### The Toreador Chronicles

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### Summary

A very AU series, in which Brian leaves Pittsburgh to accept a lucrative offer in Los Angeles. Little does he know what he gets himself into and how it will change his life forever.

**Warning:** NOT for Justin-fans.
Chapter summary: The undead business elite of Los Angeles has a meeting to decide about their new PR strategy. They decide to employ Kinnetic for PR work – and Clan Toreador claims Brian Kinney as a potential neonate.

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The Conclave room above the singe club D’Oblique was a distinctly elegant, richly furnished room that spoke of old-fashioned taste - and a lot of money. The room practically glittered in the light of the crystal chandelier hanging from the ceiling. The hardwood floors were polished nearly to mirror sheen, elegant patterns of black grain showing against the natural tones of the wood. The wood-panelled walls also reflected the great chandelier’s light, half pillars of brown marble separating the six stained glass windows along each of the side walls. Burgundy brocade curtains obscured the windows partially, adding to the out-of-the-time elegance of the room. Double oaken doors stood on one end, while a great stained glass window that depicted the coat of arms of long-dead French kings took up the vast majority of the far wall. Even in the darkness of the late hour of the night, the stained glass panel was lit from the outside, glowing in shades of red and gold.

The huge, oval table, made of dark, polished wood, stood in the middle of the room, with its head in the shadow of the stained glass coat of arms. Several high backed chairs of the same dark wood and padded with red velvet cushions stood around it, as this room served both as the place of Conclave meetings and for business purposes like the one that was going on at the moment.

The host of the meeting, Toreador Primogen Victor Girard, was a tall, funny-faced French vampire with slightly long hair and a flamboyant personality, even as Toreadors go. He’d been one of the important characters of the LA fashion scene since the early 1930’s, and the owner of the famous Girard Fashion House. His designers worked for the Vignes Studios in Hollywood as well as for the Jade Flower boutiques, and his personal creations were considered equal to those of Dior, Lagerfeldt or other great fashion houses.

Sitting on Girard’s right was Mei-ji, also known as the Jade Flower, one of the rich and influential Kuei-yin, the Kindred of the East. The exotic beauty of Korean origins owned a chain of fashion boutiques not only in South California but also in South Korea and Thailand and held major ownership of a branch of the Bank of Bangkok in Koreatown, LA. Mei-ji co-owned this bank branch with Yoshida Ozaki, an elderly-looking Japanese Kindred who was currently sitting next to her.

The major financial power, however, lay with Louis Fortier, the 250-year-old Ventrue Anarch, who practically owned the Bank of Lyon, and Countess Andrea Visconti, a fabulously rich Brujah businesswoman, who co-owned several Italian banks with her Sire, whom she’d represented in the States since the 1940’s. Los Angeles was one of the rare cities where the two ever-rivalling Clans had managed to work out a truce, mostly because of it being a Free Anarch State where the Camarilla Ventrue couldn’t bout out everyone else of the business opportunities.

Also from Clan Ventrue were Edward Vignes and his sister, Vera, the owners of the Vignes Studios, Madame D’Excavalier, who owned several art galleries from San Francisco to LA, and Philippe Navital, the lawyer of both Girard and Fortier. Two more Toreadors, Alain DeLaigle, owner and head artist of the DeLaigle Ateliers and Art School, and Diego Martinez, talented young web designer and owner of Diego Designs, made the gathering complete.

It was an intimidating concentration of money and influence. The Prince of the City might be the
law, but financial power was here, in this room, right now. There were other Kindred businesspeople, of course, and influential ones at that. One only needed to think of Justin Davies from *Winters Enterprises* or the pate of Chinatown. But this particular alliance ensured the superiority of the parties present.

However, it was a precarious balance, the keeping of which required quite some effort from the rich and influential vampires currently sitting around the table. And right now, Victor Girard’s long-held leading position was being threatened from within his own clan. By a mere neonate who used her influence and popularity in the mortal world – especially among people in their early twenties – to undermine her Primogen’s position.

“We’ve walked the own-fashioned path for too long,” Philippe Navital explained with a frown. “Diego here is the only one who truly knows the taste and demands of young people today.”

“Not the only one,” Mei-ji corrected indignantly.

The Ventrue lawyer gave her an irritated look. “You live from the Asian market and from the Asian communities within the States, Mei-ji, which is good and profitable. But we are losing the white and black youth in California to Rebecca, and that’s not something Victor could afford.”

“We are working on it,” Alain DeLaigle said. “I’ve got this very young mortal student, the artist from the currently very popular comic titled *Rage* – I hope I can warm him up to the idea of fashion designing. He’s incredibly talented.”

“Is this the same comic Brett Keller wants to turn into a live action movie?” Edward Vignes asked.

Alain nodded. “Are you interested?”

Vignes shrugged. “Vera says it’s good, and Brett, despite being Brujah, is a good director. No offence intended,” he added, looking at Countess Visconti in apology.

“None taken,” she assured him. “We aren’t exactly the artistic types.”

“Well, Brett makes action movies, which suits the Brujah nature quite nicely,” Vera Vignes smiled. “Besides, the gay community is a wide open market among the Kine, thank their ridiculous prejudices. We could establish a firm influence there – in fact, we should have decades ago. But it still could help our campaign against Rebecca when we have a big market elsewhere. Her campaign is based on her popularity among straight men and women. We should move before she realizes the opportunities offered ‘on the other river bank’, as Germans would say.”

“I still can’t understand how Rebecca has managed to stomp such a strong opposition out of the earth in such short time,” Mei-ji said, clearly worried. Rebecca was aiming at the same population group that she was. “She couldn’t have earned *that* much, despite being a TV star.”

“A sinking one, actually,” Countess Visconti added cynically. “Small wonder she wanted to establish a different business before people would forget her completely. As for the financial background, I think there’s nothing surprising. This is the golden opportunity for Jason Davies to land a hit on all of us who are associated with Salvador. A completely legal opportunity, I must add. And *Winters Enterprises* does have the necessary financial means.”

“Don’t forget Cha’ang, the pate of Chinatown,” Yoshida Ozaki reminded them. “His ties to *Wolfram & Hart* secure him opportunities few other businesspeople would discover.”

“Speaking of which,” Louis Fortier spoke for the first time, “have you found any proof about *Wolfram & Hart* having ties to the Sabbat yet?”
The lawyer shook his head. “Nothing useful yet. There are indices, but no hard proof so far. We’re… working at it.”

“Work harder,” the eyes of the Ventrue Minister were ice cold. “We don’t want another Cyrus situation at our hands.”

“It’s not that easy,” Navital said defensively. “We can’t just walk into their building and hack into their computers, you know. Their vampire detectors would catch us at once, and their guards are armed with phosphorous guns and stakes.”

“Send in a mortal with C4 for distraction,” Countess Visconti said coldly. The ruthless advice seemed strangely mismatched with her aristocratic elegance, proving that not even the upper class of the Rabble was completely different. “Or some idiot Sabbat fledgling to set off the alarms and get killed while you’re securing the proof you need.” Seeing the stunned faces around her, she shrugged. “You Camarilla types sometimes lack creativity so much it almost hurts. This is the 21st century. Use 21st century methods.”

“We Camarilla types?” Vera Vignes parroted mockingly. “I thought you were Camarilla, too?”

“I am now,” she replied with a shrug. There wasn’t much to add, really. Even converted to the Camarilla, the formerly Anarch Brujah remained very much the same.

“Could we, please, return to the main topic?” Victor Girard asked a little impatiently. “I’m still trying to find a working strategy against Rebecca here.”

“I think Vera’s idea about winning the gay community for us does have its merits,” Madame D’Excavalier said. “The question is, how do we make our offers known among them on the big scale. It would require a well-organized advertising campaign. Sporadic contacts in the artist and movie world are good but not enough there.”

“I think I can help with that,” Alain DeLaigle said calmly. “That young mortal student of mine has spoken about a former boyfriend who has his own advertising agency in Pittsburgh. A relatively new agency, called Kinnetic. The man is well-known in the community and has worked in the ad business for a decade or so.”

“We should monitor his business activities first,” Fortier said. “This is not a small thing, bringing in a new player, as our business interests are fairly interconnected.”

“I already had the local Nosferatu check on him,” DeLaigle opened his wireless laptop and turned it around, so that the others could see the viewscreen with the picture of a good-looking man in his early thirties, with auburn hair and hazel eyes and a very sensuous mouth. “He’s very talented and can be extremely successful when he put his mind to it. He built up Kinnetic in less than a year, after having lost his former job when he first nearly won the campaign of a gay-hating police chief for the office of the mayor, and then causing the same man to fall spectacularly.”

“How is the business running now?” Fortier asked.

DeLaigle switched from the picture to statistics. “It seems that the agency is now practically running itself. This is the moment we should snatch the man – he has the talent, the almost magic energy, and desperately needs a good challenge right now.”

“The same report also says that he’s moody, unreliable, completely immoral and wildly promiscuous,” Vera Vignes remarked, checking the screen; then she added with a lascivious grin. “With other worlds, the perfect Toreador. Do you have your eyes on the man already, Alain?”
DeLaigle grinned back. “Why not? I think he’d be interested in the Embrace. He has repeatedly voiced his fear from getting old, and he has just fought cancer – the vote if he’s really won is still off, although his oncologist has recently given him a clean bill of health. I think he’d welcome the chance to live for an unlimited length of time in his current shape.”

“I thought you’d choose Blondie from the art studio,” Vera teased. DeLaigle shook his head.

“No, he’s much too young. We should secure his talent for the Clan one day, but he still needs years in the sunlight to completely unfold his abilities. And he’d need an ancient Kindred of a low generation as his Sire, so that he can receive the Toreador traits as undiluted as possible.”

“I thought being the grand-Childe of Leonardo would do the trick nicely,” Vera commented.

“It doesn’t work that way,” DeLaigle said. “You can inherit the Clan traits, but not the talent. You either have it, or you haven’t. Can you compare me with my Sire?”

“You’re a good artist, Alain,” Vera protested. DeLaigle nodded.

“I know. But Leonardo was a genius. It’s just not the same. It might be something similar with Justin, which is why he needs time and the strongest Toreador source possible.”

“You expect great things from this kid, I see,” Girard said.

DeLaigle nodded. “I do indeed. I haven’t had such a talented student for a long time, despite his damaged hand.”


“Gay bashing. They cracked his skull with a baseball bat, too. He nearly died at the age of seventeen.”

“The Embrace could solve that problem,” Girard reminded him. “He’d become ambidextrous like the rest of us.”

“Art is born from the spirit, not from the hands,” DeLaigle replied. “His spirit must mature for years yet for him to reach his full potential. Then we can Embrace him… unless he wastes his talent due to his undisciplined ways. That’s a strong possibility, too, and nothing we can do against. Of course, promoting him would help to win him for the Clan,” he added, looking at Madame D’Excavalier in askance.

“I’ll take a look,” the gallerist said. “But consider also that he would need a really good education, not the half-assed one today’s youth usually receives. Talent can serve to fill much of the hole in knowledge and education, but knowledge can be very helpful, paired with real talent.”

“I can organize him a study place at the Academy of Belle Artis in Florence,” Countess Visconti promised. “My Sire and I are among the main promoters of that institution. And no amount of talent can replace a thorough education of classical drawing. Even if the artist later chooses a very different style for his work.”

“That’s very true,” Madame d’Excavalier agreed. “However, if you really want to get this ad exec… what’s his name?”

“Brian Kinney.”

“Of course. Kinney as in Kinnetic,” the Ventrue gallerist rolled her eyes. “Could the man be more
obvious? Are you really sure that he’s any good? That name alone screams of a complete lack of imagination.”

“I’m very sure, Madame. *Kinnetic* was named to create a strong an immediate association between agency and owner.”

“Very well,” Fortier shrugged; as the lead banker among them, the final decision was his. “If you vouch for him, your head it shall be. But if you want to Embrace him, you won’t come around Blood Bonding him to keep him on a short lash. And you will have to keep him on a short lash, or else he’d be of no use for us. He can’t be allowed to screw up his job in any way.”

DeLaigle laughed. “Louis, I might not know of which generation I am, but I’ve been around for centuries. Leonardo used to have such a young rebel as his prize pupil… among other things. These people are incapable of living in a relationship as equals, and are usually awful as the dominant partner. But with the right training, they usually make the most excellent slaves.”

Mei-ji shot him a rather unladylike grin. “Are you sure you’re not doing this to have the biggest slut of Pittsburgh for yourself?” she asked, tapping the keyboard with a long, silver fingernail to pull up the picture of the man in question again. “I can understand you, though. He’s almost disgustingly pretty, and has quite the reputation, I see.”

DeLaigle rolled his icy blue eyes. “Oh, please, Mei-ji! Nobody is *that* good!”

“It depends,” the exotic beauty winked. “A well-trained slave could be both useful and extremely pleasurable. I know what I’m speaking about.”

“I’m sure you do,” DeLaigle laughed. Although bisexual like all Kindred, Mei-ji was widely known to prefer her own gender. Her Disciple, a flirtatious little Chinese fetish model by the name of Bai-ling was only one of her numerous slaves, most of them female, all of them recruited in Lady Heather’s BDSM club, *La Lune Rouge*.

“Of course,” Mei-ji added, suddenly very serious, “you’ll have to keep the balance in mind. Thoroughly Blood Bond and dominate someone of such a rebellious spirit as the reports describe this one would be a very… delicate process.”

“Doing it without breaking his will entirely,” DeLaigle nodded in agreement. “He wouldn’t be of any use for us broken.”

“He’d walk into the sun if you ever managed to break him completely,” Mei-ji warned. “Some people just can’t live with that. I’ve lost two Disciples that way when I was younger. Too young, actually. Too impatient to care for the balance.”

“I’ve done this before,” DeLaigle said. “*And* I had the luck to watch one of the greatest masters at work.”

Mei-ji smiled wistfully. “I’ve always regretted not being able to visit Italy at that time. It must have been overwhelming to meet all those great artists and warlords and evil politicians.”

“Well, we still have enough of the latest,” Countess Visconti wrinkled her perfect nose in dismay. “Unfortunately, they don’t have the style required from a truly great villain. Today’s evil is brutal and unimaginative.”

“But efficient,” Fortier said grimly. “Never before were the Kine so close to eradicating themselves – and us as a result – than in our current times. But that’s a question we’ll have to address at another time and on another forum. Right now, we need to take care of our own problems. Alain, you’ll have
to ask Angelus’ permission to Embrace this Kinney person. He might be Anarch, but we’ve elected him as our legal Prince, so we better keep to the rules.”

DeLaigle nodded. “I will. By the way, I think we should snatch Kinnetic’s chief accountant as well. Eventually. He seems to be reasonably good Ventrue material, although might need a regnant to function properly. Since he appears to fear aging just as much as Kinney, he might be willing to accept the Embrace.”

“I’ll think about it in due time,” Fortier said. “It would certainly solve our long-time problem with mortal accountants – but we have to be careful. Besides, we’ll have to wait with Embracing new fledglings. Angelus has requested our help with Embracing young David Nabbit.”

“The David Nabbit?” the Countess asked after the first moment of shock was over. “Eccentric billionaire with Goth tendencies, ‘he-who-visits-demon-brothels’ David Nabbit?”

“The one and only,” Fortier nodded. “The youngster is completely smitten with Angelus and has been nagging him to be ‘turned’, as the ignorant like to call it, for half a year or so. Ever since he discovered Angelus’ true nature.”

“That’s madness,” Vera Vignes shook her head. “The boy is unstable enough as it is – we’ve worked with him as he sponsored the last Dracula movie – he’ll never be able to handle the Beast of Angelus’ bloodline.”

“Of course not,” Fortier agreed, “but he’s insistent, and Angelus is afraid that he – and his immense wealth – would fall into the wrong hands. We can’t allow that. So we’ve worked out a solution. Angelus will do the Embracing and claim ownership over the Childe, but he’ll only give him a very small amount of his Vitae. A Ventrue of an old line will serve as surrogate and help with stabilizing the fledgling after he awakens.”

“You?” Vera Vignes asked with a frown. Fortier shook his head. “Non, that would lead to awkward situations. I’ve selected Phillipe for the role,” he nodded towards his lawyer. “He’s an 8th generation Ancilla, almost four hundred, and comes from an excellent bloodline. Plus, he has no Childer to care for since Mariel has gone rogue, so he’ll have the time to teach David to create the necessary controls. As a lawyer, he can also rationalize his frequent visits at Nabbit Enterprises.”

“Not to mention securing a tycoon as a client for his firm,” Countess Visconti smiled. “It might work out. Clan Ventrue would be the best for someone like David Nabbit, and even though he’d formally belong to Angelus’ family, he’ll have… obligations to his foster Clan as well. Securing the Nabbit billions for our side would be of great advantage. We should be careful, though. Angelus is an Anarch, not a fool. When he thinks we are trying to get our hands on what is his, our lives will be forfeit.”

“We’ll do nothing of the sort,” Fortier emphasized. “He’s our Prince; we practically blackmailed him into accepting the position, and we need him. We’ll support him with everything we have,” with a faint smile, he added. “That this happens to be in our best interest is merely a coincidence.”

The others laughed. The thought of having access to the Nabbit billions, soon, made them extremely content. But even though that would give them the necessary financial background to fight concurrence effectively, it didn’t mean giving up their smaller, immediate goals, of course.

“So, who’s going to contact this Brian Kinney?” Mei-ji asked. “And how are we going to give a plausible reason for choosing his small, new and very much unknown agency?”
“He made a successful campaign for Brown Athletics, didn’t he?” Victor Girard asked. DeLaigle nodded. “Well, that’s easy then. I do have some… small interest in Brown Athletics. I’ll have Catherine contact the man officially… she’s sheer irresistible when she wants to win a business partner over. She should have become a Toreador, not a Ventrue puffy shirt.”

“I think she’s quite content as a Ventrue,” Fortier, the Sire of Catherine DuBois said mildly.

“Yeah, but she’d have a lot more fun as a Toreador,” Girard pointed out. Everyone laughed. This was a very old running joke between the two Clan leaders, and since both were right, to a certain extent, it would run for quite some time yet.

“I think we’ve covered everything,” Fortier then said. “Edward, are you giving Brett Keller green light for this Rage movie?”

“We are,” Vignes replied. “I’ll let Marty Fenderman play with him a little at first, but eventually, we will. We need that sort of audience for the Studios. Aside from sappy romances for teenage girls, the action-packed stuff for young males is the thing that brings in the big bucks.”

“Marty Fenderman is a homophobe and a coward,” Vera warned him. “He’ll hate the very idea of a gay superhero and will try to change everything in the story.”

“Of course,” Edward nodded with a smirk, “but I don’t want to make it too easy for the boy… Justin is his name, right? He wants success? He should squirm and fight for it a little. Besides, I’m curious how he’s going to argue for his own work. If he’s good, I might make him an assistant art director. He’s the one who knows better what things are supposed to look like.”

“I’m sure half of our young fledglings will be filling the theatres, once the movie is finished,” the Countess rose from her seat. “Well, if that’s all, I’d like to leave. I have to be in Venice tomorrow; Alonzo is going to fly me at sunset, and I need to order my papers before start. If you’ll excuse me…”

“Of course,” Fortier nodded. “We are done here anyway. Please give Salvador and Count Visconti my regards.”

“I will,” Andrea Visconti nodded to her business associates and left the room in her usual royal manner. Aristocracy was a matter of breeding, after all. Even Brujah aristocracy.

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For visuals: Louis Fortier (on the right)
The Job Interview

Chapter Summary

Brian gets an offer that is too exciting to refuse. So he takes off with Emmett to LA.

Chapter Notes

The D’Oblique, of course, is the single bar from the 1st Season Angel episode *Lonely Hearts*. However, I made the club quite different from the original one: more classy and with music and performance artists and so on. Hey, in this AU it’s owned by a Toreador fashion czar!

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The Job Interview

The unexpected phone call saved Brian Kinney from another afternoon of desperate boredom. In the last months he had started to realize that something was missing from his life. Ever since Justin had broken up with him and left town to start a new life somewhere with an art scholarship and refused to tell anyone where. Well, with the possible exception of his mother, but Jennifer Taylor wasn’t willing to reveal the secret to anyone. Especially not to Brian, whom she held responsible for about everything that had gone wrong in her son’s life.

But that wasn’t all. With all his friends settling down, the adventurous element in his life was now limited to the casual one-night stands, and he felt that it wasn’t enough anymore. He was almost thirty-four years old, and he felt with dread that his wild days would be over, soon. The crowd in the Babylon was getting younger and younger, and he knew he wouldn’t be able to keep his title as the Stud of Liberty Avenue any longer. If he wanted to be honest with himself – which he avoided at all costs whenever he could – he didn’t even want it anymore.

The only problem was, he didn’t really know what he wanted instead. Dreading commitment like he did, it would have been too extreme of a change, and besides, his reputation would most likely kill any opportunity of a committed relationship. At least here, in Pittsburgh.

So, he was understandably happy to hear the phone ring. It gave him the chance to distract himself from his depressing thoughts. He picked up the receiver before Cynthia, his once assistant and now top ad executive, could do it for him.

“Kinnetic,” he said curtly.

“This is Catherine DuBois, assistant director of the Girard Fashion House,” a sultry female voice with a soft French accent replied. “I’d like to speak with Mr. Brian Kinney, please.”

“This must be your lucky day,” Brian replied sarcastically. “You are speaking with him.”

“Tres bien,” she actually sounded relieved. “I’m calling you on behalf of Monsieur Girard. He has
some interests in Brown Athletics and was impressed with your recent campaign. He’d like to meet you to discuss further business opportunities.”

“What sort of business?” Brian’s curiosity was picked. Small as it might be, the Girard Fashion House was at least as famous as Dior, Gucci or Versace.

Besides, it would be a challenge. After having worked like a slave to make Kinnetic the best agency in town, the business practically ran itself nowadays. Cynthia had everything under control and Ted handled the finances expertly. Most of the time, he was practically unnecessary for the day-to-day business. Only when they had to woo a particularly important business partner were his charms still needed.

“We’ll send you the preliminaries via e-mail,” the French woman replied, “but Monsieur Girard insists on a personal meeting. When could you take a plane to Los Angeles?”

“To Los Angeles?” Brian was more than a little stunned, unable to even guess what the famous Victor Girard would need him for so urgently.

“We’ll provide the flight ticket, of course,” the woman on the phone said, probably misunderstanding his hesitation, “as well as your accommodations in LA for the time of your visit. All you need is to give me the date of your arrival.”

“Well,” Brian was still a little flabbergasted, but he’d never been a man to waste a good opportunity… in any area. He checked his time planner. “I have a business meeting on Thursday in town, and another one in Chicago on next Monday, but if your boss is willing to see me on the weekend…” He very much doubted it, but it was a way to find out how serious these guys were about all this.

“Excellent,” the woman said. “I’ll have your flight ticket booked and waiting for you on the airport. Claude Bellamy, Monsieur Girard’s personal assistant, will fetch you here in LA.”

She hung up, leaving Brian slightly bewildered but willing to pick up a challenge. To which, however, he needed professional help, not having all too much idea about fashion. Well, he did have a good – and quite expensive – taste when it came to his own clothes, but he wasn’t particularly well-versed in what was considered the latest hit in the more… flamboyant circles. Which, he was sure, the rather conservative Victor Girard was looking for. The only campaign that had something to do with fashion was the underwear one for Brown Athletics, and that one was brought to success by Emmett. Which meant, he needed Emmett for this potentially lucrative job.

With Girard paying for his flight ticket, he could afford to pay Emmett’s, and if needs must be, he’d be able to spend a day or two in the same room with the drama queen of Pittsburgh. Besides, Emmett could use a change of scenery after the all the recent stress in his life.

Decision made, Brian picked up the phone and called Emmett’s new place.

“Hi Auntie Em,” he said, grinning, “how do you feel about spending the weekend in LA?”

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Emmett was enthusiastic, of course – he loved travelling but rarely had the chance to do so, and never before for free – and four days later they boarded the plane together. Emmett had the time of his life, flirting shamelessly with the pretty flight attendants, males and females alike, not out of some suddenly awakened interest for the opposite gender, just for the fun of it, and was declared the cutest passenger of the season. It wasn’t really surprising. Emmett’s childlike happiness about the unexpected trip was near irresistible – even though slightly irritating after the first couple of hours.
But finally they reached LA airport without any major incident and were about to leave the plane.

“Emmett,” Brian warned his hyper friend one lat time, “this might turn out the biggest job I’ve ever caught… or will ever catch. If I get it, I’ll see that you get hired as my fashion expert. But if you screw it up because you can’t keep your dick in your pants, I’ll rip off your nuts and stuff them into your mouth, understand?”

“No need to be rude, darling,” Emmett said in his best drag queen manner. “I’m spontaneous, not an idiot, you know… ooh, see that little appetizer over there?”

“That’s exactly what I mean,” Brian elbowed him in the ribs roughly. “I’m about to have my most important business meeting ever, and you’ll not ruin it for me by drooling over every piece of ass that might walk by.”

“Sorry,” Emmett blushed in embarrassment, because Brian was right, of course. He did tend to forget important things when he saw a pretty man. “I’ll restrain myself.”

“See that you do, or I’ll turn you into a soprano,” Brian threatened, and Emmett pulled in his neck, knowing that his friend was serious.

They walked out into the arrival lounge. Barely had they looked around when they were already approached by a – for LA measures – unnaturally pale young man with ice cold dark eyes and slightly long, jet-black hair that reached to the collar of his dark burgundy jacket. The jacket had the gold-embroidered emblem of the Girard Fashion House on its breast pocket.

“Mr. Kinney?” the young man asked with a slight French accent, after checking out a picture on his palmtop. “I’m Claude Bellamy. Monsieur Girard sent me to drive you to your temporary quarters,” he gave Emmett a strange look. “You… came with company?”

“He’s my fashion expert,” Brian replied with a meaningful look at Emmett’s half-transparent shirt with the little sparkling gizmos scattered all over it. “Is that a problem? We can share the hotel room.”

“That won’t be necessary, sir,” the coldly elegant young man said with a dismissive wave of his hand. “You’ve been assigned one of the guest rooms in Monsieur Girard’s establishment, the Club D’Oblique. We’ll be able to open another guest room for Mr…”

“Honeycutt,” Emmett provided helpfully. The young man raised an eyebrow.

“Oh… a stage name,” he said lamely, losing his icy superiority for a moment. Emmett nearly bent over in amusement.

“Not exactly, sweetie. My father would find that idea… well, less than funny…”

“It’s his real name,” Brian told the little snot, fighting his own irritation. This smooth-licked lackey had no right to make fun of Emmett’s name. “Can we go now?”

The young man apologized immediately and – after fetching their luggage – led them to a long, elegant black limousine… with tinted windows. Emmett was beside himself, of course, chatting excitedly about his time with the late George Schickel, but Brian was getting uncomfortable. He was a cynic and a realist, and he knew well enough that his moderate success back in Pittsburgh wasn’t enough for a big fish like Victor Girard to roll out the red carpet for him like this. Either the fashion czar was in deep shit to fly him in for a campaign, or he wanted something that Brian wasn’t sure he was willing to do. The only question was how could he escape – and haul Emmett out – should this turn out to be some sort of sick trap.
“Em,” he murmured in a voice that was barely audible, “stick to me all the time. This whole… thing seems too good to be true. This driver guy is giving me the creeps… we must be ready to bolt, if necessary.”

Unbeknownst to them, the young Toreador driving the car could hear their every word – well, their every heartbeat, actually – with his acute vampire hearing. A thin, unpleasant smile appeared in the corners of Claude Bellamy’s mouth, smelling the humans’ fear. Good. They should fear him.

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The D’Oblique seemed to be one of those typical single clubs that stuck in the 1980s permanently – only for a slightly wealthier and more snobbish clientele than the average. It had a dance floor, a stage area and a large, dimly lit room for those who just wanted to sit and talk – or make out. A handsome young black man tended the bar – Emmett nearly ate him up with his eyes and earned a wink and an understanding grin for his efforts – and an apparently Italian waiter, who wore his long, curly black hair in a ponytail, zigg-zagged between the tables, charming everyone out of their underwear, regardless of age or gender, while serving them their drinks. Brian gave him a speculative look.

There wasn’t much going on at the moment, as it was early afternoon. So they could spot at once the elegant blonde in the “little black dress” that French women had developed to perfection during the 20th century coming to greet them.

“Mr. Kinney?” he asked, and Brian realized the softly accented voice that had called him four days ago. He nodded, and she proffered him a hand.

“Bienvenu. I’m Catherine DuBois. We’ve phoned.”

“My pleasure, Ms DuBois,” Brian shook her hand. “This is my… associate, Emmett Honeycutt.”

“Enchantée,” she gave Emmett, who - carried away by the spirit of the moment - kissed her hand in a theatrical manner, a seductive smile, apparently not caring that the young man stood out of the clientele of the club like a sore thumb. “I’m the manager of this establishment and the business partner of Monsieur Girard. I assume you were surprised to have been assigned quarters here instead of a hotel…”

“A little,” Brian admitted carefully. “The limo with the tinted glasses is… unusual, too.”

She redirected that sultry smile at him. “Oh, sorry to have worried you. Monsieur Girard has a… skin condition, he cannot take much direct sunlight. I should have sent another car.”

“I see,” Brian said; it was a convincing explanation, but he wasn’t about to lower his defences just yet.

“As for the rooms,” she continued, “it’s standard procedure with potential associates of Monsieur Girard’s. He has a private office and a penthouse above the club, although he doesn’t actually live here. Claude will take your luggage to the guest rooms,” she added, her manner becoming colder and authoritative.

“Oui, Madame,” the pale young man bowed and hurriedly obeyed. Mme DuBois turned back to the visitors.

“Allow me to show you the way to Monsieur Girard’s office. This will be a short informal meeting only, in the presence of his lawyer. The actual interview will take place later in the afternoon, when you’ve rested a little and some of Monsieur Girard’s associates have arrived.”
“May I ask a question?” Emmett intervened, batting his eyelashes amiably.

Mme DuBois smiled. “Mais oui, go on!”

“Is here everyone French?” Emmett blurted out, and she laughed.

“No, of course not! But many of Monsieur Girard’s business partners are. These are associations that go back two or three generations between their respective families. Follow me, please.”

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She led them into an old-fashioned, elegant office above the club. It had wood-panelled walls, stained glass windows and expensive furniture made of dark, polished wood and black leather. Really classy, Brian noticed, but perhaps a century or a half outdated. It was very old wealth that was represented there.

“Victor, your visitors are here,” Mme DuBois said in an easy, familiar manner that didn’t really match the stiffly elegant surroundings. The man whom she addressed was tall, with wavy, elegantly greying brown hair and a vivid face that seemed on constant motion – actually, he’d mach everyone’s bad cliché of French people. The hand-tailored silk shirt, the tailored slacks and the hand-sewn, soft shoes revealed that they were dealing with someone rich and important.

The only other person in the room was an auburn-haired man in an Armani suit who had ‘lawyer’ written all over him. They were sitting on a black leather sofa at a marble-plated coffee table.

Victor Girard rose and shook first Brian’s, then Emmett’s hand in a genuinely friendly manner.

“Welcome to my humble establishment, gentlemen. May I introduce my lawyer, Monsieur Phillipe Navital?”

Navital didn’t bother to shake hands with them; he remained seated and simply nodded in greeting. His manners were a lot more subdued, and his cold, calculating look belied the apparent softness of his handsome face. He was definitely a shark – one that Brian find enticing.

“I’m merely an observer at the moment,” he explained. “And to provide Monsieur Girard the data my agency has acquired about you, Mr. Kinney, if necessary.”

“Please, please, have a seat,” Girard gestured towards the deep, comfortable black leather armchairs on the other side of the table. “Our immediate goal is to gain a first impression of each other, although, as you can guess, we have checked you out as well as it was possible in the shortness of time. Catherine, ma chère, can you recommend us some good wine? Red, of course.”

“Bien sûr,” she smiled that slow, sly smile of her again, naming a wine that Brian was familiar with from upper-class movies only.

“Catherine is a trained sommelier,” Girard told his guests proudly. “One of the best in the entire California, I may add. Nobody knows as much about wine as she does.”

“Impressive,” Brian said blankly while the woman was giving the order on phone, “But I doubt it very much that you’ve had fly me in all the way from Pittsburgh just to talk about wine with me.”

It was a risky approach, but he was fed up with all the pussyfooting around the actual business. To his relief, Girard grinned.

“You are very direct. I like that. Tres bien, I’ll give you the problem in a nutshell. Less than a year ago, a popular actress started her own business in the fashion scene. Due to her popularity among
young people above all else, she could become a serious rival for us. We can’t allow that. So we want to start an aggressive campaign to drive her back, before it’s too late. We want to do it on two fronts: we need to win at least some of the young customers back, and we want to extend our influence to the gay community, which has been an unexploited market for too long. You do have good connections to that community. And you have the reputation to be aggressive and ruthless, to have an abstract way of thinking, and you’re said to like a good challenge. Those are the traits we need to give our business a new swing. Are you interested?”

Brian thought about the question unhurriedly.

“I assume you don’t mean just your own fashion house, right?” he then asked. Girard shook his head.

“Of course not. You’ll meet the others later today. We’ll have an extended meeting at 1900, where we can work out the details with Phillipe’s help.”

“What exactly do you expect from me?” Brian asked. “I can sell almost everything, of course, and Emmett here can tell you if a design can become a hit among queers, but…”

“That’s exactly what we need,” the lawyer interrupted. “Monsieur Girard has the experienced and talented designers who can do the actual work. You are needed to create and organize the campaign itself.”

“However,” Girard added, eyeing Emmett’s outfit with professional interest, “I’d welcome Mr. Honeycutt’s input. Maybe we can work out for him a contract with the designer studio. What are you doing for a living, Mr. Honeycutt?”

“Emmett, please,” the man in question batted his eyelashes. “Well, I’ve tried various jobs, from window dressing through naked house cleaning to Web porn star. At the moment, I’m working for a catering service… an absolutely serious one, I swear,” he added hurriedly.

Girard’s eyes literally bulged for a moment – apparently, he hadn’t Brian’s friends checked out – and the lawyer could barely hold his amusement.

“That says nothing about his fashion sense, Victor,” he said with forced seriousness. “You should give him a chance. I think Celeste would just love him.”

“Oh, no,” Emmett panicked visibly, “thanks for the generous offer, but I’m not into girls.”

“You’ll love this one,” the lawyer chuckled. “He’s not really a girl… well, he might be one now, but he started out as a man. And he’s gorgeous as transgender singers go.”

“Really?” Emmett’s eyes lit up in childlike excitement. “I adore transvestites! Why, when Godiva first…”

“Emmett,” Brian warned him in a low voice, “think of the safety of your private parts…”

The arrival of the wine saved poor Emmett from mortal embarrassment and the necessity to explain what the remark was supposed to mean. It was brought by the young Italian waiter of the D’Oblique, him with the long hair and the unique swing of hips, and when Brian tasted it, his eyebrows lifted, impressed, forgetting even the waiter for a moment. Although he preferred beer on the daily basis and tequila in the moments of a crisis, he knew an excellent red wine when he met one. Emmett, always a connoisseur of fine things, was out of his head from delight. The conversation turned to casual things after that, and shortly thereafter the meeting was broken up.
“We’ll all be seeing each other at 1900,” Philippe Navital said to Brian before parting. “I’m looking forward to knowing you better, Mr. Kinney… a lot better,” he added in a low, suggestive voice. Brian grinned.

“It’ll be my pleasure.”

“I certainly hope so,” the lawyer flashed him an unexpectedly charming smile and left. Emmett pouted.

“It’s not fair! The most delicious guys always hit on you.”

“Calm down, Em,” Brian grinned. “By the generous choices only in this place, you’ll find someone, too.”

“Well, I better do,” Emmett replied, “otherwise what fun would the whole thing be?”

“Em, you’re such a slut,” Brian laughed, shaking his head, but his voice was strangely fond.

“I know,” Emmett replied nonchalantly, “but at least I’m honest. And cute.”

“You’re a queen,” Brian patted his butt fondly, “and as Mikey likes saying, these days it takes real guts to be a queen in a world full of commoners.”

Emmett looked at him in pleasant surprise. “You think I’m brave?”

“Perhaps,” Brian grinned, “but perhaps you’re just completely nuts. Anyway, let’s have a break and something to eat, Queen Em. I have the distinct suspicion that negotiations won’t be all that easy tonight.”

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For visuals: Catherine DuBois as played by Catherine Deneuve:

Victor Girard as played by René Auberjonois:
Negotiations

Chapter Summary

Brian meets his future employers and gets the job, not knowing what he’s got himself into.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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NEGOTIATIONS

Basic rule of advertising and eternal damnation: Once you sell your soul to the devil, he holds the copyright. – Brian Kinney

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They were offered launch in a nearby restaurant – which, apparently, belonged to Victor Girard, too – and took a nap in their respective quarters to recover from the flight. Well, Brian did; Emmett sneaked out and had a steamy encounter with the handsome bartender of the D’Oblique in the men’s room. But again, he didn’t have to keep his mind sharp for the afternoon. Besides, in recent months Brian was slowly getting tired of the meaningless one-night-stands with men he wouldn’t give a shit otherwise. Maybe he was getting old. Maybe he was about to begin a more… mature phase of his life – the thought was positively frightening. He only hoped that the lawyer would prove distracting enough, for the duration of his visit in LA at least.

Shortly before 7 pm, Mme DuBois came personally to fetch him for the big interview. She smiled at Brian pleasantly, as if sensing his nervosity.

“You’ve made a good first impression,” she told him. “Keep up the speed, and you’ll have the job nailed by tonight.”

Brian couldn’t help but smile back. She had something of Cynthia in her, and also something of Debbie – only on a more elegant, more educated level. He liked her immediately. Contrary to common belief, he did like women – just in a completely non-sexual way. Some of them, like Lindz, could be great friends, some could be fantastic co-workers like Cynthia, and some could be like Deb, the übermother of Liberty Avenue. He wouldn’t miss the friendship with them for anything. There was a certain irony in the fact that while he was only interested in men for sex, the only ones he could really bond with were women.

Well, aside from Mikey, of course. But he was not going there. That was a loss he was still recovering from.

Catherine DuBois ushered him into Victor Gerard’s office again. This time, the room was full. Brian recognized the fashion czar and his lawyer among them. There were was a beautiful Asian woman on Girard’s side, business written all over her face, and there were two other men he didn’t know yet. One was wearing an Armani suit, just like the lawyer, the other one had casual, but apparently expensive clothes, the golden G of the Girard Fashion House embroidered on the breast pocket of his cobalt blue satin shirt and the waistbord of his designer jeans. Emmett, led in by the pale-faced
Claude Bellamy, stared at the elegant gathering with his mouth literally agape.

“I think we should start with the introductions,” Girard said, gesturing towards the seats left empty for Brian and Emmett. “My friends, this is Mr. Kinney, of whom you’ve all heard already. His… associate is Mr. Emmett Honeycutt. Gentlemen, meet some of my associates. Mistress Mei-ji,” he nodded to the Asian beauty, “is the owner of the *Jade Flower* boutique chain where we hope to sell our new collections. Louis Fortier, representing the Bank of Lyon,” he introduced the man in the Armani suit, “and Alain DeLaigle, painter and fashion designer, owner and lead artist of the *DeLaigle Ateliers.*”

Both Fortier and DeLaigle seemed to be in their early thirties, and both were handsome and elegant, not in the muscle-bound, fitness-mad Californian way, but possessing a timeless grace so typical for a certain sort of French men… the same one as the lawyer, actually. Brian began to like his potential new clientele. It definitely had possibilities.

Of course, he had to get the job first.

“Where are the others?” Fortier asked with a frown. It was obvious that he was the one calling the shots - and having the really big money - in this particular group.

“The Vignes have been hindered by some studio business and asked to be excused,” Mme DuBois reported, “and Diego has just called. He got caught in a traffic jam and will be late.”

“What’s new?” the stormy ice blue eyes of Alain DeLaigle mirrored cold annoyance. “When has he *ever* been on time?”

“Patience, *mon ami,*” Girard soothed him. “Be more forgiving with the folly of the untamed youth… and their artistic tempers.”

“Artistic tempers?” DeLaigle snorted. “*I am the artist,* and I manage to be reliable nevertheless. Diego is just a web designer, and it wouldn’t be asking too much of him to be punctual, just this one goddamn time. He’s the one who’s going to work with Kinney directly, after all. You’re giving him too much leeway, Victor. Were he mine, he’d never dare to take such liberties.”

“What a charming guy,” Brian commented softly, only for Emmett, but Phillippe Navital somehow managed to pick up the comment.

“He does have his moments,” he said with a suggestive twinkle in his eyes.

“I’m sure,” Brian replied dryly. *I just hope I’ll never experience one of them.*

The lawyer smiled. “No, really, he’s not so bad. When you learn to know him better, you’ll see his… appealing side.”

“I thought I was supposed to learn to know you better,” Brian riposted, his poker face firmly in place. But the lawyer was at least as good at this game as he was.

“The two things aren’t mutually exclusive,” he replied, completely unfazed. “We see those things pretty relaxed here.”

The introductions finished, another bottle of excellent red wine was opened, and they finally sat down to begin the actual job interview. To Brian’s surprise, although they seemed to want him for the job, they were testing him harder than he’d ever been tested before. They asked about his past campaigns, giving him a laptop with Internet access to show them samples of his work. They needed him about his knowledge concerning fashion; at this point, he had to rely on Emmett
heavily, and got a little concerned that they wouldn’t find him competent enough. They wanted to check his contacts to the gay community, especially journalists, asked about his way of working and thinking… to be able to provide the right working environment, as they said. They even asked about his family and his now-gone relationship with Justin.

At first, the personal questions annoyed him to no end, and he seriously considered to just quit the whole thing and go home. But as he began to understand how much money was there at stake, how big a risk it was for his future employers to hire someone they didn’t know and who wasn’t exactly a big name in the ad branch (at least not yet), he decided they had the right to know certain facts before actually giving him the job. Besides, if he got the job, this could bring him out big time, so he swallowed his annoyance and answered as honestly as he felt it safe.

Emmett had to undergo the same thorough inquisition. Well, actually an even more thorough one, since their potential clients hadn’t had any previous knowledge about him. But due to his open, easy-going manner, he took it a lot lighter than Brian did, and was on his best way to charm everyone out of their expensive suits. Emmett definitely had a certain quality that was hard to resist.

Finally, around half past eight, they ran out of questions…and seemed quite satisfied with the results. Especially Fortier and Girard, who were obviously the leading parties.

“What do you think, Phillippe?” Fortier asked. The lawyer shrugged.

“My advice would be to stick to the original plan and hire Mr. Kinney for the fashion campaign for starters. If he does a good job, which I actually expect, we can think about setting up a permanent partnership with Kinnetic. At least for the Girard Fashion House; the others can decide for themselves.”

“I want him, too,” the Asian beauty declared. “My business isn’t currently endangered by Rebecca, but I like to be a step ahead of the business rivals all the time. And I’ll be selling your new collection, Victor, so I need good PR for it.”

“Two campaigns then,” the lawyer nodded, “plus some help with the new cologne brand launch; I heard it’s stagnating at the moment.” He turned to Brian, all business now. “We can offer ten per cent above your usual price, plus a fifteen per cent divide in case the campaign is successful. You’ll live in LA for the duration and oversee everything personally. Do you agree with the conditions?”

Brian nodded. This was a reasonable offer – enough for him to make reasonable profit and cover his expenses. Any higher offer would be suspicious. Besides, he knew when he could haggle for a higher price – this was not one of those times. These people knew exactly what they wanted and what it was worth. Living in LA wasn’t going to be a problem either, Cynthia and Ted could run Kinnetic on their own for indefinite time. In fact, the prospect of living in LA, with its large and colourful gay subculture was an added bonus.

“What about Emmett?” he asked. He needed the nelly for this job, but he wasn’t willing to pay for everything.

“We’d like to hire him for the duration of the campaigns,” Navital answered, naming a payment that wasn’t particularly high in LA terms but twice the sum Emmett could have hoped to make in Pittsburgh - unless he sold himself to some porn site again, of course. “When his input turns out useful, we’ll negotiate about hiring him on a permanent basis.”

“What do you think, Em?” Brian asked. “You gonna accept?”

“Are you crazy?” Emmett asked back, excitement clear in his voice. “This is the best offer I’ve got
since Ted’s site was closed! Of course I’m gonna accept, I’m gay, not stupid, you know. Aside from the money, I get to live in LA for… how long exactly?” he asked the lawyer. Navital smiled.

“The campaigns are supposed to run for three months, after which we’ll need something new. Monsieur Girard wants to start with one collection first and broaden it gradually. In which case your contracts would be renewed, of course. As you probably know, aside from haute couture and movie and TV costumes, the Girard Fashion House also produces various collections for the average customer.”

“That’s where my boutiques enter the game,” Mei-ji injected. “They are quite popular in California and in certain Asian countries, so the market is reasonably large.”

Brian made a mental notice of this. Such a big market had possibilities, but it also meant that they’ll have to take the different tastes into consideration. Asian models in case the campaign would be extended to the Asian countries.

“Very well,” he said. “Now that you have us both, what’s the next step?”

“I’ll bring you the contracts to sign tomorrow,” the lawyer said. “Say, at 19:00? In the meantime, Alain can take you to meet the designers and see some of the models, perhaps. And Diego, of course, assuming he manages to reappear before the season is over.”

“I’ll need a place to work,” Brian said. “Preferably undisturbed.”

“You can have one of the studios in my atelier,” DeLaigle offered. “Diego uses it sometimes, but it’s mostly empty.”

“Once our association becomes permanent, we’ll help you to find a house or an apartment to your liking,” Girard added. “Louis has some interests in one of the biggest real estate agencies.”

*I’m sure he has*, Brian thought, still stunned what a big fish he’d managed to pull ashore. There was more money present than he could even start to imagine. But out loud he only voiced his agreement. They didn’t need to know how overwhelmed he was by this opportunity.

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That settled, the discussion was over fairly quickly. The tycoons took their leaves, satisfied with the agreement, leaving the visitors in Phillippe Navital’s care. The lawyer stood, too, and stretched his back with an audible *knack* and a relieved groan.

“I think I’ve chosen the wrong profession,” he complained. “These gatherings seem to last longer and longer every time. So, do you guys have any plans for the evening? The night has just begun, we can go out and hit the bars… or are you too jet-lagged for that?”

“Not at all,” Brian said, sleep definitely not being something he wanted right now, and Emmett agreed enthusiastically.

“Where would you like to go?” the lawyer asked, fishing out his cell phone and rattling down a long list of instructions to someone called Maria in rapid French sentences. *His secretary, most likely; although she must have weird working hours*, Brian thought.

“This is our first time in LA,” he answered, “so we’ll leave the choice in your hands. Some nice place to eat and probably dance afterwards would be fine. But nothing kinky… at least not today,” he added with a lewd grin.

The lawyer grinned back. “I promise good food and tame entertainment for tonight. Would that
“sufficient?”

“As long as the clientele is male,” Emmett quipped.

“Unless it would make you uncomfortable to go to a gay bar with us,” Brian clarified. “In which case we can rent a car and go alone.”

Navital shrugged. “Why would I be uncomfortable?”

“You’re out?” Emmett asked, knowing that in conservative business circles being gay could be a serious disadvantage. Even in LA, a city with its own large gay community and considerably higher tolerance level than Pittsburgh.

The lawyer laughed. “Sort of. I’m bi, actually, and I usually prefer women. But from time to time, I like to make an exception,” he added, with a predatory gleam in his eyes that made Brian shiver.

They took Navital’s black corvette and drove to the bar of the lawyer’s choice. It turned out a pleasantly eclectic mix of elegance and avantgarde, with lots of privacy, due to the boxes divided by decorative folding screens. The food was indeed good, the music even better, and while Emmett was reached from dance partner to dance partner, swinging on the waves of success and sudden popularity, Brian and Phillippe danced with each other all the time, pressing against each other, “mapping territory”, as Mikey would have called it. Brian suppressed that memory ruthlessly. He wasn’t going there. No way. Not tonight.

The style and obvious experience of his partner was something new for him, having been the aggressive one in his sexual encounters for the last decade and half or so. But that was with horny young tricks in a not particularly elegant disco. The man with whom he was dancing now positively radiated power and self-confidence, taking over control smoothly not only over their kiss but also over their whole encounter. He forced them to go slowly, and Brian, used to quick fucks in backrooms, was crawling up the walls in frustration.

