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"The Glass Vampire"

By

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**Prologue: In the Dark**

Stinging pain flared across the side of Richard Saxon's face as a second rock hit him in the jaw, drawing a ragged line of blood across his cheek. 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.

A strong wind shook the skeletal branches of the maples lining the nearby street 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.

“Damn,” he muttered. No one would lift a finger to help him.

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

Richard rubbed his bruised and bleeding 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 they were. It never ceased to amaze him how little mankind had changed over the past one thousand years. 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 now 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 member of America's lowest minority, 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, then 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.

Gritting his teeth, he 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 powers or no. 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 Department for tying his hands and preventing him from even defending himself as any human could. Should he attempt any violence against these youths, he would surely be tossed back into the 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 even for an instant. 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 Department 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, wuss!"

"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 out their throats. Later, when he had learned that he did not need

to kill to survive, he might have simply terrorized them with a flash of fangs and the hypnotic power of his own mind. 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. Vampires were not allowed to possess cellphones.

"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'm not 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 approach to work. The lies spread about vampires by the Department's propaganda machine had taken their toll. That, coupled with the way the undead were 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 had nearly killed him. Had they succeeded, it would have meant more than just his death. His thousand-year quest for the vampire who brought him across the void 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*.

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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 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 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 two missing vampires. According to Lieutenant John Maynard, new evidence indicates that several humans might have been involved in the disappearances in what amounted to a hate crime.*

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 Department. Of course, such a conflict could only have ended in one way. The fact that Richard and so many other vampires had survived at all cut off from their abilities was nothing short of a miracle. They had the vampire rights activists to thank for that. If left up to the hard-liners, he and everyone like him would have been staked and left in the sunlight for good measure.

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....

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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.

"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.

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. Its front doors opened and a heavysset dark-skinned man turned towards him. On his console next to his steering wheel, the red 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 woman's 'sinner' comment was almost amusing... almost. Humans 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 a modern world where 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 how to repent...

The next bus 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.

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 ignored 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 glanced up at him with wide blue eyes and smiled.

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 her 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 laptop 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. The government spun this as a perk, however it was clearly an additional way for the Department to verify his location against its internal GPS system.

As the bus pulled away from the curb, he glanced at his bracelet. It was ten forty-nine. He would never make. With little to do about his tardiness, 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. 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 the rare 'believers' for who and what he was. Now, he was hated and feared equally by everyone. To have such negative 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.

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"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 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.

"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 fighting skills slip. He was quite capable of crushing the cartilage on Joe's smug face. Of course, he was also smart enough and wise enough to know the futility of such a move. The Department 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."

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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 support 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 employees 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.

Next to Ray like some kind of yin yang mirror image, Bob stood in his dirt-smudged Hawaiian shirt. He watched as Stan, the widest member of their team played a first person shooter computer game in front of them. Richard nodded curtly to Ray and ignored the rest, crossing instead 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 monitor, logged into his phone and slipped his headset into place. It was true that vampires were invisible to video as well as 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 technology.

"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 "Department, 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. 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 have perished 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.

"All right, guys, that's enough. We're all part of the same team." Ray stepped between them.

"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."

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

"Yes." Ray turned a withering gaze on the man. "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.

As much as Stan's comments angered him, the pathetically obese human had a point. Vampires had grown complacent. The Department 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. If only he had not allowed his arrogance to blind him to the dangers they had posed.

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 because of the daylight, 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.

"We all have to be here with the exception of Richard." Ray held his hands up in mock defense. "Sorry, I know they're kind of lame, but...."

"Lame 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. The sun was as deadly as it has always been.

“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."

"It might be on my end." Richard almost laughed. It was a given that someone from the Department would be surreptitiously monitoring 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

"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 hate PC's."

