

## CHAPTER ONE

*R*hiannon's Law #22. You can't lie to yourself, so don't bother trying. Doing so only multiplies your douche bag level to the umpteenth power and confirms what others have been saying about you for years -- that you are an idiot. Of course, I couldn't fault those guilty of breaking Law #22 from time to time, as I was prone to do so myself.

Like now, for instance.

From the moment I found myself on my ass, holding an issue of the Blood Times, I tried to convince myself it was all a bad dream. One minute I was in my apartment ready to get back to my vampire boyfriend. The next I was making a deal with a demon and getting my ass sent to the future as a part of the bargain.

It couldn't be real, but damn it, the concrete sure did feel cool and solid beneath my jeans, and my busted knee was throbbing like a son of a bitch.

My gaze shifted back to the newspaper in hand. If it was meant as a joke, I wasn't laughing. The date on the paper indicated it was October 28, 2109. The feature article made my holy shit o-meter blare like a banshee. Humans were vanishing. Not as in going missing, as in they were ceasing to exist as a species. Something called the Renfield Syndrome was responsible. The side effect of the Renfield vaccine produced during the third world war between humans and vampires.

I flipped through the paper, desperate for more information.

The rest of the pages were full of ads, most of them choked-full of people offering themselves as blood slaves for immortality, money, and a decent place to live. Morbidly, the entries reminded me of the classifieds taken out when beloved pets spawned unwanted puppies and kittens and irresponsible owners were left to find them decent homes. Only these warm-blood mammals weren't pets, they were people, and knowing that made my stomach roll and my hands tremble oh-so slightly.

I blew a steady stream of air through my pursed lips, attempted to slow the erratic beating of my heart, and tried to get a handle on things. The coolness of the shade against my face as the

sun dipped further below the horizon got my attention, putting things in perspective.

It would be night soon, and I had to find Disco.

Disco. My heart spasmed as I conjured the name. If not for my feelings for the man, I would never have made the deal to sever his debt, landing me one-hundred and one years in the future. As fucked up as this shit was, I had to fulfill my part of the bargain with Zagan; the demon Disco'd once been indebted to and would no longer owe once we'd been given the opportunity to speak. One message was all it would take, a few short words to relay that the price to end their agreement had been paid. I didn't want to remain indebted to a demon -- no matter what year it was -- and there was no better time than now to get my shit together.

Groaning, I rose to my feet. The bastard right knee of mine was aching something fierce now; a dull, throbbing ache that extended straight through the bone.

The folded newspaper was oddly heavy in my hand as I headed south, in the direction of the Razor. Some things changed, but I hoped in this circumstance that some things remained the same. The Razor was a club that belonged to Paine -- Disco's most trusted friend and the second in power to his family -- which meant finding him wasn't a bad place to start.

I walked as fast as my leg would allow, wishing some of the vampire blood that saved my ass when I took on a deranged child vampire four weeks prior stuck around for some physical healing. Not that I was complaining, mind you. A minor physical handicap was nothing when compared to crossing over to the other side.

The streets were eerie, completely void of human elements. There were no cars, no traffic, no people, no pets and -- something uncharacteristic of New York -- no sounds. Each scrape of my sneakers on the pavement was the only distinguishable noise as I scuffled along the sidewalk, so loud in the misplaced silence that each step was almost deafening.

My attention flickered nervously from building to building, and I gazed disbelieving at what remained of the street. Several of the apartments were in shambles, doors and windows missing, the insides decimated and destroyed. Garbage, clothing, and personal belongings were tossed next to stairs, spilling onto the street. It was as if the tenants had been permanently tossed out on their asses, with no time to gather or tend to their possessions.

I hobbled along each new street, hoping to come out of this hellish nightmare only to be greeted with more of the same. A few of the doors that remained shut had huge crosses on them. Most were painted, but some had the real deal, wooden pieces interlocked together to form a big fat, Don't beware of dog, beware of fucking owner, warning.

