and they would abandon their foolish quest.

A glint of light hit the tracking manacle on his left arm where it emerged from under his black dress shirt. He never knew when the Agency might be watching, but to expect assistance from that quarter was utter folly. More likely, they would simply sit back and listen to the show over the manacle's audio pickups.

Someone whistled.

"Come on, wimp!"

"Why don't you come out and use your superpowers on us!" A young woman spoke this time, her voice pinched with anxious anticipation. "Oh wait, you don't have any!"

Richard took a deep breath. It was time to act. Hoping that his intelligence and cleverness would be enough to get him out of his predicament, he stepped into the opening.

"Very well, my friends. Was there something you wished to tell me?"

He strode confidently down the center of the alley, stopped just shy of the dumpster and eyed the door to his apartment building longingly. Beyond that, a brick wall blocked the far end of the passage. There was no way out, a perfect place for an ambush. Perhaps these children were not as foolish as he thought. His eyes slid back to the trash receptacle and he frowned. It sat at an odd angle offering an excellent hiding place for any would-be attackers. He took a long slow breath, held it and then released it. In the early years of undead existence, he would have ripped their throats out. Later, when he had learned that he did not need to kill to survive, he might have sampled their blood and frightened them. At the very least, he could have called the fog to hide his passage. Now all he could do was call a cab, if he could make it to a pay phone.

"Why don't you prove that you are not afraid of me by showing yourselves?" He spread his arms wide and offered his best, disarming smile.

"I ain't afraid." As he had anticipated, a broad-shouldered young man, clad in a red and white high school jacket and blue jeans, stepped from the concealment of the trash bin. His short, blond hair and blue eyes marked him as the child of one of Seattle's Norwegian families, possibly from the Ballard neighborhood.

The leader.

Four similarly dressed young men followed him, fanning out to block the path to Richard's door. They stopped and watched him. The one on the far right carried a basket filled with stones. The girl Richard had heard was nowhere to be seen.

"Harassing a vampire is not generally considered to be adult behavior. Why don't you just tell me what it is that you want of me and we can work this out like civilized people." He did not expect this approached to work. The lies spread about vampires by the Agency's propaganda machine had taken their toll. That, coupled with the evil undead portrayed in movies, had

everyone convinced that vampires were all crazed bloodsuckers bent on the destruction of mankind.

The leader's angular face split into a grin and he pointed up.

"Ask them."

Panic wrapped Richard's chest. He threw himself against the wall, unsure what was about to happen, but certain it would not be good. Three cinderblocks smashed on cobblestones where he had been standing. So much for finesse, these youths were trying to kill him! Adrenaline seared his veins lending energy to his flight as he sprinted back the way he had come.

"Get him!" The leader bellowed.

The walls blurred past, rocks whizzed by and another block smashed on the pavement in front of him. He slipped on the rubble and nearly lost his balance, but managed to regain his footing and keep moving. His shoulder throbbed as a sharp chunk hit it. The light at the end of the proverbial tunnel slanted as his balance shifted, but still he ran.

"He's getting away!" The girl cried from the rooftop.

"Let him go!" The leader ordered.

The alley erupted in a chorus of mocking laughter.

"See you around, Vamp!" One of them yelled after him.

Richard was breathing hard when he reached the sidewalk, but he kept on running. He stopped four blocks later in front of a small convenience store, and leaned against a forest green SUV to catch his breath. As he stood there gasping for air, shame and despair scorched his face. The group of teenagers nearly killed him. Had they succeeded, it would have meant more than just his death. His thousand-year quest for the vampire who made him would have died with him leaving her trapped in a living death state for all time. His body trembled at the thought as if

something deep within him reacted to that thought on a genetic level, proving that although he could not remember who she was, they still shared a connection.

A car sped past, jarring him. He blinked against its bright headlights and looked back towards his sad little home. His enemies had successfully denied him access to his designated apartment entrance. If Lyle caught him entering through the front door, he could have him evicted. He balled his fists. Ten years ago no one would have been able to touch him, nor would they have even believed he existed...now he was but a glass copy of his former self, fragile and breakable.

He glanced up at the low, ominous clouds overhead, breathed in the damp air and clenched his teeth. Somehow, he would find a way to recapture what he had lost...and then he would find *her*.

Richard closed the door, locked the deadbolt, and lowered the metal bar into place. He pressed his back against the wall of his cramped entryway, closed his eyes and breathed a sigh of relief. He had made it inside undetected. For the moment, he was safe. Turning, he opened his eyes and surveyed his pathetic flat.