Beth was a Mac girl. 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 want to fight back, come to my office now. There's not much time.*

He jerked back slightly, eyes wide, and glanced nervously around the room. Much to his relief, his coworkers remained intent on their monitors. Looking back, he reread the message. If it were some kind of Department ploy, he doubted they would have approached him in this manner.

"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. All others who had tried were either dead or in

prison. The truth was, whether she was a member of the Department, 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."

"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."

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.

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.

“How’s our workaholic?” Ray asked from across the room.

“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 has no idea how to use a PC and when it doesn’t respond the way a Mac would, calls us.”

Stan grunted but did not turn. “Yeah, no shit.”

“So, what did you tell her?” Ray asked.

“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 this.” 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.

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Located on the far side of a forest of darkened cubicles, Beth Bryant's office nestled between a large diagonal crossbeam and an elevator machinery closet. A sliver of light escaped through the narrow window of her office door, projecting a rectangle on the carpeted floor and looking like the proverbial light at the end of the tunnel. Richard walked swiftly down the narrow trail, keeping his attention focused on that glowing welcome mat. Only the whirring of CPU fans and the drone of the building's ventilation system broke the silence.

Beth's door was open a crack, allowing light to escape around its edges, outlining its frame in a glowing nimbus. He jumped as a heavy clanging sound rose over a background of screeching, dissonant chords as a series of guitars, violins and other instruments he could not identify blasted from her room. He groaned. He hated Gothic Industrial music, not just because it lacked any kind of musical skill, but because the average person who listened to it was a vampire groupie. Richard was not sure who he detested more, the humans who had stripped him of his powers, or the silly children who dressed all in black, had multiple body piercings, and who seemed drawn to him like teenage girls to the latest boy-band.

He repositioned himself so that he could look through the opening without being seen. Sure enough, a slender woman with long, unnatural black hair sat at a cluttered desk with her back to him. He could see the dreaded blue screen of death on her monitor. She had certainly

done her best to give any unwitting onlookers the impression that she was having computer problems.

He knocked on the doorframe twice. She tilted her head to one side, then turned back to look at him without lowering the volume of her music. Her beauty surprised Richard and he found himself staring for an instant at her delicate facial features, perfect lips, and dark brown eyes. As a keen observer of humans, the honest innocence Richard saw there surprised him more than anything. It contradicted her black lipstick, her diamond-studded nose-ring and the short, low cut dress that clung to her slim, athletic form. A chill ran through him. It had been years since he had been with a woman, vampire or otherwise.

He smiled, doing his best to act like an attentive support rep. She motioned for him to enter with a wave of one delicate hand. He stepped inside, committed at this point to at least hear what she had to say, and closed the door behind him.

The rest of her tiny office consisted of one small wooden chair and a tall shaded antique lamp. A poster of the original black and white Dracula movie hung behind the door reminding Richard of his distaste for Bram Stoker. Although he had never met the man, they had lived in London at the same time for a number of years. Had he known the effects Stoker's work would have on future generations, it would have been a simple thing to kill him. He sighed. Victorian London was long gone, along with any such opportunity.

"Have a seat, Richard." She motioned to the second chair.

Richard shrugged and did as he was told, wondering who she represented and what she might ask of him. For a moment, however, she simply stared at him, tugging gently on her hair as if it aided in her thought process. Finally, she leaned forward.

"Aren't you going to ask me what my message meant? Why I wanted to see you?"

Richard kept his eyes focused on hers. "Let me hazard a guess. You and some of your cohorts are going to celebrate the powers of darkness and you want to know if I'll join in with the evil festivities."

"Um... no." She smiled, displaying perfect teeth. "You don't really believe I'd go through all this trouble just to invite you to some kind of lame vampire wannabe party, do you?"

"I am not certain of your motives." He shifted his weight forward so their heads were mere inches apart and stared up at the ceiling looking for any sign of surveillance. He did not expect to see anything, but it never hurt to look. "What's your game?"