A couple of times I could have sworn heavy curtains shifted as I passed, going still as I nervously strode by. It was a damned shame that I didn't have the time to play Nancy Drew, going door to door to unlock the mystery of the religious holy relics on display. If anything, it would have matched the surrealism of my situation.

For a moment, I paused and lifted my face toward the darkening sky. Vampires would be out soon, if they weren't already. The rays of the sun were only dangerous when they came from the direct source, the reflection of the light was as harmless as tap water to them, and it was well past sundown.

I breathed in through my mouth and let it go through my nose, forcing myself to quicken the pace as I pushed my busted knee harder than I knew I should. I alternated the paper from my right hand to the left, pressing my fingers into my pocket.

My butterfly knife, rosary, and emplacement charm were still there.

Thank the Lord almighty.

At least I had something to protect myself with if necessary. Even though I was marked as Disco's familiar, I was still vulnerable without him around, and a lot can take place in a century.

I cut down an alley, deciding on a short cut as my steps were becoming painful. I was several blocks away from the Razor, and I wasn't sure I could go the distance. The sun was gone, the faintest grays and purples littering the sky as dusk lingered in those brief final moments given off prior to the moon's takeover. The heaviness in my gut warned me it wasn't good to be caught outside at night, when the creepy crawlies came out to play.

My necromancer sixth sense alarm bells started shrilling, and I drew in a deep, ragged breath. A vampire was close, damned close. Since Disco had opened the mark between us, and fully introduced me to the source of my power, I was able to distinguish a hell of a lot more -- in-

cluding vampires anywhere in a twenty to thirty foot radius. From what I could gather -- which wasn't shit -- there was only one. But one was more than enough cause for concern when you were a mere crippled mortal.

I didn't bother trying to hide, continuing on my path as I was already at the halfway mark. A vampire would know I was in the area regardless. Our uncanny senses honed in on each other, creating an undeniable pull. Sort of like a fly uncovering a steaming pile of shit.

She made her appearance directly in front of me, approaching slowly from the other end of the alley. Her blonde hair was cut short, the inch long strands sticking on top of her head in a hair-do straight out of the 80s. I was pretty sure she bleached it since the strands were a blaring platinum white. Her pale skin was bright and lovely, her full lips stained with bright, tomato red lipstick. The black heels that clicked over the pavement made her impossibly tall -- well over six feet -- and she was covered in leather. The black pants clutched and molded seamlessly to her hips, while the vest stopped at her ribcage, displaying her smooth and lean stomach.

"Animator bait," she rasped in a throaty voice and stopped several feet away. She shifted her head, looking past my shoulder as if she expected to find company.

"I'm not fishing, sister," I replied evenly and came to a stop.

"I smell them," she sneered, her nostrils flaring wide. "But the question is -- how did they come across you?"

She crossed the distance, using her vampire speed -- in front of me in the same instant that she once stood across the alley. Her hand lashed out, and her cool fingers clamped around my throat. She shoved me into the wall, pressing in, invading my personal space. She brushed her nose along my skin, breathing deeply. Suddenly, her head jerked back, she turned to glare into the darkness pervading the alley, and her deep navy blue eyes flared.

"What are they doing with you?" she whispered through clenched teeth, turning to study me.

"Who the hell are 'they' pray tell?" I questioned back, trying to breathe easy versus pant as my oxygen supply was considerably limited by her hand around my throat.

She never had the opportunity to answer.

The rustling of feet and rubber soles appeared on both sides of the alley. I rotated my head as best I could in her unbreakable grip, first left, then right. The dusk was gone, it was officially nighttime. My body hummed, a slight burning as more undead approached. However, the faces I saw with guns raised were not vampire, but human, and they were covered from head to toe in fun goodies like guns, knives, and camouflage gear that made them resemble life-size G.I. Joes.