“You’ve got the fire… but not the style, nor the patience,” Phillippe murmured, breaking the kiss and giving Brian’s flushed face and moist lips an appreciating look. “But it doesn’t matter. You’re beautiful, and I’m feeling reckless tonight. Maybe I can show you a thing or two to make it worth your time, eh?”

Brian gave him an almost convincingly sceptical look. In fact, he was looking forward to this new experience. He’d tried everything in Pittsburgh, and quite frankly, he was growing bored and tired of it all. Maybe it was time to make a step forward.

Phillippe took out his cell phone and instructed Claude Bellamy to fetch Emmett from the bar, then he ushered Brian back to his car. To Brian’s surprise, they returned to the D’Oblique.

“I don’t take people I barely know home,” he explained simply.

“Afraid of being killed by a madman?” Brian teased.

“Not really,” the lawyer said dryly. “They would have to try very hard to kill me… and fail. I just value my privacy, that’s all.”

That was something Brian could understand very well, so they went up to his room. Phillippe ordered more wine from the D’Oblique; it was delivered within five minutes, together with a few items he had not ordered, but which the well-trained personnel seemed to know they would need.

“So, Brian,” Phillippe said, when room service left. “Are you ready to test new waters?”
And Brian knew that he was more than ready.

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Some three hours later, when Brian was lying on his belly, thoroughly fucked and out like a light, Phillipe took his cell phone from the bed table and punched in a number from his direct dial list.

“Alain?” he asked when someone picked up the phone on the other end of the connection. “Yeah, it’s me. I just wanted to warn you: be careful with this one. I think he’s a resistor.”

“Have you tasted him?” DeLaigle asked.

“In his sleep only,” Navital replied, “so he’ll think it was a weird dream, even if he remembers anything. His blood has a heady taste. You’ll like it. But he man himself can give you the creeps.”

“Now, that’s weird, coming from a vampire,” DeLaigle commented dryly.

Navital shook his head, although, of course, the other vampire couldn’t see it.

“I’m serious, Alain. I’ve never been with anyone whose eyes would remain so… so dead, after hours of mutually satisfying sex.”

“You mean he doesn’t like sex?” DeLaigle sounded surprised, and rightly so. Considering Brian’s reputation, this was certainly unexpected.

“Oh, his body enjoys it,” Navital said, stroking the smooth curve of Brian’s bare ass with his free hand, “and he’s very good at it – technically. All that practice must be paying off, I guess. But… I don’t know, it’s somehow eerie how empty his eyes were all the time.”

“We’ve seen this before,” DeLaigle said calmly. “Beautiful young men who knew all about sex but nothing about lovemaking.”

“It could prove extremely… pleasurable to teach him the latter,” Navital said. “I’d love to keep him, but he’s not Ventru material. He’d be unhappy, trapped in our Clan. He’s been born to become a Toreador, I think. But Alain, you must be very careful with him. Behind that cynical persona he’s developed to perfection, he’s deeply wounded. It would be easy to break him, once you got behind the protective walls, but that would only make him take a walk in the sun.”

“Are you sure you don’t have a Lasombra somewhere in your bloodline?” DeLaigle asked. “Someone who can read blood he’s just tasted this well gives me the creeps.”

“I’m sure,” Navital laughed quietly, not wanting to wake his mortal lover. Brian would need his strength tomorrow. “It’s just a talent, nothing more.”

“And your really think I’d be able to bond this man?” DeLaigle’s voice was full of doubt. “I’m not exactly the nurturing sort, as you know.”

“You did well enough with Oliver and Pierre,” Navital said, “not to mention Sarina.”

“I’m just fostering Sarina,” DeLaigle pointed out, “and after being impregnated with demon spawn, my tempers are really the smallest evil she can met in her young life. But this man… he seems to be a complicated case.”

“You’ll do just fine,” Navital replied with a shrug. “You are old, experienced and powerful; you’ll be able to seduce him into our world. All you’ll need is ungodly amounts of patience. It won’t be easy, for sure. But in the end, it would be worth the efforts, I think.”
“We’ll see,” DeLaigle said, still doubtfully. “Tell him I’m going to fetch him and that bird of paradise of his at 9 pm, will you?”

“Bien sûr. Have a pleasant night.”

“You, too,” with that, DeLaigle hung up. For him, the night had just begun.

Navital slipped out of the bed, took a shower, got dressed, and – placing a note for Brian on the bedside table – quietly left the room.

“Alain will be coming to fetch them at nine in the morning,” he told Catherine DuBois, who was controlling the books in one of the offices. “They’ll need a wake-up call an hour earlier, and probably a big breakfast. Can you organize that?”

She nodded, making a note of the order. Phillippe kissed her – they had had a friendly, non-committal on and off relationship for quite a few decades by now – and went home. Several hours of work were still waiting for him. Setting up Brian and Emmett’s contracts, among other things.

He sighed tiredly. Being up and walking around in the sunlight all day was taking its toll on him, despite the fact that he’d fed on his bed partner and thus felt pleasantly warm. It was fortunate that vampires needed a lot less sleep than mortals did.

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For visuals: Phillipe Navital is played by Francois-Eric Genrdon

Alain DeLaigle as played by Alain Delon:

Chapter End Notes

Originally, the “reading the blood” thing was an ability of the vampires as they were shown in the Forever Knight series. Members of Clan Lasombra are said to possess various arcane abilities, so I supposed they could do this, too, without any canon proof. In Phillippe Navital’s case, however, it’s just a personal talent, nothing else.
First Steps

Chapter Summary

Brian settles in LA, and Clan Toreador – Alain DeLaigle in particular – begins to court him for the Clan. He also has an unexpected – and not very pleasant – reunion with Justin.

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FIRST STEPS

When in the next morning the wake-up call came, Brian felt as if he’d been run over by a truck. He hurt in places he’d forgotten to exist and could barely walk to the bathroom. However, when he finally stood under the hot spray, he couldn’t deny the lazy satisfaction filling every single cell of his body.

Who’d have thought the old guy had such stamina, he thought, holding his face into the spray and enjoying the hot water flowing down his naked body, plastering his hair against his skull. Navital looked barely older than he, but boy, was the man experienced! And beautiful, too… smooth, limber, finely muscled and surprisingly strong. Brian rarely had anyone of his own age – although, in this particular case, one should have said that Navital had had him. For the first time since his early teens, Brian had allowed a partner to take complete control. It was… liberating.

He’d never do that in Pittsburgh. Back home, he had a reputation to keep up. But here, in this almost foreign city, he could be someone he’d not been for a very long time. Not Brian the Stud, the king of Liberty Avenue; just plain Brian Kinney, a successful young businessman. Without any emotional baggage. Without the masks and defence mechanisms he’d been hiding behind for so long. Here, he didn’t have to prove his manliness. Here he could relax and let himself be spoiled by a skilled lover who knew what he was doing.

The hot water eased his aches enough to risk rubbing himself dry – everywhere – and he lifted his eyebrows in surprise, discovering a small jar with some sort of herbal numbing salve on the nightstand. Could these guys really be this prepared all the time? Like the fucking little boy scouts? Well, since it was there anyway, he could as well put it to good use…

Room service brought him a generous breakfast, and Emmett joined him shortly thereafter, chatting excitedly about his “amazing” evening. Apparently, the nelly had got the scenic tour home from Claude Bellamy… including a heated tumble on the back seat.

“I could get used to this life,” Emmett finished his story, told in his usual, innocently shameless manner, and downed his coffee.

“Well, let’s do our best to nail a permanent job then, shouldn’t we?” Brian replied from the bathroom already, brushing his teeth. Emmett waltzed back to his own room to do the same. One could never know what would be coming up later, after all, and fresh breath was one of the basic requirements.

Barely had they finished those small tasks of personal hygiene when someone knocked on the door. Brian tore it open, and looked directly into the stormy ice-blue eyes of Alain DeLaigle. The artist looked even better in daylight, although he seemed a little pale for someone who lived in California.
But perhaps it was just the contrast with the thick, wavy mahogany hair. If Phillipe Navital was handsome, there could be only one word to describe Alain DeLaigle: beautiful. In a cold, distant, sensual and predatory way. For some reason, Brian got the strange feeling that this man could be very, very dangerous.

“Ready to go?” the artist asked with a sleazy smile that could have loosened the thighs of a monk.

Brian nodded. “Emmett will be here in a moment.”

Just like the lawyer, the artist, too, had a corvette, but his was deep burgundy red, with a black leather sliding top lid, in case of bad weather. Strangely enough, however, the car also had tinted glass windows.

“Do you happen to suffer from the same skin condition as Mr. Girard,” Brian asked in suspicion, although secretly relieved that the herbal salve had worked nicely, so that he was now able to sit with a minimum of discomfort.

“In fact, I do,” the artist replied, unperturbed. “Many people here do. It’s said to be the result of the weakened ozone layer above the city. Too much pollution.”

“Why do you drive a corvette then?” Emmett asked in honest confusion.

“I like to feel the wind on my face,” DeLaigle shrugged. “Besides, as a known artist, I need to keep up certain appearances. It’s all right when the sunlight isn’t too bright; and I always can pull up the lid.”

He drove them to an airy villa in West Hollywood, in an area usually populated by actors, artists, various movie and art studios and the likes.

“Is this your house?” Emmett asked in awe. DeLaigle nodded.

“The atelier and the studios are in the ground level. I live upstairs.”

He parked the car in the basement garage and led them up to the designer studio, where five or six people were working at their desks.

“Our designers are already working on the new collection named Californian Summer,” he explained. “It is supposed to be a combination of bathing suits and very light city clothing for the hot days, as well as fancy umbrellas against too bright sunlight, a new cologne for men and small, refreshing cosmetic tissues for women that won’t smear their make-up.”

“That sounds like an ambitious project,” Brian said, impressed. “How far are you with it?”

“We have the cosmetic tissues and the cologne ready for the shops; they only need a good ad campaign,” DeLaigle answered. “And we also have a few ideas for the clothes and the umbrellas, too. Our people are talented, and we do have our own contacts in the local gay community… we just lack a person who’d have what the Germans call ‘das gewisse Etwas’ – that special touch that would make the collection unique.”

He turned to Emmett. “I’ve told the people about you. Feel free to walk around and tell your opinion, share you ideas, no matter how crazy they might seem at first. We’ll see in the end what could be used and what not. What we need is input, a fresh perspective.”

Emmett seemed a bit unsure first, but soon he was chatting amiably with he designers, who seemed surprisingly open for his sometimes hair-raising suggestions, and half an hour later everyone was
sketching furiously, giggling as they worked. Emmett fluttered from desk to desk like an oversized, much too colourful butterfly, flirting with the designers, swaying his hips to the music that played in the background, and generally having a grand old time. The collection had been extended and now included extravagant straw hats and oversized strand bags in shocking colours.

“He’s hilarious,” DeLaigle said with detached amusement. “I hope Victor won’t get a heart attack when he sees the finished drawings. The man had definitely grown too old-fashioned in the recent years. I think we should leave the creative minds alone. Diego is waiting in his studio for you to talk about the campaign. I have to look after my students in the meantime. They tend to become lazy without stern supervision, and my assistant just isn’t heavy-handed enough to keep them in line.”

Brian gave him a searching look. “A firm hand, eh?”

“They need it,” the artist replied with a shrug. “They do have the talent, but no discipline. I provide guidance and the necessary discipline.”

“You are fond of discipline, aren’t you?” Brian asked, double meaning clear in his voice. “I remember what you’ve said yesterday about Diego… that you’d teach him punctuality, if he was yours…”

“And you’re dying to know what I meant with that, aren’t you?” DeLaigle laughed – it made his cold, angular face positively charming for a moment. “Well, maybe later. We’ve got work to do first.”

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Diego Martinez turned out a handsome black guy in his late twenties – and an absolute wizard when it came to computers. Brian wished he had someone of Diego’s skills back home. Unfortunately, the guy also seemed immune against the infamous Kinney charm – or was just too afraid of DeLaigle to fool around at work – and so they talked shop for the next three hours, swapping ideas and discussing designs, fonts, music, video cutting and the likes. Apparently, Victor Girard wanted posters as well as a summer hit for the collection – and video clips, and whatever Brian could think of.

In the early afternoon, they had the general idea worked out – a series of clips to be shown on TV, just like a serial, so that it would give some sort of simple story in the end – and started talking about the details. With the basic clip theme created, Brian wanted to see some of the available models and make a series of pictures: single scenes, just to give his employer a general impression.

“Well, one of the male models is in the atelier right now,” Diego offered. “We can walk over and take a look. The fact that he’s bare-assed naked might prove… inspiring.”

“Art can be so beautiful,” Brian agreed, grinning. “Nowhere do you get to see so many hot, naked guys as in a gallery.”

They both laughed, and Diego showed the way to the atelier. It was a large, circular room, with tall windows directly under the ceiling, to provide the best possible illumination. The art students were standing in a half circle with their canvasses, drawing with charcoal a long-haired, nude young man in the middle. The model looked familiar to Brian.

“Isn’t that the waiter from D’Oblique?” he asked in surprise.

Diego nodded. “Alain engages him from time to time. He doesn’t like those bemuscled Californian types as models. He says their body is out of natural proportions.”
Brian gave the young model a critical look. The guy had a nice enough ass and strong legs, which was understandable, considering he had to run around all day, his soft belly ever so slightly rounded – no unpleasant at all, but not Brian’s usual type, either. Still a cute sight… and he was nicely endowed, too.

“We can have Emmett as ersatz partner for the photos,” Brian decided. “Em is used to TV appearances, and he isn’t one of those overmuscled idiots, either.”

Diego grinned in agreement. “Alain would love the idea. Oh, watch, he’s giving one of his famous instructions!”

DeLaigle walked over to the model and stroked his back and thighs – that got the students’ attention at once.

“You have to study the back and leg muscles carefully, before you start the actual drawing,” he explained. “Otherwise your picture would lack the necessary balance. Try to imagine how the muscles move under the skin; how they would shift, were the model allowed to shift positions. Watch,” he gave one bare asscheek a smack. “See how the flesh trembles from the impact? Even if you have to draw him in a passive position, you need to know how it would move. You are drawing a living being, not a piece of rock. Of course,” he added, kneading the same asscheek gently, “intimate knowledge about the working of your model’s body can be helpful. But it’s not necessary to produce a decent picture.”

He gave the asscheek a last, affectionate pat and walked around to take a look at the student’s works. Brian nearly collapsed in helpless, soundless laughter. Some art school instructions, indeed.

“If that’s helpful, then all guys should draw Justin instead,” one of the students called, laughing. “He helped each and every one of them to… intimate knowledge.”

They all laughed and looked at a blond young man in their midst, who was grinning smugly, apparently proud of his conquests. Brian’s head jerked into that direction as well, and his heart nearly stopped from shock as he took a closer look at the young guy. It was indeed Justin, his twice ex-lover, who’d left him repeatedly. First for that lying little bitch, that Heifetz wannabe Ethan, and then for some fucking art school scholarship.

So, this was where the little shit had gone!

As if feeling his eyes on himself, Justin looked up and recognized him. That smug little grin vanished from his face at once, and he became deathly pale, with red spots glowing on his cheeks – from anger, from embarrassment? It was hard to tell.

“What the fuck are you doing here, Brian?” he hissed, a nasty snarl distorting his usually perfect young face. “Have I not told you that I don’t want you interfering with my fucking life anymore? When will you stop following me around like a bitch in the heat?”

Before Brian could have answered – well, if he weren’t in shock, that is – Alain DeLaigle whirled around, grabbed Justin by the throat and lifted him off his feet effortlessly.

“And I have told you to watch that filthy mouth of yours around me, kid,” the artist growled, his eyes burning in an unholy, silver glow. “I don’t tolerate this sort of behaviour from anyone, no matter how talented they are. My school isn’t the back alley of some hustling bar. If you can’t behave, you can go back into the gutter where I’ve found you. Your sex life, past or present, is not my concern, but you leave your filth outside my house, or you’re outta here, never to return, do you understand me?!”
Justin couldn’t answer; he was choking, his lips getting a disturbing shade of purple already. One of the other students – a black-haired man with a hawkish face – hurried over to them and wrestled one of DeLaigle’s hand from his neck.

“Maestro, don’t kill the kid,” he said in a low, even voice. It sounded almost… hypnotic.

DeLaigle dropped Justin to the floor like a wet rag, twisted around and grabbed the thick mane of the other man instead, snatching him close and kissing him on the mouth with such a brutal force that the man’s lips were bleeding afterwards. DeLaigle licked the blood from the student’s mouth, his eyes now ice-blue and calm again.

“Thank you, Peppone,” he murmured; the student nodded and returned to his canvas. The others kept working as if nothing had happened, while Justin slowly got to his feet, coughing and feeling his neck, on which the finger marks were still angry red. They’d become blue and purple in the next days, for sure.

“Is this normal around here?” Brian asked, still somewhat in a shock. “Why do these guys put up with such abuse?”

Diego shrugged. “Alain has his tempers, but his controls usually work much better. That blond kid must have provoked him repeatedly in recent times. I never saw him lose it like this.”

“And that other man? The one who tried to restrain him?”

“He’s his assistant, a distant cousin of him,” Diego lied smoothly; in truth, the man was a Toreador, too, old and strong enough to face DeLaigle’s infamous wrath attacks. “Alain keeps him around exactly for the purpose to stop him, if necessary.”

“This is sick,” Brian shuddered, remembering the blood-licking thing. “I’ve seen my fair share of kink, but what these two do…”

“Alain is into kinky stuff,” Diego grinned; he couldn’t tell the mortal that DeLaigle was actually feeding from his clansman and that his temper tantrum had actually been a side effect of the Thirst, resulting from having spent too much time in direct sunlight. In front of everyone, that wasn’t an easy trick to pull, but he and Peppone had a great deal of practice in it.

“There’s kink and there’s kink,” Brian shook his head. “This was way beyond kink.”

But Diego just laughed. “Don’t diss it until you’ve tried it,” he said. “A little pain isn’t always an unpleasant thing, you know.”

Brian shot him an unbelieving look. “You too?”

“Nah,” Diego replied, “Alain absolutely despises me, thank God. But I pay the leather and fetish clubs the one or other visit myself. Just in friendlier company.” He leaned over the railing and called down to DeLaigle. “Alain, are you having a lunch break any time soon? I want to introduce Sergio to Brian here. He has an idea.”

DeLaigle, calm and cool and distant once again, glanced at his watch. “We can have it right now. Let’s go to the photo studio, I want to hear about this idea of yours.”

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The model put on a robe and followed them to the photo studio, which, as everything else in the studios, was up-to-date and in perfect order. Someone here had to be a real technology freak and anal retentive beyond help, but in this particular case it was an advantage.
DeLaigle took a look at the hastily sketched versions of the video clips and nodded in satisfaction. “Looks good. I’ll request an experienced team from the Vignes Studios. I understand you want to make a few stands?”

“Yeah, for the designers, mostly. And for Mr. Girard, too, so that he can get the general idea.”

“All right. What do you need for it?”

“Just a web camera, a bowl of ice cubes, a bottle of water or two, and a G-string for the model,” Brian replied. “Oh, and if someone could fetch Emmett and give him a G-string, too…”

DeLaigle gave the necessary orders, and ten minutes later, Emmett and Sergio were standing in front of Brian’s camera, just a hair’s breadth from being completely nude. They made a nice contrast, Emmett being lanky and pale, with short, light brown hair and Sergio a head shorter, olive-skinned and just a bit chubby, his long, jet-black curls bound together on the nape of his neck with a silver string.

“Turn around,” Brian instructed Sergio. “Stand close to Emmett, but turn your face away from him. We’ll need a full back view from you. Good. Em, grab his asscheek – not that one, the one closer to you, but turn your face away, too. Look angry, guys, you can even pout a little. Okay. Perfect.”

Flash. Flash. Flash.

“Good. Now, we’re trying something else. Shift positions. Sergio, you facing me, and you, Em, with your back to me. Look each other in the eyes. Em, cup his cock with your hand. With your left hand, silly, we want to see the rest of his body. And no smiling yet. That’s it, guys. You’re doing great.”

Flash. Flash. Flash.

“Okay, now turn around again, but you, Sergio, only so that we can have a side view of you. Em, bend your head and kiss him. Sergio, pinch his nipple. No, the other one, so that your arm would lay across his chest. Yes, like that. Aren’t the colours nice? Stay that way!”

Flash. Flash. Flash.

“Em, took a piece of ice and rub his nipples with it. I want them steel hard and erect. Okay. Now, Diego, pour a bottle of water over their heads. I want them nice and wet and delicious, so that the customers would start drooling from the mere sight of them. Yeah, just like that. That’s enough. Now, Sergio, lean against that bar stool and tilt your head back. Em, go to your knees, hug his legs and press your face against his belly. Not like that, please, turn your head to the side, so that I can see your face, and shut your eyes. I want a fashion pic, not porn. Yes, that’s perfect.”

Flash. Flash. Flash.

Brian took several more pictures, and then copied them all to Diego’s computer.

“Upload the designs from today here, too,” he said, “and search your database for pretty beach photos for the background. We can compare them all, search for the best combination, and hopefully, we’ll even get more new ideas.”

“It looks promising,” DeLaigle decided. “You really have an eye for hot stuff. If you do half this good a job with the girls, we’ll sweep the market clean.”

“Don’t worry,” Brian grinned, “I spend an unhealthy amount of my spare time with lesbian friends, and so I know exactly what turns the dykes on.”
“I hope so,” DeLaigle said. “I’ve booked Sarina, Alice and Bai-ling for tomorrow; they are very exotic, all three of them, well see what they’ll inspire you to do. By the way, we’ve been looking for the perfect face for the new cologne, an item called Summer Rain, for weeks. I think I’ve just found it. Would you like to be on the bottle, Brian?”

“Me?” Brian asked in surprise. “I’m not a model.”

“No, but you’re a fresh face, and you’re beautiful,” DeLaigle pointed out matter-of-factly; this time, his tone was purely business. “You, a wet shirt and a blood red rose… that’d be perfection.”

“Well, you could do it yourself,” Brian said. “You’ve got a gorgeous face, too.”

“Perhaps, but my face is already on our winter deodorant,” the artist replied. “Cold shades are more my style, and I won’t sell anything with the same face twice. But if we put you in front of a red sunset, in a wet silk shirt, every woman in this city will buy cologne for his husband or lover, just to drool over the picture.”

“And each and every queer will buy a battle for himself, for the same reason,” Emmett giggled.

Brian was still hesitating a bit, but after a while he gave in. His vanity was definitely flattered, and even he had to admit that he looked like a wet dream on the finished pictures. Not to mention that he’d be paid extra money for it, which was a bonus.

“You realize, of course, that Victor now would want a video clip for the cologne as well,” DeLaigle grinned. “But enough work for today. I have to go back to my lazy students and you people need to eat and to rest. I’ll call Phillipe to extend your contracts, so that you got paid for the modelling job as well. For now, the photos are enough, we can shoot the video clips later in this week.”

“Oh, no,” Brian groaned. “Being a TV star is Emmett’s ambition, not mine.”

“Why not?” DeLaigle asked, skimming a thumb over his nipples through the wet silk of his borrowed mauve shirt; it sent tiny jolts directly to Brian’s groin. “You are in a perfect shape, and not like all that faceless young flesh that gets exposed all the time. You have a face that can’t be easily forgotten… You have lived, you have a history, and it shows.”

“Like the bags under my eyes,” Brian replied self-mockingly.

“Well, that, too,” DeLaigle agreed bluntly. “But that’s a problem that can be solved – with less alcohol, less drugs and more sleep. At least right now. After forty, not even that would help, of course.”

“Geez, thanks for reminding me,” Brian pulled a face. The artist shrugged.

“That’s reality. The only way to avoid getting old is to die young. But you’ve already tried that, haven’t you?”

Brian paled. “How in hell can you…”

The artist picked up his right hand and pulled his seashell bracelet higher, revealing the faded knife marks on the inside of his wrist. “I’ve got good eyes, although these are old… at least a decade or more. Besides, your general behaviour is a dead giveaway.”

He lifted Brian’s wrist to his mouth and licked the healed marks slowly, sensuously, like a cat lapping its milk. Once again, Brian felt a jolt of arousal going through his entire body with lightning speed. On the other hand, the gesture reminded him of the recent scene: DeLaigle licking blood from
the lips of his assistant… cousin… whatever… and shivered, but not in a good way. That was not a pleasant memory.

“What sort of weird oral fixation do you have anyway?” he asked nervously. “And if you as much as try to bite me, I’ll kill you. I’m negative, and I intend to stay that way for a long time yet.”

The artist kissed his wrist and laughed quietly – it sounded like a low, throaty purr.

“Oh, I don’t intend to bite you…” yet, he murmured, letting Brian’s wrist go. “You smell of Phillipe, and we’ve made it our policy not to violate each other’s territory.”

“Really,” sarcasm dripped from Brian’s voice. “Does the ‘territory’ have a say in your little game or do you piss on his leg to mark your borders?”

“Brian!” Emmett squealed, absolutely mortified, but DeLaigle laughed.

“You’ve got spunk, I give you that,” he said to Brian. “But my time with you will come. I have time. I can wait.”

“Does that mean that I’ve now officially been marked as prey and the hunting season has been opened?” Brian asked in a deceptively mild voice, but his eyes were flashing.

“Yes,” the artist replied simply. “Does it make you nervous?”

“Not too much,” Brian said languidly. “Being chased can be exciting… as long as I still have the option to say no.”

“Bien sûr,” DeLaigle purred, his rolling accent growing stronger. “I never touch one who’s not willing. You’ll come to me… voluntarily… in your own time.”

“We’ll see,” Brian said, but even he felt the weakness of his riposte. To his relief, DeLaigle didn’t push him. The silver gleam vanished from the stormy eyes, and the artist put on his no-nonsense business manner again.

“Very well, then,” he said, “let’s meet tomorrow afternoon again. I’ll organize the female models, and you can shot a series of stands with them. You can ask Catherine to get a rental car for you – I assume you’ll find the way back here alone.”

Recognizing a dismissal when given one, Brian and Emmett shook hands with the artist and gladly accepted Diego’s offer to drive them back to the D’Oblique.

They’ve barely reached the garage when Justin came up running behind them and grabbed Brian’s arm with an almost bruising force.

“What are you doing here?” he demanded. “Why must you follow me everywhere? Haven’t I been beaten up because of you enough times already? Why can’t you just leave me the fuck alone?”

Brian gave the now purplish finger marks on the boy’s neck an uneasy look. No, he didn’t want Justin to be hurt again, not because of him. But he wasn’t going to take this shit from him, either.

He freed his arm from the boy’s grip with practiced ease.

“Hard as it might be for you to imagine, Sunshine,” that once fondly used pet name had an almost nasty sound from his mouth now, “the world doesn’t revolve around you. What I’m doing here is my business; it has nothing to do with you.”
“When has it ever?” Justin replied, his voice bitter and cold.

“I was on my way to that,” Brian said with a shrug. “You almost had me there, before you dumped me. I even took you back for the first time. I won’t do so again, so leave it alone.”

“Yeah, because I’m not your precious Mikey,” Justin hissed, his cornflower-blue eyes darkening with hatred. “Because I won’t put up with all your shit and run back to you every time like a lovesick puppy.”

“You’ve done so often enough,” Brian said tiredly. The excitement over the new challenge was suddenly gone; all he wanted was to get out of here. “You were the one who’s wormed himself into my life, whether I wanted you there or not. You set up your silly rules and you were the one who broke them first, so get the fuck out of my life. I’m not interested in your little mind games anymore. But if you dare to take Mikey’s name in your mouth again, I’ll punch your nose into your brains, understood?”

“Go on, do it!” Justin challenged. “Won’t be the first time I ended up in the IC for the questionable pleasure of having been in connection with the great Brian Kinney, right?”

Brian didn’t find the strength to answer. He shook his head in defeat, turned away and climbed into Diego’s car, sliding back into the foul mood he’d been in Pittsburgh before being offered this new job. Suddenly, living in LA seemed to lose its attraction. If it meant to run into Justin all the time, it probably wasn’t such a good idea.

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Standing in the shadows of his garage, Alain DeLaigle looked after the leaving car for a long time. He’d followed Justin here, fearing just such a nasty little scene, and when he saw Brian’s face turn blank again and those beautiful, hazel eyes grow cold and empty, he was very close to killing the blond kid on the spot.

He shook his head in mild dismay. This possessive streak had been his greatest failure all his unlife; something he’d kept from his Warm days. The very thing that had made him follow his beloved Maestro into the Dark. Something he’d often felt since Leonardo died in 1519 in Amboise, crippled and drained by a failed Toreador artist who was jealous of his unique talent beyond help, but never this strong.

He realized with a mild shock that he was already considering Brian Kinney his. This was ridiculous. Granted, there was a sound possibility that Brian would accept Embrace, but that was a long way to go yet. Still, he didn’t like those who were his get hurt – well, not by anyone else, that is. He knew, though, that right now he wasn’t the best choice to offer Brian comfort. In his current state the young mortal needed a gentler hand than his. His time will come later, he strongly believed that.

Flipping open his cell phone, he punched in Phillipe’s number.

“Navital,” a tired voice said.

“Alain here. I’m sorry, were you sleeping?” he asked in French. They always used their mother tongue among themselves.

“No, I just got up,” the lawyer replied tiredly. “It was a long day yesterday, and I had to work till sunrise afterwards to catch up with things. What’s up?”

“I was wondering if you had any specific plans for tonight.”

“So far, I haven’t. Why?”
“I think Brian will need you,” DeLaigle gave his friend a quick summary of the most recent events.”

“You could try to make him feel better yourself,” the smile in Phillipe’s voice was evident.

“Not yet,” DeLaigle said. “We’ve barely reached square one. He knows I’m interested, but I think I freaked him out with that little display with Peppone. But that couldn’t be helped. You know how fierce my Beast can be when the Thirst comes over me. So, you’d be better for him for a while yet. Safer.”

“All right,” Phillipe said, “I’ll look after him. It’s no hardship, he could be pleasant company. Where’s he now?”

“Diego is driving him back to the D’Oblique… both of them.”

“I see. Well, Catherine should be there already, she always starts work early. I’ll see that she organizes some company for that Emmett character; he’s a loose cannon, that one, and needs to be watched. I’ll keep an eye on Brian myself.”

“Thanks, mon ami.”

“What for? I like the man. He’s smart, and he’s a great laid,” Phillipe laughed tiredly and hung up.

DeLaigle rubbed his temples. He felt tired, too, but was too wound up to sleep. Maybe Sarina would be willing to provide some company. They could open a bottle of bloodwine and have a nice, relaxing roll in the sack afterwards.

Decision made, he lightly run up the steps to the large apartment he shared with his foster Childe.
Pillow Talk

Chapter Summary

Brian is shaken after his unexpected run-in with Justin and calls his best friend. Also, the contracts are signed and further steps to flesh out the campaign are taken.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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PILLOW TALK

Brian was uncommonly quiet on their was back to the D’Oblique, but Emmett’s flirtatious chatter with Diego covered it very efficiently. For the first time in his life, he was actually thankful for Emmett’s inability to shut up. It saved him from being asked questions he wasn’t willing – or able – to answer.

Upon their arrival, Catherine DuBois came to see them. She asked what type of rental car would they like to have, and caught up by the moment, Brian asked for a bright red corvette. She also told them that lunch had been ordered for them in the nearby restaurant.

"Monsieur Girard will cover for your costs of living for the first three months,” she explained. “After that, you’re on your own.”

“If we get the permanent job, you mean,” Emmett said.

“Oh, I’m quite sure you will,” she smiled. “Alain called a few moments ago… he sounded happy with the temporary results.”

“I’m glad to hear that,” Brian replied without the slightest trace of enthusiasm. Being a discreet person, Mme DuBois ignored his tone.

“Monsieur Navital will come over with your contracts at five pm,” she added. “He wants to take you out for dinner, Mr. Kinney, to introduce you to the Blount sisters. They are twin dancers and do modelling jobs occasionally, maybe you can use them for one of the campaigns.”

“And what about me?” Emmett asked, feeling left out and affronted like a true diva.

“I've organized a visit in the Blue Parrot Café for you,” Mme DuBois smiled. “I think you’ll love it… and as Monsieur Girard doesn’t need Claude tonight, the garcon can fetch you later. Trust me, you’ll have a lot of fun.”

“All right,” Emmett mellowed considerably. It definitely sounded like his idea of a good time… and Claude Bellamy had turned out way less of the cold fish he seemed to be.

That settled, they went to have lunch, after which Emmett disappeared in a beauty salon for men he’d discovered the night before. Brian didn’t have the nerve for such things, so he returned to his room… and made a long-distance call to Pittsburgh.
“Red Cape comic shop,” Michael’s achingly familiar voice answered his call in that distracted manner that meant his best friend was reading a comic at the same time. No customers at the moment, then. Good.

“It’s me, Mikey.”

“Brian?” Michael’s voice took on that strange mix of concern and wariness that had been so characteristic for their talks lately, but it didn’t entirely lack the old warmth Brian had feared would be gone for good. “Are you okay? What’s the new job like? How’s Emmett doing?”

“I’m fine, Mikey,” he said, but even he could hear the exhaustion in his own voice. “The job seems promising; we’ll be signing our temporary contracts this afternoon. If the first campaign proves successful, we’ll get hired permanently.”

“You mean Emmett, too?”

“Yeah, he charmed the big bosses out of their Armani suits, seduced two guys already, at least as far as I know, got a promise to be introduced to the most fabulous drag queen of LA, and is generally having the time of his life.”

“Good for Emmett,” Michael said; then, after a beat. “What about you?”

“Oh, I’m having fun,” Brian replied, not even convincing himself. “I’ll be driving a corvette, I live in a guest room that would put a five-star-hotel to shame, and I was so thoroughly fucked last night I could barely walk this morning.”

“Sounds like your idea of fun,” Michael agreed, mild disapproval colouring his gentle voice. “So, what’s wrong then?”

“Nothing,” Brian said, annoyed. “What the fuck should be wrong?”

“I don’t know, Bri,” Michael’s voice was warm now, like in old times. “You tell me. If you’re having so much fun, why are you calling me all across the country, just to lie to me?”

“I’m not lying!” Brian protested, and could almost see Mikey rolling those beautiful, dark eyes of his.

“Brian, please! I know that ‘my-heart-is-breaking-but-I’m-too-damn-stubborn-to-admit-I-have-one voice all too well. So, spill. What happened?”

“I…” Brian struggled to be able to answer, “I’ve run into Justin. It was… ugly.”

“I can imagine,” Michael was all support and love at once, like always when Brian got in trouble, no matter what had happened before. “That little shit! First he can’t be shaken off, then he turns your entire life upside down, and then he dumps you. What did he want this time?”

“He thought I had followed him to LA to get him back,” Brian explained with a snort. “As if… He was nasty and snotty and hostile, but that wasn’t the worst part. Mikey, he almost got killed because of me again!”

“Killed?” Michael repeated in shock. “How on Earth…”

“Apparently, his art teacher, a French painter with a particularly foul temper, doesn’t like when one has a filthy mouth in his atelier,” Brian said dryly. “He nearly choked Justin in front of everyone in a fit of rage.”
“Jesus Christ!” Michael sounded near to panic. “What sort of sick shit have you gotten yourself again, Bri?”

“It’s not like that,” Brian soothed him. “The others are pretty normal and friendly. Almost everyone I have to deal with here is French, though, and almost disgustingly wealthy. It’s very different from my usual playground. It seems I’m playing in the upper league now.”

“Just be careful,” Michael warned. “Just because they are rich, they can still be sick fucks. What about that guy you had last night? Is he one of them?”

“Yes, he’s their lawyer,” Brian said. “An elegant, over-educated, extremely skilled French lawyer. Handsome, too. A little older than I am, but not much, I think. Seems I’ve developed a taste for people of my own age, after all. Who’d have thought?”


“Well I hope so; he’s the one to bring my contract, after all. And we’re going out tonight to meet a few models who could be good choices for the women’s collection.”

“Are you going to fuck him again?” Was that jealousy in Mikey’s voice? “You never do seconds…”

“Technically, he was the one who fucked me, but yeah, I might let him again,” Brian’s voice softened. “He’s good for me, Mikey… for the time being, anyway. I don’t have to… to prove anything with him, and I never thought I’d enjoy being spoiled, but… I do. It’s nice. Even if…”

“Even if what?” Michael insisted, but Brian was not going there. He had no right. Mikey had a husband now and was happy. He wouldn’t endanger that. Mikey deserved to be happy, more than anyone.

“Nothing,” he said. “It was good to hear your voice, Mikey. I miss you.”

“Same here,” Michael replied, somewhat mollified. “Call me again?”

“Sure Mikey. But not at home. I don’t want to annoy the Nutty Professor. Is this a good time?”

“Yeah. Dead zone in the shop. I only keep it open at lunchtime because I’m too lazy to leave and actually have lunch.”

“Okay, I’ll call you in a few days at this time, then. Take care, Mikey.”

“You, too,” and with that, Michael hung up.

Brian shed his clothes and hopped onto the bed. He felt slightly better, now that he had heard Michael’s voice, and that their friendship seemed to be on the mend, once again. Maybe distance was really good sometimes. His sores from the previous night were gone, too. Whatever was in that salve, it definitely worked. He might be up to another night with Phillipe – if the lawyer was still interested.

Brian had no illusions about the nature of their encounter. He knew how these things worked. But he hoped he’d been good enough last night for Phillipe to be interested in a repeat performance. Phillipe was a known quality, and Brian didn’t feel like experimenting just yet.

Flopping onto his back, he reached out for his half-emptied glass of Scotch. Maybe he’d be able to sleep a little now.  

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He had been able to sleep indeed. Mikey never failed when it came to calm him down, to keep his
demons at bay. Emmett shook him awake at half past six, he barely had the time to take a shower
and order a coffee in the D’Oblique before Phillipe arrived, in the company of a dark-haired young
man whom he introduced as David Geduld. David worked for the CSI as some lead lab rat and was
apparently Emmett’s intended date for tonight.

“We met through work,” Phillipe explained, which sounded logical, but Brian still couldn’t shake off
the nagging feeling that there was more.

Right now, however, he had to focus on the contracts; more so since Emmett had neither the right
mindset, nor the necessary knowledge to find any hidden traps. Brian was willing to trust his new
clients – to a certain extent anyway – but he’d made it his first rule in business to be very thorough
with checking his contracts. That could spare a lot of trouble afterwards.

He found everything in order this time, and both he and Emmett signed their respective documents.
These already wore the signatures of Victor Girard, Mei-ji and someone by the name of Henry
Waters.

“He’s my business partner,” Phillipe explained, signing the documents as well. “We own a law firm
together; it has been in the possession of our families for more than a century.”

“I told you,” Emmett commented cheerfully. “Everyone here is French and blue-blooded. It’s so
exciting! I haven’t moved in such elated circles since George died, that poor dear.”

“Not everyone,” David corrected, grinning from ear-to-ear. “Me, I’m your friendly, hard-working
neighbourhood guy, and proud of it. I barely know who my grandparents were.”

“Lucky for you,” Phillipe replied dryly. “At least your clients don’t threaten to sue you afterwards, if
they are unhappy with your work. Besides, my partner isn’t French, either.” He gave David a credit
card. “Off with you two. Have a good time. You can give the card Catherine when you’re back.
And see that it still has some money on it when you return it.”

“I’ll try to restrain myself,” David laughed and left, with Emmett in tow.

Phillipe rolled his eyes. “May all higher powers be praised for small favours. David is a good guy,
but he has no style, and forgive me, but neither has your buddy.”

“Oh, he does have style,” Brian grinned. “A rather shrill and unique one; one that will earn you guys
the big bucks you seem to yearn for so much.”

“Perhaps,” Phillipe admitted. “Still, his is not the style I’d want around me privately.”

“I know the feeling,” Brian said. “So, where are we going tonight?”

“To the Maison d’Or,” Phillipe replied. “It’s an upper middle class cabaret, nothing too fancy, but
the drinks aren’t watered, the food is tolerable, and the Blount sisters have there an hour-long
performance. You can watch their bodies and how they move around, and you can decide whether
you want them for any part of the campaign or not.”

“Sounds reasonable,” Brian nodded. “Shall we?”

“Wait,” Phillipe touched his chin to lift his face and see him in the eyes. “Are you all right? I got
carried away a bit last night, and I have the impression you haven’t been on the receiving end for
some time.”
“No, I haven’t,” Brian admitted, “but I really enjoyed our time together. It was… nice.”

“Nice enough to do it again?” Phillipe asked, kissing him softly on the mouth. Brian gave an incoherent mmmpf of agreement and opened up for the searching tongue, inviting it in.

Back home, on his familiar playground, he was the one who did the kissing. The thought to let himself be kissed passively would never occur to him. But he could let go here, relax in Phillipe’s arms and simply accept the kiss. It felt so good, better than he would ever admit. He was tired of being the aggressor all the time – and besides, Phillipe was a very good kisser.

All too soon, though, the lawyer broke the kiss and patted him on the arm.

“Keep that thought for later. Business first. We have a table reservation for 20:30.”

“Do I need to change?” Brian asked.

“You could wear less,” Phillipe suggested with a sultry smile, “but there isn’t any clothing order if that’s what you mean.”

He wore black jeans and a dark red satin shirt with a black tie, proper for both a business meeting and a night out. He removed the tie now, however, and opened the top three buttons of his shirt.

“So,” he said, satisfied, “I’m a civilian again.”

Brian laughed and followed him to his car. This time, Phillipe hadn’t come with the corvette. He was driving a metallic blue, two-seat sports car instead.

“The corvette is to impress my clients,” he explained. “Personally, I prefer this one. It’s sleek and fast, and it needs much less space in a parking lot.”

The car didn’t have tinted windows, but they darkened gradually when the sunlight hit them, just like those modern glasses for light-sensitive patients.

“Are you suffering from some mysterious skin condition, too?” Brian asked in suspicion.

“No,” Phillipe laughed, “I just don’t like being cooked behind the steering wheel; and my eyes are a bit sensitive. Too many hours in the office, I guess. You better find some sunglasses, yourself, and use a high light factor sunblocker, though. Despite what the ads would like to make us believe, direct sunlight can be really dangerous in LA sometimes. Even if our president denies the fact of global warming.”

Which was true, of course. Everything Phillipe said was completely logical. And yet, once again, Brian had the feeling that the lawyer was hiding something.

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The Maison d’Or cabaret was a moderately elegant place, with just a hint too much of false glamour about it to be really classy. But the drinks were indeed okay, the Caesar salad that Brian chose for dinner edible – Phillipe said he wasn’t hungry and just sipped some red wine instead – and they had an excellent view at the stage. Which was the very reason for their presence.

The Blount sisters, Edith and Enyd, were identical twins in their mid-thirties perhaps – it was hard to tell – with smooth, ageless oval faces, shoulder-length, natural blonde hair (an absolute rarity in these days), large, azure-blue eyes, and legs so endless and perfect that they seemed more a work of art than actual body parts. The sisters were tall, and they were wearing high-heeled pumps that made them look even taller and their legs even longer, and they moved with a grace only those with
classical ballet training possessed. Tonight, however, they performed some modern, acrobatic dance
number that demanded stamina and limberness at the same time, and Brian understood at once why
he had been brought here to see the performance. When it was over, he knew exactly what the sisters
were capable of and how they would look on posters or in video clips.

“I think we should use them for the more conservative collections,” he judged. “They are certainly
very pretty, but in a classical way that won’t attract young people. On the other hand, no Californian
Summer collection would be whole without sun-tanned blondes, of course. Maybe we could do a
series with the one-piece bathing suits; those will bring out their legs perfectly. And add one of
Emmett’s fancy hats, perhaps.”

“I’m afraid their sort of white skin won’t tan well,” Phillipe said pessimistically. Brian shrugged.

“That’s what make-up is for. Those legs are pure gold. Imagine this: them sitting on red sands, legs
pulled up in a way that they would cover the G-string, so as if they’d be naked but for huge hats and
designer sunglasses… well, maybe some fancy ankle chains, too. Every hetero man above thirty will
come into his pants from the mere sight of it.”

“You certainly have a way to put things,” Phillipe laughed, but he liked the idea, and he knew the
Blount sisters would like it, too. They were Toreadors, after all.

“Or,” Brian continued, warming up for the idea, “we could put them together with a black male
model, complete with big muscles and dreadlocks. Him in a gold G-string, them in fancy hats,
arranged in a way that people would think that all three were naked. The colour contrast would be
gorgeous. People would spontaneously combust from the hotness of it.”

“I’m sure they would,” Phillipe smiled. He liked to see the young mortal so excited, that dead look
gone from his eyes. If anything, Brian certainly liked his work.

“Or we could have them kissing,” Brian went on, “touching lips only, in a position that people
would have to guess whether we had twin models or were using mirrors. Or…”

“Enough, enough,” Phillipe laughed. “Make sure to write down all your ideas for later; every single
one of them sounds hot like hell. I’ll call Oliver, their agent, and see whether they are interested or
not. If yes, you can shoot he whole thing in the Vignes Studios.”

“The Vignes Studios?” Brian repeated, stunned. “As in the studios of Edward and Vera Vignes, a
couple of the most talented people in Hollywood? The same Vignes Studios where the Raven series
was produced?”

Phillipe nodded. “The very same. Edward Blount, the producer of the series and co-owner of the
Studios, is a second grade cousin of Edith and Enyd. My partner, Henry, is the lawyer of the Studios,
by the way.”

For a moment, Brian was absolutely speechless.

“This whole… thing is even bigger than I’ve thought, isn’t it?” he finally asked. “You guys really
have a long arm, don’t you?”

“Longer than you could imagine,” Phillipe admitted. “You must understand that our families have
been in this business for a very long time. Some of them are older than the States themselves. There’s
a considerable amount of money and influence at stake – we can’t afford to lose territory to a little
upstart like Rebecca Lowell. The problem is, we’ve grown too comfortable in the recent two or three
decades. We’ve lost our touch… that’s why we wanted you to work for us.”
“Does it mean that I can actually hope for a permanent job?” Brian asked carefully. Phillipe smiled and patted his hand.

“Unless you screw up the temporary one, which I very much doubt. If you bring Victor and Mei-ji the success they need, you’ll get offers from a number of other business branches as well. Kinnetic will have the chance to become an official partner in this particular group of mutual interests. You do understand what such a chance would mean for a small, relatively new agency like yours, don’t you?”

“Of course,” Brian nodded slowly. “A whole new level of existence.”

“Exactly,” Phillipe agreed. “This… circle is wider than you can imagine. You haven’t met everyone yet… but you will, in due time. We have lands in South America, banks in France and Italy, wineries in Spain and Germany… and much, much more.”

“And you picked me?” Brian shook his head in disbelief. “Based on one successful campaign I did for Brown Athletics?”

“Not exactly,” Phillipe said. “It wasn’t such a sudden decision. We’ve been watching you for quite some time; ever since that snotty little ex of yours has mentioned you a few times. We waited to see how you can bring Kinnetic to its feet. The campaign for Brown Athletics was just the acknowledgement of what we’ve known already. That you were our man.”

Brian blinked a few times. “Well… I don’t know what to say… and that’s a first, trust me.”

“I do,” Phillipe leaned over to kiss him. “Are you finished?”

Brian looked at his empty plate. “It seems so.”

“Good, let’s go then. The rest of the program is crap. We can have more fun with each other. In bed. Naked.”

“No argument from here,” Brian laughed, and Phillipe gave the waiter a sign that he intended to pay.

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Under normal circumstances Brian simply rolled over after sex and fell asleep… well, after he’d kicked the trick of the night out of his loft, that is. Basking in the afterglow was not exactly his thing. There usually wasn’t any afterglow at all. Mindless fucking just didn’t bring those sorts of feelings.

But in this evening, no matter how much Phillipe had worn him out, he had trouble to fall asleep. He was too wired to succumb to his exhaustion.

“Tell me something about this Alain DeLaigle,” he murmured, resting his head on Phillipe’s shoulder and drawing lazy circles around the man’s nipples with his fingertips.

Phillipe laughed. “Has he opened the hunting season already?”

“It surely looks so,” Brian shuddered involuntarily, “and I don’t know what to do about him. The guy is gorgeous, but he gives me the creeps.”

“You’re not the only one,” Phillipe said. “Alain isn’t an easy one. But believe the voice of experience here, he’s not as bad as he seems, either.”

Brian gave him an unbelieving look. “You’ve had a thing with him?”
“For a short time,” Phillipe smiled; in Kindred terms, six years were a short time. “It didn’t work with us.”

“Why not? Has he tried to break your neck, too?”

“We kept fighting for dominance all the time,” that was, of course, and understatement. They had fought as only a Ventrue and a Toreador could within a stormy relationship. “It became ugly sometimes. So we decided that being friends would be better for both of us, and sought out other love interests.”