She followed his gaze. "The music and the electric junction box next door should block any listening devices. You're safe here for the moment." She motioned with her right arm towards the far wall. As she did so, a glint of metal on her chest caught his attention. Risking a casual glance he saw a good-sized silver cross nestled between her breasts hanging from a sturdy looking chain.

A spike of pain shot through his head causing him to stagger. A memory came unbidden into the forefront of his mind; a memory he did not know was his...

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"You are safe here," the lady in the red, velvet dress said. Ancient oak trees swayed gently in the moonlight behind her.

Richard didn't know her name and didn't care. His men were all dead, killed in the ambush by the rebel Saxons. They lay scattered around the clearing among the remains of the enemy. Several swords jutted out of the earth, cracked shields lay atop a few of the corpses.

Richard bit his lip, fighting back remorse. Some of those knights had been his friends for years and now, through an act of treachery brought about by his own actions, they were dead.

The gash in his thigh throbbed. The bandages the woman had used to staunch the flow of blood had grown red. A wave of dizziness washed over him, but he managed to make his way over to the nearest oak tree. He leaned back against its thick trunk and slid to the soft grass, his legs outstretched. He let his sword drop to his side, unsure how he had maintained his grip on the blade through his entire ordeal. He had lost his shield near the beginning of the battle. He looked at the wreckage strewn about, but could not see it.

As if sensing his tension, the woman in red placed a cool hand on his. "Relax, Sir Knight. I've tended to your wounds, and the last of the traitors have fled."

"Fled?" He remembered facing the last four soldiers. He had struck one of them down and then been wounded himself. After that, there had been only darkness.

"Yes. They will not return." She smiled revealing the whitest, most perfect teeth he had ever seen.

For the first time since he had found himself standing with her in the forest, he studied her. Long light brown hair framed a face of flawless symmetry, perfect skin and the deepest, greenest eyes he had ever beheld. She leaned over him, the low cut of her dress revealing her full breasts. He caught the scent of lilacs.

"Who...who are you?" He felt shy under her gaze.

She leaned in, bringing her lips close to his. Her flowery scent filled him with warmth and sudden yearning. The pain of his wounds and his exhaustion faded as his heart beat swiftly. He rose to meet her lips, but she pulled away, pressing a restraining hand on his chest. "Rest now, brave sir knight."

“My name is-”

"Richard." Her lips did not move and her voice sounded all wrong...

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Richard blinked, surprised by the intensity of his vision, and baffled by the fact that, until now, he had no recollection of those events.

"Richard?" Beth prodded.

"My apologies, I was...lost in thought." His brain worked furiously to try to understand his vision. He was sure he had never seen the woman in red before. Despite that, he knew he had met her and that those events had happened a thousand years ago when he had still been human. His breath caught in his throat as he wondered if he had finally found her or at the very least some of his lost memories of her.

"We want to help you, Richard."

He thought back to the rebel's ambush and could almost smell the blood, sweat and death of that distant battlefield. His men had fallen alongside the enemy one by one until only he and one of the attackers remained. He had killed the last man and then somehow managed to stagger through the forest and back to his castle on foot. His memories were hazy at best as if they had been blanketed by a vampire's hypnotic powers. He shook his head, trying to clear the dizzying thoughts that flitted through his mind like moths in a dusty attic.

"Who is we?"

"Vincent Radovan."

"You are part of his organization?"

The mention of the leader of the latest Vampire Rights movement gave him the strength to anchor him firmly in the present. He had heard of the elusive man and his quest to set the vampires free. Radovan had become a well-known presence on the Internet, in chat rooms and on bulletin boards trying to gain support for vampire rights. Richard was sure that Vincent Radovan was a pseudonym, and had dedicated a good amount of thought to the man's true identity. With the limited resources of a vampire, however, he doubted he could ever find out.

She nodded.

"He sent me to Big River to make contact with you." She looked at her watch and frowned. "Look, we don't have much time. We can help you Richard, but I need you to trust us, to trust me."