Barberella seemed to anticipate the company. Her lips curved into a Joker-like grin, and she relinquished her hold, stepping away from me in deliberate movements.

The camo posse moved in, guns pointed at both of us. My gaze flickered back and forth between the vampire and the men, and I lifted my hands into the air in a mock surrender. Having a gun pointed at you by someone who actually knows how to use it isn't funny or exciting -- not at all. Even worse was being in the center of a soon to be shitstorm from which I might never be fully cleansed.

"Don't even think about it," one of the men in green snapped as the vampire moved, as if preparing to flee.

I rotated my head around, toward the sound of the voice. His black hair was unkempt on the top and short in the back, his resolute grey colored eyes intense and lethal. He kept his gun on the vampire but turned his attention to me, his level stare traveling up and down my body, taking me in.

"Carter," Barberella purred. Stepping back, she shook her head and sniffed the air. "I should have known."

"Kate," he responded coolly.

"Must we do this night after night?" She sighed, rolling her eyes and palming her hips. "Really, what's the point? We'll have you all eventually. It's only a matter of time."

My necromancy buzzer was raging full steam ahead, tingling under the surface of my skin like an itchy rash. I fought the urge to shift my feet and rub my arms.

Vampires were close, and they were plentiful.

I pushed my back against the wall, my right hand at the ready to grab my only two defenses from my pocket. I didn't know how long my leg would carry me, but I was positive the adrenaline currently zerging through my veins would ensure I made it out of death pit alley.

"Get her," Carter ordered, steely eyes sharp and intense.

A handful of people from each side approached, taking slow, cautious steps. They kept the guns trained on Kate, movements intentional, calculated, and smooth. This shit wasn't good. One wrong move and it was game over. I cursed Zagan for sending me into the middle of a futuristic version of hell, and damned myself for leaving the safety of Disco's home that morning when he'd all but begged me to stay.

Hindsight was such a cruel bitch.

Swiveling my head to the right, I peered down the alley. As I did a solid and strong hand grasped my left arm, causing me to emit a loud yelp of panic. I jerked away from the touch and quite literally busted my ass, landing hard on my already sore posterior. I glared up at the owner of the appendage that touched without permission, angry and wary. It was one of the men who arrived on the scene armed to the gills, covered from shoulder to ankle with weapons and varying shades of green. He was in his forties, salt and pepper stubble spaced across his face, matching his shortly shorn hair.

"Come with me," he said quietly and extended his hand.

"Nuh-uh." I shook my head, scooting in the opposite direction. "I don't think so, All American Hero."

His frown was genuine; he didn't understand why I would refuse his help. I shoved my hand into my pocket, going for the butterfly knife. My fingers wrapped around the outline of the warm metal, and I felt an insubstantial amount of comfort at its presence -- which was better than none at all.

Vampires were here now. All around us.

“Incoming!” Carter yelled, eyes narrowed, mouth in a tight line. His chiseled arms flexed as his grip on the gun increased.

Vampires engulfed the alley, several dropping from the rooftops above. I pressed into the wall, attempting to remain miniscule. Whatever the hell was about to happen didn’t involve me, and I didn’t want to become a part of it. The alley erupted in gunfire, snarls, and the distinct clash of fighting.

Someone snagged me by the shoulder, thrusting me upright, and yanked forcefully to the left. I planted my feet and pulled in the opposite direction, stumbling as my weak knee caved. The hold didn’t lessen, firm and unbreakable as the gargantuan soldier dragged me along behind him. I focused on the direction we were leaving, gaping at the sight. Vampires were attacking in bursts of speed, but they weren’t killing their targets. Those suited in camouflage didn’t offer the same courtesy, firing round after round.

“Come on!” The man yanking on my arm snapped angrily. Too bad for him I was equally pissed.

“Let go of me!” I snarled, planting my feet again, using my left leg to bear the weight. I pulled him up short, and his dark brown eyes flashed in warning.

“Get her out of there, we’ve got to move!” Carter bellowed.