“Did that work out?” Brian asked doubtfully. Phillipe nodded.

“Oh, yes. We are both reasonable people. We just both like to be in charge.”

“In that case, I don’t think I should start anything with the guy,” Brian said with a pang of regret. “It wouldn’t work with us, either. I don’t do bottom.”

“You just have,” Phillipe pointed out. “Repeatedly.”

“That was different.” Brian squirmed a little under Phillipe’s hand on his bare ass… it was creeping suspiciously close to his most intimate parts. “This time, I needed it. Needed to let go for a change.”

“I think there’s more behind that than you might know,” Phillipe said. “It has been my experience, that for everyone, there is one person to whom he’d be willing to submit. Not just switch on occasion, as you’ve done with me, but really, completely submit. Most people aren’t lucky enough to find that special person, though. To find one whom they could entrust their body and soul.”

“Have you found yours?” Brian asked quietly.

“I have,” Phillipe nodded, thinking back of his Sire and their wonderful time together, cut short too soon by the cursed Sabbat. “But he’s died long ago... and I turned to women, because nobody would ever mean the same for me.”

“It’d be nice if you could be that person for me,” Brian murmured, surprised by his own musings; he’d never been one for relationships, “but you can’t, can you?”

“No, I don’t think so,” the regret in Phillipe’s voice was obvious. “I do like you, Brian, but if we tried this, it wouldn’t work. You see, a relationship like that has to be mutual. The one who submits has to bring out the protective streak from the dominant one. This is not about power and humiliation. This is about devotion and protection, giving and receiving, yin and yang, regardless of age, gender or preference. Two people either have it, or they haven’t. It can’t be forced.”

“And we don’t have it, right?” Brian asked, knowing the answer already. He also knew that there had been one person with whom he could have played the part of the protector – had he not pushed that person away once too often.

“No,” Phillipe said. “I’m sorry, but we just don’t. I don’t have the possessive streak that is required from a dominant partner. It’s not in my nature. But having fun isn’t a bad thing, either.”

“But what makes you think this DeLaigle guy could be the one for me?” Brian asked doubtfully.

“I don’t know that,” Phillipe corrected. “That’s something you’ll have to find out for yourself. But Alain would be a better candidate for the role than I am. He does have a kinder, gentler side somewhere, hidden deeply behind his tempers and kinks and sometimes volatile reactions. He just never found anyone who could bring out that site of his. I can’t tell you whether you’re the one who...
“And if you’re wrong, I could end up in IC. Jesus, the man nearly killed Justin today! The last thing I need is to have another abusive bastard in my life!”

“Alain’s not like your father, Brian,” Phillipe said. “He’s never mistreated a lover.”

“He just throttles a snotty kid for his filthy mouth in front of a dozen witnesses,” Brian rolled his eyes. “Guy’s a psychopath.”

Phillipe laughed. “Brian, for a man as smart as you are, you can certainly be blind sometimes. Alain would never attack someone who’s weaker than him… unless one of those he consider his are hurt.”

“You spoke with him,” Brian realized.

“Two minutes after you left his house,” Phillipe admitted. “He was quite upset… and worried about you.”

“Well, that’s too bad,” Brian shook his head. “I’m not interested.”

“Not yet anyway,” Phillipe grinned. “The pursuit has barely begun. You think he’s bad when he’s violent? He’s ten times worse when he’s charming and has set his mind to seduction. You won’t stand a chance against him.”

“We’ll see,” Brian said darkly.

“We will,” Phillipe agreed, “and it’ll be extremely entertaining. Now stop brooding and kiss me. The night is still young.”

Brian – what else could he do – shrugged and did as he’d been told.

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For visuals: Edith and Enyd Blount as played by the Kessler twins

Chapter End Notes

The Blount sisters, although genuine White Wolf characters, were modelled in their looks after Alice and Ellen Kessler, the famous German twin dancers of the 1950s.
The Next Steps

Chapter Summary

The work on the various campaigns continues. Brian, while still with Phillipe (sort of), starts drifting closer to Alain.

Chapter Notes

My thanks to Círdam who suggested the seafood restaurant.

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THE NEXT STEPS

Brian slept through after Phillipe’s departure, till ten o’clock in the next morning. Their… encounter had been different in the second night: more playful, less frantic. Accordingly, he was in a much better shape than he’d been in the previous morning, and a hot shower and the herbal salve took care of the remaining soreness easily.

He decided to skip breakfast in favour of an early lunch and sat down to make notes about his ideas involving the Blount sisters, as Phillipe had suggested. Shortly before noon someone named Oliver Simon called him, saying that he was the sisters’ agent, and that they were interested. Brian agreed to meet the guy – and the sisters – at the Vignes Studios later in the afternoon - at 16:30, to be more accurate - wondering briefly if Phillipe ever slept. The lawyer had left at three in the morning, yet had obviously found the time to contact the twins and their agent.

Nothing if not efficient, Brian thought with a satisfied little smile. Phillipe was apparently good at everything: at supporting his career as well as at scratching his itches. Had Brian been the sort of gay man who wanted to settle down behind white picket fences in happy same-gender marriage, Phillipe would have been the ideal partner for that. Just as Ben was the ideal partner for Mikey… well, would have been, had he not also been HIV positive.

Which was the major reason why Brian couldn’t stand the Nutty Professor – aside from the jealousy factor, of course, which he wound not admit in a million years. Ben was an unbearable risk for Mikey’s safety. No matter how careful they were, accidents could happen, all the time. Mikey could get that fucking virus from his hubby, and that would mean his death sentence. And Brian just couldn’t image a life… an existence without Mikey. Even if there was half the country between them.

Of course, the same accident could have happened to him. But that was different. Brian enjoyed living on the edge, playing with fire. The excitement made his life worth living: he loved the danger, the challenge, the kick of it. Unlike Mikey, he was not a domestic animal – he was a predator.

And that was exactly why he knew Phillipe had been right. Should he ever settle for a permanent relationship – which was highly unlikely – that would not be with someone nice and safe like Phillipe. He needed someone who could satisfy his darker urges as well. That was why Justin could
never have him exclusively. The boy still had baby powder on his cute butt – for the duration, Brian needed someone who was at least his equal.

Phillipe had said last night that Alain DeLaigle could be a possibility. Brian was not sure he agreed. The artist’s volatile temper reminded him too much of his father. He’d had his fair share of abuse for a lifetime; he didn’t need that shit again.

He shook his head to clear his thoughts. Musing about his future sex life was distracting and counterproductive. He had things to do, which was a good thing. Work had always helped him to deal with his so-called life.

Opening his laptop, he connected it to the Internet and asked Diego to mail him the photos from the previous day. To his surprise, the young web designer seemed to be working during lunchtime; the required material arrived within minutes, attached to a message in which Diego told him they would see each other in the Vignes Studios later.

Diego also asked him to drive Emmett to DeLaigle’s house after lunch. Apparently, the designers wanted Em’s opinion about some of their newest ideas. Brian wasn’t exactly thrilled – the last thing he wanted was to run into Justin again – but couldn’t exactly refuse. Emmett was a disaster behind the steering wheel, and he was absolutely necessary for the men’s collection. So Brian made the reluctant promise, disconnected from the ‘Net and went to find Emmett… and something to eat.

“Your rental car has arrived,” Mme Dubois told him as they ran into each other right in front of her office. “I hope it’s what you wanted. Mr. Honeycutt has just gone to have lunch; he said he’ll be waiting for you in the restaurant.”

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The corvette was everything Brian could have dreamed of: bright red, with black leather seats and a chromed instrumental board. He felt like a king when he picked up Emmett and drove to DeLaigle’s house. It was childish, he knew, but he felt more at ease here in LA than he ever had back in The Pitts. Emmett, clad in white leather trousers and a shimmering shirt that looked like clear water against his skin, also seemed to enjoy the ride immensely.

In Alain’s house, they were introduced to Oliver Simon, a middle-aged, slightly balding, bespectacled man who turned out to be the agent not only the Blount sisters and the infamous Rebecca Lowell, but also that of a number of moderately successful actresses, dancers and models.

“Not everyone has to be a big diva,” he said with a shrug. “This industry needs its worker class as well, and those people, too, need an agent. I take whomever I can get.”

Oliver came with a young black woman: a tall, pretty and slender one, who, however, wasn’t the usual anorexic supermodel type. Brian welcomed the choice. Those beanpoles weren’t really interesting anymore, and if they wanted to do something radically different from the other fashion houses, they could as well use women who actually looked like women.

“Sarina is Alain’s protégée,” Oliver introduced the girl. “She works as a model for the atelier as well as for the Studios; and I’ve managed to get her small roles in TV series. She’s a vaguely known face already, but not yet over-used.”

Brian looked at her pretty face and his trained eye discovered the well-hidden lines under the make-up. This wasn’t some airheaded bunny; this girl had seen a lot and suffered a lot. Other people would probably suggest something gothic for her, but Brian wasn’t other people. He never made the obvious choice.
“Em, kick your brains in gear,” he said. “She’s a queen; we need something shiny and provocative for her… maybe with sequins or pearls, and shimmering taffeta and tulle… we’ll use her for the most extravagant pieces. I need jewellery, too. It doesn’t have to be expensive – just shiny.”

“Na-ah,” Emmett shook his head, “that would be so… common. For a queen like her we’d need something really exotic… vaguely Egyptian, perhaps, like that alien queen in the Stargate movie, what was her name again?”

“Em,” Brian rolled his eyes, “Jaye Robinson was a guy! And not even supposed to be a queen. He played an evil god!”

“Exactly,” Emmett beamed. “And we’ll make her an evil goddess.”

“Sounds exotic, but who’ll be ever able to wear a gown designed for a goddess?” one of the designers asked, sketching already. Emmett fluttered over to her like an oversized butterfly.

“No, sweetie. You must tone down a bit…. And adapt. Have a diamond-shaped cut to leave the navel free, for showing off a gemstone or a piercing… such things are so trendy nowadays…”

“I think they’ll be running on autopilot without our help for a while now,” said a voice so close to Brian’s ear that he could fear the cool breath on his neck; he got goosebumps at once and nearly jumped. “We should leave them to their creative frenzy and drive to the Vignes Studios now,” Alain DeLaigle continued smoothly, as if he hadn’t noticed Brian’s reaction, but his eyes were glittering in amusement.

“You mean you’re coming, too?” Brian asked with a frown.

The artist nodded. “I’m doing some matte paintings for one of their new movies; and I’ve been asked to think about backgrounds for the video clips. I suggest we get going now. Vera isn’t fond of people who are wasting her time by being late. And,” he added, nuzzling Brian’s neck playfully, “despite outside appearances, Vera is the one with the deciding word.”

“Can you stop doing that?” Brian stepped away from him, truly annoyed now. “It’s weird.”

“I do have a reputation of being weird,” DeLaigle admitted, but he made no attempt to follow his target. “And you smell really nice. Most people use too aggressive cosmetic products that completely overlay their personal scent; what a pity! I must congratulate you to your good taste, though.”

“I’m so flattered,” Brian replied flatly. “Now, if you’ve finished sniffing me, can we go on with the important matters?”

“Oh, I’m far from being finished with you,” DeLaigle answered with a predatory smile, “and it seems to me that we have different ideas about things of true importance. But you’re right; we should go now.”

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The Vignes Studios were among the older, more conservative ones in the Hollywood dream factory, but technically they were more than up-to-date. And it seemed that the studio bosses were willing to catch up with the taste and fashion of the current era. They had produced Raven, after all, the most successful gothic series of the recent years, and Brian was surprised to learn from side remarks that they were the ones actually considering to turn Rage, Justin and Mikey’s gay superhero comic book, into a live action movie. He was glad to hear that, because it meant that the movie will be a success. And Mikey’s low self-esteem could use some success, not to mention the money.

He found it amusing how many of the studio bosses had more than a slight resemblance to well-
known actors. As if they’d chosen people who looked like them and had the necessary acting abilities to make their ideas real. The competent, no-nonsense Vera Vignes could have been the twin sister of Susan Sarandon (albeit a good deal older), while her brother Edward looked like Roy Scheider. And Edward Blount, their business partners, only differed from Kevin Sorbo by the colour of his hair – he was blond like his cousins.

Close up and without stage make-up, the Blount sisters, surprisingly enough, looked not a bit worse, and Brian caught himself trying to guess their true age. He was usually quite good at that sort of thing, but the sisters beat him. They could have been of any age between twenty-seven and forty-five, with those smooth, ageless faces and limber bodies.

Using his laptop, Brian presented his ideas so far, and the studio heads studied the stands and sketches carefully.

“The concept looks promising,” Vera Vignes judged. “I especially like the pictures to Summer Rain. Which one do you intend to use for the final product? It’d be a hard choice – all seven of them are beautiful and incredibly romantic.”

Brian, amused to have heard the term “romantic” used in connection with his own person, selected the one on which he was standing in profile, touching the rose to his mouth. He was wearing a hat on that picture, and flower and lips had almost the same colour.

“This one would be best for the general edition,” he said. “It shows the least of the face, giving it a mysterious air. However, we should use all the other pictures for a limited edition each. Spread the product sparsely across the market. People do have the hang to collect things, especially if they are hard to get. Truly possessed collectors would buy seven bottles instead of one, just so that they can be proud having the entire collection – and you can gradually raise the prices for each new limited edition.”

The bosses looked doubtful for a moment, but Alain DeLaigle grinned and gave a low whistle. “A remarkably ruthless strategy – but I think it’ll work. People are greedy. They’d pay insane sums for a bottle with one of the rare pictures, just because they can have it and the others can’t.”

“But only if we hammer into their skulls that their lives would be empty without the whole collection,” Edward Blount said. “We’ll need a video clip for the cologne, too. With some proper music, Brian walking down the beach in the falling rain and all seven important stands frozen for a few seconds for people to recognize them.”

“Sounds like a job for Dawn Cavanaugh,” Vera Vignes commented. Her brother and business partner glared at her in obvious shock. So did several other people present, for the matter of fact.

“You’re kidding, aren’t you?” DeLaigle protested. “That woman is completely insane!”

“Perhaps,” Vera Vignes shrugged, “but she’s the best cameraman in Hollywood, and she has an uncanny feeling for indecently sensual things.”

“It’s the indecent part that makes me uncomfortable,” Edward Blount shook his head.

“We’ve been decent all this time and it made us lose our touch,” Vera Vignes replied coldly. “We can’t be picky when we’re trying to make the big comeback on the market now.”

“All right; but I won’t be the one dealing with her,” Edward Blount declared, disgust clearly written all over his handsome face.

“You won’t have to,” Vera Vignes replied. “I’ll do that. I can handle Dawn, and let’s face it: without
her, *Raven* would never have been the success it was.”

Brian vaguely remembered the eerily beautiful – and highly disturbing – visuals of the popular horror series and had to agree. Emmett used to watch it religiously, and so some of his friends were forced to do the same. For his part, Brian always thought that while Rebecca Lowell had done a good job in the starring role, the true strength of the series were its visuals and the haunting soundtrack.

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In the following hours, they were talking shop, fleshing out details like deadlines, background music, graphics and other stuff. A few more models were presented, among them a pair of beautifully exotic Chinese girls, one of them with a strong likeness to Lucy Liu, the other one much smaller and wearing practically nonexistent clothes. More stands were shot. Edward Blount laid out a shooting plan for the video clips. Edward Vignes mailed several contracts to the agents of models and to his bank. Vera Vignes made several dozen phone calls to hunt down good photographers and even more models, cajoling or blackmailing musicians into writing the songs to the clips, talking to various print shops to get the posters printed in time and in high quality. The well-oiled machinery of the dream factory was in full work.

“I think we’re not needed here anymore,” Alain DeLaigle commented in satisfaction. “Do you have plans for tonight, Brian?”

“I don’t know yet,” Brian answered thoughtfully. Phillipe and he had not spoken about it yet, and he didn’t want to pass on the chance of another very satisfying night with the lawyer. He didn’t feel like clubbing all on his own in this strange city yet.


“As long as it doesn’t move on its own and doesn’t bite back, yeah,” Brian shrugged. “Why?”

“Phillipe has a rather… unpleasant business meeting that could take a while,” Alain explained. “I offered him to take you out to *Neptune’s Palace*, and he’ll come and join us as soon as possible. Are you all right with that?”

“It’s a public place, isn’t it?” Brian asked. The barely veiled implications made DeLaigle laugh.

“More than you can imagine. Trust me, it’s beautiful. You will like it there.”

“Very well,” Brian gave in, although the idea of being alone with the artist still made him a bit uncomfortable. “Let’s go.”

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*Neptune’s Palace* was a very public place, indeed. It was a seafood restaurant, with a transparent floor, through which one could see the sea – well, either that, or a very good sea aquarium - with colourful fish and other bizarre creatures. The walls were painted with the same motives, including Neptune himself and his entire court of mermaids, and the dishes were served in seashells.

“Pretty,” Brian looked around, thoroughly impressed. “Does it belong to one of your associates, too?”
“In a sense,” Alain shrugged. “Nominally, it’s owned by Countess Visconti.”

“And really?”

“Well, the actual owner is the Bank of Venice, but considering that the Visconti family owns the Bank of Venice, among other things, in the end it’s the same, I guess.”

“You mean she’s a real countess?” Brian raised his eyebrows. “Wow! I didn’t know we had European nobility in LA.”

“It’s a rare occurrence,” Alain admitted. “Countess Visconti is married to one of the local tycoons, Salvador Garcia, and she represents the interests of her family in California. She’s a classy lady, I can introduce you to her if she returns from Europe.”

“Thanks, but I don’t think…”

“Brian,” Alain touched his hand gently, “not that way. But she means money, really big money, and good contacts of that sort could be useful.”

“Oh… sorry,” Brian didn’t get embarrassed easily – well, not usually. But ever since he’d set foot in LA, these people kept putting him off-balance. To his relief, the waitress – disguised as a mermaid, complete with a seashell bra and a long skirt that simulated seaweeds – finally arrived to take their orders.

Alain politely declined food, asking only for some red wine, but for Brian, he recommended a dish called Neptune’s Plate: a colourful mix of fried and steamed pieces of seafood, with mixed salad, dill sauce and pita, a sort of soft, flat bread not unlike tortillas.

“Is this some LA thing that you guys never eat?” Brian asked, tilting his head back and dropping an exceptionally tasty morsel into his mouth.

Alain’s eyes were practically glued to the long, elegant line of the mortal’s neck, the blood singing in his ears already. He didn’t know whether Brian did it consciously or not – Alain’s guess would be that he did – but it was damn tempting. Alain fled to his wine to regain his precious control; thank Caine, the waitress had added a generous amount of blood to his wine. This was one of the reasons why he’d brought Brian here. The Kindred waitress knew him and his needs, and feeding helped him to get the Beast under control. He wanted this mortal too much to take any risks.

“Well, we have to keep our girlish shape somehow,” he replied with some effort. “But really, I just don’t like to sleep on a full stomach.”

Brian shrugged and continued eating his food, giving a good, sensuous performance for Alain to watch. He knew he was playing with fire – not that he could have the slightest idea what kind of fire it truly was – but seeing the effect on the other man gave him a heady feeling. He just couldn’t resist.

“Have some wine,” Alain poured a glass for his guest; he could do so safely, the blood had been in his glass, not in the bottle. “I don’t like to kiss someone who tastes like fish.”

“You think you’ll be kissing me any time soon?” Brian looked at him from under lowered eyelashes. Alain gave him a predatory smile.

“I’m working toward that.”

“You are? And what happened with the not intruding Phillipe’s territory part?”
“Small trespassings don’t count,” Alain slipped a finger under the seashell bracelet and gently rubbed the long-healed cut marks. For some reason, the raw intimacy of the gesture made Brian instantly hard. The scars were not something he easily allowed access to. That was Mikey’s privilege.

“Don’t,” he said hoarsely, his eyes flashing in anger.

Alain arched an eyebrow. “I’m sorry. Do you find it unpleasant?”

“You know I do not,” Brian replied. Phillipe had been right. In seductive mode Alain was ten times worse than in a fit of rage. “I just… don’t want complicate things right now. I’d like to have something simple for a change. Something nice… and safe.”

Alain nodded and let go of his hand. “Very well. I’m willing to wait. Soon enough, nice and safe won’t satisfy you anymore… and that’s when my time will come.”

Brian shook his head half in amusement, half in exasperation. “What the hell is this thing you have for me? Some sort of obsession?”

“Perhaps,” Alain replied with a smile. “We’ll figure out as we go. Speaking of obsessions, though, I wanted to warn you about Dawn. You’ll be working with her now, which is a great opportunity to create something really unique, but be careful with her. She’s a monster.”

“I thought that were you,” Brian couldn’t withstand the urge to tease his host a little. To his surprise, Alain only nodded.

“I am,” he replied seriously, “and you’d do well to remember that. But at least I am a civilized monster – something you can’t say about Dawn. Be sure that you never remain alone with her.”

“If you only knew, Alain thought, the joke of the younger man hitting uncomfortably close to home. Dawn Cavanaugh was a Setite – a moderate one, by the measures of her own Clan, but still a ruthless monster in the eyes of everyone else, including other vampires.

“In a sense,” he answered carefully, walking the thin line between revealing what should remain hidden and having Brian completely clueless and thus endangered. “She has… personality shifts. And her other persona is not… pleasant.”

“You mean multiple personality disorder?” Brian asked.

“Something similar,” Alain sidestepped the whole truth with an ease acquired by five hundred years of unbroken practice. “Only that she knows very well what her other self is doing, all the time – and I have the uncomfortable feeling that she even enjoys these little outlets.”

Brian shuddered. Great, a madwoman on the loose. “Why are you working with such a psycho anyway?”

“Because she’s the best,” Alain replied simply, and that was the truth. It was such a waste that Dawn had got Embraced by a Setite monster. As a Toreador, she could have achieved a fame few other people had, and had been much happier. Yet even so, they couldn’t let the concurrence get her. She was way too gifted for that.

“I’ll see that studio security keeps an eye on you all the time,” Alain promised his visibly nervous guest. He had a couple of Brujah thugs in mind who proved to be able to deal with Dawn in the past. “And I’ll try to be there during the shootings to keep her at bay, if necessary.”
Brian gave him a dubious look. “You can do that?"

“Yes,” Alain replied simply, with utter self-confidence. Brian frowned.

“By giving her a little talk, from monster to monster?”

“Something like that,” Alain leaned in and kissed his temple. “Don’t worry. I’ll protect you.”

“I can take care of myself,” Brian protested angrily.

“I don’t doubt that… under normal circumstances,” Alain replied calmly. “But this is not your playground yet. You’ll have much more to learn before you can run freely on your own in our world.”

“And you are going to teach me?” Brian asked, his voice full of unveiled irony.

Alain looked at him with intensely serious eyes. “If you’ll let me.”

The answer could be interpreted in several ways, each of which made Brian uncomfortable like a fish out of water.

“I’ll think about it,” he said after a moment of hesitation.

“You should,” Alain said, still deadly serious. “It would be in your best interest. LA is much more than the glittering surface of Hollywood. To walk its darker paths safely, you’ll need a guide.”

Brian shrugged noncommittally and changed topics, asking Alain to tell something about himself. The artist did so readily enough, reliving happy memories of his youth spent in a small French village named Yvoire, then in Florence, at art school, learning from an Italian painter whom he simply called Leonardo and whom he seemed to hold in high esteem.

“Leonardo as in da Vinci?” Brian joked, trying to show at least some awareness of European culture.

“Exactly,” Alain nodded, with a strange gleam in his eyes that Brian could not explain and didn’t dare to ask for an explanation, then he picked up the story of the DeLaigle family again.

Apparently, all Alain’s ancestors had been artists of some sort: painters, sculptors, architects, the whole scale, starting with someone in 15th century Yvoire who wore the same name. Works of various DeLaigles could be found in the great galleries all over Europe, from the Hermitage in St. Petersburg to the Uffizi in Florence and the Tate Gallery in London.

Alain himself mostly had his expositions in various art galleries in California, most of them owned by a certain Madame D’Excavalier. He worked with pastel crayons and charcoal, most of the time – techniques that Brian was familiar with from the times before Justin got attacked.

“I’d like to make a portray from you one day,” Alain said. “Rarely can I find a model so close to the Greek ideals here in the States. The population is too mixed to bring forth classical profiles.”

“I thought you preferred models of whom you had intimate knowledge,” Brian grinned.

“We’ll get there, eventually,” Alain replied, his eyes glittering, “but for starters, I just want to draw your face… well, neck and shoulders, perhaps like in the antique Greek and Roman busts. I haven’t done anything classical for a long time – I feel like returning to the old methods for a while again. Would you do it?”
Brian shrugged. “Sure, why not? I’m used to being stared at.”

“I’m sure you are,” Alain laughed. “Narcissus of the rocket era, that’s you.”

“He certainly does have the beauty,” a third voice agreed, and Phillipe all but collapsed on the chair kept free for him, “although Narcissus at least did love himself dearly.”

“And a good evening to you, too,” Alain said patiently. “You look terrible. What do you need?”

“Just a glass from that really strong red wine we usually drink,” Phillipe slumped in his chair, tense and exhausted.

“Bad day?” Alain asked sympathetically while the waitress place a large glass of red wine – with a very small percent of actual wine – in front of Phillipe.

The lawyer sighed. “It always is, when I have to deal with the sharks of Wolfram & Hart.”

“Ouch,” Alain winced in sympathy, “which one of their big guns did you have the questionable pleasure to clash swords with? The ruthless boy wonder?”

“Nah, I can handle Lindsay McDonald,” Phillipe sipped his bloodwine slowly, enjoying the rich taste. “He’s just a little upstart who’s still desperately trying to prove himself – he has weaknesses I can play.”

“Double ouch!” Alain murmured. “You got the evil bitch of Hell, then.”

“Who else,” Phillipe rubbed his temples. “I always get to deal with Lilah Morgan. I can’t let Henry handle her – he has the hots for the woman and would be beaten by her within minutes. Besides, he’s in Toronto right now.”

“Really? Since when?”

“He took the night plane. He’s negotiating the acquirement for some movie studios up there for the Vignes. Which is no doubt the reason why Winters Enterprises chose this particular time to make their move; they thought they’d have an easier game with me when I’m overworked. I hate dealing with that woman. She gives me migraines. Remind me again, why have we decided that simply killing certain adversaries would be such a bad idea?”

“For some reason we thought it would be uncivilized,” Alain replied mildly.

“Fuck civilization,” Phillipe growled, startling Brian a little, who was surprised by the uncharacteristically rude remark. “I tell you, Alain, that woman is as close to pure evil as it is possible for a nominally human being.”

“You’re frustrated and exhausted,” Alain soothed him, worried that Phillipe might slip in his troubled state of mind. “All you need is another glass of wine and a good night’s sleep.”

“What I need is to be laid and have my brains fucked out,” Phillipe looked at Brian with burning eyes. “Interested in the job?”

Brian shrugged. Easing work-related frustration through casual sex was something he did very well. “Sure, whatever you want.”

“Phillipe,” Alain warned, “I don’t think this is such a good idea.”

“I don’t remember asking you,” Phillipe answered icily.
They glared at each other, a not-quite-even match of wills. In an open fight, Alain could have subdued Phillipe with a minimum of effort – he was three hundred years older, and though of unknown generation, exceptionally strong. He hadn’t exaggerated when he told Brian that he was a monster – albeit an ethical one, most of the times. Phillipe, unlike him, had the strong Ventrue self-discipline and didn’t tend to uncontrolled outbursts of rage. But under certain circumstances – for example when helplessly frustrated – the lawyer could lose his grip on the Beast, too. And Alain wasn’t going to let Brian be endangered like that.

Brian felt an unfamiliar wave of panic rising in his guts. He hadn’t felt like this since the moment he’d realized he wouldn’t be fast enough to save Justin from Chris Hobbs. Only that this time he was the one possibly in danger, at least if Alain’s oddly protective behaviour was any indication. Nice and safe, my ass, he thought sourly.

“Guys,” he intervened, “no need to fight over me. ‘I’m a big boy, I can take care of myself.”

“No, you can’t,” Alain replied, never releasing Phillipe’s eyes, “not when he’s like this. You don’t know what you’re dealing with, so be quiet and let me handle things.”

“Stop patronizing me,” Brian hissed angrily.

Alain risked a quick glance at him from glowing silver eyes.

“Shut up, Brian,” he ordered coldly, “and let me focus. I need to solve a problem here.”

There was so much authority in his voice that Brian obeyed without a second thought. After another long moment, with the tension almost visibly crackling between the two Frenchmen, Phillipe suddenly relaxed and began rubbing his temples again.

“I won’t harm him, Alain,” he said tiredly. “But I need him tonight. I need this.”

Alain nodded, tension visibly leaving his whole body. “Very well. I’ll check on you tomorrow.” He turned to Brian, now calm and all business again. “He’ll be safe now. Don’t worry. The people he’s been dealing with tonight have a way to play sick mind games with negotiation partners, but the results can be undone, as you’ve just seen, and the effects will be over, too, in a few minutes.”

“What sort of people are they?” Brian asked worriedly.

“The worst sort imaginable,” Alain replied. “As I told you, LA can be a dangerous place, even for us who know it. I’ll take you two back to the D’Oblique and borrow a car from Catherine to get home. See that Phillipe leaves before sunrise, too. He needs rest more than he’d be willing to admit.”

Brian nodded, thrilled and frightened by the short interlude at the same time, and after Alain had paid the bill, they left the restaurant together.

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They reached the D’Oblique in silence and parted ways with Alain. Brian and Phillipe went up to Brian’s room, but instead of falling over each other like rutting animals – something Brian had expected after that strange little scene in the restaurant – Phillipe just collapsed on the bed, shoulders slumped in defeat, murmuring soft French curses under his breath.

“I’d appreciate if you at least noticed my presence,” Brian told him primly.

Phillipe looked up with eyes that seemed older than the world itself. “I’m sorry Brian, but I’m really not in a playful mood. It’s been a long day, full of things I’d like to forget – at least for a while. Can you just nail me to the mattress without the whole pillow talk routine?”
Brian certainly could do that, after a decade of practice in the various clubs of Liberty Avenue. He told so. Phillipe sighed in relief and shed his clothes in record time, stretching out on the bed in silent invitation.

It was a situation Brian knew all too well from his past. But if it was what Phillipe needed, he would give the man exactly that: a fast, hard coupling that could shut out all higher brain functions and save Phillipe from the necessity of thinking.

Sex, drugs and booze – weren’t they the ultimate answer to all unanswerable philosophical questions about the reason and sense of life?

They were the only answers that actually did make any sense.

They had worked for Brian Kinney just finely, all his life.

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For visuals: Vera Vignes as played by Susan Sarandon
Chapter Summary

Three months into his new job, Alain takes Brian to the BDSM and fetish club of the undead, La Lune Rouge, where he meets Lady Heather, a Lasombra domina, who teaches him a few things about himself.

Chapter Notes

My thanks to for the help with the domina studio's interior.
Lady Heather (Melinda Clarke) has been borrowed from the original CSI series. The Goth girl behind the bar has the looks of Abby (Pauline Perrette) from NCIS.

*DARK DESIRES*

The three months of his temporary contract flew away for Brian like a blur, filled with hectic activity. Nevertheless, he managed to settle into some sort of routine, following a schedule set by his sometimes strange new business partners, who seemed to prefer working in the evening. The excuses were numerous, starting with some vaguely described skin condition through light-sensitive eyes up to chronic insomnia and the likes. Brian was almost certain that they were lying, but he couldn’t, for his life, figure out why.

Unless they were all vampires, of course, but since they did walk in the sunshine at high noon if they had to, that was highly unlikely. Even if he would believe in vampires – which he did not. So he decided that they probably were just really weird, all of them. All that inbreeding in those old families must have had a devastating effect on the late offspring.

Ah, hell, at least they paid him well.

In these three months, he got introduced to a number of other people who were important for some reason. He met Countess Visconti and the equally elegant Madame D’Excavalier, dozens of studio guys, including the infamous Dawn Cavanaugh, a small, vaguely oriental-looking, olive-skinned woman with the creepiest ink-black eyes he’d ever seen, and who made him shiver. But she knew her job like no other cameraman, and the ad vids she produced became immediate hits.

The campaigns for Californian Summer were running on their own now, and Summer Rain had become the absolute hit of the season. Brian suggested Victor Girard to wait with the release of the first limited edition a little longer, and this, too, proved to be a sound idea. His share was high enough to buy a car – a two-seat sports car, similar to the one Phillipe drove privately, only in black. He’d have preferred a jeep, but that wouldn’t match his new, sunny Californian image, so he compromised.

His casual affair with Phillipe continued on, although they didn’t see each other every night anymore. The lawyer had much work to do with some heavy project including Nabbit Enterprises –
Brian didn’t know what it was. Of course, nobody would have told him that Phillipe was preparing to help Angelus, the vampire Prince of the city, to properly Embrace young David Nabbit, and to secure his billions for their circle of interests.

Brian missed the nightly company but accepted the inevitable changes and simply went clubbing on lonely nights – either with Emmett, who was floating on cloud nine in Nellie Land, or alone, if Em was too busy with his numerous new admirers. And he called Mikey in The Pitts at least once a week. Whenever he felt desperately alone.

Mikey seemed genuinely happy about his phone calls, telling him every bit of gossip. About Lindz, Mel and Gus. About Debbie and her detective. About the empty space Vic had left behind in their lives. About the comic shop. About Ted’s latest (and futile) attempts to get into the so-called better circles. About everyone and everything, just never about himself and Ben and their marriage. Brian knew better to ask. Mikey’s silence told more about his troubles than hours of whining would have.

On his clubbing tours, Brian often ran into Alain DeLaigle, who still seemed very intent on pursuing him. In those cases, they often ended up in interesting conversations instead of dragging off the next available trick. Alain showed him around in the art scene, especially the one in the gay community, taking him to smaller, less known – and more classy – places, making him familiar with this aspect of LA.

They became casual friends, despite the fact that Brian still had a somewhat… eerie feeling around the artist. Never being one pussyfooting around the point, one night, when they were hanging out in one of the more elegant gay bars, he decided to be direct and try to clear up things a little.

“Alain, I’d like to ask you a question,” he said slowly, “and I’d like an honest answer.”

The artist looked at him thoughtfully, and then he nodded. “All right. Go ahead. I’ll answer if I can.”

“I’ve got the feeling that there’s something going on. Something you guys don’t tell me.”

“That’s correct,” Alain admitted freely.

“I see,” Brian said after a short pause, somewhat surprised by that openness. “May I ask why?”

“For your own safety,” Alain replied. “There is… knowledge that would get you in danger. You’re better off in ignorance.”

“But that could prove just as dangerous, couldn’t it?” Brian asked with a frown. Alain nodded.

“It could. That’s why we’ll tell you everything, eventually. When you are ready.”

“And who’ll decide when the moment is come?” Brian asked sarcastically. Alain flashed him a charming grin.

“That person would be me. I’ve been selected as your… guardian before you got the job offer in the first place.”

“Does that mean that you don’t really have any personal interest in me?” Brian didn’t know if he was disappointed or relieved. “Was it all just show?”

“Oh, no,” that predatory silver gleam appeared in Alain’s eyes again. “I’ve got the hots for you since the moment you walked into Victor’s office. I knew at once that I’ll have you one day all for myself. I just let you play around with Phillipe for fun.”
Brian shook his head in exasperation. “This is beyond creepy. The whole thing is creepy. Are you guys some kind of crazed serial killers or what?”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Alain laughed. “All we’ve told you about us is true.”

“Just not the whole truth,” Brian added.

“No, it’s not,” Alain agreed. “But let me tell you something: the only truth you’ll ever truly learn is the one about yourself. About your true nature, your needs, your darkest desires,” he stood and threw some money on the counter. “Let’s go.”

“Where are we going?”

“To someone who can help you to learn the truth about yourself.”

“And what if I don’t want to learn the truth about myself?” Brian protested.

Alain gave him a long, thoughtful look. “You’ll have to, sooner or later. There is no way around it. For none of us.”

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“What is this place?” Brian asked when they walked into the foyer of La Lune Rouge. The foyer had a slightly gothic look, it had red walls with heavy dark curtains, a central bar with a tattooed Goth girl serving as the barkeeper, a small stage with a pole for strippers, but still seemed normal enough – save from the large wrought-iron bird cage in which a young man was sitting, wearing a black leather loincloth and dramatic eye-makeup. There could be little doubt what sort of establishment the club was.

“This is the place of naked truth and freedom, achieved through learning, experience… and pain,” a deep, cold female voice answered, and a tall, willowy woman in a shimmering black evening gown – not the kinky sort but an original Girard model in which she could have appeared on the cocktail party of the President – strolled around the bar to greet them. She wore her raven black hair down and without any adornment, which emphasized the deathly, almost translucent paleness of her skin and the vibrant, lush red of her full lips. Her eyes were pitch black, lined with silver. The only revealing sign of her profession was a black leather whip she held in one flawlessly manicured hand.

“Lady Heather,” Alain took her free hand and kissed it respectfully, “thanks for seeing us in such a short notice.”

The domina – for there couldn’t be any doubt what she was – waved dismissively, her silver fingernails glittering in the reddish lights of the bar.

“Nonsense, Alain. Regular clients – especially as faithful ones as yourself – deserve a little extra treatment. Who’s your liaison?”

“His name’s Brian,” the artist replied. “He’s new to the city… trying to find his way.”

“Then you’ve brought him to the right place,” the domina declared serenely.

Alain had his mild doubts about that. A Lasombra antitribu in Toreador disguise, Lady Heather had proven her reliability a long time ago. If Brian wanted to explore his darker side, this certainly was the perfect place to try. Still, the clientele was… risky sometimes, and Alain couldn’t be one hundred per cent sure that none of them would get out of control. All he could do was to trust Lady Heather, as he needed his own outlet tonight. It had been too long for him.
He hoped he’d done the right thing, bringing Brian here. It was the in domina’s best interest to keep Clan Toreador’s favour, after all. They had hidden and protected her from her own Clan for decades. Besides, she was the best LA could offer in this trade.

Lady Heather gave Brian one of those strange, intense looks usually seen by snakes when they are trying to hypnotize their prey. Then she turned to Alain.

“Phillipe was right,” she said. “He is a resistor.”

“I’m a what?” Brian asked, trying very hard not to freak out.

“You belong to the less than five per cent of humans who can’t be hypnotized,” Lady Heather explained, bending the truth a little; actually, Brian was more than that. He was one of the rare humans immune against the Kindred mesmerising powers.

“And you can tell that just by looking at me?” Brian asked, feeling still more than a little uncomfortable.

“Of course not,” Lady Heather replied. “I was making a strong suggestion to you – ninety-five people out of a hundred would have followed it, without realizing the impulse came from outside.”

“So, you’re some sort of witch, or voodoo priestess?” Brian asked with a frown.

“No,” Lady Heather said, “it’s a natural ability, rarer even than yours.” Actually, it was a rather frequent Lasombra trait, but the suspicious mortal didn’t need to know that. “It’s helpful in dealing with our customers here. Most of them are too frightened or too ashamed to lay open their true wants and needs. They need a little… encouragement.”

“Handy, isn’t it?” Brian remarked cynically, but Lady Heather took no offence.

“Yes, it is,” she said. “You must understand that people come here out of their own free will. We don’t force them to do anything they do not want or that’s against their deepest, truest nature. We are here to help discover their needs – and to help satisfy them. Nothing more, nothing less.”

“Through pain and torture?” Brian asked doubtfully.

“Nietzsche said once: ‘Everything deep needs masks’,” Lady Heather answered, “and some needs lie so deeply hidden, so buried under layers upon layers of masks that they need a strong impulse to surface. But surface they must for the person to become whole. Take him, for example,” she nodded in Alain’s direction. “He’s too strong, too volatile in his tempers, a captive of his own wrath. Would he not seek out balance by submission and punishment time and again, he’d become self-destructive… and a lethal danger for those around him.”

Remembering how Alain had nearly killed Justin in a fit of black rage over something as trivial as a few nasty remarks, Brian nodded in understanding. It made sense.

“Or look at him,” Lady Heather gestured with her whip towards the newest arrival, a short, wiry man clad in black leather and blood red silk, with spiky, bleached blond hair, vibrant blue eyes and killer cheekbones. “He lives in a committed relationship where he’s the submissive one… well, more than just that. He’s owned by his master – there’s no better word for what they have. He’s agreed to this freely; but he’s got a strong will and a free spirit and without an outlet to balance out his major role, he’d have gone mad long ago. So he seeks here the chance to dominate – and we offer him that chance.”

The Billy Idol wannabe flashed the domina a wide grin, his incredible eyes sparkling. The balance
thing certainly seemed to work for him.

“Spike,” Lady Heather greeted him. “It’s been too long since your last visit. You know that could be dangerous.”

“I was out of town,” the man said with a surprisingly deep, pleasant voice and a typical cockney accent. “Had to stalk people, beat up the bad blokes, kill things… that sort of fun.”

For a disturbing moment, Brian wasn’t sure whether the man was joking or not. But seeing Alain’s amused grin he decided that it had to be the punk’s weird sense of humour. British humour, apparently.

“But,” Spike added brightly, “I’m here now and ready to play. Can you recommend me any playmates, milady?”

Lady Heather looked from him to Alain and back speculatively.

“I believe the two of you would be a good match,” she decided. “Leave the young man in my care, Alain. I promise to hand him back to you unharmed… though maybe wiser.”

Alain nodded in agreement and left with the bleached blond through one of the back doors. Brian looked after them curiously. “Where are they going?”

“To the private areas… do you want to see them?” Lady Heather waved to one of her aides. “Darling, can you take over here for me? I’ll show Brian around a bit.”

Brian had a strange feeling following the domina around: half fear, half excitement. She only showed him the unoccupied rooms. There was over-the-top padded black leather equipment everywhere, with sensuous framed paintings and prints and artificial flower arrangements. The sight of the utilities was enough to make him tense with anxiety… and very aroused. He saw Lady Heather’s knowing glance at the revealing parts of his anatomy and smiled nervously. She returned his smile.

“You find the idea exciting,” it was not a question. She would smell his arousal even if his jeans would have been less tight – vampire senses were much stronger than human ones; a fact as yet unknown to Brian.

“Yes,” he admitted, a bit reluctantly.

She nodded in approval. “There’s nothing wrong with that. Have you tried such games before?”

“Some,” he replied. “Spanking, mild bondage… nothing serious.”

“Nothing?” she stared at him intently, feeling the lie. He shrugged.

“Well, I tried choking on my thirtieth birthday. It was an incredible turn-on. I came like a volcano.”

“But?” she asked, because there definitely was a ‘but’. Brian shrugged again.

“It nearly got out of control. My best friend found me hanging from my scarf and freaked out completely. I never tried anything like that again.”

“Why not?”

“I didn’t want to upset Mikey,” Brian murmured, his eyes opaque with pain. He couldn’t believe he was telling these things to a complete stranger. But perhaps it was the anonymity that made it so much easier than talking with those he considered friends.
The domina nodded. “His friendship is important for you. That’s good. We all need a specific someone. But this person can’t always be the one who can guide us through the darker paths of our needs… because he or she doesn’t have the same urges and couldn’t understand them.”

“Mikey has always been so much better than I was,” Brian whispered sadly.

“This has nothing to do with better or worse,” Lady Heather replied, “and the sooner you understand that, the better it would be for you. This is all about need. Obviously, for some reason, you need these things to be whole – it’s your nature. The lesson you should have learned from the incident is not that you should never do anything like that again. The lesson is that you shouldn’t do anything like that alone.”

“You should become an ad exec,” Brian grinned humourlessly, “but you shouldn’t try your skills on a fellow shark.”

“I’m not trying to win you as a customer,” she said with a shrug. “Although I can assure you that my establishment is one of the bests in the scene. What I meant was that you need someone with you when you’re experimenting – unless you have a death wish. Do you have one?”

Brian didn’t answer at once. That was a question he’d asked himself several times during the recent years. Ever since Gus’ birth, when he started flirting with death as an alternative to growing old. He often found his life empty, so much was sure, but he didn’t really want to die… at least not yet.

“No, I don’t think so,” he finally said. Not as long as Mikey stands by me.

“Very well,” the domina nodded. “In that case, the preferable way of action would be to learn more about your hidden needs. I can help you with that.”

“You?” Brian smiled. “No offence, lady, but I’m not into women.”

“I know,” she replied calmly. “Nor do I sleep with my clients. This is not about sexual preferences… not even about sex itself. Not primarily, anyway. It’s all about need and about learning what you need. To discover your debts, you’ll need guidance. I’m an expert in this area – the expert, as many would assure you. I can introduce you how these things are done correctly. To find the right partner would be your job.”

Brian nodded. “I can see the reason in that. What exactly are you suggesting?”

“I’m offering to take you on a journey of self-exploration,” Lady Heather answered. “This is usually the first session with newbies. To learn through experience what you need and what you don’t. Are you willing to give it a try?”

“Perhaps,” Brian gave the toys laid out on the table a nervous glance. “But I’m most certainly not into that S/M stuff. My goddamn father gave me enough beating for a lifetime when I was a kid; I’m not going there voluntarily now.”

“Nor was I suggesting anything like that,” she agreed. “I do believe that your need is beyond the physical level… which makes things more complicated. But doable, if you trust me.”

“Why should I?” Brian asked flippantly. “I don’t even know you, and frankly, you give me the creeps.”

“Very perceptive,” the domina gave him another of those ghostly smiles. “The only reason why you should trust me is because I’m a professional. I know what I’m doing. Besides,” she added in an amused tone, “Alain would tear me to pieces if I harmed you in any way.”
“Somehow I don’t think that would keep you from doing anything you want,” Brian said dryly.

“You are right, it wouldn’t,” she admitted. “But harming my clients would be bad for business, and I happen to find great satisfaction in my work.”

“Because of the goodness of your heart?” Brian said ironically.

“Of course not. It’s the dark depths that open up in people with my guidance that fascinate me,” Lady Heather smiled that eerie smile again. “Nowhere else are people as brutally honest as during one of these sessions. The truth about oneself, the truth about human nature is not always pleasant. But it does have a dark fascination. In ancient times, people went to temples and through dangerous rituals to face that side of themselves. Nowadays, they come to me and the others like me. It’s not an easy journey, and it could be painful. But you do have the strength to see through it.”

Brian hesitated a little, but the siren song of danger and excitement was too strong for him to withstand. It’s all about trust, Mikey’s dreamy voice echoed in his mind as his friend had told them about the bondage games with Ben in the sauna. He suppressed the memory ruthlessly.

“Very well,” he said; everything was better than reliving those moments of the past. “Let’s give it a try.”

“Excellent,” Lady Heather nodded and switched on the In Use light sign outside the room they were in. “Remember, you can stop this any time you want. Now take off your clothes.”

“Excuse me?” Brian nearly choked, and the domina laughed – the first genuine laughter since they met.

“Relax. That’s part of the routine – the way a session starts. I don’t want anything from you. Just follow my instructions, will you?”

Still suspicious a little, Brian undressed, hang up his clothes and spread his arms. “Okay, I’m naked, now what?”

She walked around him unhurriedly, eyeing his body in a manner that reminded him of Lindz looking at some new piece of artwork. With the eyes of a detached expert who didn’t want to buy, just to admire.

“I understand now what Alain sees in you,” she said. “He’s always had a fascination for ancient Greek art, and you’re the closest thing on two legs he could hope to find. Sit down,” she pointed at a leather couch. “We’ll talk now.”

“I need to be naked to talk?” Brian glared at her incredulously. “While you remain fully clothed?”

“Yes,” she said. “How does it make you feel?”

Brian thought about if for a moment. Normally, he didn’t have any problems with nudity. Every gay man in Pittsburgh had seen him naked at least once, and he had been walked in on by Lindz more than once. But here, in this surreal place, with this strange woman, things were different.

“Exposed,” he admitted. “Vulnerable, perhaps.”

“Uncomfortable?” she asked.

Brian nodded. “Maybe a little.”
“It’s a beginning,” she said. “You’ll feel a lot more uncomfortable for a while. Before you outgrow it.”

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The session coming to its end, Lady Heather allowed Brian to get dressed again and raised a thin eyebrow askance.

“How do you believe that you have learned something about yourself?” she inquired.

Brian shrugged. “Perhaps. I’m not sure.”

“It’s still too early,” the domina nodded in agreement. “To find an answer to that question, you’ll need several more sessions.”

“I don’t do psychotherapy,” Brian protested instinctively.

“Neither do I,” Lady Heather replied. “I just accompany you on your way of self-discovery… if you want me to.”

“I don’t know if I do,” Brian said honestly.