It was the smallest apartment he had ever seen. In his other lives he would have considered it to be small even for servant's quarters. His twin bed, with its faded blue comforter and flattened pillows, filled nearly the entire width with barely a foot of space on either side. In front of it, a small, cracked sink and an antiquated toilet nestled against the front left corner opposite a minute yellow-tiled countertop on which a dented toaster oven barely fit. Richard was not sure why Lyle had given him the toaster. It was not as if he could eat human food. He had

thought about returning it, but decided to keep it in the hopes that at some point he might actually have human friends and those extremely hypothetical friends might want to enjoy his hospitality. It was a far cry from the grand ballroom of his manor near York, where hundreds of nobles and wealthy merchants had gathered at his invitation, but it was all he had. He sighed. It was better than the vampire camps.

A shiver ran through him. Anything was better than the camps.

He removed his patchwork wool overcoat and tossed it into the pile of clothes that filled the crack between the right hand side of the bed and the wall. Next, he went for the mini-fridge wedged beneath the sink. There were only two blood-packs and a frozen blood bar left within. Opting for a liquid meal, he grabbed one of the hospital style packs, removed the top, and took a sip.

It had taken him a long time to get used to cold, cloned blood, but it provided the necessary nourishment he required and was preferable to starving. The fluid oozed down his throat causing warm lust to rise within him. He shook, and his face flushed as a tingling sensation swept through his body. His fangs elongated from his canine teeth despite his attempt to keep them dormant. His desire for fresh blood made him dizzy and he had to fight hard against the urge to hunt. In his present condition, he was no stronger than the average human being, and whereas once he might have used his mental abilities to assist him, those too had been denied to him. Chilled by his grim circumstance, the heady feeling passed quickly.

He looked up and the photograph of Donna caught his eye. She was young and beautiful in the picture, her round face filled with color and framed by a head of shimmering blonde hair. Her green eyes sparkled with joy as she looked lovingly at him in the special way a child looks at her parents. He had thought adoption would fill the void created by the deaths of his past human

relationships, but just as it had been difficult to watch former mates grow old and die, so it had been with her. She had died eleven years ago, almost a year to the day before the announcement, before he had lost his powers. On that day, a part of him had perished with her, but surprisingly, her adult children had stepped in to fill that void. She had led a rich life, married a good man and raised three children of her own, and in turn they had had children. Through all of that family building, she had kept his secret safe, never telling even her husband what he really was. And through the use of his powers, Richard had been able to insinuate himself into her extended family without raising any suspicions. After the announcement, when they had learned the truth about him, he had avoided them, fearing that any contact would place them in danger from the minions of the Agency. Even now, protected by the Vampire's Right's Act, he dared not approach them.

It was fortunate that Donna had not lived long enough to see what had become of him. Even at age ninety-four, she would certainly have fought for him and such actions would have cost her dearly. No, it was better that she had never known his fate.

He frowned, wondering briefly why the agents had taken all of his wealth and possessions but had allowed him to keep that picture. Perhaps Frederick Cortez, the man who had made it his life's work to capture him, had felt sorry for him. Despite their bitter enmity, he did not believe that Frederick was an evil man. Righteous perhaps, but not evil.

He chuckled bitterly and sat down on the end of his bed. Reaching into his pocket, he retrieved the small, glass figurine he kept with him at all times. It was a replica of a knight, standing with arms crossed, sword sheathed. When he had spied it at the Junk Shop, he had used some of his meager salary to buy it. It had come to be representative of his predicament. He had been a knight of good reputation a thousand years ago. After that, he had become a vampire of

incredible power. Now, he was a fragile shadow of his former self, who, like his glass knight, could be easily shattered. He sighed and stared at the floor sadly. How far he had fallen.

He took a deep breath to center himself. Self-deprecation could not serve any purpose. Instead, he retrieved his newspaper from his overcoat's inner pocket and sat back on the bed against one of his poor excuses for a pillow. He opened the rolled up paper. The main headline read, "Questor Probe Continues."

Richard ignored it. The self-destruction of a biotech company, even one as big and important to Seattle's economy as Questor, did not concern him. Instead, he thumbed his way towards the back of the first section where he found what he was looking for. Under a segment called Vampire Tidbits, he found a small heading entitled, "New Leads Bring Small Hope". A short paragraph read:

Investigators in the Seattle Police Departments Undead Crimes Division believe they are closer to finding the two missing vampires. According to Lieutenant John Maynard, new evidence indicates that several humans might have been involved in the disappearances.