A strange sensation brushed my skin, the slightest drizzle of beaded water tickling my face and hands. I stopped arguing with G.I. Joe and lifted my chin in the direction of the soothing sensation.

Then I heard the snarls.

Misty waves of condensation flittered down from the rooftops, floating in the air before dropping down. It started at the opposite end of the alley and spread down and out. If the sun had been in the sky, it would have created a rainbow effect, much like a water hose with fork holes that created an instant, ghetto sprinkler.

The vampires hissed in outrage, and Kate pulled back her lips to reveal her elongated fangs as steam erupted from their skin. It took a moment to compute, comprehension making my stomach knot as nausea ensued. The water was blessed. It had to be.

“I don’t have time for this,” G.I. Joe grumbled, using my distraction as an opportunity. He bent at the waist, shoved his shoulder into my midsection, and lifted me easily.

“Put me down, you dumb mother fucker!” I shouted furiously -- kicking, thrashing, and squirming.

He ignored my tirade, striding purposely to the camo army. My head flopped, and I tried to see through my hair as I continued squirming with each step he took. A few vampires were on their asses, bloody holes seeping their life’s blood from their bodies. The bullets had to be blessed or silver as well. Their wounds would have started healing otherwise.

The walls of the alley disappeared from view, and my weight was shifted. Unexpectedly, the shoulder holding me was gone, and I was traveling backward. I attempted to brace myself for the fall that I knew was on the way, steeling myself for the pain. My back hit first and air exited my lungs in a painful exhale, causing me to gasp.

My knee cursed me as I scrambled, but I stumbled over regardless, until I was safely on my stomach. I struggled to get my body in an upright position, using my hands as leverage. Several men in shades of green stared down at me from their seats, their expressions totally unreadable. A spike of adrenaline overcame my fatigue.

Stay in a big ass van full of scary ass men from the future? Thanks for the offer, but I had to fucking pass.

After getting my feet under me properly, making sure my left leg would be the one I pushed off with, I lunged for the back door that was still wide open, my rubber soles squeaking loudly against the floor.

An arm lashed out, and I deflected it, pivoting in the opposite direction while using the flat of my palm to throw the blow off course. I stepped back in panic as two men stood to assist the one who had attempted to stop me. Watching them all, I pulled out my knife and flicked it open

smoothly. As I peered down at the blade, and then gazed up at the men, I wanted to slap myself. It was laughable, really -- a lame ass balisong to protect me from massive guys armed with oozies.

Something hard and cold nudged the base of my skull, and I heard the very distinct double-click of a gun being cocked. My breath left my lungs, and I went still.

“Drop the knife.”

The voice was Carter’s, and it wasn’t friendly or open to discussion.

My horrified and anxious gaze darted around the bus, and I swallowed loudly. They all looked ready to roast me alive, and the rosary wouldn’t to squat against any of them. I opened my right hand and shortly after a dull clack sounded at my feet.

“Good. Now, take a seat.”

A firm hand gave me the initial get the move on shove. I staggered and bit back my diarrhea mouth. It wasn’t easy. My temper always had a mind of its own. Carter put a hand on my shoulder and guided me to an empty seat on the right. I slid in and Carter walked past, toward the front. He lowered the sidearm in an experienced grip and released the hammer. I cringed when my ears made out the violent sounds of guns being fired in rapid succession, followed by odd gurgles in the distance.

“Quinn has the second team,” Carter spoke in hushed tones to the driver. “Take us back.”

The bus started with a loud roar of engine and pistons, sputtering at the start until wheels rolled smoothly underneath. I jolted forward in the seat and quickly stared out the window, trying to figure what the hell was going on.

Carter whipped around, and I felt his eyes burning a hole in my face. I returned his stare, thinning my lips and crossing my arms like a surly teen. He looked away as he strode back down the aisle, and I returned my attention to the windows, gazing into the darkness. The footsteps stopped a short distance from my seat, scuffled, and started back in my direction. The all too familiar sound of metal sliding together chimed in my ears, and I turned in time to see him slide my knife into his pocket.