“Of course not,” she inclined her head in an almost ceremonial manner. “You need to think about it. In the end, I’m not the person you truly need. Should you choose me as your guide for the next part of your journey… well, you know where to find me.”

She turned around and made an unhurried exit with an almost otherworldly grace. Brian left the room, too, and ran into Alain in the foyer. The artist seemed to have been waiting for him for some time, while flirting with the Goth girl behind the bar. Of the bleached blond in black leather there was no sign, but Alain practically oozed the lazy satisfaction of a recent – and very thorough – fucking session.

“Done already?” he asked, giving the Goth girl a peck on the cheek. “I haven’t counted on you so early. How did you like it?”

Brian shrugged. “It was… interesting.”

“Interesting, hm?” Alain’s experienced eyes took in his expression in a second. “I guess it wasn’t your cup of tea, after all. Strange. I’m rarely wrong when it comes to such things.”

“I might try it again,” Brian said, “but I don’t really think this would be what I needed.”

“Or whom you needed,” Alain said quietly. “You do realize, I hope, that your feelings are bordering on obsession. You can destroy yourself – and your ‘friend’, if you don’t find a way to deal with them.”

“Look who’s speaking,” Brian replied dryly, and Alain laughed.

“Touché. But at least I have found a way to deal with my obsession.”

“Was he good?” Brian grinned.

“Oh, yes,” the artist answered with deep satisfaction. “I might be in for a repeat performance – or more than one.”

“Sounds intriguing,” Brian’s grin widened. Alain shook his head.
“Forget it. He’s above your league… unless you are really into pain.”

“Are you?” Brian asked.

“Sometimes,” Alain admitted. “Pain and pleasure are very close to each other – the one makes the other more intense. Sometimes I need that intensity.”

It was different for vampires, who had tasted death already. But he couldn’t explain that to Brian. Not yet, anyway. Soon, he hoped.

“Let’s go home,” he suggested. “Or do you want to go clubbing tonight?”

“Just to the D’Oblique,” Brian said. “I’ll have a drink and watch Sergio wriggle his ass to entertain the guests. Maybe I’ll get lucky.”

“He has a talented mouth,” Alain agreed. “Unless he’s taken already for tonight, you’re in for a delightful event.”

They laughed and walked out of the club to Alain’s car, with arms around each other’s waist.

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For visuals: Melinda Clarke as Lady Heather (the colouring is a bit different, though)

![Image](image-url)
Courtship Rituals

Chapter Summary

Brian and Emmett finally got their permanent contracts signed. Brian moves into his new apartment and has a disturbing phone call from Michael. Also, he finally submits to Alain for the first time, and – to his mild shock – finds it extremely liberating.

Chapter Notes

* Adults only, for this part. This is a fairly disturbing one.*

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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COURTSHIP RITUALS

The reconstruction workers finally left, and Brian looked around in his new home with extreme satisfaction. At first he hadn’t been very excited by the idea of moving into Alain’s house, as he was still a little uncomfortable with the artist’s possessive nature, but after some consideration he accepted the offer anyway.

Oliver Simon and his long-time partner, Pierre Chatelet (a successful landscape architect) had left the apartment in a fairly good shape. They’d only lived here for six or seven months, while their own house was under reconstruction. Well, that was the official reason. Brian suspected that there had to be an unofficial one as well – the true one – but he’d learned not to ask when his associates didn’t offer voluntary information.

In any case, the apartment was very nice – more suited for a bachelor than for a couple, in fact – with a large living room, of which the study area was divided by a decorative book-case that reached into one-third of the room’s width, two bedrooms, and a kitchen area, separated by a counter from the living room, opposite the study. The bathroom had, aside from the obligatory shower cabin, a semi-circular tub, large enough for two or three people, and a walk-in closet that also could be entered from the bedrooms.

With one word, the apartment had class, and the clean, elegant lines revealed Alain’s refined taste in the planning. The window glasses darkened gradually, matching the current brightness of the sunlight, but that didn’t bother Brian too much. He could always open the windows if he wanted to feel the sun on his face.

Furnishing the apartment had been great fun. He’d enlisted the help of the prop expert of the Vignes Studios, who knew small, exclusive shops largely unknown to anyone but a small circle of friends, and the result was worth the effort – and the price – indeed. Brian had chosen the larger bedroom for personal use; the one that had a mural on the walls: a copy of some ancient Greek thing, most likely, showing a merry feast with beautiful younglings and handsome, bearded men having a good time.

Like all of Alain’s works, it had nothing pornographic in it. The scenes were pretty tame, at least at
first sight. The true eroticism came from the sheer beauty of the half-covered bodies and from the emotions shown so vividly on the faces. There could be no doubt about the love and desire these imaginary people felt for each other, even though they weren’t doing anything else than lying on their couches, feasting and watching the dancers.

More than anything else he’d seen so far made this mural Brian understand the gift of his host – and Alain’s love for male beauty. But it also made him realize the difference between porn and eroticism. Not that he hadn’t known that difference before. He couldn’t have created his highly successful complaints without that understanding. But living surrounded by this extraordinary piece of artwork also made him understand the difference between the desire of his casual partners for his body and Alain’s fascination with him as a person. Alain didn’t simply want to fuck him – well, that obviously too, of course – he wanted to possess him, body and soul, as a collector wants a rare piece of art.

Such a single-minded obsession could be frightening sometimes, which was the reason why Brian still hesitated to give in to Alain’s seduction completely. Sure, they’d had oral sex a few times, with him being on the receiving end, and it had been great, Alain having a skill in deep throating worth to become the stuff for legends. (The fact that vampires didn’t need to breathe was an advantage he would understand later.) Sure, Alain had made it clear that he wasn’t expecting an exclusive relationship; in fact, Brian knew that he regularly slept with Sarina and occasionally with other people, too. Not to mention his visits in Lady Heather’s establishment. He just wanted Brian more than all the others, and was eminently certain that he’d get what he wanted, eventually.

And that was exactly what made Brian nervous. Despite the sessions with Lady Heather, he still preferred to be the one in control, and he knew without any doubt that with Alain, he’d never be that. Nor would Alain ever let him go again, once they’d done the deed. The artist’s desire for him was complex and multi-levelled, and once he gave in, it would take years to explore the relationship; or perhaps decades. Brian wasn’t sure he was ready for that. Whether he’d ever be ready for something like that. So he was still hesitating, trying to keep things between them on a casual level, although he knew that in truth they were already way beyond the casual thing.

Alain let him struggle with his hidden fears, waiting with the patience of a sphinx for his time to come. It was eerie sometimes, how the artist disregarded the merciless flow of time. As if it hadn’t affected him at all. Of course, after five hundred years that could became someone’s second nature. But Brian couldn’t know that.

Brian, on the other hand, was all too aware of it. Time always seemed too short, flowing away at an alarming speed. If he could afford it, he wouldn’t keep any clocks in his apartment. But he couldn’t do that. There were appointments and dates and deadlines to consider – he couldn’t avoid being reminded of his mortality and the fleeting nature of his youth all the time. It was beyond frustrating sometimes.

He glanced at the beautiful clock on the wall – a unique piece of abstract artwork that he’s found in one of Madame D’Excavalier’s galleries – and smiled. There was one appointment he didn’t mind being reminded of. It was time to call Mikey again.

“Red Cape comics,” the voice answering the phone in Pittsburgh wasn’t Michael’s. Bran became tense and worried at once.

“Can I speak with Michael Novotny?” he asked.

“Sorry, he’s not in right now,” the young voice, most likely Hunter’s, replied. “Do you want to leave a message?”

“No, dammit, I don’t want to leave a message,” Brian snapped. “Where in hell is he? He knows I’d
“Well, it seems like that’s exactly what happened,” the boy replied glumly. “Michael told me you’d call… and to tell you he’s sorry and will call you back, if you leave your new phone number.”

That didn’t sound good at all. In fact, it could only mean one thing.

“What’s wrong?” Brian asked. “It’s Ben, isn’t it? What has he done? Tried to run out to Tibet again, or picked up one of his besotted students?”

“Erm… no,” the boy, probably one of said besotted students himself, replied glumly. “He’s in hospital, and Michael wanted to be with him.”

“Fuck,” Brian hissed, knowing how hard that must have hit his Mikey. “Are things going to the end already?”

“Of course not!” the kid protested, shocked by the brutally direct question. “He’s switching to new medication, that’s all.”

“I see,” Brian knew the kid was lying to himself; if a HIV positive patient suddenly needed new medication that was always bad news. It meant that the old ones didn’t help anymore. Ben had had the virus for how long by now? More than seven years. I guess it was inevitable, Brian thought, after leaving his new phone number and hanging up. Poor Mikey. It’ll be a hard time for him. It’s not fair. If anyone, Mikey deserves to be happy. Why must he always pick the wrong guy?

“Bad news?” Alain asked, and as Brian jerked in surprise, he raised an apologetic hand. “I’m sorry. The door was left wide open. I thought you wouldn’t mind if I stopped by and took a look at the results.”

“I don’t,” Brian shrugged. “Just try to knock next time.”

“I will, I promise,” Alain crossed the room and hugged him spontaneously. “You look upset. What’s wrong?”

“I’m not sure,” Brian rested in the older man’s embrace for a moment. Sometimes Alain’s protectiveness wasn’t such a bad thing. “I tried to call Mikey, but he wasn’t there. Had to take hubby to the hospital.”

Alain nodded, having cajoled some of the details about Brian’s past out of him some time ago. Especially the details concerning one Michael Novotny. He knew from the beginning that he’d never be able to compete with Michael’s role in Brian’s life. So he chose to integrate those memories into their slowly growing bond as well as he could.

“That was to be expected,” he murmured, kissing Brian’s throat. “No matter what the doctors try, no matter how much headway the pharmaceutical industry has made, from a certain phase on, they’re simply helpless. How wrong is it?”

Brian tilted his head invitingly, and Alain thanked all dark powers that he’d just fed; the temptation was almost too strong. “I don’t know. The kid in the shop had no idea. I hope Mikey will call me back, soon.”

“Why are you so worried?” Alain asked bluntly. “Shouldn’t you be glad to have the professor our of your way soon?”
“Because he’s Mikey’s fucking husband,” Brian snapped. “And because Mikey loves him and will fall apart when he dies. That’s why!”

Alain looked at him with strangely compassionate eyes. As if he’d understand. Perhaps he did. He never spoke of former lovers, and Brian never asked. Some things were better left alone. So they were quiet, for a few endless moments.

“You still love him that much?” Alan finally asked. Brian nodded.

“Yes,” he answered simply. “Always have… always will.”

“Why haven’t you acted on your feelings, then?” Alan asked. “Why have you wasted almost twenty years, letting others to take what you wanted for yourself more than everything?”

“Because I’m a fucking coward,” Brian shrugged, his voice cold and bitter. “And what I’ve seen as a kid wasn’t very encouraging. My mother was a frigid bitch. My father was an abusive drunk. They had a hateful marriage, which is probably why I am unwilling or unable to form a committed long-term relationship of my own. The fact that I drink like a fish, abuse drugs, and have more or less redefined promiscuity doesn’t help much, either(1). Mikey was the only one who’d always put up with me, no matter what.”

“Why isn’t he with you, then?” Alain asked quietly.

“Because he deserves something better,” Brian said. “Someone who doesn’t treat him like shit. Someone who genuinely cares for him.”

“Oh, you do care for him, there can’t be any doubt about that,” Alain said seriously. “That’s not the problem, I think.”

“So?” Brian gave him the sarcastic eyebrow. “What is the problem then, Maestro? Enlighten me.”

“The problem is that you need two diagonally opposite things in your life to become whole,” Alain said thoughtfully. “On the one side, you’re longing for unconditional love and acceptance; you need it to survive at all. Your friend Michael has provided that for you since your teenage years. You do feel for him the same way, but you can’t admit it… or express it in a way he’d need. You are too afraid to give up control. That’s the other side of your problem. And Michael isn’t the person who could wrestle that control from you, no matter how much you would need to surrender it.”

“Who says I needed it?” Brian went into defensive mode without realizing it.

Alain smiled. “I do. And I know this because we have much in common. All you need to do is to learn accepting the truth about yourself.”

He grabbed the back of Brian’s neck, tilted the younger man’s face back and kissed him, forcing his mouth open with his tongue. It was a rough, almost brutal kiss, all about dominance and power. There was a shocking strength in his grip, a clear superiority that loosened Brian’s thighs against his will. Alain’s other hand grabbed him through the fabric of his trousers, manhandling him roughly, so that he nearly came into his pants from the intense mix of pain and pleasure.

In the next moment, Alain let go of him, admiring his flushed cheeks and kiss-bruised mouth with a satisfied smile.

“And now tell me that you didn’t like it,” he said.

It was painfully obvious that Brian could not. Alain touched his face, suddenly gentle and
considerate again, and his eyes were surprisingly warm now.

“Once you surrender control to me – and it’s inevitable that you’ll do so one day – you won’t need to keep looking for reassurance in a hundred anonymous couplings any longer. Because you’ll be mine, and I’ll be there to catch you when you are falling. I won’t hinder you in seeking out pleasure with others, for so will do I. And I won’t force you to do bottom all the time – I like the occasional switch. But I’ll be the one in control, whenever you lie with me. That will make you free to be in control with others, without abusing them. It’s all about balance.”

“It sounds awfully close to abuse and being abused for me,” Brian replied.

“It has nothing to do with abuse,” Alain shook his head. “You’ll have to want to surrender for this to work.”

“Like you do when you go to Lady Heather’s?” The sarcasm in Brian’s voice was evident.

“Something like that, yes,” Alain nodded. “With the significant difference that I actually do care for you… something I don’t get at Lady Heather’s.”

“Why do you go there, then?”

“Because I need this as much as you do. Probably even more. I’m older and a lot worse with control issues than you are.”

“Well, if that isn’t the understatement of the year…”

“You’ve seen me out of control, and that was just a small taste. Some of us simply do have these needs… and we need a safe outlet, or we’ll endanger the people around us.”

“No kidding,” Brian murmured, knowing all too well how many people he had hurt by lashing out in uncontrolled pain and anger… especially those whom he considered his friends.

“So, you’ve understood what this is all about, it seems,” Alain said calmly. “The decision is yours to make, the time is yours to choose. Leave me a message when you’re ready, I’ll come to you.”

He kissed Brian again, this time gently, almost reverently, and left the apartment without a further word.

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When Michael’s call finally came, Brian was already halfway through a newly opened bottle of Jim Beam, which gave his voice a light slur.

“Mikey,” he drawled, “what’s news in The Pitts? How’re ya doing? I heard the Professor is in hospital…”

“Yeah,” Michael’s voice was tense, nervous. “His T-cell count went down last week. Apparently, the meds don’t do the deed anymore. So the doctors are trying something new now.”

“Is it working?” Brian bit back his first instinct to ask what for? Everyone knew that once the meds stopped working, there wasn’t really much that could be done. The inevitable could be delayed for a while, but it would be just a matter of time. But he was glad that Michael at least talked to him about it again.

“I don’t know,” Michael answered after a long, meaningful pause. “Bri, I’m afraid. I’m scared shitless that he’s gonna die and leave me alone to deal with…”
“You’re not alone, Mikey,” Brian soothed. “Never have been, never will be,” then his mind jumped back to Michael’s last remark in dread. “To deal with what?”

There was no answer, and Brian, all of a sudden, had that familiar feeling of a huge slab of ice weighing his stomach down.

“Mikey, what are you not telling me?”

Still no answer… just those all too familiar, miserable little noises that Michael used to produce when trying to force back his tears. Noises that Brian had not heard for more than a decade.

“Mikey,” he said slowly, fighting back his own panic, “what happened?”

“Probably nothing,” Michael finally answered with a badly disguised sniffle. “I don’t have the test results yet… and anyway, it could take three to six months till they are really sure…”

“Test… results…” Brian repeated tonelessly, and then he practically exploded. “Fuck, Mikey, what were you thinking? How could you be so careless? You knew the risks, dammit, why haven’t you…”

“We have,” Michael interrupted him, his voice now strangely controlled. “But accidents happen. We were careful, but it didn’t matter. That fucking condom just broke. It wasn’t Ben’s fault.”

“You’re damn right; it was yours, because you didn’t listen to Deb and all the others,” Brian hissed.

“I don’t want to fight with you about this,” Michael replied tiredly. “I’ve more important things to do. What’s done is done… nobody can change it. All we can do now is to sit it out and wait for the results. Which is hard enough. For both of us.”

“You haven’t told the others?”

“No. And I’m not going to, at least not until we know for sure what we are dealing with.”

Do you want me to come home?” Brian offered without hesitation.

“No,” Michael said promptly. “And don’t you dare to tell Emmett. I don’t want either of you to run back home and fuss over me for nothing.”

“Nothing? You call that nothing? Jesus, Mikey, he could have infected you!” Brian practically screamed, forgetting about his still open front door.

“And there’s nothing you or Em could do about it,” Michael pointed out. “I can deal with it… so far. I need to focus on Ben – not only is his condition worsening, he’s also guilt-ridden and miserable…”

“He has every reason for that,” Brian hissed nastily.

“Bri, please,” Michael’s voice sounded incredibly far away and exhausted. “I don’t have the strength to deal with your shit, too – so, once in your life, just stay away, will you?”

“I can’t fucking believe this!” Brian ran his free hand through his already tousled hair. “All right, Mikey. Have your way… for now. But if you feel that it’s becoming too much for you to bear alone, you will call me, and I’ll take the first available plane home, understood?”

“You really don’t have to…”

“The fuck I don’t! I’m still your best friend, aren’t I? Promise me that you’ll call me, or I’m going home, now!”
“All right, all right,” Michael said in defeat. “I’ll call.”

“Promise?” Brian knew he sounded about four years old, but couldn’t help it.

“I promise,” Michael replied, and for the first time, there was a tiny smile in his voice. “I gotta go now. Have to close the store and go to the hospital. Call me tomorrow at lunch time?”

“Sure. Take care, Mikey. Miss you.”

“Same here,” and Michael hung up.

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Brian pocketed his cell phone and finally realized that he should close the front door. Aiming to that, he practically stumbled into the lovely black model who lived next door. She was standing in the corridor as if rooted. What was her name again? Sabrina? No… Sarina.

“Did your Momma never tell you that it’s impolite to listen to other people’s phone conversations?” he snapped at her.

“I wasn’t listening,” she replied calmly. “At least not voluntarily. You were screaming so loud that I thought you were being killed. Perhaps you should learn to close your front door before getting verbal?”

Brian was about to do just that, but she walked into his apartment and sat calmly at the counter, crossing her long, shapely legs, as if it was the most natural thing on Earth. Perhaps in Alain’s house, it was.

“I know it’s not my business,” she said, “and I won’t speak about this again, not to you, not to anyone else. But I couldn’t help overhearing a few things – you were quite loud – and I believe I know what’s going on.”

“Yeah, and what if you do?” Brian snapped. “As you said it yourself, none of it is your business.”

“No need to become hostile,” Sarina said. “I just want to make a suggestion… based on past experience.”

“Sorry, not interested, thanks.”

“I’ll make it anyway, so you better listen,” she said. “If you want to help your friend, you should go to Alain.”

“What for?” Brian asked bitterly. “Can he undo a HIV-infection?”

“Perhaps not,” Sarina shrugged, “but he certainly can help you to deal with the situation.”

“Did you help you with yours?” Brian asked sarcastically. Those old, old eyes in that lovely young face told a different tale.

“More than you could possibly imagine,” Sarina answered quietly. “If I told you about the things that have been done to me, you’d first puke for days, then call 911 to get me into a mental ward(2). So I won’t tell you anything, just this: without Alain, I’d have died a grisly death, alone in some gutter in the underbelly of the city. He might seem harsh and volatile sometimes – well, he is harsh and volatile – but there’s nothing he wouldn’t do for those who are his.”

“Are you one of those?” Brian asked. Sarina nodded.
“In a sense. He took me in when nobody else would and took care for my safety and my future, when the one responsible for me wouldn’t move a finger to save me.”

“And in exchange he gets to fuck you?”

“Not like that. Sure, I sleep with him frequently, but I do it because I love him. Not as ‘in-love with him’, though. I love him as a benefactor and as a good friend,” there was no good way to explain the mortal the intricate relations between a fledgling and her foster Sire. “Besides, he’s a skilled and considerate lover. I enjoy sharing his bed.”

“So, you have other lovers, too? And you wouldn’t mind sharing him? Not even with another man?”

Brian was understandably surprised. All women he’d known were very much into permanent, twosome relationships.

“Of course not,” Sarina replied. "We don’t have an exclusive relationship. Well, we don’t have a relationship per se. We have closeness and sex, whenever we feel alone and need each other. And he gives me protection and guidance. He’s seen a lot and gone through a lot. His advice has always been valuable. Not asking for it out of stubborn pride would be foolish.”

She stood and left with a nod, leaving Brian alone with his thoughts… which were far from being pleasant. Mikey had been exposed to the HIV-virus. Without protection. Just because a fucking piece of plastic proved to be less elastic, less enduring than it had been promised. Because of some idiot’s incompetence, his Mikey could die.

Of course, if he, Brian, hadn’t been such a fucking moron, if he had kicked Justin out when that little shit started to butter him up again, so that he could sneak back into his life… If he’d had the balls to tell Mikey how he really felt, if he had stood up and fought for Mikey, Ben wouldn’t have stood a chance… couldn’t have endangered his Mikey in the first place.

Stop, he ordered himself sternly, don’t panic! It won’t help, and besides, Mikey can still turn out negative.

But he knew he was lying to himself. The chances were fifty-fifty at best, and Michael had always easily caught everything as a child. Had suffered asthma attacks all his youth. And even though in the recent years he’d been mostly healthy… he was in more danger than your average guy.

“Fuck,” Brian murmured in despair, grabbing the half-empty bottle of Jim Beam and taking a big gulp directly from the bottle, “I can’t do this… I can’t make it without him…”

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Several days sped away in a blur… with drugs, booze, anonymous sex in the back rooms of gay bars and the occasional visit at Lady Heather’s, where he tried, with little to no result, to escape his heart-ache through physical pain. Nothing helped. He went through his day on autopilot, did his work purely on instinct and was sheer unbearable to everyone who worked with him. His lifeline were the phone calls from The Pitts. As long as he could hear Mikey’s voice once a day, he endured… somehow. But his work started to suffer from his drug- and alcohol-induced haze, and Alain began to worry in earnest.

As long as Brian produced the expected success, he was left alone. But Alain knew, the Ventrue businessmen were merciless, and they didn’t tolerate failure. As quickly as Brian had raised in the ranks, he could end up dumped in the gutter, drained dry, when no longer useful for them.

Alain was not going to let that happen. He had taken a personal interest in the young man early on, and he wanted Brian in a good shape, strong and beautiful, not as a burned-out husk. It was still too
early to think about Embracing him, but *something* had to be done. And since Brian was still too stubborn to come to him for help, Alain decided to force his hand.

Once again, he found the door to Brian’s apartment ajar. His sensitive nose had identified the sickeningly sweet smell of a joint on the corridor already. The young man was smoking pot again – and if the alcohol vapours in the air were any indication, he was drinking heavily, too.

Alain entered without knocking and found Brian sprawled out on the sofa in the living room, with an almost empty bottle of whiskey in one hand and a joint in the other one. He crossed the room, fighting his raising anger and plucked both sources of self-destructive poison from Brian’s unresisting fingers.

“Stand up,” he said in a low, commanding tone. “This ends here and now.”

“None of your fucking business!” Even high as a kite and with a goofy grin plastered all over his face, Brian managed to put enough venom in his tone to kill an elephant.

“I’m making it my business,” Alain replied, dragging the young mortal to his feet with inhuman strength. “And you’re coming with me to my place.”

“Not gonna happen,” Brian said stubbornly. “Can’t make me.”

“You think so? Watch me!” and to Brian’s utter shock, Alain simply threw him over one shoulder as if he were but a rag doll and carried him over to his own place – a place where Brian hadn’t been before.

Alain put him down, not all too gently, in the living room that was practically empty, save for the fireplace and the book-cases covering every single wall.

“Bathroom,” the artist pointed at a door, hidden behind the wallpaper. “Go take a shower – preferably a cold one – put your clothes in the hamper and be back here in ten minutes.”

“Naked?” Brian still wasn’t too far gone to notice the direction this… encounter was going. Alain raised an eyebrow.

“Is that not what you are doing on your sessions with Lady Heather? Same circumstances, different lesson. Move it!”

Had Brian not been drunk and high beyond reason, he’d probably had protested – or turned on his heals and fled, because Alain’s eyes had that predatory, silver gleam again, the one that always made him shiver with fear and anticipation. But he’d always been high in the recent days, to numb his fear for Mikey and of being left alone, and it made him uncharacteristically cooperative. Besides, a shower seemed a good way to clear his head before Alain started the inquisition.

When he emerged from the shower, he felt like shit, but his mind was slightly less foggy. Alain guided him to the bedroom, just as sparsely furnished as the living room, with a double-sized mattress serving as the bed. At least it had exquisite satin sheets. Dark blue ones.

“Sit,” Alain gestured towards the bed, and after some hesitation, Brian obeyed. The artist, still fully clothed, sat next to him and draped a robe over his shoulders. “And now talk to me. I’ve already figured out the basic facts, but I want to know why have you been so self-destructive lately.”

“It’s not your business,” Brian snapped. Alain grabbed the back of his neck and pushed him face down onto the mattress with a grip he was unable to break.
“Wrong answer, boy,” the artist growled, nipping on Brian’s earlobe warningly. “I told you, I’m making it my business. In fact, I’m making you mine first, and after that, we’re going to have this business talk, whether you like or not.”

“Fuck!” somehow, Brian managed to squirm out of that iron grip and was backing away from Alain in panic. “You wanna rape me or what?”

Alain made no attempt to follow him. “Do I need to?” he asked with a thin smile. “Or are you going to bend over and take it like a man?”

“And what happened to waiting for me to come to you on my own when I’m ready?” Brian asked sarcastically.

“Oh, you are ready all right,” Alain gave his raging hard-on a meaningful glance, “you’re just too damn stubborn to admit. You’ve been poisoning yourself with alcohol and drugs for days, instead of admitting you need to hand over control,” his voice became low and seductive. “I can give you what your usual poisons and anonymous tricks cannot. And I’m not allowing you to destroy yourself. Come here!”

Brian made a few hesitant steps forward, ready to bolt, but all Alain did was taking his hand.

“Lie down with me,” Alain purred, “and I’ll make you mine, in a way you never belonged to anyone. Do you want to be freed from your burden and let go of your pain?”

“I do,” Brian whispered, “but I won’t become your bed slave.”

“Not yet anyway,” Alain laughed, “that’s still a long way to go. All you need to do right now is to surrender your precious control, such as it is, and let me call the shots. You’ll like it, I promise.”

And he did. Forced to play the completely passive part wasn’t easy for Brian – even with Phillipe, he often controlled the sex from the bottom – but he had to admit that it was liberating. And Alain, a true master of dominance, used his amazing skills to keep him interested all night… just like Phillipe had during their first times together.

*Do all Frenchmen have such incredible stamina or are these guys on something?* Brian wondered. *If they are, I sure as hell would like to try it.*

“Don’t even think about it,” Alain smacked his ass, playfully, but with a force that stung afterwards; he couldn’t read the blood he tasted like Phillipe, but having drunk from Brian while the mortal fell asleep had formed a rudimentary, albeit one-sided bond between them. “Besides, we aren’t on anything. We are just gifted, that’s all. Age and experience can do that to a person.”

“Age and experience,” Brian snorted. “You can’t probably be older than I am, which means that having more experience would be virtually impossible.”

“You’d be surprised,” Alain said, stroking his flank.

Brian raised a sceptical eyebrow. “How old are you anyway?”

“I’ve been perpetually twenty-nine for the last, oh, five hundred years or so,” Alain grinned, knowing that telling the exact, although highly unimaginable truth would make it sure that the mortal wouldn’t take him seriously. And indeed, Brian burst out in near hysterical laughter.

“You’re truly insane,” he said.
“I’ve been told so, repeatedly,” Alain shrugged, then he gave the young man a searching look and asked. “Are you feeling better?”

Brian was speechless for a moment.

“Yeah,” he finally answered, realizing that he was telling the truth. “Much better, in fact.”

“Good,” Alain replied seriously, kissing him. “Next time, don’t wait till I go and drag you to my bed with force. We both know you need this… and that I can provide it. So don’t be an idiot. Come to me if you need me, will you?”

“I might,” Brian said after some hesitation. Alain was right. He couldn’t support Mikey by self-destructing. Letting Alain have his way with him seemed to help. It would had been foolish not to accept that help.

Chapter End Notes

1) Quoted directly from the series.
2) In the 1st season of AtS, Sarina got impregnated with demon spawn and nearly killed by her "offspring". In my AU, she got Embraced by the then-still-fledgling Rebecca Lowell, shortly thereafter, and only left alive because Alain accepted her into his foster care.
Kindred Spirits, Part 1

Chapter Summary

Emmett, is introduced to Celeste, the transsexual drag queen. However, this could get them in deep trouble. In the meantime, Brian has a happy reunion with his best friend.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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KINDRED SPIRITS, Part 1

Brian was sitting on a high stool, bare-chested, his shoulders squared, his head turned to the side to offer his profile in a classical position to the artist drawing him. It wasn’t too comfortable a position, but after daily sessions for almost two weeks, he was growing accustomed to the immobility. More so since he usually got more than enough action – of the most satisfying sort – afterwards.

Alain worked in his small, private atelier in the attic, built in a clever way, so that the sunlight would fall onto the model through the roof window, while he could remain in the shadows. He hadn’t enjoyed drawing so much for decades. With his tousled dark hair and wide hazel eyes, Brian was the best model for classical studies Alain had had since leaving Europe some two hundred years ago. The lush, red mouth, slightly shortened chin and long, graceful neck only added to the classical air. The young man could have stepped off an ancient mural from Crete, as if he were a descendant of those wasp-tailed princes portrayed on the walls of Minos’ palace.

Since he had slowly letting Alain get closer to him, when they were alone, Brian didn’t wear his usual mask of calm arrogance that would have ruined the atmosphere of the drawing. Plus, he was narcissistic enough to endure the discomfort of the session, so that his beauty would be captured forever. These two factors resulted in a truly stunning portrait that seemed timeless and somewhat dreamy.

“So,” Alain said, signing the finished picture, and spread fixative spray all over it generously. Pastel crayons enabled one to work with the finest details and shades, but the end result was very… sensitive. “We are done. Do you want to see it?”

“Sure,” Brian slid from the stool and popped the joints in his back in relief. He took a long, critical look at the portrait and gave a low whistle. “Wow! I knew I was hot. But I never knew I was this hot. Are you sure you weren’t idealizing me?”

Alain laughed and kissed his bare shoulder. “I am sure. I have my shortcomings, but you can trust my eyes. I’m happy with the results. Let’s celebrate.”

“What do you have in mind?” Brian inquired, rubbing his body against the artist’s suggestively. Alain shook his head in amusement.

“You really do have a one-track mind. But I was thinking of something more… public tonight.”

“More public?” Brian raised an eyebrow. “Kinky…”
“If you find a business dinner with the Vignes kinky, then yeah,” Alain grinned. “They want us – well, more you than me, actually – to participate on the brainstorming session of the Rage movie.”

“What?” Brian stared at him in honest surprise. “I thought Justin had blown their chances with the director for good.”

Last time, it had been a disaster. That selfish little prick had insulted the homophobic studio exec and alienated the director with his blatant attempts to sell his ass for a chance to influence the storyline. The director, who had been well aware of the fact that Justin was responsible for the artwork, not the stories themselves, had not been amused. And Mikey… Mikey had been devastated, seeing his chances stolen away.

“It was a close call,” Alain admitted, “but Brett Keller still loves the idea. And with Justin off to Italy, and thus unable to jump his bones during business negotiations, this time it might even come together.”

“But what does Brett need me for?” Brian asked. “It’s Mikey he should have here. He was the one who came up with the whole idea in the first place, and he’s the creative mind behind the plots.”

“I know,” Alain nodded, “that’s why Vera Vignes had him fly in, together with his lawyer, a certain Miss…"

“Marcus,” Brian said, as there was no real chance Mikey would have asked anyone else but Mel. “Melanie Marcus. But… do you mean Mikey’s here? Since when?”

“Well,” Alain glanced at his watch, “their plane must have arrived about half an hour ago. They must be in the D’Oblique, soon. Wait,” he stopped Brian, who was already moving towards the door, “they’re probably jet-lagged, and they’ll need to rest to be in their best form for the evening.”

“I just wanted to call them,” Brian said defensively, his irritation about the way he was constantly manipulated, rising. “I haven’t seen him for moths, for fuck’s sake!”

“And you can’t distract him right now; this meeting is too important,” Alain pointed out. “Vera Vignes was… displeased with the last meeting. Very much so. This might be the last chance for the movie to get the green lights.”

“It’ll be all right,” Brian smiled. “Mikey’s adorable, especially when he gets to talk about his superheroes. He’ll wrap them all around his little finger in no time. Plus, he does have good manners.”

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Several hours later, in the huge, elegant villa in West-Hollywood that the Vignes siblings shared with Henry Waters, Edward’s Childe and lawyer, Alain had to admit that Brian had been right. Michael Novotny, a short, slender man with an average face and big, shiny dark eyes, was adorable, in the best sense of the word. He talked about his brain-child, the gay superhero Rage, with a child-like excitement that seemed to infect even Brett Keller, although the cynical, ruggedly handsome Brujah director usually was a tough negotiating partner, and Alain could see Vera Vignes literally melt under the influence of those beautiful eyes and that thousand megawatt smile.

Beyond that, Michael was also clever. He came well-prepared, providing three different plotlines for a possible movie, pointing out the pros and contras of each plotline, arguing to the bitter end in favour of certain aspects he seemed to find particularly important and giving in relatively easily in other things. He even created an important female character from the scratch - in less than ten minutes - when Vera Vignes voiced her concern about wanting a blockbuster, not a little-known,
independent gay movie. To make it short, he was the exact opposite of what Vera Vignes had disliked in Justin. Of course - unlike Justin - Michael was a mature adult... with a decades-long passion for the topic to begin with.

Brett seemed particularly taken by the improvised female character, Dragonfly, and Alain knew why. Brett had wanted to create a chance for his Childe, Susie Wong, to make the big break as an actress. An exotic beauty and a martial arts expert, Suzie could be the ideal casting chance for this Dragonfly character, especially since she could act, too.

“I don’t want big names for this movie,” the director said, with a glance at Vera Vignes. “I want the idea getting the people to the theatres, not the starring actor. Besides, big shots usually play themselves, not the part they have been cast for.”

Vera shrugged. “The casting decision is yours. Although, as Mr. Novotny said, we might have to make certain... allowances to the current trends. For example, I don’t think that having an all-white lead cast would be a good idea... politically.”

“Well, we don’t have much choice with JT,” Brett said thoughtfully, “or with Rage himself, for that matter. But Zephyr perhaps... Michael, could you imagine him as a Hispanic-looking character?”

Michael, dark-haired and dark-eyed himself, just like the character that had been based on him, nodded. “Why not? It would make a nice contrast... and what’s truly important is his heart, not his looks, anyway.”

“Good,” Brett said. “With Suzie as Dragonfly and a Latino actor as Zephyr, we’ll have two ethnic characters, one of them a woman... I think that should be enough.”

“Cast a handsome black actor with big muscles as the main villain and let him show lots of naked skin,” Michael suggested with a lewd grin. “People would be too busy drooling to complain.”

“We should pick the plotline with this Shadow guy,” Brett said, after the general laughter had died down. “I like the mind-controlling plot. I think Dawn could make a visual world around him that would make the viewers bite their nails. I don’t want that overly technical sci-fi shit everyone has been doing in the recent years.”

“Including yourself,” Vera Vignes pointed out, “but I see your point. This is time to change genres, and it always pays out to be the new trendsetter. Something more esoteric would be refreshing – especially when we can be the ones to establish the new trend. Of course, we’ll need a very good and aggressive campaign for that. Mr. Kinney, this is why we wanted you here for today.”

Brian nodded, giving Michael a smile... the first true one Alain had seen on that handsome face, ever.

“No problem, Ma’am. I’m familiar with the material. I’ve already done a lot of advertising for the comics – I still have good contacts to those journalists and TV-reporters.”

“Good,” Vera Vignes nodded. “Brett, if I may suggest something: it would be a shame to waste that Black Widow character from the other storyline. Mr. Novotny, could you probably work her in as an ally of Shadow? I think Sarina would play her with amazing creepiness.”

Michael shook his head apologetically. “I’m sorry, but that won’t work. Either her or Shadow – we can’t squeeze them both into the same story, they are just too big for that.”

“Keep that thought anyway,” Brett said. “If the movie turns out a blockbuster, which I very much believe, we can do the sequel with the Black Widow. Sarina would indeed be great for the part.
Perhaps we can shoot a teaser with her and add to the DVD-release.”

“You really trust the idea that much?” Michael asked in amazement.

“Do you have success with the comic?” Brett raised an eyebrow.

“Yeah… and it still dumbfounds me,” Michael admitted. “I thought it would have a tiny corner on the market. After all, it was written for gay teens who are struggling with their identity. And now…”

“Sixty per cent of your fans are women, most of them straight,” Brett finished for him. “And there would be even more, had Justin not tried to turn it into cheap porn. Market research shows that particular issue cost you 2.6 per cent of your female readership and only a 0.8 per cent increase of male readers. Women read it for the plot, not for the chance to look at pornographic pictures – although I must admit that Justin’s artwork is very good.”

“For my part, I’m tired of movies aimed exclusively at male viewers between the age of 14 and 49,” Vera Vignes said. “The female-oriented market is covered with sappy, mindless romances aimed at illiterate teenage girls; it’s insulting. I think if we can make a movie with enough action for the men that can also give something to the women who want to see anything else than Brad Pitt still desperately trying to look twenty years old, we might practically create a whole new market – and earn a lot of money, before the concurrence realizes what’s happening.”

“Especially when I manage to cast someone like Keith Hamilton Cobb as Shadow,” Brett laughed. “That was the secret of the early Andromeda episodes: half the women watched them for Tyr Anasazi, while the men got their technobabble and space battles.”

“What about the supporting characters?” Edward Vignes asked, joining the discussion for the first time.

“I’ve got a few thugs up my sleeve who’d put Dolph Lundgren and Jean-Claude van Damme to shame,” Brett answered. “Plus, they’d cost considerably less. The current body-building madness makes it easy to cast background characters for a superhero movie. All we need to do is to put them into skin-tight costumes and let them adore themselves in front of the camera.”

“Sounds promising,” Vera Vignes nodded. “Any casting ideas for the main characters yet?”

Brett named three young, relatively unknown actors who had passing similarities with Brian, Michael and Justin. They were talented, physically fit and interested, he said. And he had them read every single issue of Rage. They were willing to do moderate sex scenes, but not graphic ones. Even the one openly gay among them refused to blow anyone before the camera.

“That shouldn’t be a problem, though,” Brett finished, “as I want to make an action movie, not an erotic one. With car chases, wall-climbing and the hero kissing the guy on top of the imploded building at the end.”

“Which guy?” Vera Vignes asked. “If I understand the basic idea correctly, Rage has two men in his life: JT, with whom he has sex, and Zephyr, with whom he has everything else.”

Alain noticed with amusement Brian and Michael exchanging a meaningful glance and Michael blushing a lovely shade of magenta. Personally, he had no doubts who would ‘get the guy’ at the end, despite Michael being currently married to another man. These two were destined to be together – perhaps the Clan should consider Embracing Michael as well. He’d be an asset to the movie industry, and he’d make a gorgeous Childe…

“It depends on what sort of movie the studio is planning to make,” Brian replied to Vera Vignes. “If
“You want hardcore porn, let JT get Rage. If you want women consuming whole boxes of Kleenex and sentimental queers drooling all over the theatre, let Zephyr get him. Eventually with JT returning as the vengeful ex-lover in lieu with the evil Black Widow in the next movie.”

“That’s not very nice, Brian,” Michael chastised his friends softly.

Brian shrugged. “It’s the truth, though. Sex sells – but sentimental clichés sell even better. And if you provide the healthy amount of action and some violence to balance out the droolworthy scenes, you won’t end up with kitsch.”

Vera Vignes looked ad Brett. “It’s up to you… to a certain level. I won’t give the go for hardcore porn, though. This studio has a certain reputation to protect.”

“I’m not interested in porn,” Brett said. “I want to translate Rage to the big screen in its original form: dark and funny. Besides, I always thought that Rage and Zephyr belonged together… and could never stand JT. Such a snotty, whining little prick! Now, that that’s settled – Michael, would you be interested in writing the screenplay?”

Michael nearly choked on his drink. “Me? I really don’t think I’m up to it.”

(Of course you are,” Brian murmured in an aggressively protective manner that made Alain smile. “Don’t sell yourself cheap, Mikey.”

“Brian is right,” Brett nodded, his acute vampire hearing having caught the low-voiced remark. “You have remarkable talent, Michael. You are full of ideas – hell, you’ve just created a new character in ten minutes! – your dialogues are fast-paced and funny… the rest is made up of technicalities like camera angles and stuff, which can be added later by a professional co-worker. Of course, this would mean extra money for him,” he added, turning to Melanie, “as well as a certain percentage of the profit the movie will make. We can have your lawyer work out the details with ours.”

He handed Melanie the preliminary contract, and she scanned the text with a critical eye… an eye that was widening with every new line. Not the writing fee was the really big deal, even though for a first time screenwriter it was considerable. But that was noting compared with the potential offered by the percentage of the profits. Since Brett hadn’t made anything else but hugely successful blockbusters for the last seven years or so, that could make Michael almost indecently wealthy.

Melanie, realizing that potential, broke out in a wide grin (after all, it meant a small fortune for her and Michael’s child as well), exchanged a look with Henry Waters, then nodded. “If Michael wants to give it a try, I’m all for it.”

“I’d like to,” Michael admitted with dreamy eyes. “Writing the comics has been great, but a movie script… wow!”

Alain couldn’t remember having seen such a motherly-benevolent smile on Vera Vignes’ face. Ever. And he’d known her since the 19th century. Brian noticed it, too, and grinned. The famous Novotny charm had worked its magic once again. And in his typical humble manner, Michael hadn’t even realized that he’d managed to woo some of the toughest Hollywood studio bosses without effort. But that was Mikey for you: always willing to see the best in everyone, never believing how wonderful he was himself. This often angered Brian, but he had to admit that it was an essential part of Michael’s charm.

The discussion turned to business details, which Alain found horribly boring, so he tuned out and watched Brian interact with Michael instead. Twenty years of close friendship were a long time for humans – small wonder that they seemed capable of communicating almost without words and could
finish each other’s sentences without hesitation. They had an interesting dynamic with each other... and with the lady lawyer, who seemed to adore Michael, but she obviously despised Brian. Interesting indeed...

Alain’s cell phone rang and accusing looks turned to him. Ventrue could be very snobbish when it came to etiquette. On the other hand, this was a phone for emergency situations only, and the few people who knew the number wouldn’t call him for nothing.

“My apologies,” Alain murmured, retreating to the furthest corner to pick up the call. Barely had he answered it, he became deathly pale, even for a vampire. “I see. On my way.” He switched off the phone and turned to the Vignes. “I’m sorry, but I must leave now. A… family emergency has just occurred. Can you see that Michael and Miss Marcus get back to the D’Oblique?”

“I’ll drive them,” Brian offered.

The others, Ventrue and Brujah alike, nodded and watched Alain leave in a great hurry. Family emergency was an euphemism among vampires with a deadly meaning.

Someone has been Embraced without Angelus’ permission, and probably against their will. And since it was Alain who’d been called away, the perpetrator must have belonged to Clan Toreador.

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In the darkened backstage area of the Pink Stools, one of the less than prominent transgender bars of West Hollywood, Emmett Honeycutt was convulsing in the unbearable pain of the Becoming. His not-quite-voluntary sire, Celeste, sat on his side, sobbing in fear and despair.

“I d-didn’t p-lan t-to Embrace him,” s/he wailed. “I got c-carried away w-while f-fucking and f-feeding. He w-would have d-died, I t-took too much b-blood. He’s s-such a s-sweetie, I d-didn’t w-want him t-to d-die!”

“It would have been more merciful to let him die,” Victor Girard, the Primogen of Clan Toreador in LA, said grimly. “You know how Angelus thinks about Embracing people without their consent – and without his permission. He might send Spike after you and have you both killed… slowly and painfully. Spike does have a certain reputation…”

“On the other hand, the bloodline of the Sons of Discord is nearly extinct,” Alain said. “Celeste is the last one – and Emmett would certainly be a good match, for both the Clan and the bloodline.”

“Unless the females of the bloodline discover him and kill him like the rest of the males,” Victor Girard said sourly. “That wouldn’t be a pleasant death, either. If I’m not mistaken, they tore their last discovered ‘brother’ to pieces with their bare hands.”

“You are mistaken, but being killed by Muse is a grisly death nevertheless,” Alain replied. “However, we could disguise Emmett as a Toreador and give him into foster care. Our current association with him would make the guise convincing.”

“That could work,” Girard admitted reluctantly. “If we found the right foster Sire for him, that is.”

“I’d take him in myself, but I’ve still all hands full with Oliver, Pierre and Sarina,” Alain said. “And it would be dangerous to have him near Brian right now. That man is very observant for a mortal; we can’t risk breaking the Masquerade. Besides, since I’m planning to Embrace him in the not too distant future, I can’t concentrate on Emmett right now. What about Diego’s Sire?”

“Joaquin Murietta?” Girard shook his head. “That’s a bad idea, Alain. Aside from the near impossibility for an LAPD detective to take in such a flamboyant queen and not draw unwanted
attention, Joaquin is too old and too strong. Emmett wouldn’t last a week under his hand.”

Alan shrugged. “Diego seems to manage well enough. And he’s a sissy, too.”

“Diego is a lot stronger than you might think,” Girard replied, “and he’s Joaquin’s Childe, has the same strong blood. That’s different. No, we can’t give Emmett to Joaquin. But what about the Blount Sisters? They’re old enough to deal with a neonate, and they would have a lot of common with the boy… at least when it comes to fashion taste.”

Alain thought about it for a minute. Fact was that probably no sane male vampire would be able to deal with Emmett in the long run. But two females, with Edward Blount as the higher authority if needs must be…

“It could actually work,” he said in surprise. “You think you can talk Edith and Enyd into accepting the responsibility? They never wanted to make a Childe themselves.”

“I don’t need to talk them into anything,” Victor Girard replied coldly. “I’m their Primogen; they’ll do as I tell them. I think they’d actually like Emmett, and so would Edward Blount. The relationship between the three of them is not an exclusive one, and Edward is known to like a good, willing ass occasionally. The real problem is to get Angelus’ blessing for the plan.”

Alain sighed. “I’ll give it a try. Since I’ve done him a favour with taking Sarina into foster care and Embracing Oliver and Pierre for him, so that they won’t work with Rebecca against him, he might listen to me.”

“I hope so,” Girard opened a vein in his own wrist and offered the seeping blood to the half-mad fledgling to calm him down. “We’ve lost too many young ones during Cyrus’ realm of terror. I’d like to keep this one.”

Chapter End Notes

Celeste is a canon character in the White Wolf RPG. The “casting” is mine, however. S/he is played by Hugo Weaving, whose Elrond in the LOTR movies I absolutely hated, but he’s said to have been an excellent drag queen in "Priscilla".
Kindred Spirits, Part 2

Chapter Summary

Emmett, who’s been given a job in Victor Girard’s designer studio as a gay fashion expert, is introduced to Celeste, the transsexual drag queen. The two bond immediately, and after a disturbingly short while, Celeste Embraces Emmett. However, s/he forgets to ask Angel’s permission first, which could get them in deep trouble. In the meantime, Brian has a happy reunion with his best friend.

Chapter Notes

In my universe, events of Angel: The Series took a very different turn after Season 2. Angel learned to accept his vampiric nature, and he was practically blackmailed by the Camarilla in the city to take over the seat of the Prince, in order to keep the Sabbat out. Also, I postulated that Russell Winters from Angel (killed by Angel in the pilot) and Cyrus, the Brujah Prince of LA in Kindred – The Embraced were one and the same person.

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KINDRED SPIRITS, Part 2

Alain was familiar with the elegant and expensive villa that served as the Prince’s residence. In fact, he had been an infrequent visitor in the times of the former Prince, Cyrus, known among mortals as Russell Winters. Cyrus was fond of artwork, although his taste wasn’t the most refined one, and in spite of being a ruthless monster – and in league with the Sabbat at that – he frequently invested his wealth into paintings and sculptures. He sometimes hired Alain as an expert, so that he wouldn’t buy anything worthless.