And that was the extent of the daily vampire news segment. There had been a time after the Announcement when people had eagerly awaited the latest news on the roundup of Richard and his kind and they had not had to dig through the paper to find it. For nearly a year after the Announcement, he and his fellows had sought to evade and even fight back against the Agency. Of course, such a conflict could only have ended in one way. The fact that Richard and so many other vampires had survived was nothing short of a miracle. They had the vampire rights activists to thank for it. If left up to the Republican hard liners, he and everyone like him would have been staked and left in the sunlight for good measure.

The one thing he had hoped for from such a news section in his paper was to find a clue to *her* location. One thousand years of searching with his full vampiric abilities had yielded nothing, making it certain that whatever had befallen her had been accomplished by a vampire of such age and raw power that he or she was capable of completely shielding her from Richard. Now, however, with every vampire on earth reduced to shadows of themselves, he had a chance. Despite that, ten years in his current pathetic state had produced the same results as the rest of his questing. He had no reason to believe the recent disappearances had anything to do with *her* and there had been nothing else in the vampire news section to shed any light on what might have happened to his mysterious sire so long ago. Still, he hoped.

Beneath the segment on the missing vampires, a smaller article entitled, “Vampires take jobs from Migrant Workers,” discussed the problems that the vampire rights movement had caused among the farm laborers of Washington’s wine country. A third article talked about the historical benefits gained from direct interviews with vampires. Richard shrugged. At least the news wasn’t all bad.

He tossed the paper to the floor, slid lower on the bed and closed his eyes. He had a good three hours before his shift started. Perhaps some sleep, however uneasy, might help him to focus on the problems that plagued him. He concentrated on slowing his breathing and allowing his mind to drift. Soon, his conscious mind slipped into unnerving dreams where his young teenager assailants chased him across the medieval French countryside with pitchforks and shovels....

Richard awoke to the shrill wailing of his tracking bracelet’s alarm clock. He opened his eyes wide, all thoughts of his situation flying from his mind. It was ten-thirty PM. He had slept

longer than he had intended, and as a result, he would be hard pressed to make it to work on time.

"Damn." He sprang from bed, grabbed his coat and darted out the door, heading this time for the rear of the building, chancing that the teenagers had left by now.

His guess was proven right as he exited the building and found the alley devoid of any threats. He sprinted with mere human speed, past the dumpster and out onto sidewalk and into the night.

As it had been earlier, the traffic on Stone Way was light as he headed south towards the nearest bus stop. The road sloped gently towards Lake Union. A mix of old bungalow style houses, 1970's apartment buildings and newer more modern condominiums stood to either side all the way to the marinas and shipyards at the water. Beyond the distant docks, several boats bobbed on the water, barely visible in the dim light provided by their running lights and the luminescence coming from the houseboats that nestled against much of the lake's shoreline. Far in the distance, the skyscrapers of downtown winked at him like the lights on a Yule tree. Richard had often marveled at the beauty of that particular view, however he barely gave it a second thought this time.

He reached the small, open bus stop canopy but did not go inside. Although it was still cloudy, it was not raining. And even if it had been, vampires were not permitted to enter the structure per Seattle City ordinance number 1876. He did not have to stand there long. Mere moments after he arrived, his carriage approached. He could see that it was crowded, with a person in every window and the indistinct shapes of people standing in the aisle. He swallowed nervously, wondering if he would make it onboard. The massive green and yellow double-sectioned bus pulled up with a hiss. It's front doors opened and a heavyset dark-skinned man

turned towards him. On his console next to his steering wheel, the red vampire indicator flashed. Richard frowned at the light.

“I’m sorry, son. There isn’t any room for vampires.” The man’s voice was calm and even sympathetic. He waved to him. “You’ll have to catch the next one.”

Richard sighed. There was nothing he could do.

“Close the door!” one of the female passengers shouted.

“Yeah, leave his bitch ass there!” a young man added.

A chorus of angry shouts and jeers followed.

“You’d best back off a few steps.” The driver closed the door and the bus pulled away.

“See you later, vamp!” a young woman shouted out the window.

“Sinner!” another chimed in.