“These aren’t so easy to come by. You can consider it a down payment for saving your ass,” he said calmly and propped himself into the seat across from me. Leaning forward, he braced his elbows on his parted knees.

I drew in a breath and looked away, rolling my eyes as I muttered, “Don’t be so quick. You didn’t save shit.”

“What were you doing out past curfew?”

I blew him off and kept staring out the window, wishing that I had the power to shut him down entirely. I had no idea there was a curfew to follow. It wasn’t as if I’d experienced anything in the last century. Besides, I had my own set of problems to think about -- namely finding Disco and delivering the message from Zagan. It was the only thing that would end the bargain between them and ensure the vampire I’d fallen in love with wouldn’t pay the piper in spades. I had to take this one step at a time or run the risk of losing my goddamned mind.

Anger surfaced; a fire inside my chest. Maybe that was Zagans’ intention all along; to have me freaking out and caught in something I couldn’t control.

The rotten bastard.

“What were you doing out past curfew?” Carter asked again.

“You know what?” I tilted my head back against the seat and peered in his direction, looking him in the eye. “You wouldn’t believe me if I told you. So why don’t you drop me off at the next stop and we’ll call it a night.”

“I’m afraid that’s not possible. You should have stayed safe and sound where you belonged. Now we have to take you with us. It’s protocol.”

“Protocol, huh?” He didn’t so much as nod, his expression unreadable. “Fuck me sideways,” I muttered and leaned forward, until my head pressed against the brown leather seat in front of me. When I got home, I knew the first thing I was getting -- a tattoo on my forehead that read, “Your ticket to insane shit stops here.”

“I wouldn’t say that any louder, if I were you.” His grey eyes darkened, and his voice deepened as I glanced at him. “Someone might try to give you exactly what you’re asking for.”

“It wasn’t an invitation.”

He moved across the distance and rested his hands on the seat directly next to my leg. I felt my hair move as his face brushed the strands, and he whispered against my ear, “Then keep it to yourself.”

I settled in and kept my fat yap shut, fuming silently, and safely, instead. The view from the window didn’t lift my spirits. The landscape was as dead as the people I saw on a routine basis. In fact, I saw several of those along the way too.

The entire city was a dead zone.

The driver turned right on Prospect Park West, and I gasped in shock; the reality of my situation hitting me hard and fast. I was seeing the buildings that were only a conception during my century. Prospect Village, a mere idea in my time, had reached its completion in my absence. It was impressive, even on the darkened street, and I was fairly certain the contract on the leases had expired by now, leaving plenty of room for potential tenants.

The bus took a sharp turn around the corner and I ducked, thinking the top would rip off by way of the roof of the lower parking floor of the building. We barreled underneath without incident, into a dimly lit area. I latched onto the seat in front of me as the driver maneuvered the large vehicle, slammed the breaks, and tossed it in reverse. When he had the bus where he wanted it, he put it into park. The bus veered back and forth unsteadily before slowly going still. The sounds of shuffling bodies and feet echoed inside the enclosed space, and I glanced behind me to see the men filter out of the back door.

Carter stood, and his broad body encased the walkway. He stared down at me, studying me intently. He hadn’t bothered speaking since he imparted that little warning. It was cool, I didn’t miss the conversation. I only wanted to get the hell off the bus -- at some other location preferably.

He lifted his hand, pointing with his index finger down the aisle. “Let’s go.”

Pressing my lips together and biting my tongue, I rose from my seat as gracefully as possible. The men from the back of the bus were gone, but I could see them entering the building directly ahead. I reached the drop off, jumped, and landed awkwardly on my left foot. I wobbled unevenly, losing my balance, and I tumbled forward. Hard and unyielding fingers gripped my arm, pulling me up and back. Carter waited until I regained my balance before he let go.