Unlike in Cyrus’ times, security measures were rather on the low side now. Angelus, aside from being the Prince, was very much Anarch in his mannerism and lifestyle, working as a private investigator and beating the shit out of demons and the Sabbat every other night - supported by Spike, his Enforcer and favourite Childe, and in league with the local group of Legacy hunters. The latter of which was a fairly unusual alliance for a Kindred Prince, but it helped the never-ending struggle against Sabbat infiltration; and besides, Angelus never really cared what other vampires thought about him.

Alain rang the doorbell – as the porter’s room seemed to be abandoned – and one of Angelus youngest Childer, a tall, blond young man named Owen, answered it. Owen hadn’t been freed yet; he was still struggling with the aftershocks of his unusually long and painful Becoming, the result of his hurried, irregular Embrace. Angelus had saved him in the last moment from becoming a human sacrifice in a Setite temple – but not timely enough for him to continue a human life, due to the poisoned wounds from the ceremonial knife and being almost completely drained already. As a result, Owen’s transformation had dragged on for months, with many agonizing throwbacks. Alain felt sorry for the friendly and good-natured young man who endured the phases of excruciating pain
with stoic acceptance.

“Hey Owen,” he smiled. “Is your Sire in? I’d like to speak with him… in some urgent Clan business.”

Owen shrugged and gave him an easy smile. For one of the Line of Aurelius, which usually produced vicious monsters, he surely was a charming guy. And handsome, too. But again, the Line of Aurelius was supposed to have been “reformed” now – whatever that could mean in the case of a bloodline that had been feared for millennia, even among the Sabbat.

“I can ask,” the fledgling led Alain into Cyrus’ former foyer that had been transformed into a magnificent library, with heavy furniture made of dark wood, stained glass lamps, burgundy velvet curtains and a beautiful fireplace. Angelus apparently had a more masculine taste – Alain appreciated the changes. He never really liked the creamy colours Cyrus had preferred; they were ridiculous for a powerful male vampire and a Brujah Prince at that. The new Prince clearly had a vast interest in ancient lore, too.

However, Alain didn’t have the time to study the changes to the extent he’d have liked to. Only moments later, a door opened on the opposite site of the library, and a tall, dark-haired, dark-eyed man strode in with long, confident strides. Having spent half a millennium in the Dark (give or take a few years), Alain wasn’t easily impressed… or intimidated, for that matter. Yet facing the former Scourge of Europe, whom he’d never met before, he could feel the power radiating from this vampire who was barely half his age. Alain liked calling himself a monster – which, in a sense, all Kindred were, no matter how disciplined – but now he had to admit that compared with the new Prince of LA he was a boy scout.

Angelus wore black on black on black – black slacks and a black silk shirt, both of which wore the emblems of the most expensive fashion houses, and tailored black leather shoes – all of which emphasized his pale complexion, even in vampire terms. He was handsome, in a rugged, almost primitive way – Alain suppressed a grin, remembering Spike’s snidely remarks about his Sire’s “caveman brow” and “nancy-boy hairdo”. It was a dangerous memory. Spike could get away with making fun of his Sire, but Alain didn’t have a death wish. Well, a Final Death wish. Whatever.

He bowed from the waist, kissing the red-stoned ring on Angelus’ middle finger. It wasn’t exactly the Ring of Amarra, but it symbolized the status of the Prince. Plus it was warded, which - together with the natural abilities of the red sunstone - protected its wearer from the destructive powers of direct sunlight. At least for a short time, that is. The Line of Aurelius, belonging to the True Undead, had no tolerance whatsoever against sunlight, nor did they have a reflection (just like the Lasombra). So they needed special measures to protect themselves.

“My Prince,” Alain murmured, respectfully but not submissively. You didn’t show weakness while facing a monster.

Angelus waved impatiently. “Leave the show to impress the fledglings. You said it was urgent. So, who are you and what do you want?”

“I’m Alain DeLaigle from Clan Toreador, and I came on behalf of my Primogen, Victor Girard,” Alain replied.

Recognition showed in those dark, impenetrable eyes.

“You’re the one who took in Sarina and who keeps Oliver Simon and his mate on my side?”

“Yes, my Prince.”
“I owe you,” Angelus said simply. “So, what’s the emergency?”

“There has been an… accident,” Alain said, choosing the words very carefully; it was a delicate act of balance. “By one of our minor bloodlines, the Sons of Discord,” seeing the Prince’s blank look, he added helpfully. “The male line of the Daughters of Cacophony?”

“Hasn’t the male line become extinct some ten years ago?” a precisely accentuated voice – so British that it almost hurt – asked from the background.

Alain whirled around, agitated that he hadn’t felt the presence of the human by entering the room. The tall, thin, bespectacled man who rose from a deep, dark leather armchair was wearing a three-piece tweed suit with a totally unimaginative tie and the seal ring of a Legacy Percept on his finger. That explained how he could veil his presence from a vampire as old as Alain. The LA Precept was known to have Watcher genes.

“Well?” the mortal demanded. “Is it not true that the last Son of Discord, Harlan Graves, was killed in the late 1991?”

Alain nodded. Harlan had been a great guy; a freelance scriptwriter and art director at the Vignes Studios, and completely safe in his Toreador disguise – until he made the fatal mistake to fall for Celeste, a human transgender singer, and Embrace him. Her. Whatever.

“True,” he said. “But shortly before his Final Death, he Embraced Celeste. Muse, the blind Sabbat killer of the Daughters, didn’t find Celeste because she was looking for a male Childe and didn’t know Celeste wasn’t a woman.”

Angelus looked from one to another with growing impatience.

“Would you two care to enlighten me?”

“Sorry,” Alain apologized. “According to legends, back in the Dark Ages, there was a great Toreador singer who sought the secret of her Fae rival’s singing. She was being taught deep under the hills the arts of Fae Song and was thought to be lost, forever. Hundreds of years later, in the 17th century, she suddenly reappeared and began to gather like-minded people around her. That’s the origin of the bloodline.”

“Unless you follow other legends involving the Lamia and the Songs of Lilith,” the bespectacled Englishman added in slight amusement. “Some people see them as a Malkavian offshot, but they also might be Ventrue…”

“Oh, no,” Alain shook his head, “the Daughters are basically facetious Toreadors who are ‘above’ the conflict between poseurs and true artists, or so they say.”

“Because they are poseurs, all of them,” the Legacy Precept snickered.

“Well, they are very entertaining to listen to,” Alain shrugged, “but only if you have industrial strength earplugs. Anything that can shatter glass and do bad things to living flesh….” He shuddered. “But Celeste is basically harmless. The Sons of Discord lack the destructive powers of their ‘sisters’.”

“Which is the reason why the Daughters were able to exterminate them,” the Precept finished.

Angelus looked like someone just this side of a killer headache.

“What. The hell. Has. Happened?” he asked, with angry emphasis on each single word.
“Celeste took a shine to one of our new associates,” Alain summarized. “They were heavily involved in oral sex, and Celeste got a bit carried away while feeding on the mortal. So, instead of letting him die from the severe blood loss, he spontaneously Embraced his bedmate. Who’s now going through the agony of Becoming without help, as Celeste has suffered a nervous breakdown. Well, Victor is there with them, doing what he can, but…”

“Has the human known about our kind before?” Angelus asked.

“No,” Alain said promptly. “We’ve been very careful.”

“Why don’t you put him out of his misery, then?”

“Well, firstly, we need him for work-related stuff,” Alain sighed. “Secondly, it wasn’t his fault. Thirdly, he’d do just fine in Toreador disguise, with the proper foster care.”

“Hmm…” Angelus raised an eyebrow. “You again?”

“No,” Alain said quickly. “I’m grooming someone else for the Clan right now, and that one might come complete with a soul mate. No, Victor suggested the Blount family. The fledgling already knows them from the studios, and between the three of them, they could easily manage.”

Angelus remained silent for a moment. “You realize that this is against the rules, right?” he then asked.

“It’s said you’re not such a stickler to the rules as stiff-necked Ventrue Princes are,” Alain replied. It was a calculated risk, knowing Angelus’ tempers, but he couldn’t let Emmett be put down like a rabid dog, just because Celeste couldn’t keep hold on his Beast. It had been bad enough to lose Harlan because of him. Alain was not willing to lose Emmett, too. Not if he could do anything against it.

“That’s true,” the Anarch Prince nodded “But this is one particular rule with which I happen to agree. Embracing people without their consent is a crime. I should know. I’ve done it often enough in the past.”

“Then don’t punish the victim,” Alain said quietly. “I don’t care about Celeste, he’s insane. Have him killed, exiled, eaten – whatever. He’s always been a liability for the bloodline and the Clan. But the fledgling is just as innocent as Sarina has been; and unlike his Sire, he’s not an irresponsible fool. We can manage the situation with minimal effort. Let us do so. Please.”

“Let’s make a deal,” Angelus suggested, a predatory gleam in his dark eyes. “I’ll spare him – if you tell me why are you fighting for his life so hard.”

“Very well,” Alain said. He hated to show any weakness, especially in the presence of someone who had considerable power over his existence, but if this was the way to save Emmett, he could do so, every once in a while. “He’s important for the one I’m grooming for the Clan. They’ve been friends for years. I don’t want him to lose a friend; he doesn’t have that many.”

Angelus gave him a penetrating look. “Is he that important for you?”

“Yes,” Alain replied without hesitation. “He’ll be the first Childe I’m going to sire for more than a century. Embracing Oliver and his partner was a convenience for you. Sarina isn’t even mine. And all my older Childer have been destroyed, back in Europe, a long time ago. I want this one to have a happy unlife.”

“I see,” the Prince said after a long pause. “I gave my word, so I’ll spare the fledgling – for now.
He’ll still have to prove himself before the Conclave, though.”

Which was the standard procedure and didn’t worry Alain a bit. Emmett might be hard to bear sometimes, but he was no idiot. And he would certainly love the idea of remaining young and pretty forever. Even if he had to give up sunbathing for the rest of his life. Unlife. Whatever.

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While Alain was doing his best to save Emmett from being killed for something that wasn’t his fault and Melanie was sleeping (her early pregnancy and the flight draining her usual strength), Brian and Michael were having a good time. They had a lot of catching up to do, and for once, Michael’s news were good ones. Ben’s T-cell count had gone back up to almost six thousand; the new medication seemed to work, at least the time being.

Michael’s own HIV test came back negative, and though that still didn’t mean absolute certainty, it was a huge relief – until the next control anyway. He had fathered Melanie’s baby the same way Brian had done with Gus just before the condom accident and was now looking forward to becoming a father.

Debbie was still dating that gruffy cop of hers, and they seemed to get along better than anyone would have expected. Ted was the only one with his life still slightly out of synch, but he was slowly getting there, too.

“And how’s Emmett doing?” Michael asked, stuffing popcorn into his mouth. They were lounging on the couch in Brian’s living room, watching Brett Keller’s latest action movie – one that had been leading the charts for seven weeks.

“Good, I guess,” Brian shrugged, enjoying the familiar weight and warmth of Michael’s body leaning against him like in old times. “I haven’t seen much of him lately, to tell the truth. Not since he got involved with that weird transgender diva who looks like Hugo Weaving in Priscilla.”

“Ah, God!” Michael shuddered demonstratively.

“Yeah, right,” Brian agreed. “Not only is this Celeste character criminally ugly, he’s also mad as a hatter. Em doesn’t seem to mind – although I don’t know how they decide who’d fuck whom. They’re such bottoms, both of them, that it physically hurts to see them together. As if Emmett in full Southern belle mode wasn’t bad enough to begin with.”

Michael laughed quietly, and Brian’s heart jumped at that long-missed sound.

“Em does have beautiful eyes, you know,” Michael then said thoughtfully, “especially when he puts that silver eyeliner on them. Very few guys could pull that one without looking ridiculous, but with Em, it looks… well, natural. I’m glad you took him here. The Pitts wasn’t the right place for a tropical bird like him – and he’s been floating somehow ever since George’s death. I wish I could see him before we leave.”

“I’m afraid I have no idea where he could be,” Brian admitted, reaching for his cell phone, “but perhaps Alain has. He’s usually awfully well-informed.” He speed-dialled Alain’s number. “Hi Alain… yeah, me. I wanted to ask… have you seen Emmett lately? Michael asked about him. Yes? Very well,” he hung up and looked at Michael with a frown. “Something is wrong. Alain said he’d be here in ten minutes to discuss the issue. I don’t like this. He’s never evaded a direct question before.”

Michael gave him a curious look. “Do you know him that well?”

“It’s just…” Michael made an uncertain gesture. “You live in his house… you fuck him… you seem to know him pretty well… Is it something, you know, serious?”

“Not in your hopelessly romantic sense of ‘serious’,” Brian laughed. “I still go tricking, and he… well, he has several more or less permanent partners, both male and female ones. But he can give me something none of my former bedmates could.”

“And that would be?” as always when discussing Brian’s sex life, there was a hint of jealousy in Michael’s voice.

“He’s stronger than me,” Brian replied simply. “And I don’t mean muscles or that inner strength that you have, No, just shut up,” he said, seeing that Michael tried to protest. “We’ve had this discussion many times. Why can’t you admit that you are strong and brave? How would you have endured me and your mother and Ben’s steroid escapades otherwise? You are strong, Mikey, strong and good and wonderful, so just fucking accept it!”

“I love it when you talk dirty,” Michael laughed gently. “But what about this Alain person? He makes me nervous, just sitting across the table gave me the shivers – and not necessarily in a good way. He’s dangerous.”

“Yes, he is,” Brian agreed, “he even admits it freely. He calls himself a monster – albeit a reformed one. I don’t really know what that means, but I know I’m playing with fire… it’s an incredible turn-on.”

Michael shook his head in exasperation. “You should finally grow up, Bri.”

“What for?” Brian asked. “To become boring and domestic and wrinkled?”

“Does that mean you find me boring and domestic?” Michael asked, slightly hurt.

“Nah, you’re just wrinkled,” Brian answered and had to laugh at the honest panic on his best friend’s face. “Relax, Mikey, I was kidding. You’re the exception from every fucking rule.” He ran his fingers through Michael’s dark locks, and then kissed him, saying. “You are unique.”

“I’m also married,” Michael reminded him gently.

“How could I have forgotten that?” Brian replied with biting sarcasm.

This was the one topic still too sensitive to be discussed in a casual manner, and things might have gotten ugly, had Alain not finally arrived.

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After a lengthy period of time spent in the Dark, each vampire develops certain abilities that go beyond general Clan characteristics. Phillipe Navital could read emotions, even memories in the blood he tasted. Alain DeLaigle could see auras. Not all the time, thank Caine; that would have led to sensory overload, just when he wanted – and when he concentrated hard enough. It was a useful treat. By the changes of size and colour in the aura of a person he was familiar with, he could guess the emotional state of said person with great accuracy.

All the time he had known him, Brian’s aura had been tightly bound to a thin but almost impenetrable layer of an icy blue-white colour. The mortal wore it like a plate armour… or more like a forcefield. It matched the dead emptiness in his eyes, even in the throes of passion. Alan had always found it strange that a dedicated hedonist would find so little pleasure in what he supposedly
enjoyed.

Now, however, as he entered Brian’s living room, Alain registered an almost dramatic change in his selected Childe. Brian’s aura had extended to almost thrice of its original size, with a slightly blurred perimeter – and it was pale gold. The reason for it was, of course, the aura of his best friend: the largest one Alain had seen in quite some time by a mortal, and it had a colour of deep amber. There could be no doubt that Michael Novotny was an empath – in that passive way as some mortals were who reacted strongly to other people’s feelings and supported them unquestionably and unconsciously.

Which explained how Michael could have endured Brian for twenty years. He was probably the only one who knew Brian’s true feelings, despite the cold and arrogant mask and the sometimes hurtful behaviour. He believed in Brian because he knew him, in a way nobody else did. And Alain understood that Brian would only last in the Dark if he didn’t have to lose Michael.

Seeing Alain enter, Brian’s aura tightened around him again, like some automated defence mechanism, although it kept its golden hue… at least for now.

“That was fast,” he commented softly, “considering that you’ve left in an awful hurry.”

“I have,” Alain agreed, “but the situation is under control now.”

“Good to hear that,” Brian said. “In which case we can cut the bullshit and talk like mature adults. What did really happen? And don’t give me that ‘family emergency’ nonsense. I happen to know that you don’t have any family left.”

“Unfortunately, that’s true,” the artist admitted. “It’s just something we always say when we don’t want to discuss the topic publicly.”

“Is this about Emmett?” Michael asked quietly.

Alain nodded. “Yes. He and Celeste got… well, a bit over-inspired, and Celeste slipped him something that didn’t bode him well.”

Which was probably the worst euphemism for being sucked dry and then turned into a vampire, but what else could he tell two clueless mortals?

“Oh, shit!” Michael paled considerably. “Will he make it? Can we see him?”

“No, you can’t at least not right away,” watching an unprepared fledgling’s Becoming wasn’t a pleasant sight, not even for another vampire. “Victor Girard had him taken to a private clinic, so he has good chances. But he’s not responsive right now – stable but critical is the expression the doctors used. As soon as he wakes up, you can call him. A visit, though, might be out of question for a while yet.”

At least this part was more or less true. Victor had called the only Kindred clinic in LA, led by Brujah doctors, and Emmett had been transported there. Gloria Martinez, Salvador Garcia’s Childe, had given an optimistic prognosis, and since she was practically never wrong, Alain felt carefully optimistic, too.

“That’s too bad,” Michael’s face fell. “I have to leave for home the day after tomorrow. Is there any chance he’d be able to have visitors before that? Or at least have phone calls?”

“I don’t know,” Alain shrugged apologetically. “He’s not exactly in a coma, at least according to the doctors. His body is just trying to adjust to that invasive stuff.”
Which, again, was a major understatement – even though the Becoming of a Toreador wasn’t half as bad as that of a Malkavian or a Nosferatu, it was still a painful process. The body fought the changes of rebirth, and the first Hunger after the awakening was always terrible. But Emmett was in good hands in the clinic, and the Blount sisters would take care of him properly.

It was ironic, Alain thought, that the very person they hadn’t even considered fit for the Embrace – or even desirable as a Clan member – would be the first reborn to the Dark from Brian’s small circle of friends. They’d wanted Brian before they had even met him. They had been considering Theodore Schmidt for Clan Ventrue. Alain himself was slowly coming to recognize the necessity of Embracing Michael, when he wanted to keep Brian in the long run. But Emmett… none of them had ever thought about Emmett.

Well, that had been a mistake, apparently. In hindsight, had they given the issue any thought, they would have realized that Emmett was due to clash with the Dark, earlier than anyone else. Because Emmett was curious and perceptive and not easily frightened, despite his nelly manners. They hadn’t realized that. And now they would have to live with the consequences. Including the responsibility for this clueless young man, who was about to adjust to some dramatic changes in his life.

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Two days later, Michael was packing his suitcase already when his cell phone rang. To his joyous surprise, it was Emmett… sounding a bit weak, but back to his usual, cheerful self.

“Michael, sweetie,” he trilled, “I’m so sorry that I can’t see you right now. But we’ll make up for it the next time you come to town, honestly!”

“Em, are you okay?” Michael asked, torn between concern and relief.

Emmett suppressed a sigh. No, he was definitely not okay. The changes still hurt like hell, plus he was still trying to wrap his mind around the fact that he apparently was a vampire now. Wanting to throw up every time when he realized he was drinking blood. Wanting to cry and scream when he realized that sunbathing was now out of question, forever. How was any sane person supposed to be okay with those facts?

“Well, I’ve been better,” he admitted. “It will teach me to take any unknown substances from people I know are completely nuts. But I’ll be better, eventually, or so the doctors say. Hey, at least the doctors are pretty here!”

“I wish I could see you before I leave for the Pitts,” Michael said.

“Well, I’ve been better,” he admitted. “It will teach me to take any unknown substances from people I know are completely nuts. But I’ll be better, eventually, or so the doctors say. Hey, at least the doctors are pretty here!”

“I wish I could see you before I leave for the Pitts,” Michael said.

“Me, too, sweetie, but trust me, you wouldn’t enjoy the sight,” Emmett forced a talon that had extended on its own back to hiding and made a disgusted face; was manicure even a possibility after the changes were finished? He certainly hoped so. “I’m not exactly my normal, pretty self right now.” And wasn’t that the understatement of the century? “Tell you what, though – how about chatting on the ‘Net when you are home again? I’ve gotten myself a laptop lately… we could exchange gossip and stories about our conquests.”

Michael laughed. “I see you’re feeling better already. All right, Em, Brian has my e-mail address, you can reach me any time.”

“Will do, darling. Take care,” Emmett hung up and curled into a fetal position on his bed, shivering. “Shit, it hurts again!”

“That’s because you haven’t been feeding properly,” a stern male voice said, and Edward Blunt walked into the room, as big as life and twice as handsome, making Emmett nearly swoon. Em had
always had a weakness for tall, blue-eyed men with longish hair and an excellent fashion sense. “Stop being such a stubborn fool. You can’t change what happened, so try to accept it. It does have its advantages, you know.”

The idealized version of Kevin Sorbo sat down on the edge of Emmett’s bed, rolled up his sleeve and offered the fledgling his wrist.

“Either you feed now on your own, or I’ll force it down your throat, Childe,” he threatened. “I’ve accepted responsibility for your well-being, and I’ve had enough of your antics.”

Whether it was the commanding presence of an Alpha male or Emmett’s heightened sensitivity for the enticing male scent and the pheromones of his foster Sire, he didn’t know. But smelling the blood in Edward’s veins, his fangs dropped on their own, and for the first time, the heady taste of his Clan’s blood filled him with ecstatic pleasure.

Edward Blount supported the head of the fledgling with his free hand and released an unnecessary – but relieved – breath. Now that he’d broken through Emmett’s instinctive resistance, Edith and Enyd would be able to handle the boy.

With Celeste sent to San Francisco to live there under the iron fist of the Ventrue Prince, Emmett was no longer in danger to be discovered by the murderous females of his small bloodline. And perhaps it wouldn’t be so bad to have a fledgling in the house for a while.

Throwing his head back in pleasure as the ecstasy of being fed from washed over him, Edward Blount considered the possibilities of this new arrangement.
Revelations, Part 1

Chapter Summary

Brian is attacked by a Sabbat Toreador outside the Black Hole. Alain saves him in the last moment, but accidentally reveals his true nature during the fight. Brian is understandable freaked out and asks for time to consider his choices.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

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REVELATIONS, Part 1

Alain DeLaigle was perching on the roof of a building opposite the gay disco The Black Hole, in the form of a peregrine hawk. The disco was situated in Anarch territory, and even though the local Anarch groups had worked out a truce with the Camarilla lately, in an open city like Los Angeles that meant at least the possibility of Sabbat infiltration. The Anarch gang La Hermandad – actually, more like a well-organized task force in these days, under the strong leadership of the charismatic Carlyle (a Childe of Salvador Garcia and surprisingly cultivated for a Brujah) – kept the area under control in general, but couldn’t watch every single bar, pub or disco. So Alain had taken upon himself the task of watching over Brian – preferably undetected. Truce or not, thire were some places where members of the Camarilla weren’t welcome. The Black Hole was one of those places.

It was owned by Marguerite Foccart, a three hundred year old Brujah Anarch, blood bound to Jeremy McNeil, one of the leaders of the Anarch revolt. And though the majority of their forces had been wiped out during the power struggle when the former Prince, Cyrus, had taken LA, the McNeil clan was still a considerable opponent. Ironically enough, it was actually safer for mortals to enter The Black Hole than for Camarilla vampires. The Anarch didn’t kill their prey by feeding, either. Not in these days anymore.

Of course, Alain would have preferred to keep Brian from visiting the place – for several very good reasons. None of which he could name to the mortal, though. Not without breaking the Masquerade, which he didn’t want to do. Even though in LA – where people were more aware of vampires and demons living among them than in most other cities – the rules were more on the expanding site than in San Francisco, for example. Alain had been in the Camarilla all his unlife, and the rules had become a second nature to him. They had been made for a reason, after all.

Anyway, in situations like this, he almost envied the Blount sisters, who could simply forbid Emmett to visit places too risky for a newly Embraced fledgling… and severely punish him, should he disobey. Alain didn’t have the same rights where Brian was considered. Not yet anyway, although working towards it. All he could do was to watch over the young man.

He’d been sitting on the roof for half an hour or so, when the bouncer of The Black Hole, a large Brujah redneck who went by the well-earned name of Trasher, finally managed to localize him. Brujah usually had almost as sharp instincts as the Gangrel (which was one of the reasons why the two clans hated each other so much, because who wanted strong rivals?), but the Trasher obviously wasn’t the sharpest tool in the toolkit. Nobody willing to wield a phosphorous gun on a street where he could be seen by passing mortals was.
“Come down and show yourself!” he demanded.

Alain floated down in bird form and landed on his feet in his human disguise.

“I have no quarrel with you, Brujah,” he said. “I’m just here to watch over a human acquaintance.”

The small, beady eyes of the Brujah watched him curiously.

“A special someone, huh?” the Trasher giggled. “Courting him for Clan Toreador, aren’t we?”

“That’s right,” Alain replied. “I wouldn’t risk to go in, unless I have to – some of your Anarch buddies are a little trigger-happy sometimes – but I wanted to be nearby… just in case.”

The Trasher pocketed his gun and thought for a moment, which seemed to cost him considerable effort.

“Gimme your hand,” he finally said, putting the entry mark on the back of Alain’s hand. “Salvador says we should be nice with you Camarilla types now. Go in and take care of your man.”

The turn of events surprised Alain a little, but he wasn’t going to refuse the uncommonly generous offer. The mark on his hand showed that he had been allowed to enter the club. As long as he kept to himself and didn’t cause any trouble, the Anarch would leave him alone. It was a known fact that the Trasher didn’t react positively when someone interfered with his authority, limited as it might have been.

Entering the huge, dimly lit dance floor, Alain routinely tuned out the trobbing music (the currently popular music trends weren’t exactly his cup of tea – he found them simply noise, too loud and lacking any musical qualities - but that was personal taste, he guessed) and looked around in the mass of half-naked, sweaty and wildly gyrating male bodies.

*Beef soup*, the analogy came to his mind unexpectedly. He avoided discos whenever he could – the anonymous mass-wriggling reminded him of secret, orgiastic cults of the Middle Ages, and that was *not* a pleasant memory. Apparently, some tendencies were due to return cyclically – at least during the Middle Ages such events used to have some sort of twisted spiritual value for the participants, beyond the massive orgy in which they usually ended. Well, these clubs had the darkrooms for *that* part.

He shook his head to free it from the disconnected thoughts. When someone had lived half a millennium already, sometimes memories of the past were overwhelming enough to interfere with the demands of the present. It was inconvenient but inevitable, especially by someone with Alain’s impulsive nature.

He looked around again. The disco was full on this evening. On small, raised platforms the practically naked go-go boys were performing their fairly acrobatic dance numbers – the artist in Alain admired their sleek, beautiful bodies and their skills – and a few dozen people were actually watching them from the bar or from the galleries. But the majority of the guests was on the dance floor, turning the dance into one giant event of multiple foreplays. Alain wrinkled his nose. Hot as the sight might have been for most people, personally he was never into mass events. It was bad style.

Brian didn’t share his opinion. The young man was enthusiastic about *The Black Hole*, right after his first visit there – it reminded him of his favourite place back home, a dance club named *Babylon*. Brian loved the noise known as hard rock and heavy metal, and he loved dancing and pulling people into the ban of his personal charme. Conquest was very important for him… it nurtured his self-
image of being irresistible. And it satisfied his need for success in a wholly different level from work-related stuff. So, where was he in this mass of sweaty, anonymous flesh?

The crowd made it impossible for Alain to pick out Brian’s personal scent, and the infrequent tastes of the young man’s blood he had taken secretly weren’t enough to form a working bond between them, not even a one-sided one. But a nagging feeling of familiarity directed him to the shadowy backroom of the club, and he followed his only lead, trusting his instincts.

It took him a minute to discover Brian and his trick among the dozens of couples, deep in various sexual practices along the wall. With his pants around his ankles, Brian was bent over the back of a leather sofa, occupied by another couple, with a tall, muscular man draped over his back and pounding into him so hard it was painful to watch. The slack mouth and clouded eyes revealed that Brian was high on something again, or drunk - or both - like several other times lately, ever since Michael had left. Alain had been furious about that, furious that Brian hadn’t come to him when in need, but he couldn’t force the stupid mortal every single time. Brian was supposed to learn what was good and useful for him and what wasn’t.

Getting drunk or high or both in an Anarch club definitely was not. And as Alain took a closer look at Brian’s trick-of-the-night, his slow, inhuman heartbeat nearly stopped for good. This was not someone he’d have been counted on seeing here. Although it was only logical that from a room with a thousand horny and willing men, Brian would pick the most dangerous one possible. Yitzhak was not someone a man could resist. Alain himself had not been able to. It had very nearly caused his Final Death.

Which meant that the Sabbat infiltration was worse than any of them had thought. He needed to alarm Victor – and probably Angelus, too – as soon as possible. As soon as he had saved Brian from the clutches of his personal nemesis.

Damn it, where had they gone? He’d been distracted for a moment only, but that had been enough for Yitzhak to vanish and take Brian with him. It made sense – if he could sense Yitzhak’s presence through the masses, Yitzhak probably would feel his, too. They used to be very close once. Before he realized that his lover was a Sabbat monster.

He had to hurry up now. Brian was in grave danger, alone with a hungry vampire who thought of humans simply as food. They must have left through some back door, as there were no windows in sight. They couldn’t have gone too far yet.

Determined to finally get this particular loose end of his unlife tied up, Alain was moving already, in search of that back door.

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Originally, Brian had come to The Black Hole for pain management. He intended to draw his personal problems in booze and anonymous sex – just as it had been his wont. He’d broken up the irregular sessions at Lady Heather’s, after having realized that they went nowhere, and was now healing himself with the methods he’d always used.

Only that they didn’t seem to help as much as they used to. Part of the problem was that he missed Michael’s presence in his daily life – he’d never fully admitted before how dependent he had been on his best friend’s steady reassurance. And, no matter what he’d always said, he actually missed the entire circle of their friends, too. Granted, they were more Michael’s friends than his, but he’d had a place among them nevertheless. It gave him a feeling of home.

There was nothing compared with that in LA, despite his on and off – lately rather off, as being submissive wasn’t easy on him – affair with Alain, and the fact that he lived in Alain’s house. In
spite of their occasional intimacy, there always remained an invisible wall between him and Alain – between him and all the people he socialized and/or worked with in LA. The one closest to him, Phillipe Navital, had been in Europe for months by now, and Emmett… Emmett had changed dramatically.

Brian still hadn’t managed to get any details out of Emmett since that near-fatal drug accident of his. Emmett, owner of the loosest mouth in The Pitts, was remarkably tight-lipped about that particular event. And while on the surface he still seemed to be the flamboyant queen he always had been, there was now a steely quality about him that had not been there before, at least not visibly. It suited him, in a strange manner, but it also alienated him from Brian to a certain extent.

Having lost his other distractions, Brian thus turned to darker avenues to numb his feelings. He had heard about *The Black Hole* from one of the male models they had hired for a sportswear ad campaign of *Brown Athletics* – one of the few old clients for whom Brian was willing to work himself from LA, instead of dropping them onto Cynthia’s lap. The model had been enthusiastic about the place – it sounded like a darker, more dangerous version of *Babylon*… exactly what Brian needed. So he returned after his first visit, in the hope that here he might forget everything for a while.

Entering the room, he almost had a feeling of returning home. The music was fast and furious, the laser show above the artificial smoke almost hypnotic, and the offer of hot, ready and willing men overwhelming. This was the most perfect place he’d seen so far in LA.

“New here?” a low, slightly rough voice asked, easily audible through the music, although not particularly loud.

Brian turned around and eyed the gorgeous man standing behind him with appreciation. The guy was tall and muscular, but not in the bodybuilder sense of the word, more like an athlete. He had a ruggedly handsome face, dark olive skin, wavy ink-black hair that barely reached his collar and impenetrable black eyes. Not dark brown ones like Michael’s, but so pitch black that he couldn’t distinguish the pupils from the irises. Brian hadn’t seen eyes like that before. The guy must have been Spanish. Or half-Indian. Or something like that. In any case, he was hotter than a volcano and had Alpha male written all over him.

Brian had no problem with that. An anonymous fuck was very different from Alain’s dominance over him, which he didn’t always tolerate well, even though he’d grown to crave it sometimes.

“My second time,” he answered the question, basking in the raw hunger directed towards him by those impenetrable eyes. “I’m Brian, by the way.”

“Yitzhak,” the other man smiled, and Brian felt his knees weaken already. He’d never met a man before who’d have been dripping of sexual magnetism the way this Yitzhak character did, and considering his previous experience, that was something of a rarity. “Shall we have a drink?”

“Why not?” Brian shrugged. He’d been dedicated to get shit-faced and high and laid tonight – not necessary in this order. Or in any specific order.

Yitzhak – what kind of name was that anyway? – forced a path for them through the gyrating mass of half-naked, sweat-soaked bodies to the bar in the background.

“Give us two Bloody Marys, Nigel,” he said to the lanky, bald-headed young bartender who looked like an African ebony statue with his smooth, naked torso and the fluorescent pearl string around his long neck.
The Toreador Anarch flashed his perfect white teeth in a broad grin – he recognized Clan when he sensed it – and mixed the drinks expertly, with record speed. One with tomato juice for the mortal, one with 0-negative for his fellow clansman. The industrial strength Cuban rum neutralized the scent of blood, at least for mortal noses.

“You seem to be a regular here,” Brian said, nursing his drink carefully. It was so strong it almost curled up his toenails, but it tasted surprisingly good. Although a whiskey person himself, he could get used to this.

“Semi-regular,” Yitzhak corrected, devouring the mortal with his black eyes. “I never stay on the same place too long. I get easily bored.”

“Used to get the same problem with tricks,” Brian grinned mirthlessly. “They always want repeats. I do not. Makes them whine and complain and get on my nerves.”

“It’s nice to meet a man of my own mind,” Yitzhak commented, finishing his drink with one long gulp. “Most guys are disgustingly sentimental. If they want bells and flowers, why do they come to a place like this?”

“My thoughts exactly,” Brian agreed, fishing a pack of cigarettes out of his pocket. “Do you smoke?”

Yitzhak gave the cigarettes a dismissive look. “Not that stuff. Try mine,” he offered Brian a joint. Brian frowned before accepting it.

“What the fuck is this? Pot?”


In truth, it was marijuana, mixed with certain drugs that served to break the will of mortals, so that they would come to Sabbat vampires like sheep to the slaughterer. It worked even by most resisters. And though this particular human seemed willing enough to fuck without the persuasion of any mind-altering substances, Yitzhak wanted something else from the beautiful and arrogant man. Wanted his blood as well – with or without killing him in the feeding process, he still hadn’t decided.

On the one hand, draining this exquisite specimen slowly and watching the life seeping out from his broken eyes would give a heady feeling of absolute power. On the other hand, keeping him alive and enjoying his blood – and his ass – again would be most pleasurable, too. Well, there was time enough to decide later.

Brian accepted the joint and inhaled the spicy smoke deeply. He had a high tolerance level against drugs, due to his long years of experience, so the effect came slowly. They danced for a while, rubbing against each other, and Yitzhak seemed to have at least three pairs of hands – or more. Brian giggled; he had nothing against groping, and Yitzhak managed to find all his hot spots with an almost eerie instinct. Plus, just like Phillipe and Alain, he, too, had a thing for necks, which Brian had always found most erotic.

“Let’s go to the backroom,” he finally murmured, nibbling on Brian’s earlobe with sharp little bites, just this side from drawing blood. “Enough foreplay already. I want you – now!”

Brian found the idea excellent – after all, this was what he’d come to The Black Hole in the first place – and followed Yitzhak to the backroom. The joint had taken full effect by then; he felt light-headed and extremely horny, in a primal, almost animalistic way. His brain was in a red haze, the blood was pounding in his ears, way louder than the music on the dance floor. He felt himself relax,
sliding into a mellow, near-helpless mode, and made no attempt to resist when Yitzhak bent him over the next available surface and unbuckled his belt to drop his pants. In fact, he felt fantastic, high as a kite, and eager to go on with what they had begun.

Yitzhak felt deep satisfaction over the helpless obedience of his hand-picked victim. He recognized a fellow top and knew that among his own kind, Brian was definitely an Alpha dog. Making such one – and a strong resistor at that – to his sex toy was one of the biggest turn-ons of his unlife.

“I’d love to take you dry,” he murmured, oiling himself expertly and pushing into the pliant body of the young man without preamble; Brian groaned in pain and tried to relax, “but you mortals are so damn fragile. Doesn’t… matter. Once I’ve… made you one of us… you’ll be able to… take it…”

Brian groaned again, this time with pleasure, under the rough assault that stabbed his prostate with every upward thrust. He liked a quick, rough fuck just like the next guy, but the pounding Yitzhak was giving him went beyond any previous experience. His orgasm splashed through his entire body like a whiplash; he was writing under the other man like a dog in the heat, milking the big cock inside his body with his contracting muscles mercilessly.

To his mild shock, however, Yitzhak suddenly pulled out of him, and that not particularly carefully, and slapped him on the bare ass, hard. He was tense, his black eyes wary and narrowing to dark slits.

“Get dressed,” he ordered harshly, “we’re gonna move it to a better location. The best is yet to come, don’t worry.”

Brian shrugged, not really understanding what was happening (his higher brain functions having slowed down considerably due to the drugs) but obeyed nevertheless. It was easier than trying to think. Yitzhak grabbed his arm with a bruising grip and dragged him out of the room through a back door to the dark alley behind the bar.

“I’m sorry, boy,” he said in a low, almost hypnotic voice. “I wish I could keep you, at least for a while. But, you see, an old… friend whom I’ve been trying to avoid for quite some time has found me, after all. I can’t allow you to talk to him about me,” he reached out, stroking Brian’s face almost gently. “Try not to fight me. It will be less painful that way.”

He leaned in, ready to let his fangs drop and sink them in the young man’s jugular. But he didn’t know the famous Brian Kinney survival instincts that were able to kick in even through the foggiest mindset after heavy drug abuse, in the last moment. Brian waited for this moment, and when it came, he rammed his knee into the vampire’s groin with all his might. Yitzhak howled in pain, his fangs dropping, razor-sharp talons extending, his eyes showing an unholy silver gleam.

“That,’ he growled, “was a mistake, Kine. I wanted to kill you quickly and painlessly. Now I’ll tear you to jerking body parts alive, limb by limb.”

The drug-induced haze was evaporating quickly, and Brian tried to back up on unsteady legs, knowing with a chilling certainty that there was no escape from this… this monster. Whatever the freak might be, he would kill him.

“Yitzhak,” a familiar voice, cold and furious, called from behind the monster’s back, “aren’t you even greeting your old lover?”

Brian looked up in disbelief and saw Alain coming out of the back room, calm and collected on the outside, but his eyes were glowing in the same silver gleam. Yitzhak whirled around with an inhuman snarl.
“What the fuck do you want, Alain? I’m busy!”

“I can see that,” Alain replied coldly. “Unfortunately for you, you were about to walk into my territory. Trying to take what’s mine. I can’t allow that.”

“Yeah? And what are you gonna do about it?” Yitzhak taunted. “You’ve never been able to best me… in any way you tried.”

Alain stretched out his arm, and Brian watched in horror as the slender, long-fingered hands of the artist transformed into something akin to the clawed foot of a bird-of-prey, with slightly bent, razor-sharp talons.

“We’ll see,” he said in a low, angry voice. “Times change. Even we change. I’ve nearly been executed because of you, lover,” he spat in disgust. “Nobody would believe that I’d lived with a Sabbat monster for years and never recognized him for the beast that he was. That at my age and with my vast experience in the Dark, I could be blinded by love – or lust – that much. I had to leave Europe and everything I loved and valued because of you, you goddamn freak! I had to flee across the ocean and to live in an Anarch city… all because of you. I’ve hunted you all across the States – and now that I’ve found you, I won’t let you escape again.”

“You really think so?” Yitzhak laughed. “You really think you would stand a chance in a fight one to one against me?”

“I can try,” Alain replied, and he leaped into attack at the same moment.

But Yitzhak was ready for him, and the fight was beyond everything Brian had ever seen, even in a Brett Keller action movie. Alain and Yitzhak were slashing at each other with fangs and talons, exchanging bone-breaking blows, somersaulting high in the air to avoid each other’s attacks, even turning into wolves and back again, snapping at each other’s throats like rabid dogs.

What the hell was happening there?

Brian looked around for something he could use as a weapon frantically. He knew already that Alain was much stronger than him, and Alain seemed to be losing against Yitzhak. He would think about who – or what – Alain really was later. Right now, he had to help Alain. That way, he could at least hope to survive the night.

To his relief, he spotted something that looked like an iron bar near to a wrecked car. That should do it, he decided. No matter how strong Yitzhak was, an iron bar was an iron bar. Iron was harder than bone.

The two were in wolf form again. Alain had taken on the shape of a silver wolf, Yitzhak that of a pitch black one. Brian grabbed the iron bar with both hands, praying to a God he no longer believed in that he wouldn’t hit the false monster, as it was unlikely that he’d have a second chance to do this. He waited until the snarling wolves got into arm’s length to him, and then he slammed the iron bar down on the skull of the black wolf as hard as he could. The wolf flew backwards from the power of the impact, rolled on the street several times, and then remained lying there, motionless.

“Is he dead?” Brian asked Alain, who switched back to human form, looking horribly. His clothes were shredded, and deep, parallel gashes disfigured his smooth chest, bleeding heavily.

“Nah,” Alain winced in pain. “It takes a lot to kill one of us. He won’t be able to leave on his own, though. I’ll have to send someone to pick him up later.”

“You could use being picked up, too,” Brian fought his nausea at the sight of the gory wounds.
“You should go to the hospital, man.”

“No,” Alain hissed through gritted teeth. “I won’t make it to the only clinic where I could go safely. You… you must help me.”

“How?” Brian asked, dangerously close to panicking.

Alain looked at him intently. “Do you trust me?”

Brian hesitated for a moment. “What I’ve just seen doesn’t make it easy, you know,” he finally said. “But I’m trying.”

“Then give me your arm,” Alain said.

Brian hesitated again. “What for?”

“I need blood to heal,” Alain replied simply. “The bottled stuff they serve in the bar won’t help; my wounds are too severe. I need to take it fresh, from the source. I won’t take more than what’s necessary... but that’s the only way for me to make it right now.”

Slowly, uncertainly, Brian extended his arm, not really sure what to expect. Alain grabbed it with both hands and licked his wrist for a few times, to lure the big vein to the surface. Then his fangs drooped, and the sharp pain as they sank into his flesh shot directly to Brian’s groin. Alain began to suck his blood… the sensation was unbelievable, like the best orgasms of his life rolled together. High on endorphins and still not capable of thinking straight due to the drugs he’d consumed earlier, he grabbed Alain’s head, pressing it harder against his arm.

When Alain finally let go of him and licked the twin puncture wounds clean to seal them, Brian was dizzy from the blood loss, but also completely euphoric. He saw in amazement that Alain’s deep wounds have stopped bleeding and were now closing slowly.

“How… how did you do that?” he asked, not sure what he’d seen was the truth or just some weird image, caused by the unknown drugs.

“Natural healing abilities,” Alain shrugged. “Please... I’ll explain you everything, but let’s go home first. I’m still weakened and won’t be able to survive another fight, should any of Yitzhak’s… associates come to look for him. Where’s your car?”

“Outside the bar,” Brian replied. “Haven’t you come by car?”


“Sure,” Brian guided him to the car, hoping that the police would patrol other parts of the city tonight. A slightly drunk and more than a little drugged driver with a passanger in a shredded, blood-soaked shirt would have drawn some unpleasant attention, that much was certain.

Chapter End Notes

Yitzhak, the Toreador antitribu is played by Randy Vasques, known from JAG and Love Boat. Trasher is played by Eric Bruskotter, known from Tour of Duty. Both are canon characters in Vampire – the Masquerade, but their cameo appearance has
probably nothing to do with how they are shown in canon.
Revelations, Part 2

Chapter Summary

I broke the chapter into smaller parts, to make reading easier. This is a direct continuation of Revelations, Part 1.

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REVELATIONS, Part 2

They reached Alain’s house without any further incident, and Peppone, Alain’s “cousin” helped Brian to support the artist, up to his private apartment. Despite the already healing wounds, the young Italian Toreador realized that Alain had been in a vicious fight, and he was worried about Brian’s condition, too. The human was deadly pale, and that meant severe blood loss, even though he had no visible injuries.

“Can I bring you something?” Peppone asked.

“A bottle of blood and a phone,” Alain replied dryly, “and Brian here will need some strong red wine. We’ve had a Sabbat incident.”

“Alain…” Peppone warned worriedly. Alain had never been so careless in the presence of Kine. Was it just the injury, or had the artist broken the Masquerade?

“He saw me change, and he’s a resistor, so it’s too late to worry about him,” Alain sighed. “I’ll clear it with Victor. After you’ve called Gloria to take a look at him, and I’ve had more blood. I took from him all that I could without endangering his life, but it was still far from enough. Now, get going!”

Peppone nodded and hurried off, returning with two seemingly identical bottles or red wine and two tall glasses.

“Pinot noir for you,” he handed one of the bottles to Brian, “and the house special for our host.”

Brian eyed his wine suspiciously, hoping by God that Peppone hadn’t made any mistake. He felt nauseous enough without accidentally swallowing a mouthful of blood. Alain caught his wary look and grinned tiredly.

“Don’t worry, we can smell the difference, even if the bottle hasn’t been opened yet,” he said. A condition that Peppone changed with practiced ease, pouring them their respective drinks.

“We,” Brian repeated slowly, sipping his wine carefully. “I’d like to know who – or what – you are. The truth, please. This… obfuscating is getting tiresome.”

“I thought after what you’ve seen you would figure it out alone,” Alain replied, nursing his own drink. “I’m a creature of the night. A being your kind calls a vampire.”

“A… vampire,” Brian said, in the calm, collected manner of a doctor who doesn’t want to upset his obviously insane patient. “As in Dracula? Or Nosferatu the demon?”

“Not the ones you see in Hollywood movies,” Alain shrugged, “but basically, yes. We don’t live in
crypts or sleep in coffins in these times – well, not the sane ones among us, anyway – but the bloodsucking part is true, and so is the low tolerance for direct sunlight.”

“I see,” an uncomfortable thought suddenly occurred to Brian. “So, all this bad skin condition shit you guys were giving me all the time…”

“Was an euphemism for the fact that – unless recently fed – we would spontaneously combust and burn to ashes in the sun,” Alain nodded.

This particular piece of news wasn’t exactly suited to calm down, though.

“Does that mean that Victor and Phillipe and all the others I work with here are blood-sucking monsters, too?” he asked.

“Not all of them,” Alain corrected, “but most of them, yes.”

“Victor?” Brian asked, and as Alain nodded, he felt a strange coldness gripping his heart. “The Vignes sibs?” Another nod. “Edward Blount and his twin cousins?” Nod. Brian hesitated before asking, because it was just too much to accept at once. “Phillipe, too?”

Alain nodded again, and there was a long silence, as they both were nursing their respective drinks.

“Assuming that I believe it, which I do not,” Brian finally began to speak again, “does this mean that you were not joking when you said that you’ve been permanently twenty-nine for five hundred years?”

“No, I was not,” Alain said. “I was born in France, in the fifteenth century; in 1450, to be more accurate, and I’ve been Embraced into Clan Toreador in 1479, a the mortal age of twenty-nine. I haven’t aged since then, though… well, not by my looks. Not much anyway.”

“And the Leonardo, your master and teacher, the one you were speaking of…” Brian trailed off, not quite willing to continue. It sounded too frigging unlikely.

“That was Leonardo Da Vinci, one of the greatest artisans of the Renaissance,” Alain finished for him. “He was my friend, mentor and lover, and I’ve protected him, for nearly three decades. He knew what I was, but it didn’t bother him a bit.”

“Was he also your… the one who made you…?”

“No,” Alain smiled a bit regretfully, “although that’s a popular misconception among my kind, and I don’t correct them – it’s good for my reputation.”

Brian could imagine that. “And you met all the big guns at that time, right?”