And then they were gone and Richard remained standing there. The last woman had called him a sinner. He almost found it amusing. It was true that he had sinned, but he freely admitted it and often regretted such behaviors. Humans, on the other hand, were quick to use their own religious beliefs to justify their own sad or terrible behavior. They had apparently forgotten how religion had brought such wonderful things to the world as the Crusades, the Spanish Inquisition, and the Salem Witch Trials. And even in the modern world when people used religion as an excuse to blow up innocent civilians, they still failed to see the irony and the hypocrisy.

He shook his head, silently wishing that he could find a way to make every one of them pay. He would show them repentance...

The next bus arrived mere minutes after the first. It screeched to a halt in front of him, the doors opened and a gaunt looking man in a tilted driver’s cap stared at him without comment.

Richard took this as an invitation, not that he needed one. He made sure his tracking bracelet was out of site beneath his coat sleeve and climbed aboard. Trying his best to appear inconspicuous, and hoping the passengers hadn't noticed the red indicator light on the driver's console, he moved along towards the vampire section at the rear.

The bus was perhaps one third full, with men and women representing a broad span of ages spread out through the cabin. Most of them wore coats of one type or another against the fall chill and the strong possibility of rain. They did not pay any attention to him, instead looking out the windows or at the floor in an apparent effort to be antisocial. Halfway back, however, a young girl with golden pigtails and a sweet cherub like face glanced up at him with wide blue eyes. She smiled at him.

Richard paused, pleasantly shocked by her innocent kindness. He nodded to her.

Her look dissolved into a frightened stare and she pointed.

"Vampire!" She began to cry.

"Leave us alone, devil!" Her mother put a protective arm around the girl and glared at him.

"I...I'm sorry," Richard stammered. "I was only being polite."

"Get away from us!" An elderly woman waved an umbrella at him.

"Yeah, get out of our section!" A man in a business suit ordered, hefting a briefcase menacingly.

Ignoring the old woman and resisting the urge to strangle the man with his neck tie, Richard bowed his head and hurried to the rear of the bus where a small section of very uncomfortable, plastic seats awaited. A V on the floor marked it as the vampire area. Sitting in the rear was historically humiliating and Richard had to wonder what Rosa Parks or Martin

Luther King might have said about putting vampires there. Regardless, at least he was allowed to ride for free. All he had to do was scan his bracelet on the way out. True, it was a way for the Agency to verify his location against its internal GPS system.

As the bus pulled away from the curb, heading towards Aurora Ave and downtown, he glanced at his bracelet. It was ten forty-nine. He would never make it, but at this point there was little to do but wait. He settled in and frowned out the window.

A short while later the bus driver deftly maneuvered the massive vehicle up to a stop near a pedestrian overpass on highway ninety-nine. Richard could just make out the dim outline of a person in a bulky coat standing there but could not make out any further details.

The doors opened and a man in a faded, but thick winter coat climbed aboard. He slipped on one of the steps and barely caught himself. He recovered and then staggered towards the rear as they pulled away from the curb. Richard did not need heightened senses to recognize a drunk. The man, probably homeless, could barely stand, and the stench of alcohol and body odor quickly filled the entire bus. The vagrant continued back passed the other passengers. They did their best to completely ignore him and even the little girl did not pay him any attention. Finally, he reached the last row before the V section.

Now that he was closer, Richard could see the man's leathery, weather beaten face. His eyes were clouded, his hair stood up in all directions and half of his teeth were missing. He peered at Richard from beneath bushy eyebrows, looked at the section sign and then back at him.

"Vampires," he mumbled and proceeded to spit at Richard's feet. Without waiting for a response, he spun wobbly on one heel, stumbled back into the middle of the bus and then collapsed sideways across three seats.

Richard leaned back, his eyes suddenly moist. Once, he had been hated and feared only by those who believed in vampires. Now, he was hated and feared equally by everyone. To have such emotion constantly directed towards him was disheartening and for a moment, he again wondered if it might have been better if he had died in the camps along with so many others. Even as he thought it, however, his soul railed against it. He had to survive, had to save *her*.

He focused on the trees on the hill to their right and listened to the drone of the bus, trying to find a moment of peace in its steady rhythm. He found none.

"You know that I supported Craig's decision to hire you, Richard... but this is the fourth day in a row you've been at least three minutes late for work." Joe Drew stood between the large plate glass windows and the oval conference-room table.

The man would have stood several inches shorter than Richard were it not for his spiked hair. The blond spears protruding from his head contrasted humorously with his zigzagged wool sweater, bellbottomed jeans and cork sandals. Richard forced himself not to laugh and allowed the man to stare him down for a moment. Joe finally toned down his stern gaze and looked away seemingly satisfied that he had gotten his point across.