He motioned toward my bent knee. "What happened to your leg?"

"Oh, that?" I looked down and shrugged. "I was a professional river dancer until one of my jigs went terribly awry. It happens."

His brow crinkled in what I recognized as very real confusion -- a look I was all too familiar with. He probably had no clue who in the hell Michael Flatly was, much less The Lord of the Dance.

He didn't press the issue, standing quietly behind me as I strode up the ramp and inside the building. The hallway was barren, the cream colored walls spray painted with multi-colored graffiti. He placed his hand under my left arm and guided me toward the elevator. The men from the bus moved aside, allowing us to pass. I felt the weight of their stares but tried to appear unfazed, looking directly ahead at the silver elevator doors.

When they slid open, I stepped inside and found there was one bonus to be had in the apocalyptic future -- no whimsical flutes serenaded the inhabitants with the sounds of music. Carter pushed the button to take us to the top floor, and the doors closed with a happy ding.

The horrible wretch of the elevator as it lifted caused my stomach to roll. I shifted my attention to Carter. He was as serious as ever. From what I could gather, he was probably in his thirties, but when his brow furrowed and creased he looked damn near fifty.

When we reached the designated floor, the alarm chimed again and the doors opened. Directly ahead was a huge living room, complete with art deco furniture. Carter lifted his hands, indicating I should go first, and I nervously stepped inside of the room. Although he hadn't given the vibe that he would try to do something I wouldn't agree to, I was well aware of the masks people wore when they wanted to portray themselves as something they weren't.

“Take a seat,” he instructed.

I took him up on the offer, not to be menial, but because my knee was betraying me like a two-faced bitch. The couch wasn't comfortable, but neither my bruised posterior nor my lame ass leg complained.

I sat back; anxious and cautious, but physically relieved.

“Would you like something to drink?” Carter asked and stepped from the center of the room.

I remained silent as he walked around the bar and worked the holster off his broad, muscular shoulders before tossing it onto the counter. He unbuttoned the long sleeve camouflage shirt, revealing corded forearms with a scattering of dark hair, and shrugged out of it. He walked to the fridge and I heard the pop of the door being opened as he called out, “Do you always make people repeat themselves?”

“Sure Martha, why don't you whip me up some dinner too while you're at it? I'm starving out here,” I retorted tartly. My annoyance threshold was at the breaking point.

I heard glasses being dinged together, the slurping slosh of liquid being poured inside, and the refrigerator door slamming shut. He came around the bar with two drinks in hand.

“Here.” He held one out and I took it, keeping it away far, far away from my mouth. Silently, I balanced the glass on my knee, studying the amber colored liquid encased by thick crystal.

“Not thirsty?” he asked just before he downed his own drink.

Rhiannon's Law #5. Don't accept drinks from strangers. Not unless you want to be drugged, date raped, and given all sorts of STDs -- and not necessarily in that order.

“I don't drink things unless they come from a sealed container.” Anyone could drop something into an open glass. I was a bartender back in the normal world, and it was a known fact.

“Then you must be special to one of them. I haven't tasted soda since I was a boy.” He

popped the glass down on the table in front of me. "I'm amazed your master let you stray so far away. I'm sure he'll be upset to find you've been taken."

"Look." I sat up, placing my glass on the table. "This isn't what you think, and I don't really have the time or patience to explain. I have somewhere I needed to be yesterday."

"I bet you have somewhere you need to be, and lucky you, we've brought you there. Distance from that cesspit will allow you to see clearly." He smirked, lifting his glass, and returned to the kitchen.

"I am not staying here," I said quietly, refraining at screaming him like I wanted to. Acting like a bitch wouldn't help me now. I had to attempt to pacify, and in the doing, bargain with the asshole.