“Donatello… Michelangelo… Raffaello… yes, but also the Medicis and Savonarola,” Alain said thoughtfully. “The best and the worst of that time. It was a great gift from Fate, but also a great burden. In a lesser time, I could have become the lead artist, the greatest celebrity of my generation… well, the mortal one anyway. But compared with those giants I could never be anything else than slightly above the average. I was – well, I still am – a good painter and an excellent musician, but I’ve always been a mediocre sculptor,” he added with a self-ironic little smile.

“You’re a musician, too?” Brian asked in surprise.

Alain shrugged. “The greatest thing of the Renaissance was that an artisan didn’t have to limit himself to one branch of art. I never composed, if that’s what you mean, but I was one of the best
organ players of my time in my mortal days. They called me a virtuoso, and I played in the greatest cathedrals of Italy and France, from the San Pietro in Rome to the Notre Dame de Paris…"

"Why have you stopped?" Brian asked. Alain gave him a wry grin.

"Do you really think a vampire would be welcome to play in those legendary churches anymore?" He laughed with a certain bitterness. "In those times, clerics could feel the presence of my kindred, even without knowing what we were. I couldn’t risk being revealed and burnt at the stake."

"But what about now? What about music halls?"

"They don’t have the same acoustics," Alain waved dismissively. "The organs in those rooms sound… well, dead. But I’ve been lucky recently. I met this strange priest…"

The expression strange priest woke X-rated reminiscences in Brian, memories of the encounter with his mother’s cherished priest in a gay sauna. He suppressed a snicker.

"A… strange priest?" he repeated with false innocence. But Alain’s eyes remained serious.

"Father Callaghan," the artist explained. "He’s an exorcist… someone who knows of our kind and yet he doesn’t judge by one’s species, only by one’s deeds. He lets me play in his parish church whenever I feel like. Not during mass of course, but still…"

"An… exorcist?" Brian repeated, unbelieving. "You mean the whole growling like an animal and puking up green pea soup thing?"

"Don’t be ridiculous," Alain laughed. "I mean real obsessions. Some demons can merge with their human hosts on a cellular level, and you need not only strong spells to exorcise them but someone with True Faith, someone who’s been consecrated by the old rituals of the Church to do the task."

"Okay, stop right here," Brian massaged the bridge of his nose, feeling a killer headache coming. "I can’t believe a word from what you’re saying… only that I’ve actually seen you change into a wolf… and into something else that I can’t even guess what it was."

"That was my true form," Alain replied. "Most of the time, we wear our old human form, the one we wore at the time of our Embrace. The Beast only surfaces when we are fighting for our lives – or when we’re hungry."

"Hungry," Brian gulped nervously. "You guys really go around and kill people to drink their blood?"

"No!" Alain replied sharply. "We are no Sabbat monsters! We only take what we need to survive, which is not much, under normal circumstances – no more than what’s taken by a simple blood test. Our Vessels don’t even remember anything afterwards; there’s a substance in our saliva that closes the wounds immediately."

"Then why do I remember?" Brian asked. "I’d certainly prefer not to. Does it have something to do with being a… a resistant?"

"A resistor," Alain corrected. "Yes, that’s why. Fortunately, resistors are extremely rare. Otherwise mortals would become aware of our existence and would hunt us down and destroy us as they did during the Inquisition."

"But aren’t resistors a threat for you?" Brian felt uncharacteristically nervous.
“A very big threat,” Alain agreed. “So big indeed, that we can’t ignore them. As a rule, they have two choices: since we can’t make them forget, they’ll either be Embraced – made one of us – or sacrificed.”

“Sacrificed,” Brian repeated grimly. “You mean killed, right?”

“Yes,” Alain said. “That’s Kindred law. We must protect ourselves.”

“And when you Embrace someone… how does it happen?” Brian asked.

“If I’d Embrace you, I’d drink your blood – all of it – until your heart stopped,” Alain explained matter-of-factly. “Then I’d feed you my blood. That would start the changes in your body, and after a few… unpleasant days, you’d wake up as one of us.”

“Unpleasant, eh?”

“Unfortunately, the process is… painful. I won’t lie to you about that. The body resists the changes, and there’s a fight between old and new. But the neonates of my clan usually survive the transformation with a minimum of discomfort. By some other clans the Becoming can be true agony, prolonged for weeks, even months, if not done properly.”

“But you still have to kill people to make them one of you,” Brian said tonelessly.

“Yes,” Alain admitted honestly. “We are a species that procreates by transforming humans into our kind.”

“I see,” Brian said. “So, since I’m a resistor, I have the choice between being killed – or being killed, right?”

“In a city ruled by the Camarilla, you’d be right,” Alain said. “But LA is different. This is an open city, where many mortals know about our kind, work with us, fight with us against the Sabbat and malevolent demons. In LA, you are allowed to know a lot about us – and live, but not to tell the tale. Not even if you choose to leave the city.”

“As if anyone would believe me,” Brian snorted. “Vampires… demons… they’d think I was high on E or something.”

“There are people who would believe you,” Alain’s voice was deadly serious. “People who’d make it their ‘mission’ to hunt us down and kill us.”

That Brian could imagine all too well. Weren’t there dickheaded idiots who would hunt down and kill gay people, driven by some arcane fear from their different nature? It was only logical that some would hunt and kill… creatures that were, as a matter of fact, bloodsucking monsters, even more vigorously.

But were Alain and the others of his kind truly monsters? Brian could still not wrap his mind around that whole vampire thing – it was easier for him to think about his new associates as humans who, for some weird reason, needed to drink blood to survive. That was eerie enough for starters, but it made him easier to eventually accept the whole truth, step by step, without freaking out seriously. After all, neither Alain nor the other Kindred had harmed him in any way. On the contrary, they had helped him to be successful in the advertising business like never before. And they had helped Mikey to make the greatest dream of his life true. Perhaps they were basically okay, despite their liquid diet…

Except that Yitzhak character. Now, that was a real monster, beyond even what special effects could
produce. Brian shuddered in realization how close he’d come to be eaten by a savage beast. Apparently, the undead did have their sociopaths and madmen, too, just like the mortal world did.

“I won’t harm you,” Brian said, after a lengthy pause. “You’ve never tried to harm me, and I actually like Phillipe. It’s just… it’s a lot to digest in such a short time.”

“I guess it is,” Alain agreed. “We’ll give you all the time you need. All we ask is to keep our existence secret. Our survival depends on secrecy, both as a species and as individuals.”

“Was it not a great risk then to work so closely with me?” Brian asked. “To take me into your home… to your bed? I could have come behind your disguise any time. The whole ‘skin condition’ excuse wasn’t very convincing.”

“Only because you’re a resistor,” Alain grinned tiredly. “Other people have no problem accepting it for face value. You’re right, though – it was a risk. But a calculated one, one that had to be taken.”


“We needed to reveal ourselves to you anyway,” Alain explained, “since you’ve been selected to be offered the Embrace – the chance to become one of us.”

Brian opened and closed his mouth several times, without being able to reply. Shell-shocked wasn’t even beginning to describe his feelings. Speak about dropping a bombshell right onto the lap of the unexpected…

“Me?” he finally said… well, more gasped, actually. “Why me?”

“Our Clan has been looking for neonates for quite some time,” Alain replied. “There have been a few neonates in the recent couple of years, of course, but those Embraces were hurried events, done for damage control, mostly. We have selected you because we found in you the traits of Clan Toreador – that’s our Clan – already given: talent, beauty, ruthless ambitions, artistic interests and a healthy amount of arrogance. You would fit into the Clan fabulously… and I’d like to preserve your youth and beauty forever.”

Well, that was a tempting idea indeed, but the price to pay – no sunbathing anymore and a liquid diet forever – still seemed too high for Brian. Speaking of which…

“You drink from anyone who comes across your path, right?” he asked. Alain nodded. “What about HIV or other diseases?”

Alain shrugged. “They can’t arm anyone who’s already dead. Viruses and bacteria die as soon as they become part of our blood stream. All we have to do is to brush our teeth carefully after feeding, so that we won’t carry any germs from one Vessel to another.”

“What… vessel are you talking about?”

“That’s how we call people we feed from. It’s an expression of respect.”

“Yeah, sure…”

“It is. I for my part, and the others of the same mind, have tremendous respect for humans. They feed us, keep us alive… well, undead at least. Besides, we all were humans once.”

“Somehow I don’t think this Yitzhak person shares your respect towards humankind,” Brian commented dryly.
“No,” Alain replied sadly, “he does not. Yitzhak and the others of his kind consider mortals nothing but sheep and themselves as the shepherds. They belong to the Sabbat sect: a part of our society that doesn’t bother to hide themselves from the eyes of mortals, and they frequently kill their prey when feeding. They celebrate dark rituals and have abilities way beyond mine – they allow their Beast to surface freely, whenever they please. They are proud of being vicious monsters. The fight between us, the Camarilla, and the Sabbat has been going on for centuries.”

“Camarilla, huh?” Brian frowned. “So, it’s like good vampires against bad vampires?”

“Kindred,” Alain corrected. “We call ourselves Kindred. ‘Vampire’ is just an epithet, a word humans made to give their fears a name. Although the Sabbat actually don’t mind being called that.”

“So, you’re the good guys, then?” Brian asked doubtfully.

Alain shrugged. “Good, bad… I’m not exactly sure either of those would apply. We are predators, all of us: the Camarilla, the Sabbat, the independent Clans – every single one of us. But we of the Camarilla are at least ethical predators: we don’t break human law, don’t kill the people we feed from and don’t turn anyone into one of us without their consent. We have our own set of rules to live by; rules that are a lot harsher than human law. When someone breaks those rules, their life is forfeit.”

“You mean they get killed?” Brian was a little shocked by the finality of that.

“Executed,” Alain corrected. “The Camarilla is a more or less feudal system. Usually, each big city or large area has its own Prince, and the word of that Prince is law. If a member of the Camarilla breaks the law and endangers the Masquerade – our hidden existence among mortals – the Prince calls a blood hunt on this person, declaring them free for the killing.”

“What about the guys like Yitzhak?” Brian couldn’t really believe that they would follow such rules.

“They have their own set of rules,” Alain shuddered. “Let’s just say that you wouldn’t like them.”

“I’m not sure I’d like yours, either,” Brian said. “Choosing between living in a feudal system of utter dependence or among a bunch of crazed, blood-thirsty monsters doesn’t really seem a chance to me.”

“I can understand that,” Alain nodded. “Many of the younger Kindred have their problems with the old ruling methods – that led to the Anarch Revolt, Clan wars and a lot of bloodshed. Here in LA we have worked out a truce with most of the local Anarch groups. The Sabbat threat had grown too great. Even Salvador Garcia, one of the greatest Anarch leaders has arranged himself with us. Because living in a Sabbat city would be much worse.”

“If this Yitzhak is any indication, I believe you that,” Brian pulled a face. “But you… doesn’t it bother you to live in such an outdated society? Like in the Middle Ages or whatnot?”

“Brian, I was born in the Middle Ages,” Alain laughed. “That’s what I was used to, the one I knew and thought the only possible order of things. I’ve adapted to the changes in mortal society, even welcomed some of them, but the feudal system is what comes most naturally to me. There’s a reason why the older Kindred are more devoted to the Camarilla, while the younger ones tend to become Anarch, without strict clan boundaries, rebelling against their Elders’ authority.”

“Well, I can’t blame them for that,” Brian commented. “They sound more reasonable for me.”

“I thought you’d say that,” Alain replied a little sadly, as he’d been always devoted to the Camarilla; that was why Yitzhak’s betrayal had hit him so hard. “But LA is different. We have an Anarch Prince here, which is a contradiction per se, but it seems to be working, at least for now. You must know that Los Angeles has been the citadel of the Anarch Revolt, the very first Free Anarch State in
the entire world. The greatest, most respected Anarch leaders still live here and control large parts of LA and Hollywood. The harsh rules of the Camarilla have been loosened here. The only crimes our Prince punishes by calling a blood hunt are Embracing someone against their will and killing the people we feed from. He needs us all – Anarch and Camarilla, independent Clans and even the Garou, to keep the Sabbat and the malevolent demons at bay. Living in an open city does have its risks.”

Brian shook his head, still too bewildered to accept all this as part of his own reality.

“Demons,” he said, turning the word around in his mouth as if it was something indigestible. “Vampire clans. Garou… whatever those might be. Next you’ll tell me werewolves are real, too.”

“Garou are werewolves, Brian,” Alain said matter-of-factly. “But it’s unlikely that you’d run into any of them. They usually keep to themselves and prefer the outskirts of the city.”

Brian raised a hand in defence.

“All right, can we stop this right now? I’m still trying to accept the fact that you’re supposed to be five hundred years old… and that you’ve just drunk my blood and healed spontaneously from injuries that would kill an average man. Speaking of which… if you turn someone into one of you, would this person heal from any fatal illnesses, too? From one he already has?”

“I assume you mean cancer or AIDS or other virulent illnesses?” Alain asked. Brian nodded. “Well, it depends on the condition of the candidate. A weakened body wouldn’t survive the transformation – as I said, it’s a painful process. But once we’ve Become, human illnesses won’t bother us anymore. We already are dead, after all.”

Brian nodded again, digesting this particular piece of information for long moments. He could see that Alain’s wounds were now completely healed. There was a lot to say for being undead, it seemed. He still had his problems with the price, though.

“And you want to make me one of you?” he finally asked. “A… Toreador, you said? What does that mean?”

“We are the most sophisticated of all the Kindred clans,” Alain replied simply. “We are concerned with beauty in a way that no mortal can fathom, and use the rarefied senses and tastes given to us by the Embrace to become as consumed and impassioned as possible.”

“So you are artists and hedonists?” Brian tried to translate the sudden flood of information into terms he could understand.

“Yes,” Alain said. “And like all true artists, we search for a truth beyond the mere physical existence. This very search has inspired us to what we consider our mission – to protect talent wherever it shows itself within the human race.”

“Like you have lived with Leonardo?”

“Exactly. Our protectorate has consisted of the world’s greatest artists during history. We specifically seek out the most talented and grant them the gift of immortality, to preserve their talent against the ravages of aging and death. We constantly search for new talent and spend a great deal of time deciding whom to preserve and whom to leave to their fate. Among us are some of the greatest musicians and artists who ever lived.”

“If that is true,” Brian said, “I still can’t understand why you would want me. I’m not an artist, and

my only talent lies in seducing people – either to let me fuck them or to buy things they don’t really
“You’ve just answered the question yourself,” Alain replied. “Seduction is one of the specific gifts of our Clan; and beyond that, one of the things we are drawn to most is beauty. The Clan would greatly profit from your so-called only talent. But that’s not the true reason why I’ve wanted to Embrace ever since I started researching your personal background on Victor’s behalf.”

“Oh, I know,” Brian said sarcastically. “My looks did it, once again.”

“To a certain extent, yes,” Alain admitted. “The sort of classical beauty you possess, the one so often seen on Greek vases and murals has become exceedingly rare in these times. You’re a great inspiration to me – to the artist in me – by your mere existence. But I’ve also come to know you a little since you moved here, and I began to want you for yourself; for the person that you really are. I’d like to keep you with me, forever. I haven’t made a Childe of my own choice since I left Europe. I did Embrace people for the Clan, out of convenience, but you’re the first one I want to make mine.”

“Yours as in your undead progeny or yours as your bed slave?” Brian asked, dripping with irony.

Alain looked him straight in the eyes and answered simply, “Both. Well, in a sense. The Sire does have the right to take his Childe to his bed any time he wants, that’s true. But I won’t Blood Bound you, not unless you ask for it, which is extremely unlikely, so you won’t be a slave. If you decide to accept the Embrace from me, that is. I hope you will.”

“I really don’t know,” Brian said honestly. “As tempting as remaining young forever sounds, living without sunlight and drinking blood for eternity just isn’t my idea of a good life. Not to mention having to bend over whenever you happen to get a boner.”

“This isn’t an easy decision, I won’t deny that,” Alain nodded, “and while I swear that I would never abuse you, I would use the Sire’s prerogative to take you to my bed. I desire you greatly, and I don’t think I’d ever grow tired of you.”

“But why?” Brian asked, a little bewildered. No one but Mikey had ever wanted him for the duration. “Good-looking as I am, it’s certainly not just my pretty face.”

“No,” Alain said quietly, “it is your beautiful soul that you are hiding behind the many masks you wear all the time. I can’t assume that I’ve ever got more than a glimpse of it – at the time when your friend was visiting – but I’d like to see more.”

Brian shook his head in bewilderment. “I’m nothing special, Alain.”

“Oh, but you are,” Alain rose and draped an arm gently around his shoulders. “Why else would your best friend still be loving you, after twenty years? I knew that you were one of a million the moment I saw you. You probably don’t know it yourself. As I’ve told you before, I’d like to help you discover your true depths, if you’ll let me.”

“Alain, I… I just don’t know,” Brian sighed, the stress of this strange night and the heavy blood loss finally catching up with him. “I’ll have to think about this… very carefully. Once it’s done, we won’t be able to undo it.”

“Take your time,” Alain murmured, stroking his face with uncharacteristic gentleness. “I’ll be waiting for you.”

As soon as Brian sank into exhausted sleep, Alain kissed him softly and laid him into his own bed.

“Watch him,” he ordered Peppone. “I have some phone calls to make.”
**Revelations, Part 3**

Chapter Notes

Once again, I broke the chapter into smaller parts, to make reading easier. This is a direct continuation of Revelations, Part 2. There will be much talking and little action, I’m afraid, but sometimes talkative parts are necessary for the understanding of the bigger picture.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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**REVELATIONS, Part 3**

First, Alain called the *Barofsky Research Faculty for Haematology* – a medical institute for blood research, led by Brujah scientist Dr. Takura Shiraiwa, also serving as the only Kindred clinic in the city – where he was told that Dr. Gloria Martinez was already on her way to his house, thank to Peppone’s earlier call. Then he called Victor Girard to tell him about the most recent “Sabbat incident”.

Victor became very agitated, as expected… and rightly so. The “Shepherds of Caine” was a rather vicious Sabbat pack, and Yitzhak was their pack priest. Plus, when *one* Sabbat pack had managed to infiltrate the city, there could be more. Aside from the ones that had already dwelt there for some time.

“I’ll give a city-wide security alert,” the Toreador Primogen said. “And I’ll inform Angelus. He needs to know. Can we hold the crisis meeting in your house?”

“Sure. There’s enough room in the big atelier. And I’d prefer to remain in my own haven tonight. I’ve healed already, but I feel still a bit shaky. Yitzhak has grown very strong since our last encounter.”

“Diablerie can do that to a monster,” Victor commented dryly. “See you in about half an hour.”

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The first one to arrive was Gloria Martinez, some twenty minutes later. The small, lovely Latino woman quickly and efficiently cleaned up and examined the sleeping Brian – including his most private areas, applying some healing salve to the mortal’s torn and bleeding anus – and gave him several iron shots to even out the blood loss.

“You should be more careful with your toys,” he warned Alain. “Humans are fragile, compared with us.”

Alain rolled his eyes at this typical neonate tendency to lecture those who were centuries older. “It wasn’t me, Gloria. He had the bad luck to pick up a Sabbat in a gay bar.”

“And weren’t you supposed to watch over him?” Gloria asked pointedly. The concerned manners of a doctor gave way to those of a smart street kid that she once had been. The one who’d tracked down Salvador Garcia, confronting him with the news that she’d figured out he was a vampire.
“I was,” Alain replied pointedly; she was a Brujah, and not so long ago she had been an Anarch, too; two very good reasons not to raise her ire. “Which is the reason why he’s still alive.”

“And what’s the reason of him being severely anaemic?” Gloria asked with a frown. “He’s not injured.”

“Yeah, but I was,” Alain said. “He saved my life. I only took as much as it was necessary for my survival, but… I had severe wounds.”

“So he knows what you are,” Gloria frowned. “Did you make him forget? Planted a believable story in his mind?”

“I can’t. He’s a resistor.”

“Then you’ll have to Embrace him. Or to kill him.”

“I’m most certainly not going to kill him,” Alain replied coldly. “Sure, I’d like to Embrace him, but in the end, it’s his decision.”

“Hmmm,” Gloria seemed amused. “What happened to protecting the Masquerade, no matter the costs? I thought you were devoted to Camarilla laws.”

“I thought you were Camarilla, too,” Alain riposted. “Besides, has it not always been the dream of your Sire to live and work in peace with the Kine, just like your Clan supposedly did in Ancient Carthage?”

Gloria shrugged. “I love and respect my Sire enormously, but he can be delusional sometimes. Forging a shared community with the Kine is his dream, not mine. I prefer playing safe.”

“Is that why you’ve joined the Camarilla?” Alain asked.

The lady doctor nodded. “The rules aren’t too harsh here. Even my Sire lives by them - well, mostly - although nominally he remains an Anarch… where the true power lies.”

Peppone appeared in the open door, interrupting their conversation. “Alain, the emergency meeting is complete. They’re waiting for you.”

Alain smiled and patted the slender Italian vampire – his friend and (strictly platonic) company for the last three centuries – on the shoulder.

“Thank you, Peppone. I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

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When he entered the atelier, which had been hurriedly turned into a conference room, Alain couldn’t help but think that the people present actually were representing Salvador Garcia’s dream of coexistence between Kindred and Kine of all directions.

There was, for starters, LAPD detective Joaquin Murietta: an exceptionally handsome man, progeny of a Latino father and a black mother, but also a 6th generation Toreador of Ancient Blood – incredibly strong as Kindred go. He wasn’t just the Brood brother of the late Prince, Don Sebastian (diablerized by Salvador Garcia in 1944) but had also been the Prince’s Enforcer and always devoted to the Camarilla.

His mortal partner, Detective Bianca Moralez, was smart, beautiful… and the biological sister of a recently Embraced Brujah fledgling, who’d found an untimely – and gruesome – Final Death not so
long ago, igniting and burning in the sun in Belize. Detective Moralez was one of those mortals who knew about the existence of the Kindred in Los Angeles, and actually helped to cover their track from too nosy colleagues.

Kevin Jackson, on the other hand, a broadly built, handsome black man with a military buzz, was the leader of one of the most influential Anarch gangs in the city, the Jackson gang, while Jesus Ramirez, an expatriate of Nicaragua, represented Salvador Garcia’s forces, La Hermandad. They were both Ventrue, as in LA the Clan that in other cities usually supported the Camarilla, made up a healthy percentage of the Anarch forces.

Alonzo Guillen, an elegant, sophisticated Nosferatu with the striking resemblance to Egyptian death masks, was the right hand of Nosferatu Primogen Hawk, who’d once been the Enforcer of Justicar Petrodon, the sworn enemy of Salvador Garcia. All Nosferatu were in the Camarilla in LA, but that didn’t hinder them in cooperating with the Anarch forces against the Sabbat threat.

Arthur Gonzales represented the scattered Gangrel in LA. An independent Clan ever since Xaviar had pulled them out of the Camarilla, the Gangrel had not Primogen, but the two major bloodlines had chosen a common representative from a third one that wasn’t even resident in the city, to ensure his neutrality.

The Malkavians had sent Duke Fontaine, an ex CIA-agent and Vietnam War veteran, who’d been fairly crazy in his mortal days already, becoming infamous due to his interrogation methods, which had earned him the nickname “Free Fall Fontaine”. He’d regularly threatened his captives to throw them off the helicopter, unless they started talking. Nevertheless, he was Camarilla, the right hand and weapons expert of his Primogen, and the guardian of the largest weapons depot of the LA Kindred – by mutual agreement.

Kyoko Shinsegawa, known as “the Scourge of San Francisco”, was an elderly, fragile-looking Japanese woman – and the second-ranking sorceress of the local Tremere chantry. Camarilla, and the sworn enemy of the Sabbat for very personal reasons, she was capable of causing horrible things due to sorcery… and didn’t hesitate to do so, if necessary.

Allison Maller, a pretty blonde, had been a specially trained government assassin, until Embraced by Salvador Garcia. She had her own Domain in Anaheim and was Anarch to the bone. Unlike Sergeant Miguel Sanchez, an LAPD police officer and Salvador’s grand-Childe, also present in this gathering.

The Ravnos were usually quite unwelcome in any Domain, but they had a small yet not constant presence in LA: Independent clans were particularly threatened to get under the wheels in the power struggle between the Camarilla and the Sabbat, and their only hope was to find a more or less safe haven in one of the few remaining Free Anarch Cities. However, Jacopo Taddi was an unusually adventurous spirit who voluntarily submerged among the Sabbat time and again, with various false identities, to gather vital information for La Hermandad. He was a big, ruggedly handsome man, with an uncanny resemblance to Antonio Banderas – due to which he normally had a great effect on women.

And – last but not least – there were the representatives of the Anarch Prince of the City: his Seneschal and favourite Childe, Spike aka William the Bloody, clad in black leather and blood red silk, and Faith the Sabbat Slayer – the most disturbing vampire Alain had ever met outside the Sabbat. A psychotic, homicidal Slayer in league with evil forces and demons, who’d decided to make amends while sitting in prison, then asked for the Embrace from the former Scourge of Europe and thus became a member of the Line of Aurelius and blood bound to her Sire… The whole thing was unsettling on more levels than Alain cared to count. And the haunted eyes of the Slayer always
followed him for days, even after a chance encounter.

Of course, it was Spike who broke the silence among them – he was much too impatient to wait.

“So, mate,” he said, directing his words to Alain, “you said it was urgent. Speak up then.”

“You’ve mentioned a Sabbat situation,” Kyoko Shinsegawa added, her educated tone in sharp contrast to Spike’s.

Alain nodded. “I’ve just had a run-in with Yitzhak – the pack priest of the ‘Shepherds of Caine’.”

Joaquin Murietta’s eyes glittered. “Yitzhak… he’s a disgrace to our entire Clan. I’d love to delete him from the playground. But if he’s here, the others can’t be far, either. Sabbat packs don’t travel without their priest. If no one else, his Childe, Sabrina, must be here with him.”

“Do we know anything about the whereabouts of the rest of the pack?” Sergeant Sanchez asked.

“At least one of them has been seen in the city,” Arthur Gonzales replied grimly, “Frere Marc.”

“But if he is here, Cherubim can’t be far, either,” Kyoko Shinsegawa said in worry. “She’s the most dangerous of all – especially as nobody would suspect someone who looks like a twelve-year-old girl.”

“Wasn’t she only eight when she got Embraced?” Jacopo asked with a frown.

“She always looked older,” Kyoko answered. “She was particularly mature for her age. Under what name does she run now?”

Jacopo shrugged. “Miranda, I think. There have been sightings in San Francisco in the recent years.”

“What?” Duke Fontaine snarled, clearly agitated. “They managed to sneak into the city of Julian Luna? Into one of the most tightly controlled cities in California? That’s bad news! What did she want there?”

“Apparently, she tried to find a way to infiltrate the local Legacy House,” Jacopo said. “She very nearly succeeded – through the psychic child of one of the Legacy hunters.”

“Clever… and disgusting,” Kyoko said. “It doesn’t surprise me, though.”

“But if she managed to get into San Francisco, she’d have an easy game to walk into LA as she pleases,” Fontaine warned. “She’s one of the vilest witches who’ve ever lived.”

“So we can assume the presence of at least four pack members,” Detective Murietta summarized.

“Five,” the Nosferatu corrected. “There’s a rumour among our Clan that Raphael Catarari had been seen in Santa Monica. Hawk didn’t want to believe it… but now I believe it must have been true, after all.”

“You need to check this rumour,” Victor Girard said. “Santa Monica is your precinct – nobody knows the hiding places better than you.”

The Nosferatu nodded. “I’m working on it.”

“Any word of other Sabbat packs?” Girard asked.

“The ‘Night Crew’ has been in the city for some time,” Sergeant Sanchez replied with a shrug, “but
they are no real threat. A bunch of hot-headed Brujah thugs with one Gangrel who likes to believe that he’s their leader. Besides, they don’t leave al-Muthlim’s Domain. I have them under constant surveillance.”

“They might join al-Muthlim’s gang, though,” Duke Fontaine warned. “How many of them are here?”

“Only five,” Sanchez said. “Tenth to twelfth generation. No big deal. I’m more worried about the reappearance of a Ventrue named Dancer. He’s a psychotic transgender artist who seduces his victims either as a man or as a woman and reveals in torturing them for days before the actual killing. He was seen in one of the fetish clubs: La Lune Rouge. Lady Heather alarmed us immediately, but he slipped through our fingers.”

“Was he alone?” the Ravnos asked.

“No, with a Mexican named José Sadillo. Do you know him?”

“Sadillo is a Ravnos,” Jacopo Taddi said, “a Sabbat from Mexico City and an important member of the ‘Crypt-Ticks’ nomadic pack. He and Dancer are usually sent forward to scout the area the pack intends to take over.”

“Who’s their pack priest?” Sanchez asked.

“A Malkavian named Jack Knife; a crazed killer himself,” Taddi replied. “Other known pack members are: a Brujah, Tony Hodo-Leatherback, formerly a professional wrestler; Leo Washington, a Gangrel who used to be the leader of a vicious street gang, and a Toreador by the name of Thomas Jurras. Jurras is said to have been an FBI agent in his warm days and still has excellent contacts. How many foot soldiers they have, I don’t know. A lot.”

“This is not good,” Kyoko Shinsegawa said grimly. “Three Sabbat packs on their way to infiltrate our city – not to mention al-Muthlim’s people and the Setites who’re already here. This time we’re facing something big.”

“The ‘Shepherds of Caine’ are definitely the most dangerous of the whole,” Alain said. “I’ve seen them in action; it’s beyond ugly. If they follow their usual tactic, they’ll go for the fledglings first – and they won’t simply kill them. They’ll dialberize the weak first, then go for the older and stronger ones. We’ll have to hide our youngest Childer someplace safe, and then hit the pack, quickly and hard, before they have the time to make their move.”

“It won’t be easy,” the Malkavian said. “After your fight with Yitzhak, they know we have been warned. They’ll be more careful.”

“That’s exactly why we have to hit them first,” Spike shrugged. “Let’s find their lair and smoke them out.”

“It’s not that easy,” Victor Girard sighed. “They are an old pack, and some of them are incredibly strong.”

“And we have the Slayer with us,” Spike pointed out.

“I’m not sure that will be enough,” Joaquin Murietta said grimly. “Slayer powers or not, the ‘Shepherds’ are serial diabolists. Only Caine knows what they are capable of. Especially Yitzhak and Frere Marc. Not to mention Cherubim, who has the advantage of looking like a little girl. There’s a natural hesitation to kill a child, even if we know that in truth it’s a monster.”
“I have no problem with that,” Spike shrugged.

“Aside from the fact that she could kill you without breaking a sweat,” Murietta replied. “She has gained at least three generations by diablerie, and she is a witch. You won’t have a rat’s chance against her.”

“Kyoko is the only one who’d have a chance,” Fontaine said.

“Perhaps,” the Tremere witch allowed cautiously. “The problem is, she knows me. She would feel my presence and be alerted at once. But I can try... unless Lady Abigail is willing to make a move herself.”

“Let’s hope she is,” Victor Girard murmured. “We’d definitely need that advantage.”

“Very well then,” Murietta summarized. “We need to find their lair and take out the pack priest and the witch. I’ll take care of Yitzhak. Hopefully, Lady Abigail will take care of Cherubim. The others are just muscle.”

“Unfortunately, no Sabbat monster is ‘just muscle’,” Alain warned. “We should divide the packs and assign a different group to each, hitting them simultaneously.”

“We can’t well enter al-Muthlim’s Domain and hunt down the 'Night Crew' right under his nose,” Sergeant Sanchez said.

“I can,” Faith spoke for the first time, her rough voice cold. “I’m the Slayer and the Enforcer of the Prince. I can enter any Domain within his. And so can Spike. We’ll take our own people – no need for you to get involved.”

“La Hermandad is with you,” Jesus Ramirez spoke up. “We’re in the neighbourhood anyway, and Salvador has been worried about the Sabbat activity for quite some time.”

“And I’ll see if I can find Dancer and the rest of the 'Crypt-Ticks','” Jacopo Taddi looked at Kevin Jackson. “I’ll come to you when I’ve found out anything. You have the people to take care of the problem.”

They all agreed to send all information to the resident Nosferatu computer wizard, a former college professor nicknamed Four-Eyes, who moderated the undead info network on the Internet, then the meeting was adjourned. To make their first move, they had to figure out the whereabouts of the enemy first.

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Before turning in, Alain visited Brian for a moment. The human was still very pale, despite his perfect tan – a result achieved in sun banks – and the iron shots he had recently got. Alain had expected to find him fast sleep, but to his surprise, Brian was wide awake – and visibly nervous. Small wonder, under the circumstances.

“You should rest,” Alain said.

“I would, if I could,” Brian replied dryly, “but at the moment, I don’t exactly feel safe enough to let down my guard, you know.”

“That’s understandable,” Alain agreed. “I’ve almost killed you an hour or so ago.”

“You saved my fucking life,” Brian said, “And don’t think I’m not grateful. That’s not how I’ve planned to die. I just... freaked out from the blood-sucking part, that’s all.”
“Yitzhak wouldn’t have simply killed you, had I not interfered,” Alain said grimly. “He’d have turned you into one of his kind.”

“Which is exactly what you have been planning all along,” Brian crooked an ironic eyebrow. “Where’s the difference?”

“The difference is that I’d never Embrace you without your consent,” Alain answered indignantly. “The further difference is that after turning you, the Sabbat would have buried you alive – well, undead anyway – and expect from you to crave your way out of that grave without help… if you can. They don’t tolerate weakness in their fledglings.”

“And you do?” Brian asked doubtfully. Alain shrugged.

“Not really. But we teach them and train them, instead of simply killing them if they don’t meet our expectations. You don’t need to worry, though. We’ve selected you for the Clan exactly for the way you are. You’re the perfect choice for a Toreador.”

“And what if I don’t want to become one?”

“We’ll respect your wish, of course. However,” Alain added with a sultry smile that went directly to Brian’s groin, “I hope to persuade you to change your mind, eventually.”

Brian shook his head – and regretted it at once, because the careless gesture brought an unpleasant wave of vertigo. He was still very weak from the heavy blood loss.

“You’re not giving up, are you?” he asked.

“Not for a while, at least,” Alain said with a shrug. “I have time – but you don’t. Not much, anyway. Not before you start getting wrinkles and losing your most attractive qualities. I won’t Embrace a tattered, burned-out old sack, just that it’s clear. I want a perfect Childe, not the sorry remnants of a wasted life.”

The bluntness of his answer shook Brian to the bone.

“You find my life wasted?” he asked.

“You should look at it with a neutral eye,” Alain replied. “What have you achieved? Other than fucking every willing ass in Pittsburgh and beyond, that is?”

“I have a son,” Brian said quietly; the brutal truth of Alain’s words hurt more than he’d expected.

“And what sort of legacy are you going to leave to your son?” the vampire asked. “What can you point out to him, saying, “I’ve made this’? All your success has lasted but a moment and was forgotten in the next one. You’d leave nothing behind when you die. Nothing that would last.”

“And becoming a blood-sucking monster would change that… how exactly?” Brian asked back angrily.

The vampire laid a hand on his naked chest.

“You’ve shaped one piece of true art, and that is your body,” he said, eyeing Brian’s form with the critical detachment of the artist he was, “but even that is a fleeting thing. I can make it last. I can preserve the only item of beauty you have created… for a very long time. Think about it.”

He rose and left Brian’s apartment, without looking back.
Brian pondered over this particular aspect of things for a long time. Then, as sleep was still avoiding him, he snatched his cell phone and speed-dialed Emmett’s number. He had a strange suspicion that he knew now what was behind Emmett’s so-called ‘drug problem’… especially that Em had lived with the Blount siblings for quite some time. If he was right, nighttime would be showtime for Emmett and his lot. His new lot.

The phone rang once, twice… four times, before the answering machine picked up the call. The cheerful voice of Emmett rang out.

“Hello, this is Em’s mailbox. I’m most likely otherwise occupied and can’t answer the phone right now. Leave a message, honey, and I’ll call you back as soon as I can. By my honour as a boy scout.”

“You have never been a boy scout, and I think I know what exactly you are right now,” Brian said, irritated that he could not speak with his friend at once. “Cut the shit and call me back. I’m having problems here.”

He hung up and fell back onto his pillow, still dizzy and exhausted, and now royally pissed, too.

In his bedroom, in the elegant Blount mansion in West-Hollywood, Emmett was on his elbows and knees, while his foster Sire was pounding into his willing ass in abandon. He didn’t even hear the ringing of his cell phone that lay forgotten in the anteroom.

There were definite advantages in being given into the custody of a vampire with Edward Blount’s stamina and appetites.

Even if he had to share the man with his twin cousins.

For visuals: Dr. Gloria Martinez as played by Kamala López

Chapter End Notes

“Free Fall” Fontaine is a character borrowed from the excellent Vietnam War series “Tour of Duty”. Allison Maller is very different from her canon version; she was modelled after Peta Wilson’s character in “La Femme Nikita”. Sergeant Sanchez was a regular character in the police series ”Adam 12” (new version). Cherubim aka Miranda was a returning villain in “Poltergeist – The Legacy”, although with a slightly different background. I love all these shows and wanted to keep some of my favourite characters to play with them a little.
Forging the Bond, Part 1

Chapter Summary

While the fight between Camarilla and Sabbat vampires is still going on in LA, Brian, safely guarded in the Hyperion, gets acquainted with the local Legacy members and learns a lot about things that bump in the night.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

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FORGING THE BOND, Part 1

For the next couple of days Brian was ordered strict bed rest. Under other circumstances he’d have climbed the walls – he was practically never sick – but the heavy blood loss had taken its toll, despite the iron shots. So, for perhaps the first time in his life, he obeyed without as much as a word of protest.

Sarina brought him light meals three or four times a day and threatened him into taking Vitamin E-capsules (real ones, not Ecstasy tablettes that often were nicknamed so) and iron pills. They chatted a bit about neutral topics: mostly about the upcoming Rage movie, the success of which might pave the way to for Sarina’s breakthrough as an actress. That was a safe thing to talk about, and Brian did his best not to think about his voluntary nurse’s true identity. Because there couldn’t be any doubt that Sarina, too, was a vampire. She was too close to Alain not to be one.

Alain paid Brian daily visits as well, keeping himself at arm’s length all the time. He knew the mortal needed time to accept the truth that had been revealed to him quite untimely – and without the necessary prep work. Although, to be honest, how could someone be prepared for a truth like that? Besides, he had other things on his mind right now – and he was not alone with that. Every vampire in LA was preoccupied with the Sabbat threat and the possible methods of dealing with it.

On the fourth day, the pretty lady doctor returned to check on Brian, and after a thorough – and partially embarrassing – examination, declared him strong enough to be moved. As long as he took it slow, she added as a warning.

“Moved?” Brian repeated after the doctor had left. “Where the fuck should I be moved to?”

“To a place safer than mine,” Alain replied seriously. “There will be a big fight between… between us and Yitzhak’s people, soon. And now that they are aware of your importance for the Clan – for me – they would come for you. And they’d look for you here first.”

“How could they know about me at all?” Brian asked, trying very hard not to panic. “That Yitzhak guy was the only one who knew me, and you’ve taken care of him, haven’t you?” As Alain didn’t answer at once, Brian became even more nervous. “You have that freak taken care of, right?”

Alan sighed. “Unfortunately, not. We… we were too late. When our people went to pick him up, he was already gone. His own pack must have been somewhere nearby.”
“Oh, great!” Brian scowled. “So I’m still considered dinner by some crazed monster, who’s possibly royally pissed at me for hitting him with an iron bar.”

“He’s most likely not happy about that,” Alain agreed. “Which is the reason why I want to bring you to a safe haven. It’s only temporary, until we’ve taken care of them altogether.”

“And what if you lose?” Brian asked quietly.

“In that case you should take the first plane back to Pittsburgh,” Alan replied, “because that would mean that I’d be dead – the Final Death sort of dead – and no longer able to protect you. But don’t worry just yet; we’ve fought these monsters before, and I’m still here, aren’t I? And so are the others.”

“Very convincing,” Brian said, not the least convinced. “Where are you taking me anyway?”

“To the safest place that could be found in LA right now,” Alain said. “To the only mortals that can face my kind. You’ll be better off among your own people during the next few days.”

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That didn’t tell Brian much, but Alain refused to say anything else. On the next day, however, a square-jawed, muscular young man with a military buzz arrived to Alain’s house with a black jeep and asked for Brian. Although wearing casual civvies, his entire mannerism practically screamed ex-military, which made Brian extremely uncomfortable, despite the fact that the man was a true eye-candy. Jarheads weren’t his preferred sort of people, as jarheads were generally homophobic – and strong enough to make a lot of damage as a sign of their dislike.

“I’m Graham Miller,” this particular jarhead introduced himself, “chief of security in the LA house of the Luna Foundation. I was sent to take you there.” Seeing Brian’s obvious discomfort, he grinned briefly. “Don’t worry,” he said, “I’m not on liquid diet. Nobody employed by the Foundation is.”

“You seem to know about those who are, though,” Brian said in suspicion. The jarhead named Graham Miller shrugged.

“Well… I used to serve in a special unit of the armed forces… a very special unit. Let’s just say that vampires aren’t the weirdest thing I’ve seen in my line of work. Which is why I got my current job. The Foundation needed someone who wouldn’t freak out by the sight of Hostiles.”

“Hostile… what?” Brian frowned.

“Hostile sub-terrestrials,” the other man explained. “That’s the official euphemism for vampires, demons and others of similar kind.”

“Official… euphemism,” Brian repeated in disbelief. “As in the government or the military or…”

“A very special branch of the Marines, actually,” Graham said matter-of-factly. “I was a Marine before being selected for Special Ops.”

Special Ops. Oh God, the man was a cold-blooded killer. With the official blessing of the government, no less. And Brian was supposed to go with that to a previously unknown location? Was Alain fucking insane? Brian shook his head in exasperation. Could his life get any more complicated?

Graham gave him an amused look. “No need to be paranoid,” he said. “I’m not the one who bites here.”
“Sometimes,” Brian riposted tartly, “so-called normal people are worse than certified monsters.”

“Tell me something I don’t already know,” Graham said grimly, remembering Professor Walsh and her inhuman experiments on sentient beings, evil as they might be. “But the folks of the Foundation are decent people. And you’ll need a hiding place for the next couple of days. Trust me: you wouldn’t like getting caught between the fronts of the undead.”

Which was very true, of course. So, still wary and suspicious, Brian finally got into the jeep with two suitcases and his laptop, and Graham drove him from Hollywood to Downtown Los Angeles, which, surprisingly, didn’t take too long, as the traffic wasn’t very stark at this early hour. The jeep stopped in front of a beautiful old building in Spanish-Californian Art Deco style. The sign on its front declared that it was the Hyperion Hotel, built in 1918 – probably a very popular place at its prime, now a relic, but renovated not so long ago. Next to its main entrance was a black marble plaque with simple, but elegant gold letters that said “Luna Foundation”.

Graham led Brian into a marble-floored foyer that had most likely been reconstructed with the help of old photographs because it looked absolutely authentic. It was furnished with overstuffed armchairs and circular sofas, polished coffee tables and stained glass lamps, and the wallpapers seemed to be gold-embroidered brocade. Even an old-fashioned television set, seemingly out of the 1950s (but with a flat digital screen) stood in one corner. It was very classy; whoever had been responsible for the redecorating, they had a good eye for the details. Brian already felt extravagant ideas taking shape in his head about how he could use this room for ad purposes.

But it wasn’t the time for work-related ogling yet. Graham gestured him to come to a semi-circular desk that once must have been the workplace of the receptionist but was nor obviously the control centre of some pretty sophisticated, high-tech surveillance system, with a control panel like the bridge of the Starship Enterprise and a dozen or so monitors. A large, straw-haired, college football player type guy was sitting at the controls, and Brian’s gaydar went off the scale in the moment their glances met. Hmmm… the place started looking more promising.

“Hey, Larry,” Graham said. “Is everything all right?”

“Smooth sailing, boss,” the big buff with the name tag ‘Blaisdell’ on his breast pocket replied. “We keep the perimeter under constant surveillance.”

Graham gave the monitors a cursory look and nodded. “Good. We’ll make a good little soldier out of you yet.”

“Yeah, and the President is a drag queen,” the guy named Larry snorted. “I’m pretty content with what I am now, thanks. Oh, and by the way, the Precept wanted to discuss security measures with you. Preferably yesterday.”

“Am I not a lucky man?” Graham said sarcastically. “All right, can you see Mr. Kinney here to his room? I think he’ll appreciate your company more than mine, anyway.”

“I hope so,” Larry replied with a suggestive leer, and then he called out, seemingly into the empty room. “Gunn, could you take over for me?”

“Sure, man,” a voice with an unmistakable street accent answered, and a previously unnoticed black guy emerged from one of the large armchairs. “I’m free for the next couple of hours and bored out of my head anyway.”

“Thanks,” Larry changed places with him and picked one of the keys from the old-fashioned board hanging on the wall behind the desk. “Come with me, Mr. Kinney?”
Brian grabbed his suitcases and followed Mr. Big, Buff & Gorgeous to the elevator, which was a relic, too, with its gilded doors and brocade-covered cabin walls. It was also in perfect order, though, even if a bit slow, and took them to the third floor safely.

“This is where the guest quarters are,” Larry explained. “The Foundation’s labs and the rooms of Foundation members are on the ground and the first floors. The second floor is off-limits; it’s reserved for the hotel owner and his family. Some security people live on the third floor, too, because we came later and the first floor was full already.”

The hint was very obvious, even a little clumsy, and Brian suppressed a grin. Contrary to common belief, some of the football player types could be such nelly bottoms that they’d put Emmett to shame. This Larry character seemed one of those, which was exactly what Brian needed at the moment.

“Which one is yours?” he asked bluntly. That shocked Larry for a moment, but he recovered quickly enough.

“Down the floor, number 304,” he said. “Yours is number 312, right over here. I don’t know how well your bathroom is equipped, though; the girls prepared the room. So, if you need anything…”

“I know where I find you,” Brian finished the sentence.

They grinned in complete agreement, and – after dropping his belongings in the room prepared for him – Brian followed the buff security man to #304.

Half an hour – and a blowjob performed by Larry masterfully – later, Brian finally got around unpacking his suitcases. After the surreality of the last few days, an honest fuck (and the promise of more, as soon as Larry got off-duty) was exactly what he needed to keep the rest of his sanity. Even though he was still weakened from his recent… adventures, he didn’t have his reputation for nothing. He still had enough stamina to nail Larry’s fine ass to the mattress and take out his pent-up frustration on it. He needed to be the aggressor once again, to balance out his position in Alain’s bed – and to flush the memory of what the monster Yitzhak had done to him out of his system.

He finished unpacking and powered up his laptop; he was supposed to work from this place, after all. Not that there would be much to do; the current campaigns were running smoothly, and his undead associates were busy with other things at the moment. This was the ideal time to do some creative thinking. Winter season would come faster than one expected, and he needed to plan the campaign for the *Rage* movie well in advance. *That* was one project he determined to help to success. For Mikey. And to piss the Nutty Professor off that he could give Mikey something Ben couldn’t.

But it seemed that no undisturbed work would be granted him today. Barely had he begun, someone knocked on the door, and – without waiting for an answer or invitation – Emmett waltzed into the room. This time, however, the flamboyant queen of Liberty Avenue was uncharacteristically serious.

“Hi, Brian,” he greeted the mortal and dropped into one of the comfortable armchairs. “I’m told that you’ve finally discovered the true nature of your host?”

“Apparently, you beat me at it,” Brian riposted.

Emmett pulled a face. “Not voluntarily, believe me. Going through Becoming unprepared wouldn’t be anybody’s idea of a good time.”
“Becoming… what?” sometimes Brian had the impression that the people around him were speaking a foreign language.

Emmett raised an eyebrow. “Are we still in denial? Or have they forgotten to tell you that I’m one of them now? A blood-sucking fiend of eternal night?”

He tried to make it sound ironic, but there was a bitterness in his voice that Brian had never heard before. Not when Emmett and Ted’s relationship fell to pieces, due to Ted’s Crystal addiction. Not when Drew Boyd turned out the same cheating bastard as Emmett’s other partners.

“Well, look at the bright side of it,” Brian said, in a lame attempt to cheer his friend up. “At least you won’t need to worry about getting old.”

“No,” Emmett agreed bitterly, “since I’m dead already, that’s not gonna be a problem.”

“You’re amazingly mobile and vocal for a dead man,” Brian said, “Actually, all of you guys are.”

“Unlife is a weird thing,” Emmett admitted. “No sunbaths, no real food – we can eat, but it wouldn’t nourish us, so most vampires stop eating after a while – hiding one’s true nature out of fear from the Hunters… I thought it wouldn’t be necessary for me, ever, as I’ve been out all my life. It’s a lot to adapt to. Even if you’ve chosen this kind of… existence voluntarily.”