Richard nodded his understanding and glanced out the window. Several skyscrapers, lit up like Christmas Trees, formed a colossal frame around the dark waters of Elliot Bay. If he had been alone, he might have found the view soothing, but with Joe standing there, his goatee fixed in place around a mouth that rarely smiled, it offered him little solace.

He shifted his weight from the balls of his feet to his heels and returned his attention to his supervisor.

"I understand your position, Joe, however I feel inclined to mention the trouble I had with-"

"Richard." Joe put up one hand. "I don't care why. If you're having trouble getting here for your shift, then you need to leave earlier." He brushed the front of his sweater and walked around the table.

Richard forced himself to remain where he was. This was the part where Joe would pretend they were friends. He knew from experience that it was in his best interest to play along with the man. He did his best to appear repentant, nodding his understanding and frowning as if frustrated with himself. Sure enough, Joe reached over and put an arm around his shoulder, guiding him towards the door.

"Look, I understand that Vampire Americans have gone through a lot since the Announcement, and am also aware that the recent vampire disappearances might have you on edge, but unless you want your coworkers to start thinking of you as an Affirmative Action Employee, you need to ignore that other stuff, focus, and get your shit together. Okay?"

Richard resisted the break the man's nose. Even without super strength, he was still a former knight and vassal of William the Conqueror. It might have been a thousand years since he had trained on the grounds of the White Tower, but he had never let his martial skills slip. He was quite capable of crushing the cartilage on John's smug face. Of course, he was also smart enough and wise enough to know the futility of such a move. The Agency kept a cell with his name on it, waiting for the day that he went too far. And in light of the missing vampires, he hardly thought antagonizing the few people who treated him like a human being was a good idea.

"I'll do better. Thanks for your understanding." A little validation of Joe's 'people' skills couldn't hurt. "It's nice to work for such an open-minded individual."

Richard walked meekly out of the conference room and charted a course down the narrow aisle between dark offices on the right and a massive cubicle farm on the left. A single bank of fluorescent lights and several computer monitors cast a sickly glow and drew long shadows that reached towards him with dark fingers.

Just ahead, a small area of light pressed back the night. A small square of tall cubicle walls stood apart from the rest of the floor, rising above the surrounding offices and workstations like the tower of Saint Rule's Church. This structure, however, had no ancient stones, no religion, and no history. The walls were too high for Richard to see over, but he could hear the patter of keyboards and muffled booms as the other helpdesk representatives went about their nightly ritual of blasting through mindless computer games.

Thinking it fostered a better team atmosphere, Joe had removed most of the inner walls leaving a large open area around which Richard and his coworkers performed their duties. Richard rounded the corner and saw that his fellow helpdesk representatives clustered near a single PC on the left wall. Standing stiffly behind them in his trademark gray suit, Ray, their team lead and intermediary between them and Joe, watched with casual interest. He turned and offered Richard a half smile. Of all of his coworkers, Ray was the only one who ever treated him with anything resembling respect. More exactly, he treated him like a member of the group. Richard was uncertain as to his motives, but thought it possible that on some level Ray felt as out of place as he did. The man insisted on dressing in business attire for the graveyard shift,

something that the other Big River employees frowned upon. There seemed to be a secret mandate for them to dress like slobs.

Standing next to Ray, Bob's wardrobe contrasted starkly. As per usual, he wore a dirt-smearred, Hawaiian shirt and had his black dreadlocks tied back in an unruly ponytail. He watched over the Stan's shoulders as the widest member of their team played a first person shooter computer game.

Richard responded to Ray with a curt nod and crossed to his seat on the opposite corner. His desk space was spartan at best, having only a few procedural memos hanging on his one wall. In part, his choice of décor was motivated by his desire to remain as inconspicuous as possible among his peers, but since the Announcement, he barely had any possessions with which to decorate.

He removed the figurine of the knight from his pocket and set it on the desk next to his monitor. He switched on his CPU, logged into his phone and slipped his headset into place. It was true that vampires were invisible to video and still photography, but their voices carried quite nicely over phone lines making them ideal for technical support positions. That, coupled with their inability to venture forth in the daylight, made them perfect candidates for the graveyard shift. Thus, upon his release from the camps, he had endeavored to learn all he could about them.

"Turn the corner, turn the corner!" Bob shouted.

An explosion shook the room as Stan's subwoofer magnified the blast of the rotary cannon his computer-generated character fired.