"I see no reason to believe you over any other human being. If nearly a thousand years of life has taught me anything, it is that humans cannot be trusted. Regardless of the good press your Mr. Radovan has been getting, I'm afraid I can't help you."

Beth chewed her lip thoughtfully and finally reached back to pull a manila folder off her desk. She opened it, revealing what looked like a personnel file. At the top, he saw his name and the Department logo. His throat tightened and he quickly looked back and forth, desperate for a second exit, but knowing that when the officers showed up there was no possible escape. If they wanted to, they could always detonate the explosive in his bracelet and kill him that way.

She held up one hand as if to reassure him. "Chill, Richard. You look like a cornered rat. I stole the file. I'm not working for the Department."

So she could read him, though he doubted it was hard under the circumstances.

"Then let us suppose I believe you. What then?" He was not sure anyone could steal a Department file unless the Department wanted them to do so.

"We've only got a few minutes before the agents wonder why they can't read the signal from your tracking bracelet." She glanced nervously at her door. "I can give you a few details now and we can meet in a more secure location later."

"Very well, but I should at least look like I'm helping you." He got to his feet, drew closer to her and hit CONTROL-ALT-DELETE on her keyboard causing the machine to reboot.

"Good idea." She turned towards the monitor. "I'll be blunt. You're the oldest vampire in Seattle."

Richard shrugged. "A fairly well known fact and completely irrelevant now that I've been reduced to a mere shadow of my former self."

"True." A pen appeared in her hands. She tapped it on the desk. "But what most people don't know is that when the Department finally caught up with you in Boston ten years ago, they only seized several hundred million dollars of your assets."

Richard's throat tightened as he remembered those final days, hiding out in a Mausoleum in a seventeenth-century graveyard. His mind-numbing hunger and the void that had taken up residence in his soul had nearly finished him even before the agents had finally taken him.

"I'm sorry." She dropped the pen to the desk. "I didn't mean to..."

"Just get to the point." The events of that day had only destroyed his life, after all.

Beth clasped her hands and tapped her thumbs against each other. "All right. Vincent Radovan has a makeshift lab where his team is working on finding a cure for the vampire virus that has left you powerless. We need vampire blood and a test subject."

"You want a guinea pig." Richard curled his lip in a sneer. Humans in a secret lab had created the virus in the first place.

"Sort of." Beth offered him a tentative smile that made her quite attractive.

"Why would any humans wish to help us? Are you not safer with us in this condition?"

"A lot of people believe that." She tilted her chin in what Richard took to be defiance.

"But we know the truth."

"And what is this truth you speak of?" The truth is, I *will* be a danger to humans if ever I reclaim what I have lost, Richard thought, dreaming of retribution.

"Vampires are simply humans with a very unusual disease." Beth did not look away as her computer beeped.

"A disease can drive a man mad. Take rabies for example." Richard ignored the computer as well.

Her features softened. "But your particular disease does not make you evil, at least not any longer. Once medical science was able to synthesize human blood, you no longer had the need to victimize the innocent."

"But you are forgetting one thing," Richard countered. "We all chose to become vampires. For most of us, that decision came with the knowledge that we would have to take the blood of others, perhaps even kill to survive."

"True." She paused and slightest hint of a frown appeared at the corners of her mouth. "But my research tells me that many vampires only took the blood they needed, never draining anyone to the danger point. When they finished this process, they blanketed the minds of their donors so they remembered nothing. I think you were one of those vampires. Am I right?"

Richard narrowed his eyes. She seemed to know him a little too well for his liking. He wondered just how much information could possibly be included in his file.

"You are correct. However, I have killed to survive." He smiled, allowing his fangs to come out for an instant. Even after he had been stripped of his preternatural abilities, he had been responsible for the deaths of several agents.