“Which you hadn’t.” It wasn’t a question. Brian still had to learn the details, but based on Emmett’s behaviour it was clear that the younger man hadn’t volunteered to become a vampire.

“I think I’m the only one of my generation who got Embraced by accident,” Emmett replied with a derisive snort. “Just because an insane, undead drag queen got carried away with blood lust and nearly sucked me dry through my dick…” Seeing Brian’s smirk, he rolled his eyes. “Not that way, you idiot!”

Brian frowned. “Are you telling me that vampires feed by cocksucking? That’s… kinky.”

Emmett couldn’t help but laugh. “You really have a one-track mind. But no, that would be a bit, well…” he shook his head. “Usually, we feed from the wrist or the neck – that’s a clean and simple procedure. Although, yes, technically, any big vein would do the trick.”

“That’s a relief,” Brian said. “I was afraid I wouldn’t be able to get a boner in a darkroom ever again.”

“Very few vampires are insane enough to feed in such public places, before the eyes of witnesses,” Emmett replied. “It would kinda make the whole Masquerade thing pointless.”

“Alain said that not all bloodsuckers are committed to the Masquerade,” Brian pointed out.

“True,” Emmett nodded, “but even the Sabbat know that hey wouldn’t stand a chance against SWAT teams with flame-throwers, so they, too, are reasonably careful as a rule.”

Brian frowned. This was the second time that someone hinted the government might know about the existence of… well, of non-humanoid creatures.

“You mean the police or the Army or wherever knows about you guys?”

“Some of them know,” Emmett replied. “Not many, my… my new family says, and they try to cover all knowledge to avoid mass panic among the Kine.”
“Among the what?” Once again, Brian had the impression that everyone was talking in a foreign language around him.

“Mortals,” Emmett explained. “Can you imagine the hysterics when people realized that vampires and demons are real?”

“Well, considering that some people are willing to believe in fairies, that’s only one step further,” Brian grinned, remembering Emmett and Michael’s brief brush with that insane fairy cult.

Emmett shrugged nonchalantly, but his eyes were serious. “Believing in every possible insanity is one thing. Knowing that they exist is something else. And people tend to react violently to everything they fear or can’t understand.”

“True,” Brian admitted; gay-bashing was one of such reactions. “So, tell me… what’s it like to be a vampire?”

“Well,” Emmett brushed his fingernails on his shirt in an affectionate manner, “the diet is a bit one-sided, and sunbaths are out of the question, but the sex is frequent and great, and the not getting older part is a definite bonus. Not to mention that vampires are generally a lot stronger than humans, so I probably won’t have to be worried about homophobes ever again.”

It sounded almost convincing, but Brian had known Emmett for too long to buy it.

“Save the show,” he said. “I want to know what it’s really like. Starting with that so-called drug episode of yours. I know you don’t do drugs, so…”

Emmett sighed, the fake brightness vanishing from his face. “That was my Becoming, actually. My transformation. It was a very painful thing, turning into something else… something entirely different,” he extended a talon to demonstrate.

Brian shivered. “What else?”

“Fangs,” Emmett dropped them briefly. “And our eyes turn silver when we are hungry. Or fighting. Or generally in rage.”

“But I saw Alain turn into a wolf, too,” Brian said. “And he says he can turn into a bird as well.”

“Many of the elder ones can,” Emmett shrugged. “It’s a latent ability that comes with the Change, but the extent of it depends on two things: age and generation.”

Brian nodded. “Age, I can understand. Alain is more than five hundred years old, so he’s pretty strong, I guess. But what is generation?”

“Well, according to legends, Caine himself was the very first vampire, gotten cursed after killing Abel,” Emmett explained. “The second generation was Caine’s progeny; the numbers of them vary from three to six, depending on which legends you’re listening to. These are supposedly destroyed – or hiding. The third generation is called the Antediluvians, as they existed before the Great Flood already. They are said to have founded the thirteen Kindred Clans that exist today. They’re currently hiding in torpor – a coma-like state, in which Kindred can exist for a really long time, but legend says they’ll return one day and bring the Apocalypse upon the whole world.”

“And you believe that?” Brian snorted.

“I don’t really know what to believe anymore,” Emmett confessed. “During the recent weeks, the Blount sisters have drilled Kindred lore into me until I thought my head would explode. I’m just
All right,” Brian said. “So, how does it continue? What comes after those anti-dead guys?”

“Antediluvians,” Emmett corrected. “Be careful, Kindred are a bit… sensitive about their terminology. Anyway, the next level are the Methuselahs, members of the fourth and fifth generation. There are very few of them still around, the true power lies in the hand of those of Ancilla Blood: the sixth, seventh and eight generation. Young Bloods are of generation nine and ten; all above that are considered Weak Blood, like me.”

“Which generation are you?” Brian asked, suddenly curious.

“Twelfth,” Emmett replied with a shrug. “Besides, I’m just a fledgling… a neonate. I haven’t been presented to the Prince yet.”

“Presented?” Brian repeated; it had an unpleasant sound to it. “And what Prince…?”

Emmett rolled his eyes. “The Prince of the City, of course. Has Alain told you nothing about Kindred society?”

“He told me a lot, but I couldn’t really make heads and tails of it, aside from the fact that it’s some sort of feudal system,” Brian admitted.

“That’s true,” Emmett said. “Well, the Third Tradition states that no new vampire can be created without the permission of the local Prince, or the Clan Elders, in case there’s no Prince. I was lucky that the Prince hasn’t ordered my destruction, together with that of my idiot Sire, ‘cuz sure as hell that Celeste hadn’t asked first.”

Brian felt a chill run down his spine. “You could have been killed, just because of some arcane vampire rule?”

“Or left to die,” Emmett said, “which would have been longer and a lot more painful. People usually don’t survive the Becoming without help from their Elders, and my Sire was in no shape to help anyone, not even himself. Herself. Whatever.”

“But since you’re here, someone did help you, right?” Brian asked.

“It was Victor Girard,” Emmett replied. “He’s the leader of our Clan. And it was your Alain who took the risk to go to Angelus – the Prince – and beg for my life.”

“He’s not my Alain,” Brian corrected automatically; then he looked up in surprise. “He petitioned for your survival? Why would he do that?”

Emmett shrugged. “I don’t know. Likely, he did it for you, since we’re friends. Everyone knows that he’d do anything to get you.”

“Like nearly sucking me dry?” Brian asked wryly.

“You still don’t understand it, do you?” Emmett gave him an almost angry glare. “I’m just a fledgling, but I hear things when my Elders talk. This… Yitzhak character is a monster the magnitude of which you can’t even begin to imagine. The consensus is that Alain starting a fight with him was a suicidal action. Had you not found that iron bar, you’d be both dead now.”

“I know,” Brian admitted. “I could see that Alain was losing the fight, big time. I… I was never so scared in my entire life.”
For a moment, Emmett stared at him in shock. The old Brian Kinney would’ve never admitted something like that. But again, the old Brian Kinney hadn’t socialized with undead citizens, either.

“You’re learning,” he said in mock appreciation; then he rose. “Well, I’ll better be going now. The Thirst is rearing its ugly head, and that’s not something you’d want to see.”

Brian rolled his eyes. “You really think that seeing you kip a glass of blood behind your collar would shock me? After what I’ve seen not so long ago?”

“Probably not,” Emmett said, “but my controls aren’t strong enough yet,” he retracted a talon that had emerged on its own. “God, I hate this! It makes manicure seem so pointless… Anyway, watching a vampire feed isn’t very… appetizing for outsiders. I’ve puked for days after my Becoming, every time I tried to feed. See ya later!”

He waved his goodbyes and left, swaying his hips in his usual, seductive manner, leaving a very thoughtful Brian behind. Everything he’d heard about vampires before had now become a new and more serious meaning for Brian. Before, it had only been an intellectual game, trying to make the impossible imaginable somehow. But having seen an old friend drop fangs and extend talons – that had made everything frighteningly real.

He couldn’t deny the reality of it any longer. The question was now: was he interested in this sort of life… unlife… whatever? Could he ever get used to live in darkness and to feed on people? To drink blood, to call the deal by name?

He wasn’t sure about that.

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When Larry’s duty shift ended, Brian went over to the security man’s room and fucked him through the mattress, bringing him to several screaming orgasms. It was good to be in control again. To drown all his questions and worries in the white heat of pleasure. But when it was over, Brian fell back into brooding mode again.

“Hey,” Larry rolled onto his side and shot Brian a sleepy-questioning look. “What’s wrong with you? It was hot, wasn’t it?”

“Yeah,” Brian nodded in agreement. “I just… I’ve got a lot on my mind lately.”

“Uh-huh,” Larry hesitated for a moment before asking. “Can we do it again? Later sometimes?”

The old Brian Kinney would have told him that he didn’t do seconds. But the old Brian Kinney had never had to ask himself whether his casual bedmate considered him as dinner as well. So he just shrugged.

“Why not?” At least this good-natured jock was one hundred per cent human. Not to mention a great fuck. As long as he was confined to the Hyperion, Brian could put that fine ass to good use.

For tonight, however, he’d had enough. He put his clothes back on, patted Larry on aforementioned ass and returned to his own quarters. He collapsed on the sofa, switched on the TV and fell asleep somewhere in the middle of the rerun of some old Mutant X-episode.

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For visuals: Larry Blaisdell as played by Larry Bagby III
Larry Blaisdell (played by Larry Bagby III) was the only canonically gay male character in BtVS. He was supposedly killed in the last episode of Season 3, but this fact is open to interpretation. I decided to leave him alive and use him, instead of creating an original character for the part. And yes, he was a football player in the series.

Graham Miller was one of the Initiative soldiers and a friend of Riley Finn, also a canon BtVS character.
Chapter Summary

While the fight between Camarilla and Sabbat vampires is still going on in LA, Brian, safely guarded in the Hyperion, gets acquainted with the local Legacy members and learns a lot about things that bump in the night.
Continued from Part 1.

Chapter Notes

Adults only, please, for really disturbing discussion topics. Sex isn’t the only thing that might harm underage readers, you know.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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FORGING THE BOND, Part 2

The next four days were like some surreal dream for Brian. He was practically imprisoned in the Hyperion – whenever he tried to leave, some security guy told him in a friendly but firm manner that he wasn’t allowed to do so… for his own safety. Not even Larry would give in, despite the good, hard pounding Brian gave his willing ass each night. Well, at least the guy was gorgeous and provided Brian with the best sort of distraction imaginable.

He got to know the other residents of the Hyperion, too – well, at least the mortal ones, as the second floor was still off-limits. Having gotten used to the euphemisms everyone was using here, Brian strongly suspected that “the owner and his family” would be some undead freaks, too, but knew better than ask. They’d never tell him the whole truth anyway.

But he had met the leader of the Luna Foundation’s local branch: a skinny, bespectacled Englishman about his own age; him with the posh accent and the impossible, three-piece tweed suits. At first he dismissed the bookish young man and his softly rounded, always nervous-looking blonde wife as a pair of ridiculous breeders… until the day when he witnessed the Precept, as the Luna employees called their boss (except Gunn who just called him “English”) shooting some freakish creature accurately through the heart.

With a crossbow. After which aforementioned freakish creature exploded into dust. Just like that.

“That’s nothing,” Bethany, the red-haired psychology student, who had been watching the scene with him through the window, commented. “You should see him when he comes home after an all-night hunt, with a battle-axe in one hand and a sword in the other, covered with demon goo.”

“Demon… goo,” Brian repeated neutrally. He had been warned not to antagonize Bethany, who was – supposedly – a psychokinetic. Which was an urban legend, of course, but so were vampires, and yet vampires turned out to be frighteningly real.
Bethany shrugged. “A common occurrence in our field of work.”

“You seem to walk knee-deep in this freakish stuff,” Brian said. “How did you get yourself into such mess to begin with.”

“Not voluntarily, you bet,” Bethany replied with a wry smile. “Ever heard of Wolfram & Hart?”

Brian nodded. “Some kind of law firm, isn’t it? An acquaintance of mine, Phillipe Navital has dealings with them sometimes – and he doesn’t like it a bit.”

“Wolfram & Hart is a law firm that represents the interests of Sabbat vampires and other unpleasant people who are in league with the Sabbat,” Bethany explained grimly. “Some of those people are very rich and influential businessmen who are stupid enough to believe their wealth and influence would be doubled if the Sabbat took over the city.”

“It would not?” Brian asked, although he could guess the answer already.

Bethany shook her head. “For the Sabbat, we mortals are nothing but cattle. LA is a dangerous enough place as it is, but if they took over, it would become a slaughterhouse. I heard you’ve had a ‘Sabbat incident’ already – well, the rest of them aren’t any better.”

“But if they are so strong, how do Alain and the others plan to keep them off the city?” Brian asked.

“By hitting them first and killing as many of them as possible,” Bethany replied simply. “If they can do that, the Sabbat would retreat… for a while. This war has been going on for centuries, and it will continue as long as one party manages to completely eradicate the other one. And we mortals can only hope that it will end with the victory of the Camarilla, or else we’ll be moved considerably lower on the food chain.”

“So, in order to avoid a bloody massacre, Alain and his cronies must perform a bloody massacre?” Brian asked in distaste.

Bethany shrugged, her green eyes hard and cold.

“Would you hesitate to put down a rabid dog to protect yourself or those who are important to you?” she asked. “You can’t even imagine the things the Sabbat and their allies would do to reach their goals. Look at me. I was born a psychokinetic, but my ability only surfaces when I am in danger. So Wolfram & Hart arranged for me to get gang-raped, in order to bring that ability out, full force. Angel saved me, gave me shelter, and helped me to find ways to deal with this cursed ‘gift’. Do you think I wouldn’t do everything I can to help him… and to see Wolfram & Hart brought permanently down?”

Brian had to admit that she had a point. He said so. She smiled faintly.

“Every single mortal in this house has a similar story,” she said. “And most of the younger vamps, too.”

“Oh,” Brian said in satisfaction. “That’s why the second floor is off-limits, isn’t it? There are vampires in the house.”

Bethany nodded. “Yeah, but only fledges. Newly-embraced ones who aren’t strong enough to fight an all-our war with the Sabbat yet. Like your friend Emmett. They are just as restricted to the house as you are… for their own safety. It’s a custom of the Sabbat to kill the weak first and go for the strong afterwards.”
“Well, if that isn’t a reassuring thought,” Brian grinned mirthlessly. “Being closed in a house with a bunch of green vampires who have no control over their blood lust.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Bethany replied sharply. “They are closely watched, every minute of the day. Besides, they sleep during daytime anyway, and can’t enter the floors where the mortal residents live. Those places are warded.”

“They are what?” Brian frowned, getting the feeling of some weird Goth movie. Bethany sighed impatiently.

“Really, your ignorance will be the death of yours one day. Warded means protected by a spell. You’d have to invite a vampire in, for him or her to enter your room.”

“Bullshit,” Brian said succinctly. “Next you’d tell me you have here warlocks, too.”

“Nah,” she said. “No warlocks. Wiccas. White witches. The Precept’s wife is the strongest one among them.”

“That meek little breeder?” Brian asked incredulously. “You gotta be kidding me!”

Bethany gave him a sour look. “One doesn’t need a shrill voice or the spectacular looks of a drag queen to have powers,” she said. “I’d mind my manners around Tara Maclay, if I were you. She’s not quick to anger, fortunately, but she’s incredibly strong. Do not mess with her; in your own best interest.”

“Really?” Brian asked. “If she’s such a big shot, why does she always look like a scared rabbit?”

“Family history,” Bethany replied. “The women of her line were all witches; and the men, scared shitless from their powers, made them believe they were possessed by demons and needed to be shut away to protect the rest of humankind. She would have lived out her life in a windowless room, too, if not for her friends,” she shrugged. “It was years ago that her father tried to drag her home by force, but some memories need a long time to fade. Yours wasn’t the only rotten childhood, you know.”

Her darkening eyes spoke volumes, and Brian wisely refrained from asking. One did not provoke the crazy, psychic woman.

“Anyway,” Bethany said, yawning, “I’ve got early lessons tomorrow, and an essay that needs to be finished. Stay put and don’t do anything stupid. This will be over in a few days, one way or another. Let the vamps and the professional demon hunters deal with it.”

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That was certainly a sensible piece of advice; the only problem was Brian being too restless to “stay put”. He didn’t have the patience to surf the ‘Net, either, and it was way too late to call anyone in the Pitts, too. He knew the Foundation had an extensive library on the ground floor, but honestly, all those dusty old books about occultism, ancient history, religious beliefs and strange legends weren’t exactly his cup of tea. And the people here seemed to have something against TV – they had neither a satellite dish, nor cable access.

At least not in the guest rooms. He could only guess what was hidden away in the labs. Or better not.

So, since sleep was stubbornly avoiding him, he got dressed again – somehow he didn’t think his hosts would appreciate if he went down just in a morning robe and nothing beneath – and opted for the library anyway. It was still better than sitting in his dark hotel room, alone.

The library room was, surprisingly enough for a hotel, a cavernous space. Perhaps the people had
taken out a wall or two to create it. The smell of fine leather and aged parchment filled Brian’s nose and made him think of old mantle-and-dagger movies, as he stepped towards the shelves, truly curious now. On almost two dozen shelves were hundreds of books, varying in size and age. But all of them very old. Most of the titles were in Latin or other languages he haven’t even heard of before. Little chance for distraction here, then.

He looked around to see if anyone else would spend their night awake. Not surprisingly, the reading room was empty, save for a tall, well-built blond guy of about twenty or twenty-two, in form-fitting jeans and a short-sleeved shirt. Since Justin, Brian had developed a mild distaste for bond twinks, but the elegant, even features of this young man had nothing in common with Justin’s cheeky grin or falsely innocent eyes. Despite the closeness of age, this young man was definitely an adult. And one who had seen a lot, if the slightly haunted look of his eyes was any indication.

He heard Brian coming, however quiet the older man had been, and looked up from his book with a friendly smile.

“Hey, you’re Alain’s protégée, right? Or should I say newest obsession?” he rose from his seat and extended a hand. “I’m Owen Thurman. English major at the UCLA.”

“Brian Kinney,” Brian shook the proffered hand, which was suspiciously cool to the touch – vampire? Or just cold in that thin shirt?

“I know,” Owen replied, gesturing him to take the other seat. “We all know who you are. It’s a rare thing for Alain to get so attached to a mortal, or so I am told. I don’t really know him, not personally.”

“But you are…” Brian trailed off, not sure how to ask the question – or if he should ask it in the first place. Owen shrugged off his concern.

“Oh, I am a vampire all right,” he said, “but I try to keep out of the undead politics as well as I can. It’s not so that I’d have chosen this life… unlife… whatever.”

That didn’t sound very promising in Brian’s ears.

“I thought these Camarilla guys were not supposed to turn anyone against their will,” he said, more than a little worried.

“They’re not,” Owen agreed, “and they don’t do it, not usually. Well, it wasn’t exactly against my will, either. It’s just… My choices were fairly limited: becoming a vampire or die a slow and extremely painful death,” he shrugged again. “Turns out, my choice provided me with a long and sometimes rather painful unlife, but that’s something nobody could know in advance.”

“Sounds… unpleasant,” Brian said carefully, not really sure how to comment. The fledgling vampire pulled a face.

“Trust me, it is. But it serves me well, for my own stupidity. Why the hell did I want to visit a secret cult everyone warned me about?”

“I might get the morale of the story better if you started at the beginning,” Brian said. Perhaps if the guy talked long enough, the night would be over.

“I guess so,” Owen grinned at him charmingly, showing a row of perfect white teeth; shit, but the guy was eminently fuckable. “All right then. I grew up in a small town called Sunnydale – ever heard of it?”
Brian shook his head, “Nope.”

“You will, if you keep socializing with the undead,” Owen promised. “Well, it’s built over a place called the Hellmouth – long story; you’d better look it up in the Demon Database of the Internet…”

“There’s a demon database?” Brian was flabbergasted. Apparently, there were more freaks on the planet than he’d assumed – and he’d never had a good opinion about his fellow humans to begin with.

“And a pretty good, accurate one at that,” Owen nodded. “Moderated by one of the best demonologist we know. You should really take a look one day. It’s… educational. Okay, Sunnydale. It’s one of the worst Sabbat nests in California… perhaps even beyond. But we were your average middle-class family in happy denial that anything but the American Dream could exist. We were very good at ignoring the fact that Sunnydale had the highest mortality rate of the entire state, and the most deaths had… unusual circumstances, to put it mildly.”

“Like twin puncture wounds on the victim’s neck?” Brian asked sarcastically, but Owen nodded.

“That, and worse. But as I said, most people are big at denial, and so were my parents, my sister, and even I. Until I met that new girl.”

“Who broke your heart because she was a blood-sucking fiend?” Brian grinned.

“No,” Owen answered seriously, “she was the Slayer. The one and only in each generation with inherited powers to fight and kill vampires successfully – well, the Sabbat, anyway, as the Camarilla has always been careful enough to cover our existence. We dated a few times, but it always ended up in some sort of disaster: she fighting freakish things and I nearly getting killed. So we broke up early on; she didn’t want to endanger my life. But my eyes were opened by then, and I found that I liked the excitement. So when I graduated from high school and came to LA to college, I began to seek out places I shouldn’t have. Until the day when I ended up in a Setite temple as a human sacrifice.”

“In a what as a what?” Brian could barely trust his ears.

“Hmmm… how could I explain you the Setites?” Owen thought about that for a moment. “You have worked with Dawn Cavanaugh, haven’t you?”

“Yeah,” Brian shuddered. “She gave me the creeps like nobody before.”

“Well, she is a Setite,” Owen said. “A very civilized, moderate one, who doesn’t keep contacts with her Clan brethren. That should give you an idea about the rest of the Clan.”

“Are they Sabbat, too?” Brian asked.

“No, they are an independent Clan,” Owen replied, his distaste obvious. “But they happily offer their special abilities and their power of corruption to both sides. They believe that everyone can be corrupted, and that the best way to corrupt someone is to give them what they want.”

“Sounds like the professional *ars poetica* of an ad exec,” Brian commented dryly. Owen shook his head.

“Oh, they do more than just talk. They actually *give* people what they want, and they watch that desire breed even stronger desire. They provide ecstasy and indulgence to their cattle, always encouraging excess, addicting their thralls to pleasures only they can give. Drugs, sex, money and power are their tools, and they enjoy using those while dealing with other vampires… or with mortals. Some of the most powerful Jamaican and Haitian drug lords are Setites.”
“Well, if that isn’t fascinating,” the thought that he’d been the manipulated toy of some blood-sucking fiends while thinking that he could evade reality in the smoke of pot was not a pleasant one for Brian. “But that still doesn’t explain how you’ve ended up as the sacrificial lamb.”

“Setites are a strange lot,” Owen replied. “The males are the muscle, and they have the resources, both scientific and financial ones. But the true power within the Clan lies with the females. They are the priestesses who guard the secrets of the cult of their dark god… ancestor… whatever. The first one arriving to an area establishes a temple and prepares the way for others. Once a newcomer arrives, she stays at the temple until she has enough power to found her own. Each temple is the centre of a web of corruption, and is always led by a single vampire, though they may be one or more subpriests, depending on the size of the domain.”

“All women?” Brian asked with a frown.

“Male priests do exist, but they are less powerful, as a rule,” Owen said. “There are exceptions, of course. There always are. In any case, I became one of the retainers of Celine Chevalier, a Setite priestess, without knowing who – or what – she really was. And since she judged me too weak to become a Setite, I was chosen to be their sacrifice. Setite rituals are vile – especially the ones needed for the founding of a new temple. To ritually kill a human sacrifice takes six days.” He swallowed hard. “I was well into the fourth day when Angel found me.”

“Oh, shit,” Brian felt like throwing up. “Is it even possible for anyone to get through torture so long without bleeding out completely?”

“The poison on the ceremonial knife slows down the body functions,” Owen replied tonelessly. “It gets adsorbed by the tissue of your body as water gets into a sponge, but it doesn’t numb you. The wounds are small and strategically placed. You are supposed to suffer; to feel every drop of blood leave your body, slowly, little by little, until, on the sixth night, a night with a dark moon, you are finally dead… and your soul… ghost… whatever is trapped within the walls of the temple for eternity.”

“How did they find you in time?” Brian asked, ignoring the trapped soul part of the whole thing, because it sounded too weird for him.

“Angel’s Seer gets visions sometimes, so that they would know when somebody needs rescuing,” Owen said with a shrug, as if it were the most natural thing in the world. Actually, this was the first aspect of the entire story that Brian found partially believable. He knew even the police used people with paranormal abilities sometimes to find missing persons.

“They didn’t exactly find me in time,” Owen continued. “I was so far gone already that Angel couldn’t even properly Embrace me… do you know how our kind is made?”

Brian nodded. “They drink your blood, then give you some of theirs in exchange, and then you feel like shit for a while, until your body gets used to the changes. What went wrong with you?” It seemed to him that making a new vampire was a far more risky thing than the bloodsuckers would be willing to admit.

“Angel couldn’t drink my blood… what little was still there,” Owen said matter-of-factly. “The poison is deadly, even for vampires, and it takes a lot to kill one of us. They had to force the poisoned blood out of me with methods I can’t even begin to understand, and then Angel forced his down my throat, while I was halfway done with dying already. Then they whisked me to the only Kindred clinic in town and hooked me up on the IV to flush the poison out of my system.”

“I bet that was easier said than done,” Brian commented.
“Yeah,” Owen replied with a humourless laugh. “I hung on the frigging IV for weeks… in fact, it still isn’t over completely. I’ve had to go back to the clinic once a week for the last five months, to get my system flushed. They can’t even tell me how long it will take until I’ll be clean again.”

“You spoke of… pain,” Brian risked the remark. Owen nodded.

“It’s bad,” he said, “especially on nights with a dark moon. And nothing helps, except the blood of my Sire. I wonder if he ever regretted saving me,” he added thoughtfully.

“Why should he?” Brian asked with a frown.

“My… dependence on his blood is a fatal weakness,” Owen replied simply. “I’m a liability for the whole family. Plus, since we share blood so often, our… connection is extraordinarily strong. It’s not easy for me to shield my thoughts or my pain from him, and a distraction like that could be dangerous if he’s in the middle of a fight.”

Brian leaned back in his seat. *What kind of sick shit have you gotten yourself into, Bri?* Michael’s worried question echoed in his mind.

He looked at Owen again, who seemed so… normal, everyone’s favourite son-in-law, the perfect little breeder through and through – and yet he was a vampire, suffering from the aftermath of some bizarre poison that could kill even the undead. * Weird shit didn’t even begin to describe the situation.

“Have you ever regretted that he’d rescued you?” he asked.

“When all’s been said and done… no, I haven’t,” Owen had apparently given this a lot of thought, as he answered at once. “I wouldn’t deny that this is not the most comfortable existence, but it still beats being dead. I mean, the Final Death kind of dead,” he grinned at Brian. “Don’t fret. This is not how a proper Embrace usually happens. Most people get over the… unpleasant part in a week. Mine is a special case.”

“I don’t know if I really want to become a monster,” Brian said dryly. “If vampires do such things to ordinary people…”

“Not *all* vampires,” Owen corrected. “The Kindred have their share of psychos just like mortals do. Granted, the share might be somewhat bigger…”

“No kidding,” Brian commented. Owen shook his head.

“Mortals can be just as bad… or worse,” he said. “The biggest human sacrifice known in history was performed by an Aztec warlord who had twenty thousand captured enemy warriors massacred in a mere four days. Having their hearts cut out while they were still breathing, to satisfy their gods. Not even the Sabbat have ever come close to that. The skull racks of Aztec, Maya and Mochas temples could tell you… interesting things about human nature.”

“I thought you were an English major, not an historian,” Brian said. Owen shrugged.

“I am. But we’re all supposed to be well-versed in history; both human and Kindred one. Besides, this is a pet project of mine… for personal reasons, as you might think.” He yawned. “It was nice to talk to you, Brian. I hope we run into each other again while you are here.”

The dismissal surprised – and annoyed – Brian a little, as he had certain…. Ideas concerning Owen. Vampire or not, the guy was gorgeous; and besides, Brian had been boinking the undead since his arrival to LA, so what would one more count?
“You’ve gotten very busy, all of a sudden?” he asked, mildly irritated.

“Nah,” Owen smiled. “You have.”

Brian turned around and saw Alain standing in the doorway, watching them with unreadable eyes. Eyes that glowed in that unholy, silver gleam again.

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For visuals: Bethany Chaulk as played by Daisy McCrackin

Owen Thurman as played by Christopher Wiehl:

Chapter End Notes

Owen Thurman, played by Christopher Wiehl, was Buffy’s short-time date in the 1st Season episode “Never Kill a Boy on the First Date”. We never saw him again, but at least one piece of fanfiction assumed that he went to the UCLA and ran into Angel in LA again. The rest is entirely my doing.

Bethany, played by Daisy McCrackin, is a character from the 2nd Season “Angel” episode “Untouched”. All the background info about her is canon. She’s an interesting character whom I thought would be a great addition to the Legacy House.
Forging the Bond, Part 3

Chapter Summary

While the fight between Camarilla and Sabbat vampires is still going on in LA, Brian, safely guarded in the Hyperion, gets acquainted with the local Legacy members and learns a lot about things that bump in the night.

Chapter Notes

There are some Buffy-related spoilers in this part, but none too obvious. Besides, they are used in a vastly different context. Consequently, under Beast I mean the bestial nature of vampires, as mentioned in the Kindred: The Embraced series, and not the similarly-named character from Angel – The Series.

FORGING THE BOND, Part 3

Alain was not willing to tell Brian about the fight that was still going on in the underbelly of LA – at least not any details. From what little he was willing to reveal at all, it seemed that the Camarilla was slowly gaining ground on the Sabbat – but it wasn’t easy. Not even with the help of their allies, whom he was not willing to name, either. But Brian had a pretty good idea anyway, after having seen the seemingly so skinny Englishman with the crossbow.

“Do you really combust into a cloud of dust if killed?” he asked.

“I probably wouldn’t, since I’m too old and too strong,” Alain replied thoughtfully. “But a wooden stake through my heart would kill me, yeah. That, or decapacitating. Or fire. Or direct sunlight, if I haven’t fed for days… nah, for weeks, in my case. But a fledgling like Owen, or your friend Emmett, or even an older but weaker Kindred, yep, they would decompose in seconds.”

“What about garlic?” Brian asked, warming up to the topic and curious how many of the legends were actually true. “And crosses? And holy water?”

“Holy water burns us all,” Alain replied, “just as acids would burn you. We can get used to the sight of crosses, with enough willpower – how else could I play the organ in Father Callaghan’s church? Garlic is simply unpleasant – we have an allergic reaction to it – but it can’t really harm us.”

“What about guns?” Brian asked. Alain shook his head.

“Bullets can’t kill us,” he said. “Sure, they hurt like hell, and the blood loss is just as dangerous for us as it would be for mortals, but if we can feed right after getting wounded, we can survive any possible bullet wounds. You’d need a phosphorous gun to kill one of us,” he cocked an eyebrow. “Planning to get rid of me already?”

Brian grinned. “Nah, just gathering information. Knowledge is power.”
“That’s certainly true,” Alain agreed and slumped into one of the seats in the foyer. “But why are you still up and around? It’s four a.m. Switching to Kindred schedule already?”

“In your dreams,” Brian retorted. “Nah, I’ve trouble sleeping. And when I do fall asleep, I keep having those weird dreams that make me wish I haven’t.”

“ Weird dreams?” Alan was fully alert again, all of a sudden. “What kind of dreams?”

“I’m not sure,” Brian shrugged. “I rarely remember afterwards. But it has something to do with dark corridors and freaky creatures and lots of blood… What’s wrong?” he asked, because Alain had become very pale, even for a vampire.

“Merde!” the artist always cursed in French, and it gave even his more vulgar expressions a certain elegant flair. “I should have known that this could happen.”

“W-what?” Brian tried very hard not to freak out – with very little success Alain took a deep (and completely unnecessary) breath to calm down. Frightening the mortal won’t help, he berated himself.

“Nothing major… or irrevocable,” he replied calmly. “Those aren’t real dreams… In a less conscious state like in sleep, you actually see through my eyes.”

Brian frowned, trying to understand… and failing.

“Have you put some weird vampire whammy on me?” he demanded.

“Of course not,” Alain laughed. As if he’d need to use such methods! “It seems that we’ve accidentally formed a bond, though. It must have happened when I fed from you, after fighting Yitzhak. Perhaps I had some of my own blood on the lips, from the injuries, and it got into your blood stream.”

“Fuck!” Brian was seriously panicking now. “For all those arcane laws of yours, there are too many accidents happening here for my taste.”

“Don’t worry,” Alain patted his hand. “It will fade, eventually. It was only a tiny amount, and we haven’t repeated it, so you’re in no danger to become my thrall – unless you want it, that is.”

“Would that make me stop aging?” Brian asked, hoping for a way to have his cake and eat it. Alain shook his head.

“No, it doesn’t work that way. For that, you must become a ghoul – a creature between mortal and Kindred. You wouldn’t age, and you’d be able to live in the sunlight as before, but you’d be dependent on my Vitae – my blood – or on someone’s from my bloodline.”

“How many of your line are still there?” Brian asked.

“Just Oliver and his lover boy,” Alain shrugged. “But they are barely more than fledglings. Their blood doesn’t have the power to sustain you. Besides, you’re not the type who’d like to depend on someone… anyone.”

Unless it’s Mikey, Brian added for himself, but basically, Alain was right, of course.

“But Owen is a vamp… a Kindred,” he corrected himself hurriedly, because Alain’s eyes still had some of that silver gleam, “and still depends on his… his maker, doesn’t he?”

“It’s called Sire,” Alain said, “and Owen is a specific case. Most fledglings become independent after
a few months. It’s a case of mutual agreement then, whether they want to keep in touch with their Sire or not. It’s deeply personal, and so different in each case.”

“Somehow I don’t think you’d let me waltz away into the night, should I choose to become one of you,” Brian said. Alain nodded.

“You’re right, I wouldn’t. Embracing you would be the way to keep you for eternity.”

“There’s only one person I’d wish to spend eternity with,” Brian replied, “and that’s not you.”

“Perhaps not,” Alain allowed, “but I could be your way to that end.”

For a moment, Brian stared at the artist in confusion – then he began to laugh.

“No way,” he said. “Mikey would never…”

Perhaps not at the moment,” Alain agreed. “But his husband won’t live forever… perhaps not even much longer. As a Kindred, you’d have the time to wait.”

“You’re disgusting,” Brian scowled. Alain raised an eyebrow.

“Why? Because I speak out your secret thought loudly? Or are you trying to make me believe that you don’t want the professor out of your way?”

“Of course I do!” Brian admitted. “But first and foremost, I want Mikey happy.”

“I believe you,” Alain said, “but don’t you understand that he’d never be happy with anyone else? All the others, no matter what he might feel for them or they might feel for him, are just poor substitutes.”

“He loves Ben!” Brian protested, because no matter how much he hated to admit, that was the truth.

“With the about ten per cent of his being that’s not completely focused on you, yes, I don’t doubt that he does,” Alain replied. “But I’ve seen the two of you together, and trust me if I tell you that you’ve formed a bond a long time ago. You’re both incomplete without each other, and you’d never be able to find fulfilment in anyone else.”

“And you could tell that by simply seeing us together?” Brian asked sarcastically.

Alain nodded. “Your body language, your ability to understand each other almost without words, speaks volumes.”

“Well, we’ve been friends since the age of fourteen,” Brian pointed out.

“It’s more than that,” Alain said. “You’re burning up with desire for each other. But beyond that, you’re in synch a way very few mortals I’ve seen in half a millennium have been. When you’re together, even your auras become the same hue after a while.”

“Our… auras,” Brian repeated blankly. “I didn’t know you were into that esoteric crap. Someone who’s supposedly five hundred years old should have a better grasp on reality.”

“Auras are real,” Alain replied. “Just because you can’t see something yourself, does it mean that it can’t exist? Do you deny the existence of infrared or ultraviolet light, too, just because they’re outside your limited spectrum?”

“It’s not the same,” Brian protested, but Alain interrupted him.
“It’s exactly the same. Kindred are capable of things by their very nature that mortals would think impossible. Seeing auras is a talent, like the ultrasound sonar of bats. Nothing less, nothing more. A… reward for our choice to live in the Dark, if you want to put it that way.”

“Would I also see… things if I decided to become one of you?” Brian asked.

“It’s hard to tell,” Alain replied with a shrug. “Each individual Kindred has his or her very specific gifts; although these usually only surface after a few decades in the Dark.”

“Well, that sucks,” Brian declared with a scowl, and Alain laughed.

“We have to mature in unlife, just as we’ve matured in life… well, some of us have,” he added, grinning. “We’re not getting older, and we don’t die of natural causes, so what’s the hurry?” He yawned and stretched like a big, graceful cat. “Caine, but I’m tired… and hungry, too. Fortunately, the people here always keep bottled stuff in the house. I’ll snatch me some of it before crashing down in one of the guest rooms.”

“I thought they were off-limits for bloodsuckers,” Brian commented.

Alain gave him a warning silver glance. “Not one of the mortal guest rooms, boy. One that’s reserved for the owner’s visitors.”

“So, the owner is…” Brian trailed off, and Alain nodded.

“The Hyperion belongs to the Prince of the City. That’s why it’s the safest possible place for you as long as the fighting goes on on the streets. This is where he collects his mortal protégées for their own safety, whenever things turn ugly. Them, and the fledglings who aren’t strong enough to fight yet.”

“I won’t match any of those categories, though,” Brian said.

“True,” Alain said. “But I pleaded your case to the Prince, so that you’d be given the same protection.”

“Pleaded? You?” Brian couldn’t quite trust his ears. That was so not Alain, who usually took what he wanted, regardless of the consequences.

Alain sighed. “You still don’t understand what feudal system means, do you? The people of the Luna Foundation wouldn’t grant you shelter without the blessing of the Prince – not in this House, anyway, and there isn’t another one that would be half this safe. Aside from the small convent of Coptic nuns, that is, but they don’t allow males within their walls. I had to make sure that you were safe. Swallowing my pride wasn’t such a high price. I protect what’s mine…”

“I’m not yours!” Brian protested, his temper flaring. Alain gave him another of those silver glances.

“Not yet,” the vampire said in a silky-dangerous voice that sent cold shivers down Brian’s spine. “But I’m working on it.”

“You sound like the Borg,” Brian replied, half-laughing and aped the artificial voice of Star Trek’s cybernetic villains almost perfectly. “You’ll be assimilated. Resistance is futile.”

“You can’t even begin to imagine how right you are,” Alain rose. “Well, I’m off for a snack and then to bed. You should do the same.”

“I was hoping I won’t have to go alone,” Brian said. “But since you scared Owen off my scent,
would you care to make up for my loss?”

“That would be… unwise,” Alain replied. “I’m coming from a long night of fighting, and the Beast is close to the surface. I could kill you by accident, should I get carried away.”

With that last, sobering remark he left, leaving a slightly shocked Brian behind.

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Another couple of days were spent following the same pattern. Brian remained trapped in the Hyperion, under the watchful eyes of the Luna Foundation security. Fortunately, Larry provided a most enjoyable outlet for his frustration, and even Emmett managed to pull himself together for a few hours each day, so that they could work on Girard’s winter collection. They stayed in contact with the designers of the fashion house via Internet (most of them were mortal and therefore had no idea what was going on on the streets) and made some decent headway, despite the less than ideal circumstances.

On the evenings, Brian usually met Owen in the library. The young vampire seemed to like his company and explained him some details concerned unlife. As an academic and an English major at that, Owen had a much better grip on the bigger picture of Kindred society and culture than Emmett, whose interest rarely went beyond the surface. Brian listened to Owen with morbid fascination, his curiosity to learn more battling with fear and disgust.

On one of those evenings, he got to meet the Prince himself. Angelus, as the other bloodsuckers called him – even though the Luna people simply called him Angel – was a tall, dark-haired man, clad in black, with dark eyes and a ruggedly handsome face. He was very pale, even for a vampire, and a frown seemed to be permanently etched onto his high forehead. He radiated strength, danger and a strange sort of animal magnetism that loosened Brian’s thighs even from across the foyer.

He moved towards the dark vampire instinctively, without even realizing what he was doing, when a pale hand grabbed his arm. Glancing back, he recognized the spiky-haired punk Alain had some kind of encounter with at Lady Heather’s establishment.

“Don’t,” the man – the vampire, according to the unnatural coolness of his hand – said with quiet warning in his surprisingly deep voice. “This isn’t your league, mate. Would be a bloody shame for your pretty face… or for your pretty arse.”

“Why would he want to harm me?” Brian asked with a shrug.

“He wouldn’t,” the punk vampire replied. “This isn’t about what he wants. It’s about what he is.”

“Why, what exactly is he?” Brian asked.

“A monster,” the vampire – Spike, Brian remembered, his name was Spike – answered grimly. “A brooding and relatively tame monster on a good day, which is bloody boring if you ask me, but at least on those days he’s only moderately dangerous.”

“I guess this isn’t one of the good days, then,” Brian said.

Spike shook his head. “This is one of the times you won’t like to cross his way, pet,” he replied. “To fight the Sabbat successfully, Angelus has to set the Beast free – and after a killing spree of this magnitude, the Beast isn’t easy to cage again.”

“Killing… spree…” Brian repeated blandly.

Spike raised a scarred eyebrow sardonically. “Let’s just say, mate, that some of the sewers under the
city are liberally coated with dust,” he said. “I assume you know what that means?”

“Dead bloodsuckers?” Brian guessed. Spike grinned at him.

“I see you’re learning. Good pet. So, listen to ol’ Spikey and leave the dark and brooding one alone.”

“An excellent suggestion,” Alain, walking up behind them, said. “Now, Spike, may I suggest you the same thing, concerning Brian?”

“Or what?” Spike challenged, not because he’d have any serious plans, just to yank on the artist’s chain.

“Or I’ll break every bone in your body,” Alain replied in a deceivingly mild manner. Spike stared back at him with the same false friendliness.

“I’d love to see you try,” he said in a low, seductive voice and sauntered away.

“You shouldn’t make new enemies so quickly,” Brian murmured. Alain laughed.

“Don’t worry; that was just one of the mind games Spike is so fond of. Provoking people entertains him very much.”

“Could you really break his bones?” Brian asked.

“Perhaps; perhaps not,” Alain replied with a shrug. “It’s hard to tell. He’s more than three hundred years younger than me, but his bloodline is incredibly powerful. The Order of Aurelius used to be a vicious Sabbat sect for quite a while before Angelus got reformed and brought his Childer over to our side.”


“And one hated and feared even within the Sabbat. Why, until a century or so ago, Angelus himself was known as the Scourge of Europe. Dead bodies marked his way wherever he moved in the Old World. And Spike got his nickname from his favourite pastime: torturing his victims with railroad spikes. They’ve left their old ways – there are guarantees for that, so don’t worry – but it still doesn’t hurt to be careful around them. Especially for a mortal, and even more so when they’ve just come from a fight.”

“And you said this place would be safe,” Brian said sarcastically.

“It is,” Alain said. “Or it was, as long as you needed it.

“Does it mean I don’t do anyway?”

“No. The fighting is over.”

“You’ve won, I hope?” Brian asked. Alain nodded.

“We have – for now. For quite a while, there will be no more Sabbat attacks on the city. Those who’ve escaped will have to lick their wounds first, and to regroup. I daresay we’ve prevented the takeover for the next couple of years… perhaps for a decade or two. Long enough for our fledglings to gain strength and learn how to fight properly.”

“Have you…” Brian hesitated, “have you lost many people?”

“A few,” Alain said. “Nobody you’d know personally. Not very well at least. You won’t see some
of the studio guards again, though. Or some of Victor’s so-called security.”

“Cannon fodder, huh?” Brian commented. Alain shrugged.

“They were hired for that; they knew the risks. But they weren’t the only ones fighting. We all were out there: Victor, Phillipe, Louis Fortier… even the women. This was about the very existence of us. The Sabbat don’t take prisoners – if we are very lucky.”

Brian shuddered by the imagination what those monsters might do to helpless prisoners.

“Is that what I would be doing, too, should I decide to become one of you?” he asked uncomfortably.

“It is,” Alain said simply. “But you’ll also have the strength and the instincts to do so. The Becoming changes one’s imperatives, too. You’ll see the world in a different way. You’ll understand.”

“I’m not sure I want to understand your ways,” Brian said.

“I think, you do,” Alain replied. “You just don’t want to admit. Denial is always a complicated thing. But you’ll get over it.”

“I will?” Brian asked doubtfully.

“Oh, yes, you will,” Alain said with a thin smile. “You’re not born to be the victim. I knew it the moment I first set eyes on you.”

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Brian was relieved to get home that night. The Hyperion was a place way too weird for his taste, and while he lived in a house full of vampires, at least Alain, Peppone and Sarina were known qualities. He noticed with a certain amount of wry amusement that the merciless war between Alain’s people and the weirdoes like Yitzhak had actually found its way into the mess as “isolated fightings between street gangs influenced by new, experimental drugs”.

“I assume you guys are sitting in the TV-studios as well,” he said to Alain.

“Of course,” the artist replied with a faint smile. “The Vignes siblings and Edward Blount have… interests in several TV and radio companies.”

“Yeah, but can they force the reporters to keep their mouths shut?” Brian asked doubtfully. He knew enough reporters to know how doggedly they could follow a thread, regardless of the consequences.

“We let them have exactly the bits of information we need them to spread,” Alain replied in a bored tone. “Besides, some of them belong to us.

“Is there something you guys do not control?” Brian asked dryly.

“Nonsense,” Alain said. “We do have some influence, but we don’t control the world of the Kine. Our numbers are too low for that.”

“Especially if you keep massacring each other on the regular basis,” Brian commented.

“There’s some truth in that,” Alain agreed. “But mainly, the Camarilla keeps our numbers low intentionally. Too many of us would endanger the Masquerade as well as the existence of the Kine.”

“Too many mouths to feed,” Brian added, starting to understand the concept. Alan nodded.
“Exactly. The Sabbat has no such self-restriction, of course, but the brutal nature of their Becoming kills a high percentage of candidates, so that they can’t breed like rabbits, either.”

“This struggle between your fractions has the unpleasant reminiscence of a religious war,” Brian commented.

“In a sense, it is one,” Alain replied thoughtfully. “Behind all the big words and flamboyant declarations of supremacy and independence, it all comes down to basic beliefs when we’re trying to phrase what divides us. We believe we need to build up our strength for the time when the Antediluvians return. The Sabbat believe the only way to prevent that the Antediluvians would absorb our strength through diablerie is to kill us all, so that the Old Ones won’t find anything but mortal cattle when they return.”

“So they don’t want them to return, either?” Brian asked, vaguely aware of the absurdity of the whole topic but curious enough to keep digging. Alain shook his head.

“No sane vampire does; not even most of the insane ones do. The last person who tried to open a portal for them was the Master of the Order of Aurelius. Fortunately, the Slayer killed him and his acolytes in time – but it was a close call. One I don’t wish to see coming ever again.”

“Does that mean we’re safe now?” Brian asked. Alain shrugged indifferently.

“There are no absolute guarantees for anything. We can be reasonably certain that that particular danger won’t occur for quite some time again, though.”

“Is at least that Yitzhak character dead?” Brian insisted.

“We’re all dead already, Brian,” Alain laughed quietly. “I’ve been dead for five hundred years myself, remember? But don’t worry; Yitzhak is dead – the Final Death sort of dead. I’ve seen Joaquin Murietta loop off his head; not even a Sabbat can survive that. It was a relief to watch his smoking remains,” he added nonchalantly.

Brian shook his head in disgust. “You’re a real freak sometimes, you know that?”

Alain laughed. “I’m a Kindred, Brian; that’s freakish by definition.”

“No kidding,” Brian rolled his eyes. “And I’m a certifiable idiot for ever getting involved with you.”

“We’re not exactly involved,” Alain pointed out. “Not yet anyway; although, as I’ve said, I’m working on it.”

He leaned in to kiss Brian’s neck, sucking gently on the pulse point, which sent an electrifying jolt directly to Brian’s groin. The potential danger – now that he knew it existed – added some extra thrill to what would otherwise simply be a pleasant feeling.

“Come to bed now,” Alain said in a low voice, opening Brian’s jeans with one hand and grabbing the nape of his neck with the other one. “I’ve gone without you for too long.”