"Oh, yes you are. Your bedroom is right there." He pointed to the left behind me. "I suggest you get comfortable. All of you black swans are exactly the same, so don't think you're any different. You get swept up in the night side and forget all about your own kind. A few months here will open those eyes of yours. If it doesn't..." He cleared his throat, shaking his head, and said, "Let's hope it won't come to that."

"You don't get it," I snapped, stood steadily without the betrayal of my knee, and walked toward the elevator. "I cannot stay here. I have something important I have to take care of. Fight your war with someone who gives a shit. Me? I'll take my chances with the creepy crawlies outside."

I pushed the button repeatedly, the round flickering yellow border indicating the device was working. My breathing increased, stomach contents shifting past my sternum and into my throat. I didn't want to vomit, not right now. However, once I was safely inside the confines of the neat and clean elevator, I could take care of that little problem. A ding sounded and the doors opened, revealing two men dressed in camo pants, wife beaters, and black Beretta's.

"Is there a problem?" Their eyes trained on me as they asked the question, and their hands drifted to their sidearms. I loved men who felt superior simply because they had bulk and an automatic weapon on you.

Spineless pricks.

I lowered my head, exhaling in exasperation. This was the craziest fucking shit. Too bad I'd be repeating that same thing in the future. I couldn't seem to stop trumping myself.

"I think she understands the ramifications if she tries to leave," Carter answered from behind me, and I heard him settle into one of the seats and clunk his boots on the table. The big ass bastard on the right nodded his buzzed blond head, his biceps and chest flexing as he pushed the button and closed the doors with another cheery ding.

"So, this is what we've reverted to," I snapped angrily, turning to glare at Carter. "Kidnapping people and holding them hostage. It's good to see the human race has evolved during my sabbatical."

"Don't give me that bullshit," Carter snapped, his boots creating an earsplitting boom as they connected loudly with the floor as he sat up. "If you need someone to blame, blame those leeches you supply. They are the ones who have caused this, not us. We're doing what we can to survive. It is our responsibility to show those bred in captivity what it's like to be free."

"Bred in captivity." I grimaced in disgust. "You can't be serious."

"Where have you been the last forty years?" he snapped in what I easily perceived as agitation. "Did you miss the after effects of the war? When we lost, they changed everything. You can't believe what they tell you, not even your parents can vouch for it. Blood slaves are tainted -- all of them. You're nothing more than walking food."

I was curious and completely confused. No better time than the present to get some answers. I wasn't very adept at playing a dumb ass -- okay I admit it, my douche level had increased recently -- but with my lack of experience I hoped I pulled it off.

"So let me get this straight. They won the war and made us into walking meals on wheels? Even our children?"

"Have you learned nothing during your captivity? You're not a child, and you're far too old to have been allowed to remain with your family." His words conveyed his shock, surprise, and

doubt.

“Let’s just say,” I answered cautiously, shaking off the skeevies at the notion of being taken from my parents like a newly minted, six-week old puppy. ”The last time I was in the know, the world was slightly less messed up.”

“How much do you know?” He was studying me, curiosity and disbelief overriding his annoyance. His eyes were lighter now, the grey softening to what reminded me of a calmer sky, along with his features.

“I know something called the Renfield Syndrome wiped us out and that humans have resorted to whoring themselves out in the paper.”

“Take a seat,” he instructed quietly, raking his long fingers through his dark black hair, “and I’ll tell you.”

I nodded, rolling my eyes, and complied with the request. If I was stuck in this hell hole, at least I got cookies, milk, and story time. I took a seat and settled in.

“The first vampire came into the open in 2041. No one believed it at first, but after a few months when the world found out it wasn’t a hoax, things started to change. The United States government, as well as the leader’s across the globe banded together, calling for registration of all the vampires across the world. That was met with resistance. Some of the older vamps refused to participate, and a line was drawn. Those that didn’t submit to the request were deemed a danger to humanity. Within a few months, the fighting started. By 2044, the war was in full swing.” He rubbed his hand across his shadowed face, hair falling across his forehead. “I need something stronger than tea.”