"What is this evening's game of choice?" Richard swiveled his chair to face his teammates.

"Where is the dirt-bag?" Stan's voice was frantic and Richard could hear his thick sausage fingers pounding on the keyboard as he continued to shoot.

Bob raised his hands. "Slow down, he's in the next room! I've cleared this level already. Watch out, he's a fast blood sucker!"

Richard frowned. They had to be playing "Agency, the Early Years." It was their favorite game, perhaps because they knew it annoyed him, or perhaps because hunting vampires was just trendy. He pushed off the ground moving his chair backwards until he could see their game screen.

"Should I use the BFG instead of the rotary cannon?" Stan slowed his character's movement, stopping in the middle of a brown, stone passage.

No doubt the game's fictitious hero hunted vampires in some cold, wet dungeon. Everyone seemed to think vampires lived only in ruins or dank crypts. It was true that the foolish ones did, but they never survived very long. Occasionally, during times of strife, Richard had hidden in a basement or two, but that had always been a last resort.

"They're playing *Vampires*, again." Ray loosened his tie and lifted it up above his neck, pretending to strangle himself with it.

Richard smiled at the joke. "So I gathered." He turned back to his monitor, grabbed his mouse and launched his email.

"Look out!" Bob shouted.

The cannon blasted again, each shot echoing across the floor. Richard supposed that the there were no other employees in the building to care about the noise.

"He's moving too fast. I can't hit him."

"Turn, turn!" Bob ordered.

After one final explosion that shook Richard's chair and caused his computer screen to flicker, the game went silent.

"Shit!" Someone, presumably Stan, pounded their fist on their desk. "The bastard got me again!"

Richard ignored them, turning his attention instead to his email. With the exception of some spam advertising the latest sexual performance drugs and mortgage lenders, his inbox was empty. He sighed, feeling his soul sink a bit lower. He had not expected to find any email, really. Vampires were forbidden from having communications with one another and all of his human friends had abandoned him, or he them, after the Announcement. Every now and then, however, he received communications from scholars seeking firsthand accounts of various historical events he had witnessed. Richard realized that these learned men and women had no interest in him as a person, but it was still nice to receive attention. He was only too happy to tell them all he knew about a particular subject.

A drawer slammed behind him. "This game is so unrealistic. Vampires can't fly, and even if they could, how hard could they be to kill?"

Richard's inner voice told him to let the comment lie, but at least part of what Stan had said demanded a response. He turned towards them and smiled. "While it is true that vampires do not have the ability to fly, if this was at all realistic, you would be dead ten seconds into the game."

"Really?" Stan's voice dripped with venom. His chair groaned as he swiveled towards him. The fluorescent lights glittering off his thick glasses. "Did you tell that to the government when they released their virus and captured your ass?"

Richard clenched his fists and felt his face flushing with near human color.

"Yeah, Richard, all your magical powers didn't help you there." Bob laughed.

Richard slowly exhaled, never taking his eyes from them. Their ignorance screamed for a response he knew he could never deliver.

Ray stepped between them and raised his fist in the air revealing a kangaroo punching-puppet. "All right, guys, that's enough. We're all part of the same team." He made the kangaroo throw a few quick jabs. "Unless of course you want to mess with the kangaroo." He smiled broadly.

"Yeah, yeah." Stan turned back to his machine, unimpressed.

Ray's eyes narrowed ever so slightly and his smile slipped almost imperceptibly. It was the first time in several months of working together that he had ever noticed such an expression on the ever-cheerful man.

"Do you know what, Stan?" Ray's tone was calm and measured. "Maybe you should get back to work and quit with the slacking."

Stan swiveled back towards him, his expression unreadable. For a moment he said nothing.

"Are you serious, dude?" Bob broke their stalemate.

"Yes." The puppet fell to Ray's side as he fixed his gaze on him. "Richard is part of this team, and I've had just about enough of you two flipping him shit. Chill out.... Understood?"

"Yeah, man. No problem." Bob crossed to his own pc, flopped into his chair and put on his phone headset.

"Okay." Stan shrugged and returned to his beloved computer.

"All right, then." As quickly as Ray's ire had appeared, it vanished behind a solid wall of goodwill as he turned back towards Richard and smiled.

Richard mouthed a thank-you. As much as Stan's comments angered him, the pathetically obese human had a point. Vampires had grown complacent. The Agency had been in existence since 1789, formed as a secret branch of the government with the ratification of the constitution, but he had not taken them seriously until it was far too late.