"That was a long time ago, Richard." Beth did not even flinch. "This is the twenty-first century, and I believe that you and many of your brethren deserve to be welcomed back into society, not shunned and treated like third-class citizens. Our government has treated you poorly. Many of you are American citizens, some could even be considered among the founding fathers of this country. What we have done to you is inhuman!" She slammed her fist on the desk in emphasis.

"Your patriotism is impressive." Richard leaned back and put his hands behind his head. Her performance was masterful, her passion admirable, if a little forced, but there was more to it than that. There always was. "You don't expect me to believe that is why you would help me, do you?"

"No. I don't, not completely, anyhow." She sighed.

"Wouldn't it make more sense to simply work through legitimate channels to convince your fellow humans to grant us the full array of rights that all Americans enjoy?" He asked, hoping to catch her in an inconsistency.

"Do you really think the Department would go for that?"

She was correct. The Department would never allow Congress to enact any legislation to truly set him and the other vampires free. They would blackmail, bully and do whatever it took to prevent that, despite public outcry. Richard sighed. The only way he could hope to ever regain his freedom would be to do as she suggested, seek the aid of an underground organization.

"Let us say, for the moment, I believe you. Why me? There are plenty of other vampires in town, vampires who are not so scrutinized and who are nearly as old."

"Because you are clever. You had a dozen hiding places, stashes of currency and supplies that allowed you to evade the Department's bulldogs for nearly a year after you lost your powers. Who better than to help our scientists find a cure." She looked up at him.

So that was it. "Bravo." He laughed. "A for effort."

"What do you mean?" Beth pressed back into her chair as if startled by his behavior.

"You think I have more money hidden away and you want to use it to fund whatever experiments you are performing."

Beth's face turned beat red. She was not very good at this, Richard decided, a fact that he found somewhat endearing and actually made him more inclined to trust her.

"It's true, we need money." She shifted uncomfortably in the chair. "It's also true that we can help you. We're close to beating their virus."

"Sorry, but they did indeed take all of my wealth." Richard wanted to believe her, just as he had wanted to believe the other two activists that had approached him in the past. Of course, they had been much less refined. Eventually, both of them had been arrested. He shivered. Each of those events had cost him a month in the stockade under the brutal care of Frederick Cortez.

"If I had managed to hang onto even a small portion of my wealth, I would certainly not donate it to an erroneous group that either wants to take the money and run or use it to pay off their college loans."

Beth was at his side in an instant, moving with surprising speed for a human. She grabbed his shirtsleeve and yanked him around. She was not as frail as she appeared. He felt tension and strength in her arm.

"I am telling the truth, Richard," she insisted. "We can help you."

He met her gaze for just a moment. The deep pools of her blue eyes offered no hint of malice or foul intent. Still, he could not afford to take another chance. Frederick had made it clear that he had used up all of his karma.

"I wish I could believe you." He opened her door and stopped short.

Stan stood a dozen or so feet away from them, leaning against the wall by the elevator. His bulky form took up half of the large hallway. "Ray sent me down to check on you." He ran a hand through his greasy hair.

Richard tilted his head to the side. He did not trust Stan any more than he trusted the others. Perhaps Ray had sent him down, perhaps he was taking orders from someone else, but regardless, the course of action was the same for either case. Act natural.

"Don't hesitate to call us again, Beth." He waved to her then headed towards Stan.

"Thank you, Richard. For all your help." The lack of sarcasm in her voice surprised him, but he continued forward without looking back.

Richard continued over to where Stan watched and slapped him on the back.

"Thank-you for looking out for me, Stan, but everything is under control. Shall we return to the cubicle farm?"

Stan shifted away from his hand. "Yeah, okay." He pushed the lift button four times fast.

When the car opened a moment later, Richard allowed himself a smile. Whatever game they were playing, it would not work. They stepped into the car and as the doors closed, he wondered about the memory of the woman in the red dress and why it had surfaced now after all this time. Perhaps there was more to Beth than met the eye.