He braced his hands on his knees and pushed his way to his feet. Swiveling around the couch, he quietly returned to the bar. He reached under the counter, producing a bottle. Some things might change, but liquor always stands the test of time. I recognized the label immediately. It was my old friend, Mr. Daniels. He reached for two short glasses, holding the rims between his fingers, and returned to his place to take a seat.

“Now.” He put the glasses side by side, pouring the amber liquid carefully. “Vampires might

have been weak during the day, but they slaughtered at night. The military dispatched soldiers to all largest neighborhoods, a worldwide curfew was established, and it became a game of cat and mouse.”

He handed me a glass, and I took it. He threw his shot back, swallowing hard, and shook his head. Then he poured another and sat the bottle on the table.

“Then the war on bloodsuckers got a new weapon. Something so accessible anyone could have it -- the Renfield vaccine. It was engineered from vampire blood, and the way it worked was simple. You got the vaccination and if a vampire bit you, the vampire died. It seemed like an easy solution. All the leaders around the world showed a united front, televising the summit where they received the injection themselves. Before the end of the month, over three quarters of the world population had the shit floating around in their systems.”

He downed the next shot, pouring a third.

“It took almost thirty years for the side effects to occur. People started aging rapidly, their cellular levels going completely off the charts. They died within hours, all of them -- men, woman, and children. The only populations that remained untainted were the third world nations that didn’t have access to dependable health care, and we lost contact with them years ago. Since the first people to inject the tainted shit into their systems were the world’s leaders, it was only a matter of time before the entire infrastructure combusted.”

Eyes wide, I exhaled softly. “Jesus.”

Carter smiled bitterly. “It was only weeks before what was known as the Renfield Syndrome wiped us out. When vampires started scouting for survivors, we got word there was a safe haven here in New York, and so we came. That was thirty years ago, and things still haven’t changed. People are still fighting for the right to live, and vampires are still hunting them down and forcing them into slavery.”

“So people are slaves?” I spoke slowly, thinking, “How does that work, exactly?”

“They are nothing more than primped and preened cattle the vampires keep as pets. They try to fool you into believing you can live a normal life, that you can have a family and children.

They clothe you, they feed you -- but you're never free. You're always privy to what they need. Trust me, I know."

I twirled the glass between my palms, looking down at my hands. "Would it be too personal to ask how?"

"Someone here will tell you eventually. It's probably best you hear it from the direct source." He reclined back in the seat. "Years after we arrived, my older brother started getting cabin fever. Each day Patrick ventured out, traveling further and further, and one night he didn't come home. It was difficult, but we made our peace with the fact he was gone. When he showed up several years later, he was..." Carter paused and swallowed loudly. "He belonged to one of them. I won't go into detail, or explain why it was so reviled among us, as it's irrelevant. He claimed they only wanted to help rebuild society and that's when we learned they only demanded one thing in return -- servitude. He was lucky to make it out the door alive. If he weren't my brother, he wouldn't have."

"I'm sorry," I said, voice hollow.

"Losing a sibling is painful, but I'd imagine losing a child would be worse, and that's what would happen. Once you agree to what they want, they own you. And that ownership extends down to your children. They aren't trying to rebuild the population because they care. They are doing what is necessary to ensure survival. Right now, children are a rarity, especially among us. Once we're gone -- they're fucked."

I crinkled my forehead, giving my brain time to filter through the new information. Things were worse than I could possibly imagine.

I put the glass to my lips, blocked off my nose and throat, and downed the shot in one gulp. I closed my eyes and drew in a nose full of fire laced air, blinking several times to clear the tears from my eyes. I sniffed, clearing my throat, and plopped the glass down on the tabletop as I met his gaze.

"Now that is some fucked up shit."

"I'm glad you think so." He nodded his approval, leaned forward and downed his third shot, and then he lifted the bottle and refilled both of our glasses.