His email beeped, interrupting his self-reflection. Looking at his inbox, he discovered an email from 'Big River' entitled, 'All Hands.' He opened it and read.

Reminder: All Hands IT Services meeting tomorrow at Noon in the auditorium. (Vampire Employees Excluded).

Richard looked towards the ceiling as if something there could offer him peace. Not another meeting. The leadership of Big River, in their infinite wisdom, had deemed it important to gather their flock together at least once every month for what Richard affectionately called, 'The Gathering of the Zombies.' Unlike actual zombies, however, these humans had voluntarily given up their freewill to their fearless corporate overlords. Although he was excluded from attending, he was still expected to sit through the agonizingly dull video rebroadcasts.

"Oh, Christ, do we really need to come in for that?" Stan whined.

"Yeah, I don't even get out of bed until two," Bob added.

Richard looked over his shoulder again.

"We all have to be here with the exception of Richard." Ray held his hands up in mock defense. "I'm sorry, I know they are pretty boring, but...."

"Boring is the understatement of the century," Stan shot back. "These things are excruciating."

"And endless." Bob crossed his arms and then glared at Richard. "I think Richard should have to go with us."

“The auditorium is all windows.” Ray countered. “Richard wouldn’t last five minutes. And besides, he still has to sit through the rebroadcasts.”

Less than five minutes on a sunny day, Richard thought, but kept his mouth shut.

“I don’t have a problem with that,” Stan tilted his head and raised his chin defiantly.

Ray frowned again. “Enough already.”

“Jesus,” Bob curled his lip. “Richard gets all the special treatment.”

Ray turned ever so slightly, fixing his baleful gaze on him. “Yeah, Bob, you’re right. I’m sure that spontaneous combustion in the sunlight thing is a real privilege.”

Bob’s face turned beet red and he tugged at one of his dreadlocks like a nervous girl.

Richard arched one eyebrow, again wondering at Ray’s never ending well of sympathy for him. But despite Ray’s gallant attempt to stand up for him, the others would only resent him more now.

The phones rang, interrupting his thoughts.

“Oh man, it’s Beth Bryant,” Bob hissed quietly as if she might hear.

“Shit,” Stan added. “Our number-one pain in the ass.”

Richard looked at the caller ID and frowned. Beth had consistently been one of their most difficult customers. She was what Ray called a “Power User” who felt it necessary to launch and maintain myriad programs on her PC at one time. The inevitable result, of course, was that she constantly complained about the slow speed of her system and its frequent crashes. Despite her status among the group, Richard was not overly concerned. Next to what he had endured in the camps, nothing his job threw at him could ever touch him and dealing with such individuals was, after all, part of their job. It also occurred to him that if he helped his coworkers with this call, they might be more inclined to accept him.

"Jesus, doesn't that woman ever sleep?" Ray asked.

"I nominate Richard for this one," Stan declared without looking.

"I have no problem with that request. I'll take it." Richard depressed the call switch, activating his headset and causing a window to appear on his monitor with a list of all of Beth's previous call information.

"Internal helpdesk, this is Richard. How can I help you?" As a vampire, he had to appear twice as good as his human coworkers to keep his job. He made certain to always be courteous and helpful.

"Richard... you're the vampire, right?" Beth's voice was soft, yet brimming with barely contained excitement.

"That is correct." Richard would never understand the human need to place everything into a neat little box; Saxon, Norman, Socialist, Capitalist, Vampire....

"I think we've talked before," she added.

"Yes, we have. What can I do for you, Beth?" Richard remembered everyone he spoke to. He was not sure if it was a vampiric trait or if he just had a good memory, but either way the result was the same.

Silence.

"Beth, are you still there?" He tilted his head to one side as if that might enhance his hearing somehow.

The line crackled.

"Yes, I'm sorry, my phone is having problems."

Richard almost laughed. "It might be on my end." It was a given that someone from the Agency would be surreptitiously listening to his calls. He had become accustomed to the

crackling. On more than one occasion, he had thought about putting on a show worthy of Shakespeare for the eavesdroppers. He imagined telling the person on the other end of the phone that he had recently regained his abilities and slain a dozen of people in a span of days. It would almost be worth it to instill the fear of a vampire's full wrath in his oppressors, but in the end they would either imprison or kill him. Not an appealing outcome in either case all for what would amount to a childish prank.

"You should have the phone guys fix that. It's really annoying," Beth jarred him from his daydream.

"I'll do that." He leaned back in his chair. If only it were that simple. "What can I help you with this evening?"

"Can you take a look at my notes in the system? I called earlier today and my computer is having the same problem. I can never seem to get these damned machines to work for me instead of against me."

Richard sighed softly. This was not going to be a quick call. He looked at her most recent record in the database. Strangely, there was only one note. It said simply: *If you wish to reclaim the past, please come to my office immediately.*

He jerked back slightly, eyes wide, and glanced nervously around the room. Much to his relief, his coworkers remained intent on their monitors and did not appear to notice. Looking back, he reread the message. If it were some kind of Agency ploy, he doubted they would have approached him in this manner. If they wanted him for some reason, they would hardly play coy about it.

"Did you see my notes?" Beth's voice shook slightly.

"Yes." Richard tapped his fingers on his desk lightly. He did not know what else to say. She was not the first person to offer him aid. The others were either dead or in prison and it was only blind luck that had spared him from a similar fate. The truth was, whether she was a member of the Agency, part of the group responsible for the vampire disappearances, or something else entirely, it mattered little. She was a human being who wanted something from him and therefore could not be trusted.

"Good." The instant she said it, the notes vanished from the computer screen to be replaced with a description of a generic computer problem.

"I'm sorry, I don't think I can help you with this problem." Richard's pulse quickened as he realized that every second he continued this conversation placed him in greater jeopardy. "Let me escalate this call to second-tier support."

"Don't sell yourself short, Richard. I know you're the tech for the job, but I think it would be helpful for you to come down and take a look in person. This damn machine keeps locking up no matter what I do."

Richard positioned his hand over the call cancel button, ready to disconnect, but something held it there. His encounter with the teenagers moved to the forefront of his mind. They had insulted and humiliated him and they were not alone. Everywhere he went, humans treated him like a second-class citizen, lower than the poorest minority. Nothing he could say or do could change their views of him or make his life any easier. The teens would continue to harass him and the other people he encountered in his daily life would continue to swear at him, insult him, and humiliate him. It would only end when he finally lost control and fought back, thus giving the Agency what they really wanted...a chance to legally destroy him.

He pulled his hand away as his mind worked fast for a suitable response. "Have you tried rebooting?"

"Of course," she answered. "It didn't do anything."

"I'll see if I can come down and take a look." He decided suddenly. To hell with it; they could only kill him once. If there was even a chance of taking back what he had lost, then he had to take it...and hope that it did not end in pain...again.

"Great. I'm one floor below you in the back corner towards Elliot Bay. Room 33-7."

"I'll find it."

"See you in a few." The line clicked off as she hung up.

Richard stared at the phone for a moment. "What have I done?" His voice was barely a whisper, but just the same, he risked a casual glance at his coworkers.

Stan and Bob were still trying to appear busy at their computers, but Ray watched him with raised eyebrows.

"Richard? How's our workaholic?"

He had been a knight once upon a time and although he had been a vampire for infinitely longer, much of his former self remained intact. He had and would never like to lie. Despite that, he did not always have the luxury of being honest, at least not completely, and in his near helpless state, lying had become a means of survival. He had found there were many things he had been forced to do that he did not like.

"Miss Bryant has requested that I join her in her office to examine her RAM. She thinks it might be defective."

Bob spun around in his chair, his dreadlocks arching outwards like tiny whips. “She’s a real piece of work. She opens a dozen memory intensive programs at once, then wonders why her machine crashes.”

Stan grunted but did not turn. “Yeah, no shit. Some people just don’t get it, as if having ten programs open makes you a more efficient employee or something.”

“So true.” Ray nodded his understanding, a smile creasing his features. “So, what did you tell her?”

“I informed her that I am not normally permitted to leave my post, but that I could make an exception this once. I assume that she will continue to plague us until we do something about it.” Richard swallowed. His lie sounded good.

“Go for it, but you might want to bring earplugs.” Ray grinned.

“Yeah.” Stan snickered. “Just nod every once in a while as she spews useless information at you, then tell her you’ll have to research her problem. That should keep her quiet for a day or two.”

“I’ll keep that in mind, Stan. Wish me luck.” Richard stood, steeling himself for whatever lay ahead.

Ray nodded. “Good luck.”

“Better you than me,” Stan piped up.

“No doubt,” Bob added, spinning back to his computer.

So much for the coworker pep talk. Richard removed his headset. “I shall return shortly.” He headed out of the cube farm, his gut twisted in anticipation of whatever plot Beth was about to reveal and how it might affect him.