A tiny, sensible voice in the back of Brian’s head screamed to him to tear himself away and run. Out of the room, out of the house, out of this entire city of sick weirdoes – if necessary, to another continent. And yet Brian followed Alain to the artist’s rooms, drawn to the vampire like moths to the flame.
Chapter Summary

The casting for the *Rage* movie starts. Brian makes the acquaintance of the ill-fated undead movie star, Ash Rivers, and comes to the perhaps most profound decision in his existence.

Chapter Notes

*Vagabond* comes from the Latin word *vagabundus*. In its original meaning it’s a restless person who wanders from one place to another, trying his luck in different places.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

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**TAMING THE VAGABOND, Part 1**

After the fighting had ended, life returned to the usual hectic pace for Brian. They worked feverishly on the winter collection with Victor Girard’s designers, Emmett and Diego, delivering the ads and posters and video clips well before schedule, so that Brian could focus on the campaign for the upcoming *Rage* movie.

All parties involved would have preferred Michael’s direct participation in the casting process. But as it often happened whenever Michael would need to work on his film-writing career in earnest, Ben had taken a turn to the worse and had to go to the hospital. Which meant that Michael had to stay with him. Brian suspected in his darker moments that the Nutty Professor was producing psychosomatic symptoms, in order to chain Michael to his bedside – and keep him away from Brian. Based on the resignation in Michael’s voice when he called to cancel his appointment with the studio bosses, Brian was not alone with this suspicion.

Since the car was rolling already, Michael signed a contract that gave Brian free hand with casting choices, commenting that Brian was the person best suited to know whom – or what – Michael would like. On the same occasion, Brian managed to talk Michael (per phone) into transferring his legal issues to *Navital & Waters*. As much as they both liked Lindz, not even Michael was naïve enough to believe that *Melanie* wouldn’t try to manipulate things the way it would match *her* interests the best. Besides, she was very pregnant already and not really interested in anything else at the moment.

Fortunately, Michael not only had delivered his script – basically the dialogues of the movie, without all the technical details – before schedule; he’d also created character sheets that described the detailed personal background and the physical appearance of each character, including a sketched psychological profile. That made it easier for Edward Blount, who’d been chosen as the executive producer of the movie, and Brett Keller to invite certain types of actors for the interviews, and Brian was usually called in to help pick the best candidate from the remaining handful in the last round.

The three starring roles – namely Rage, Zephyr and JT – had already been cast. Brian particularly
liked the slim, beautiful Latino actor chosen to play Zephyr. The guy had large dark eyes almost as beautiful as Michael’s own, collar length, wavy dark hair and an exotic Spanish accent. The blond twink chosen for JT’s part was an excellent choice, too: very pretty, falsely innocent and vaguely annoying. The Rage actor was handsome enough to flatter Brian’s ego; it was strange to choose someone who would practically play him, though.

For Shadow, they’d found a sculpted black actor who’d have put Tyr Anasazi to shame, complete with dreadlocks and a goatee. Suzie Wong practically nailed the part of Dragonfly, the blind seer and katana fighter – which was funny, considering that she was Chinese, not Japanese. Bai-Ling also got her chance as Dragonfly’s caretaker… best friend… scholarly counterpart… whatever. She practically had nothing else to do as to appear in very eccentric and extremely revealing clothes and listen to Dragonfly’s philosophical musings, as her character was mute, and the two were supposed to communicate through a complicated series of touches on the hands and forearms. Their relationship wasn’t closer defined, as Brett wanted to focus on the male love triangle in the first movie. He kept the possibility of bringing the strange and exotic couple back in the sequel, though.

The minor characters were also easily cast, as they were either Shadow’s thugs or weird creatures populating the underbelly of Gayopolis. In the first case Brett simply called in a few of the local Brujah who occasionally worked as stuntmen (as long as no fires were involved, understandably enough). For the weird folks they contacted Lady Heather’s Goth barkeeper girl who spread the word among her friends. That about took care of the problem.

That left only one major character to cast: Shadow’s human slave, from which he regularly drained life energy to continue his existence. This was a completely clueless invention from Michael’s side, one that the vampires found very amusing. After all, it mirrored their own unlife in a certain way. The Thrall was an important character and a complex one: a victim for whom one would feel sorry, if only he had any redeeming qualities. Which The Thrall hand not. It was conceived as a vile, sadistic character; in certain things worse than Shadow himself and immensely beautiful, but also weak and whiny and corrupted to the bone. Finding an actor who could bring out all those aspects wasn’t an easy thing.

“We should go to the Asp Hole tonight,” Edward Blount suggested to Brett. “It’s always full of actors and other artists. We could just sit there for a while and watch.”

“Do you think Ash would be interested?” Brett asked. Blount shrugged.

“If we can play his ego right, he’d jump at the chance. A role in a big blockbuster movie could move him back into the spotlight and make him happy. And if Ash is happy, Isaac is happy. And if Isaac is happy, he might be interested in financing the sequel, which would mean a really big budget.”

“True,” Brett admitted, “but I’m not so sure about Ash. With his depressions and suicidal stupidity lately… I don’t know if we can count on him.”

“Brett, he’s an actor,” Edward Blount argued. “He used to be a good actor before he destroyed himself with excesses.”

“Yeah, before that,” Brett growled. “Now he’s just vegetable. It would have been better, for both of them, had Isaac left him die.”

“He’s still a big name,” Blount pointed out, “and Absolute Zero still sells like crazy. He’s a superstar; he just misses being in the spotlight.”

“And a few million brain cells,” Brett commented.
Blount shook his head. "That’s where you’re wrong. The talent is still there. Give him the chance, and he’ll rise above his broken hull again."

The mentioning of Absolute Zero finally rang a bell in Brian’s head. That had been the last movie he and Mikey had gotten to watch together before he left the Pitts.

"Wait a minute,“ he said. "Are you talking about Ash Rivers? The guy declared the ‘Sexiest Man Alive’ by the movie press?"

“Well… not exactly alive,” Brett replied dryly. “Not anymore.”


“No, you haven’t,” Edward Blount replied. “You haven’t even begun to realize what kind of creatures swarm in the night,” he glanced at Brett. “Perhaps we should take him with us to the Asp Hole tonight. Him and Emmett, too – so that they learn.”

“Good idea,” Brett agreed. “But you better check with Alain first. I don’t want him to think we’re trespassing his territory.”

“Hey!” Brian protested indignantly. “I don’t belong to Alain. It’s not like he’s pissed on my foot to mark me or whatnot!”

The two vampires exchanged amused looks. The mortal was still so clueless, despite everything he’d seen and experienced already… they found this level of naïveté highly entertaining.

“Brian,” Brett explained patiently, “ever since Alain was suicidal enough to pick a fight with Yitzhak over you, every Kindred in this city knows that he has… intentions towards you. In a sense, yes, he has marked you as his. According to Kindred customs, no other vampire would approach you – unless, of course, they really want to fight Alain for that privilege. And few would be stupid enough to do so – Alain is old and strong and ruthless, even for one of us.”

“Does it mean my fate is sealed, whatever I might say to the whole thing?” Brian asked sarcastically.

Brett shook his head. “Nobody would dare to force the Embrace upon you, now that the Sabbat is out of the picture. The First Commandment of Kindred law forbids that, and Angelus takes this Commandment very seriously.”

“Call Alain,” Edward Blount said, “and I’ll have the limousine waiting for us. With Ash, we need to make an impression.”

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The Asp Hole turned out very different from Brian’s expectations. Sure, it was a night club, but a lot less seedy than Brian would have thought, and without the expected Goth scenario. It was a place for the upper class of Tinsel Town, full of the usual movie industry glory spread generously all across the rooms. It had a bar, a dance floor, a small stage for solo artists or small groups to perform, and several private soirees, the exact purpose of whose better remained unknown.

The general style was that of a cabaret form the mid-twentieth century, just with a little more glitter. The waitresses were wearing multiple layers of knee-length gauze skirts in moss green or electric blue, with shoulder-free, skin-tight tops in a darker hue of the same colour and were running around in such high-heeled pumps that it almost hurt to watch. They had identical, bee-hive hairdos, and long, intricate earrings jingling just about an inch above their shoulders.

“Stylish,” Brian commented, thinking of the spring collection already,“ but a little bit suicidal.”
“That’s Ash for you,” Brett replied. “Now, let’s move inside. I’ve reserved a table from where we can watch the clientele discretely.”

Said clientele was very mixed, consisting – according to Brett and Edward Blount who seemed to know just about everyone, at least from sight – of aspiring young actors, aspiring young artists, a few temporary rock stars surrounded by their groupies; even a couple of sports celebrities could be found among them. Not counting the usual party girls and playboys who loved to be seen with stars, even with minor ones.

“Another room full of bloodsuckers,” Brian grumbled under his breath, but still not low enough for the acute vampire hearing.

“Actually, most of the clientele is mortal,” Brett said. “Ash doesn’t socialize much with his own kind. He hates what he’s become and keeps trying to remain in the spotlight – even if it’s only reflected in these nights.”

“Why did he accept the Embrace, then?” Brian asked with a shrug.

“He wasn’t exactly lucid in the all-deciding moment,” Edward Blount replied dryly. “One seldom is when dying from heroin overdose.

“In that case he couldn’t have given his consent, either,” Brian pointed out logically. Edward Blount shrugged.

“Neither could he protest,” he said cynically. “Isaac thought it would be a criminal waste to let him die so young.” He shrugged again. “I’m not sure I agree. Ash couldn’t cope with success and fame at all. Putting him out of his misery would have been better than dealing with a petulant Childe who can’t value the gift he’s been given. But Isaac was so besotted with the little brat he didn’t think clearly.”

“Can you blame him?” Emmett stared at the owner of the club with his mouth literally open. “Who could let that die?”

Brian usually found Emmett’s constant drooling over pretty guys ridiculous, not to mention annoying, but this time he had to agree. The young man approaching them in skin-tight leather pants and an iridescent burgundy shirt through which one could see like through clear water, looked like Stuart Townsend’s Lestat in “The Queen of the Damned” – just a lot better. Brian suspected that the similarity was intended, in fact actively sought for, and the result was beyond gorgeous.

The face of the young man – the vampire, Brian reminded himself – was thinner than it had been during the Absolute Zero movie, bringing the killer cheekbones to full effect, and the dark rings under his large, hazel eyes made them look even larger. His collar-length, auburn locks were a little mussed, creating a delicate frame around his face, and the full mouth seemed almost shockingly red, opposed to his pale skin.

“Well, well,” he said a low, sing-song voice that had a nasty overtone, despite its mellow quality, “if that isn’t the star director himself, stooping to the fallen star… What gives me the questionable honour?”

Brett shook his head in apparent distaste. “Ash, you’re annoying.”

“Am I?” the ex-superstar leaned against a nearby column of false marble, arching his body slightly; an effect that didn’t get lost on any of the four customers. “And how is that my fault? I don’t remember asking to be drafted in the Army of the Dead.”
“It’s a miracle that you still can remember anything, considering the number of brain cells you’ve killed off with alcohol and drug excesses,” Brett replied sharply, and Brian winced because the angry remark of the Brujah hit uncomfortable close to home. Did he really want to end up like Ash Rivers? Like a pretty but empty husk, burned out and cast away? He’d been there – well, almost there – on his thirtieth birthday… did he want to get there again?

Granted, Alain had said he wouldn’t Embrace Brian, should he come to such a sorry state, but the mortal version of it wasn’t any better. Worse, in fact, as it had the additional disadvantage of getting old and wrinkled and impotent. He wondered if he’d hate unlife as much as Ash seemed to hate it. The others – even Emmett and Owen who hadn’t originally chosen to become vampires – seemed to cope well enough.

“Stop being a spoiled brat, Ash,” Edward Blount intervened, interrupting the staring match between director and ex-superstar. “We’re not here to listen to your whining. It’s disgusting, and you can only blame yourself. Now, the question is: do you want to spend the rest of your unlife – and that’s a damn long time, let me tell you! – wallowing in self-pity, or are you willing to put what little of your talent and charisma is still there to good use?”

The affected boredom fell from the actor’s face like a discarded mask, replaced by desperate hunger.

“You’ve… you’ve got a role for me?” he asked in the manner of a drowning man grasping for a straw. Brian could see through the translucent shirt his large, flat nipples hardening to little peaks in excitement.

“Perhaps,” Edward Blount replied. “We’ll have to check with Isaac, of course, as you’re not independent. But if he gives his okay and you want the part, we can negotiate.”

That seemed to excite Ash even more; it seemed that the mere possibility of returning to fame turned him on, big time, if the sudden tightness of his leather pants was any indication.

“A script… do you have a script for me?” he asked almost frantically.

“Not a finished one, but close enough,” Brett took a copy of Michael’s draft from his briefcase and handed him. “We’d like to try you for the part of the Thrall. It’s not a starring role, but I think between you and Dawn Cavanaugh you can make something truly memorable of it.”

Ash was only half-listening, devouring the lines of dialogue with his eyes greedily.

“Hey, this is actually witty and funny, for such a ridiculous genre,” he said absent-mindedly after a few pages. “Who’s this Novotny guy who wrote it? I’ve never heard of him before. Some first-time freelancer?”

“Something like that,” Edward Blount answered. “The creator of the original comic the movie is based on.”

“There was a comic?” Ash looked up in surprise. “Never mind, I’m not interested in comics anyway. They make good basis for action movies, though. Who’re these guys, by the way?” he asked, realizing Emmett and Brian’s presence for the first time.

“Emmett Honeycutt helps with the costume designs,” Edward Blount said smoothly; that part hadn’t been negotiated yet, but Ash seemed to like Emmett’s flamboyant clothing style and besides, as the executive producer, he could always hire his own foster Childe for the job. “And Mr. Kinney is our new PR director.”

“Sharp,” Ash commented with an expert glance that took in Brian’s assets in seconds. But in the next
moment, he was back on the script. “Hmmm, so I’m supposed to be kept in his Shadow guy’s lair…
and he feeds off my life energy? Cool… what, he gets to fuck me, too?”

“He’s evil,” Brett pointed out, giving Edward Blount an amused glance. “You’re his slave, and he
does nasty things to you. Like binding you up and torturing you and yes, even fucking you, although
none of this would be really shown on the big screen. Do you have a problem with that?”

“Nah, been there, done all that already,” Ash studied the script. “Oh, cool, so I hate queers and
organize the bashing of this JT character? And manipulate Shadow to kidnap Zephyr? Who the hell
is Zephyr anyway?”

“The best friend of Rage,” Brian commented quietly. “The only one he would kill… or die for.”

There was something in his tone that caught the actor’s fleeting attention.

“Autobiographic much?” Ash asked absent-mindedly. “Those are the best scripts, usually. Have
drama and character interaction and all that. More than just spectacular effects – though we’d need
those, too, for a superhero movie like that. The dumb majority of moviegoers need their candy.”

“Let that be my concern,” Brett said. “So, does this mean you’re interested?”

Ash stared at him in surprise. “Are you kidding? Of course I’m interested – this is a fucking brilliant
part. It’s a good thing that artificial light can’t harm us; as long as I don’t have to make outdoor shots,
yeah, I can do this.”

“Do what?” a voice with a slight southern accent asked, and a short, slightly balding man in an
Armani suit appeared next to their table, seemingly out of thin air. He looked like a younger, much
thinner version of the known actor Danny De Vito and was probably in his early forties. Despite his
simple, elegant looks, he practically reeked of money and power, and Brian, who’d learned long ago
how to find the biggest fish in every pond, realized at once that this man was the most powerful and
influential person he’d met in L:A. so far.

“Isaac,” Edward Blount nodded with a certain degree of respect. “How good of you to join us. I
assume you’ve heard about the upcoming Rage movie?”

The film mogul nodded. “Gary may have lost his prettiness, but as a Nosferatu, he’s the best-informed
person in the city. His participation in the shrecknet.com network is invaluable for us. So, I understand
that you want Ash for a part in this movie?”

“For a character part,” Brett replied. “He won’t have to go out into direct sunlight, or anywhere near
the pyrotechnics.”

“I see,” the film mogul extended a hand. “Show me the script, Childe.”

Ash hurriedly handed him the document, and in the next twenty minutes Isaac Abrams – a pioneer to
Hollywood since 1920, a Toreador vampire since 1926 and a devout Anarch for almost as long –
studied it thoroughly. With his vast experience, he didn’t need the little technical details added to
imagine what the movie could become.

“It’s a good story,” he finally judged, “and the dialogues are excellent. Very well, you can have Ash
for it if you want. But should you cut his scenes afterwards, I’ll see that you never make a film in
Hollywood again.” With that, he handed back the script to his errant Childe and left, without any
further comment.

“Can he do that?” Brian asked. “Ruin you, I mean?”
“Oh, yeah!” Brett laughed quietly. “Nobody can make a movie in Hollywood without Isaac’s consent. He practically owns the American Film Association.”

“But why do you need his blessing to offer Ash the part?” Brian asked.

“Ash is still a fledgling, unable to survive in the Dark alone,” Edward Blount explained. “His behaviour was borderline suicidal after his Becoming, so Isaac had to Blood Bond him. Even so, he was foolish enough to fall into the hands of vampire hunters – the cross-shaped burns on his face took weeks – and lots of alchemy – to heal without permanent scarring.”

Brian shot a slightly agitated look at the actor who was now completely submerged in the script, his face unblemished once again.

“He won’t hear us,” Brett said. “You see, he didn’t get away unharmed from his heroin overdosing. There was some permanent damage. He hasn’t been able to focus on more than one thing at a time ever since. That’s why Isaac had to bond him; so that he’d always know where Ash is and what he’s doing.”

“But what when he becomes independent?” Brian asked, remembering what Owen had explained him about the development of an undead fledgling.

Brett shook his head. “He won’t. Ash will always remain a thrall – more than a lover, less than a slave – to Isaac. His whole existence depends on Isaac.”

“Does he know that?”

“Of course; that’s why he hates Isaac so much.”

“I can’t say that I blame him,” Brian said grimly. “I’d also rather be dead than a slave.”

“He’s not a slave,” Edward Blount corrected. “Slaves, at the very least, have their own thoughts to themselves. Bonded thralls don’t even have that luxury. Of course,” he added cynically, “in Ash’s case there wasn’t much to begin with.”

“And why should this… ownership mean a status higher than that of a lover?” Emmett asked dubiously, eyeing Edward Blount in deep suspicion. His foster Sire smiled.

“Because the regnant’s – the master’s – thoughts aren’t his own either. They share on a level so deep no outsider could even begin to understand. Don’t wet yourself, Childe; I have no intention to do that to you. I’m afraid the chaos in your mind would drive me insane within days.”

Emmett, not one to be easily insulted, just grinned and shrugged his bare shoulders; he was wearing a shoulder-free, glittering top today that matched the slightly crazy trend of the Asp Hole perfectly.

“I am what I am,” he declared. “You’ve adopted the belle of the ball, not some mousy wallflower, you know.”

Edward Blount shook his head tolerantly. No matter how outrageous Emmett could be, one couldn’t stay mad at him too long. Behind all that Southern belle mannerism, the fledgling was surprisingly brave and resilient.

“Well,” he said, “it seems we’ve wrapped up the casting process. Ash will be at his role single-mindedly, and I think he’ll add something to the movie that wouldn’t be there without him. Now all we’ll need is a seasoned screenwriter who can add all the technical details to Mr. Novotny’s script, and we’ll be on the roll.”
“I already have my eyes on someone with great experience and not too much ego,” Brett replied. “He won’t touch plot or dialogue, and he’s used to work with Dawn. I’m getting optimistic about the whole project.”

“Good,” Edward Blount yawned. “We should go. I have to read another couple of scripts before going to bed, and the night isn’t getting any younger.”

“I’ll go Hunting,” Brett said. “Tomorrow, I’ll have an outdoor shooting, and it won’t be a good idea to spontaneously combust in the front of my entire crew.”

Emmett giggled at that, and even his foster Sire suppressed a grin. For his part, Brian didn’t really understood what could be so funny in the prospect of a violent and extremely painful Final Death, but perhaps it was a vampire thing. And who was he to judge the small talk of the bloodsucker kind?

“Are you coming, Bri?” Emmett asked, already on his feet.

“I don’t know,” Brian replied, eyeing Ash Rivers with vague interest. “Do you think his… owner would mind if I nailed the guy’s ass?”

“Perhaps not,” Edward Blount said with a shrug, “but he would certainly listen, through their mental link; it’s said he always does. For ‘safety reasons’, whatever that might be. Personally, I think he’s just jealous, and since Ash doesn’t offer his ass voluntarily, this is the only way Isaac can share his passion.”

Emmett pulled a face. “Ewww… that’s so sick!”

“In a way, Isaac is as much Ash’ slave as the other way round,” his foster Sire said thoughtfully. “I couldn’t live like that, on either end of the bargain. But we’re different people, and if Isaac finds the meagre results worth the effort to keep Ash, it’s his decision.”

Brett touched Brian’s elbow lightly.

“You should leave with us,” he said seriously. “Trust me, this particular net of hornets isn’t the place where you want to put your hand… or whatever body part of yours.”

“I take my own risks,” Brian said, vaguely pissed that they would patronize him. Brett rolled his eyes.

“How independent of you. But pissing off Isaac isn’t your personal risk. You would harm our existence, and that’s something we don’t take kindly. If you want a fuck, I can give you one that you’ll walk funny for a week. But don’t cross us where our business is concerned – we’re a lot less forgiving towards your antics as Alain would be.”

The threat was unmistakable, and for the first time in his life, Brian Kinney realized that it was a better idea to back off. So he dropped his original intent to jump Ash Rivers’ bones and went home like a sensible man, dissatisfied but alive.

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Back home, he called Michael in Pittsburgh and informed him that the Rage movie was practically a go. Michael was properly impressed by the fact that they’d managed to get Ash Rivers for the part of The Thrall. Absolute Zero had been the last movie he and Brian saw together, and he’d been blown away by Ash’s performance in it.

“I can’t say that I had him before my mind’s eye while creating The Thrall,” he admitted honestly, “but I was definitely thinking of a similar character. How did you manage to get him for the part? He
hasn’t been seen in anything lately.”

“It seems stardom didn’t become him,” Brian explained. “He was on a downwards spiral, they say: drugs, booze, other excesses. The really big suits of Hollywood drop a new star just as quickly as they create him, should he become a liability. So, Ash practically jumped at the chance to play in something big again.”

There was a short pause, then Michael asked, a little uncertainly. “You really think this is gonna be something big, Bri?”

Brian rolled his eyes – in vain, of course, as Michael couldn’t see him.

“Mikey,” he said with forced patience, “it is a good story. If it wasn’t, the Vignes Studios wouldn’t have bought it. With Dawn Cavanaugh behind the camera and Brett Keller in the director’s chair you can bet that cute ass of yours that it will be something big. And the guy playing Zephyr, Daimon Olivarez, is so hot that every queer’s gonna come into their pants the moment he appears on the big screen. So don’t fret, it will be great.”

Michael laughed. “I like it when you talk dirty to me,” he said.

He sounded so carefree that Brian risked asking about Ben’s welfare. Unsurprisingly enough, now that Michael had no chance to fly to LA and enjoy his success, or be involved in the Rage movie in any way, the Nutty Professor seemed to be on the mend. At least he was well enough to be released from the hospital in a day or two. Michael didn’t sound particularly upset about the whole thing – in fact, there was tolerant forgiveness in his voice, surprisingly similar to that of a loving parent for its errant child, for all that Ben was the older the better educated and the more worldly one of the two of them.

Well, not so much of a surprise for Brian, who knew his Mikey’s generous nature better than anyone else. He knew that when Mikey gave his heart, in love or in friendship, that was unconditional, and it would take more than some petty selfishness from Ben’s side to make Mikey turn away from him. A lot more. And even though it angered Brian that Michael would allow others (including Brian himself) to use him that way, it was part of the reason he had always loved Michael so much. It was what made Michael so unique.

And in that rare moment of absolute clarity Brian suddenly understood that he’d never be able to let Michael go. Ever. The Dynamic Duo, the “Michael and Brian Show”, as Melanie liked to call them, with more than a little malevolence, a pinch of jealousy and a great deal of bitterness, knowing she would never experience the same level of devotion – it had to prevail. There was no other choice, certainly not for Brian, and he could be reasonably sure that Michael felt the same way.

This closeness had survived Doctor Dave, despite Debbie’s well-meant but cruel interference. It had survived Justin – again, despite Debbie’s considerable efforts to break them up on Justin’s behalf – which in itself was a strange thing for a mother to do, although considering his own mother Brian surely wasn’t the right person to judge maternal intentions. It had survived Brian’s own shitty behaviour towards Michael. It would survive the Nutty Professor as well.

As much as Brian disliked facing uncomfortable truths – especially if they concerned his own person – he knew that Alain had been right. He did count on the time when Ben wouldn’t be standing between him and Michael anymore, though he didn’t exactly want it to happen, knowing how devastated Michael would be. But once it happened, Brian would be there for Michael to catch him – and to never let him go again.

*That* was something he knew with absolute certainty now. As if all the years of drifting and seeking
a purpose, the years during which Michael had been the singular stable factor in his life, had been nothing but a slow process to bring him to this particular understanding; to his sudden revelation that he must not allow Michael to seek elsewhere again, once Ben was out of the equation.

Oh, he knew he would have to wait. Michael was as loyal a husband as he was a friend; he would never leave Ben as long as Ben needed him, and Ben seemed to grow more and more dependent on Michael’s faithful presence. But, as Alain had put it with the brutal honesty of a being half a millennium old and way beyond white lies, it wouldn’t last forever. Perhaps not even too long. So all Brian had to do was to wait.

There was another aspect, however, that Alain had mentioned earlier: time didn’t stand still while he waited. Did he truly want to offer Michael a burned-out husk, no better than an older version of Ash Rivers, when Michael was free again? After having refused him the years of his prime? In a year or two, would he still be a worthy offering?

As Kindred, you have the time to wait, Alain’s casual remark echoed in his mind like a siren’s song.

He stood and walked into the bathroom, eyeing himself critically in the large mirror. He still looked well enough; in fact better than for a long time. The enforced inactivity in the Hyperion – including the absence of drugs – had done a great deal of good for him, despite the haunting dreams. The rings had vanished from under his eyes; he appeared sleek and smooth and younger than his actual years.

He would remain like this for eternity if he accepted Alain’s offer to take him over to the creatures of the Dark. Just as Alain himself had been permanently twenty-nine for the last five hundred years. Yep, the thought did have its attraction, despite the liquid diet and the impossibility of sunbathing.

There were other disadvantages, of course. Becoming a vampire would mean that he’d also become a pawn in the eternal struggle between Alain’s side and the freaky monsters like Yitzhak. But Brian had leaned the hard way that remaining mortal wouldn’t necessarily mean that he’d be spared. The choice was to remain cattle or to become one of the wolves. And Brian Kinney was not a man to bear cattle status well.

Neither did he want the same status for his Mikey. And he most certainly didn’t wish for Michael to grow old and feeble in the Pitts, and then die there, before he’d have truly lived at all. Michael did have a gift in him that could grow to full bloom if not the hampering presence of Debbie, Ben, Ted, the munchers – and all the mediocre queers of Liberty Avenue. A spark, so well-hidden under the layers of his modesty and his mundane tasks that nobody seemed to recognize it, not even after the first, unexpected success of Rage. Especially not that stupid cow of a mother of his who was too busy raving about her precious Sunshine to realize what an incredible treasure she had in her own son.

Brett Keller had been the first person to recognize the true driving force behind Rage. And Brett Keller was a vampire, with who knows how many years of talent-seeking experience under his belt. Vera Vignes, Edward Blount and all the other bloodsuckers from the movie industry, also recognized Michael’s talent. If Michael became one of them, he’d have uncounted years to make up for all the time wasted in the Big Q, wasted with Doctor Dave, wasted with Ben.

It was a certain irony that he would have to die first. But he would follow Brian into the Dark trustingly, just like he’d followed him to practically everywhere all their life. And, bar unexpected disasters, they would have eternity to make up for the time they had been too stupid to put to better use in their youth.

Mildly surprised by the decision that had come to him almost unexpectedly, Brian left his rooms to speak to Alain. There were certain points in this business that still needed clarification.
Ash Rivers is a game canon character. In canon, he was Embraced in 2003, at the age of twenty-eight. I ignored the exact time of his Embrace – well, it’s perhaps more accurate to say that I kept it vague – so that I could include him into this story.
Chapter Summary

Brian makes the all-deciding step into the Dark – but it is only the beginning of his journey.

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TAMING THE VAGABOND, Part 2

He found Alain in his office – in the company of Victor Girard. The two didn’t seem to be discussing anything of importance, though. If they had any business with each other, they had got over the official part already, and were now sitting in the deep, futuristic armchairs in a corner opposite the desk and were sipping red wine – or what seemed red wine. Brian had learned not to assume anything any longer where bloodsuckers were involved.

Having taught the importance – and the privileges – of a Clan Primogen, Brian nodded to Victor Girard politely before turning to Alain.

“We need to talk,” he said simply. The artist frowned.

“Can it wait? As you can see, I have a visitor.”

“That comes in handy,” Brian replied, “because what I have on my mind concerns both of you.”

The two French vampires exchanged looks of mild surprise. Then Alain, who’d become very good at reading Brian’s moods, turned to the mortal with widening eyes.

“You’ve come to a decision,” he said. It was not a question.

Brian nodded. “I have.”

Alain looked at him for a long moment, and when he finally spoke, Brian knew that the artist had already guessed what his decision would be.

“You accept.” That wasn’t a question, either. Brian nodded again.

Basically, yes,” he said. “But there are a few things I’d like to know before… well, before the big suckfeast starts. Actually, make it a lot of things.”

The shadow of a smile appeared for a moment on Alain’s pale face.

“Of course,” he said. “We usually instruct our future Childer about the intricacies of unlife before we go for the jugular.” There was that dark irony again that made him so attractive in Brian’s eyes; well, that and his good looks.

“Besides,” he added, “I need to get the Prince’s permission first. And the support of my Primogen, of course.”

Victor Girard shifted positions and rubbed his bony hands in delight.
“Oh, I do support you,” he said; then, after a moment of consideration, he asked. “Do you want me to speak with Angelus on your behalf? It has usually more weight if the Clan Primogen presents the request.”

“He already knows of my intent,” Alan replied. “After all, he allowed me to hide Brian in the Hyperion. But it never hurts to stick to the rules. I appreciate your offer.”

“Consider it done,” Victor Girard emptied his glass and stood. “Well, I better get going now. The two of you will have a lot to discuss. Oh, and welcome to Clan Toreador, Brian.”

“I’m not there yet,” Brian reminded him. The Primogen grinned.

“A technicality,” he replied airily. “Deep in your heart you’ve always been a Toreador, I believe. Alain will just set your true nature free. Au revoir.”

He waved at them and waltzed out, in the manner of a slightly overbearing stage actor, obviously thrilled by the perspective to win a proper fledgling for the Clan. Alain looked after him for a moment with mild exasperation; then he gestured to Brian to sit down in the Primogen’s vacated chair.

“Let’s talk, then,” he said.

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It was a long talk, all things considered – it lasted the whole night. While in theory Brian had accepted the offer of eternal life… unlife… whatever, he was full of anxious questions about how the entire thing was going to happen, and what to expect afterwards, once the task had been performed.

They were discussing his life, after all. And while he had flirted with death occasionally, whatever his motivation might have been, approaching his own death with eyes wide open – with open arms, in fact – was a very different thing. Besides, there were technicalities to discuss.

“I see no reason to postpone it too long, now that you’ve made up your mind,” Alain said carefully, not wanting to press him. That would have caused the polar opposite of the desired result with Brian, and the artist knew that. “An overlong waiting period only worsens the anxiety. Also, it would be a good thing if you were done with Becoming when Brett starts shooting the Rage movie. You might be needed to represent your friend’s interests again.”

“But he plans to start filming in two months’ time!” Brian said. “Will I be through the worst by then?”

“By all accounts, you should,” Alain replied calmly. “This will be a controlled Embrace, not the kind of freak accident like in Emmett’s case. I’ll prepare you well – no, not that way, get your mind out of the gutter this one time! This is a serious step that will last for eternity, unless you do something monumentally foolish afterwards.”

“I know,” Brian said, “and frankly, it scares the shit out of me. Is it gonna hurt a lot?”

“No more than what’s inevitable,” Alain assured him. “And I’ll be there for you, every step on the way. There are ways to ease the pain of the Becoming – I’ll do everything in my might to make this as easy for you as possible.”

“I know,” Brian sighed. “Do you think, though, there’s anything that could really prepare someone for… for this?”

“No,” Alain admitted bluntly. “Dying and Becoming is a unique experience for everyone. But it
helps if the Sire is as old and powerful as I am. The more powerful the Sire’s *Vitae* – his blood – is, the more does it sustain the fledgling. You’ll be fine – if you live through the Embrace, that is.”

“What do you mean *if* I live through it?” Brian felt the panic rising in the pit of his stomach. “I thought you knew what you were about to do!”

“I do,” Alain replied, “and I don’t really expect any complications. You’re young and strong and determined. If you can resist the lure of the light in the deciding moment, you’ll be okay.”

“I don’t understand,” Brian fought the panic very hard, clinging to the soothing touch of Alain’s cool hand above his heart.

“Of course not – how could you?” Alain’s voice sounded distant, almost wistful. “But you will, once you’ve come to that particular threshold. There is a significant moment, after your heart has stopped and I’ve fed you my *Vitae*, when you must make the final decision – to continue your journey into the light you’ll be seeing, and to the great unknown that lies beyond, or to return to this world as a creature of the Dark. Should the pull of the light prove too strong, you may not be able to resist. There’s no way to tell beforehand. It’s different for everyone.”

“I don’t wanna die, really die, I mean,” Brian said, still panicking a little. “I wanna come back! That’s the reason for this whole exercise, isn’t it?”

Alain nodded. “It is. And I believe your roots in this world are strong enough to keep you here. It’s a rare thing anyway, to be pulled over by the light – but it’s a distinct possibility. Knowing what you’re gonna face can help you to resist.”

“What the hell is that light anyway?” Brian asked with a frown. “Is it the same thing the priests babble about?”

“How could I know?” Alain asked back with a shrug. “No one has returned from there to tell; not in *my* lifetime anyway, which has been long enough, as you know.” He patted Brian’s chest reassuringly. “Don’t worry. Of all the potential fledglings I’ve ever met, you have the strongest reason to return. After all, you’ll leave the better half of your heart and soul behind.”

Which was very true, of course. If Michael wouldn’t be a strong enough anchor for Brian to keep him in this world, nothing else would.

“And *if* I return,” he said, “what will happen afterwards?”

“You’ll go through Becoming, which will be unpleasant enough,” Alain replied with brutal honesty. “For a while, I’ll have to keep you close; a fledgling must learn to control the Beast, and it is violent in our bloodline, as you’ve seen yourself at more than one occasion.”

“Vamp training?” Brian joked lamely.

“Learning your new nature,” Alain corrected. “It won’t be easy. But I don’t want to Blood Bond you, even though it would make it easier to establish control. In fact, when we first decided to approach you, it was suggested to me.”

“And you declined?” Brian asked in surprise, having learned of Alain’s control issues already.

“Why?”

“I don’t want a thrall, a bonded slave who’d detest me the way Ash detests Isaac,” Alain replied. “I want you to submit to me out of your own free will, not because you have no other choice. I’m strong enough to establish my dominance without breaking your will – or causing you to take a walk
in the sun, as I doubt that you’d be able to survive as a slave. It’s not in your nature.”

“But aren’t you risking that things wouldn’t turn out according to your wishes?” Brian asked.

“I am,” Alain agreed. “If all I wanted were your body, I would bond you – but what should I do with a pretty but empty husk? I want you the way you are – well, save from the drugs and the drinking, but once you’ve experienced the rush of the Kindred Kiss, you won’t be needing those anyway. All will be well, you’ll see it. Just listen to me and follow my lead.”

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Two days later Victor Girard called Alain and told him that the Prince of the City had given his consent – Alain was now free to Embrace Brian any time he wanted. In fact, the time couldn’t be any more fitting, with Alain’s students off to Europe on a study trip and the shooting of the Rage movie still weeks away. They had the house all to themselves.

At least where mortals were considered, that is. Representatives of the Clan and close Kindred friends were supposed to be present, if not for other reason, than to help, should anything go wrong. In theory, Alain could be trusted with performing a proper Embrace without help, but everyone knew that there were no two cases alike. So it was quite a crowd that gathered in Alain’s house on the chosen day.

That Victor Girard would be there was only natural; it was his right as the Clan Primogen. But Louis Fortier had come, too, representing the Anarch Ventrue, with his Childe Mlle DuBois; and Edward Blount and his twin cousins from the Camarilla side of Clan Ventrue (although they hadn’t brought Emmett who was still nothing more than a fledgling). And Phillipe, who might be a Ventrue too, but had a personal interest in Brian still. And, last but not least, as the only mortal present, Bethany, the red-headed psychology student from the Luna Foundation.

“She’s a volunteer,” Alain explained. “You’ll need mortal blood after your reawakening, and taking it fresh, directly from the source, is always better than the bottled stuff. With her psychokinetic powers, Bethany is probably the only mortal who can safely face a newly Embraced fledgling.”

Brian gave the young woman a doubtful glance. She seemed so soft and feminine, almost fragile – it was hard to imagine that she would be able to stand up to an out-of-control vampire. Alain grinned.

“Show her,” he said, and in the next moment Brian felt an irresistible force lift him off his feet and press him against the wall, about a foot above the floor. Another moment later Bethany let him go, and he landed on his feet again, with a slight thump.

“I thought you could only do this when you’re in danger,” he grumbled, rubbing his throat uncomfortably. Somehow, a mere mortal girl having superhero abilities seemed weirder than all the bloodsuckers in the room.

“I’ve trained,” Bethany replied simply. “Don’t fret; we’ll both be fine. I’ve done this before.”

“You should begin,” Victor Girard intervened quietly. “We’ll stay here and wait… just in case.”

Alain nodded. “I agree. Brian, are you ready?”

Brian’s stomach clenched painfully. This was the very last moment to change his mind should he want to. His nervous glance met Phillipe’s eyes: soft hazel eyes full of fondness and understanding. Alain might have seduced him into the Dark, but Phillipe had been the first vampire he’d become intimate with, and even after they’d drifted apart, they remained casual friends. The presence of the lawyer meant a lot to him.
Phillipe came over to him and kissed him, slowly and deeply. The familiar taste helped a lot to soothe Brian’s nerves.

“Good luck,” the Ventrue said. “See you in a few hours.”

And so there was nothing else to do than to proceed to Alain’s bedroom – the very same where they had made passionate love last night to enjoy Brian’s last warm night. Even a devout cynic like Brian had felt how much more it had been than his usual excesses – it had been his farewell to the world as he knew it and as he would never see it again. To a life he had lived to its limits and that couldn’t offer him anything that would still attract him.

Except Michael, of course, but Brian had come to realize that his former life would never hold anything worth offering to Michael. It had to be a different life, with different rules, for them to be together.

If he lived through the painful process of becoming a vampire, that is.

“Second thoughts?” Alain asked quietly. “You can still back off, you know.”

Brian shook his head. “Nah, I don’t want to. Just cold feet, I guess.”

Alain grinned. “That’s normal. Cold feet we can deal with.”

“I hope so,” Brian looked around in the almost empty bedroom, noticing that the large bed had been covered with a simple crimson cloth. It had the symbol of Clan Toreador, a single rose, embroidered in the middle, in black and gold. Two antique candlesticks stood right and left of the headboard, with tall, red candles burning evenly.

“It looks like a bier,” Brian said, and Alain nodded.

“In a sense, it is one. I’m going to kill you, there’s no other way to put it. And where would be more appropriate to reawaken you to new life than in the same bed where we’ve become one in body and soul many times?”

“In soul?” Brian repeated, darkly amused. “Are you sure I actually have one? I’m not sure many would agree.”

“They don’t know you as intimately as I do,” Alain replied calmly. “I drank your blood, and you saw through my eyes in your dreams. Few can hope to get any closer than that.”

“I see your point,” Brian hesitated for a moment. “How are we gonna do this?”

“Relax and let me lead you,” Alain stepped closer, loosened Brian’s tie and pulled it off him completely. Then he unbuttoned the upmost three buttons of Brian’s shirt to gain free access to the mortal’s neck.

“I appreciate the fact that you’ve dressed up to the occasion,” he said, stroking Brian’s chest through the expensive silk shirt. “I always knew you had style. Now, lie down on the bed, on your back.”

Brian obeyed, and Alain stretched out on his side, touching and kissing him on the most sensitive spots, if they were about to make love again. But this time the artist’s eyes were shot with silver; Alain had fasted for days to be able to drain him of all his blood, and the Thirst was strong, very strong. The vampire had to walk on razor’s edge, the thin line that separated Embracing from killing. Fortunately for Brian, Alain was old and strong. Strong enough to keep the Beast on the leash.
Alain sucked Brian’s neck above the pulse point, luring the big vein to the surface. Then his fangs dropped on their own, piercing the soft, sensitized skin and opening the blood vessel. Brian convulsed in the sharp pain, but the ecstasy of the Kiss washed him away, filling his blood with adrenaline and endorphins, making a gourmet meal of him for his Sire-to-be.

Old and experienced, Alain didn’t allow the rapture to overwhelm him. While drinking slowly and deeply, he listened to the mortal’s heartbeat as it slowed down gradually, while the flow of life left the limp body. The all-deciding moment wasn’t far now.

Brian felt strangely light-headed, in a way no drugs could ever make him. His limbs were numb, and he felt as if he was floating among clouds or some other cotton-like substance. The world darkened around him, but it wasn’t threatening. It was like sinking into a deep, dreamless sleep.

And then, like a door suddenly opening in a windowless room, a panel of white, blinding light appeared, gleaming, calling to him to follow its lure, to step through the gateway and enter the unknown lands beyond it. Forgetting everything else, he moved towards the light, slowly but irresistibly.

Catching the last beat of the mortal heart, Alain knew he had to act quickly. Kissing the now cool lips, he sliced his tongue with the tip of a fang, and deepened the kiss, forcing his Vitae down the unmoving throat. This was an unusual method, but he found that it worked better than most. Many a fledgling died because their Sire wasn’t able to make them swallow his Vitae. With Alain’s method, it always worked.

The sheer unbearable heat of Alain’s powerful Vitae burned through Brian’s very being like a living flame. It was agony, but it was also a pleasure beyond anything he’d ever felt before. It stopped his instinctive drifting towards the light, making him vaguely self-aware again.

He realized – rather feeling than truly knowing – that he was standing on the threshold of two worlds. Before him, the great unknown stretched to infinity, just past that shining gateway whose siren song tried to lull him into dumb obedience again. Over there lay adventures he couldn’t even imagine. Behind him lay the dark empire of the undead; a long life in the twilight, the chance to right the wrongs of his mortal life that was now irrevocably over, no matter the outcome.

He would never be able to go back the way he’d been for three decades and more. But in the Dark behind him was the potential of centuries. Centuries to learn, to grow, to love. And somewhere behind him, on the sunlit side of the Dark, was Mikey… and the chance for them to finally be together as they had always been meant to be together.

It wasn’t such a hard decision, really. The adventures of the great unknown could only be faced together with Michael… but there was no need to hurry. The gleaming fields would keep. Before they would cross that particular threshold, there were shared centuries in the Dark – or so he hoped. First, though, he had to return… if he could only find the right direction.

He sought around him blindly, and before he would start panicking in earnest, he found Alain’s steady presence. For the first time, he could feel the power of his Sire directly – it was enough to pull him back, if only he held on fast enough.

Alain felt Brian’s consciousness awakening through their link; it was a crude and weak connection yet, but enough for him to send his instructions directly into the fledgling’s mind, instead of shocking his sharpened vampire senses with actual sound or touch.

*Easy, Childe,* he soothed. *I’ve got you now. All is well; it’s done.*
Brian opened his eyes – only to shut them again, tightly. The dim light of the candles in the otherwise dark room attacked his vision like hot knives.

“Hurts,” he whimpered, his own voice thundering in his ears, unbearably loud.

_I know_, Alain replied mind-to-mind. _Your senses are much sharper now. Give yourself time to adjust._

The reasonable explanation calmed the fledgling a little; he lay still in his Sire’s arms, leaning against Alain’s body that was almost mortal warm from his own blood that had been transferred to it. Much warmer, in fact, than he felt himself. He was shivering.

“C-cold,” he whispered, and curled into a foetal position as the pain of the Becoming – the hunger of the starved tissues – hit without a warning.

“I know,” Alain murmured in the lowest possible voice, almost subvocal. “You need to feed.”

The scent of blood – the blood of his Sire, of his unknown but powerful bloodline, the blood of his Clan – hit his senses as Alain’s wrist, with the large blood vessel already opened, was offered to him. Hyperaware of scent, taste and texture, the fledgling launched at the precious offering, suckling like a babe, until the worst edge of the pain was blunted to a dull ache and he could take a deep – and now completely unnecessary – breath again.

He looked up into Alain’s smiling face and was surprised to see the older vampire’s pride and joy. As a mortal, he’d never seen anything remotely like that on Jack Kinney’s face; and while his relationship with his Sire had nothing parental in it – _that_ would really be sick and weird – he could finally feel that he was _wanted_. Wanted and cherished. Strange that he had to die first. But it was well worth the price.

“Yes, you are worth it,” Alain murmured, still smiling and more touched than he’d felt in a very long time. This fledgling, this beautiful, arrogant, vulnerable creature was _his_ now, and he would teach him everything, every trick learned in half a millennium, to make him last long in the Dark.

Something of his feelings must have seeped through their link, because Brian relaxed in his arms and leaned against him trustingly – something that didn’t come to him easily.

“How are the senses doing?” Alain asked in the same low, almost subvocal voice. It still sounded too loud, almost harsh in the fledgling’s newly sensitized ears, but it didn’t hurt anymore.

“Better,” Brian murmured, mindful of his own ears. “I’m adapting.”

“You’re a survivor,” Alain replied. “I’d like to bring in the others now, if you don’t mind.”

_Now?_ In his sudden panic Brian sent the question through their link, without being aware of it. _Too soon..._ he wasn’t sure he could face multiple sensory attacks just yet.

“Easy, take it easy,” Alain soothed. “They’ve all been through the same thing; they know how to approach a newly awakened fledgling. And it must be. It’s tradition to present the neonate to the Clan Primogen if said Primogen has come to witness the Embrace. Trust me?”

After a moment of hesitation, Brian nodded. Alain, who kept a surface link with his Primogen, sent Victor Girard a silent invitation to enter. Knowing from first-hand experience how painful a sensory overload right after the Embrace could be, the Toreador entered the room almost noiselessly – it didn’t sound more than loud footsteps for Brian’s ears.
“It is done,” Alain reported to his Primogen. “He has awakened.”

Victor Girard smiled and nodded, taking in the changed looks of Brian with appreciation. The fledgling still showed the usual tan achieved in the solarium, but his chestnut hair had a slight reddish hue now that fit him excellently, and his eyes were shot with silver.

“Congratulations,” Girard said to both of them. “And welcome to Clan Toreador, Brian.”

“Thanks,” Brian murmured; then he doubled over in pain again. It felt as if his insides were slashed by hot knives.

“He needs more blood,” Girard warned, and Bethany came already, without waiting for an imperative. “You should open the blood vessel yourself, though, Alain. An untrained fledgling in the first bouts of the Thirst…”

“I know, I know,” Alain said impatiently. He accepted Bethany’s outstretched arms and – extending a talon – opened one of the large blood vessels. “Come here, Childe. You need to feed.”

The scent of her blood, mortal blood, the source of his unlife for the entire future, pulled on Brian’s senses. He didn’t give the process any thought, sure that it would probably freak him out, big time, if he did, so he just bent over the proffered arm and let his instincts carry him on. The mortal warmth of her blood felt scalding hot to his starving cells; it burned through his insides, warming him, easing the pain…

*That is enough, Childe,* Alain’s order reached him through the link, in a tone that brooked no disobedience. Reluctantly, he withdrew, licking the wound to seal it as he’d been taught. Bethany’s head was thrown back, her pale face frozen in ecstasy, and Brian suppressed a chuckle at the absurd thought that he only had to die in order to pleasure a woman thoroughly.

*You’re incorrigible,* came Alain’s amused mental comment, and Brian shrugged and grinned, presenting his brand new fangs.

“I see all the necessary parts are in place,” Phillipe smiled. “If you’re interested… and if Alain lets you… we can test the differences, once you’ve finished Becoming.”

“I doubt I’d ever be able to keep Brian from anything he really wants to do,” Alain said dryly. “Once he’s freed, his decisions will be his own.”

“As long as he pays his due… *respects* to his Sire, I presume,” Phillipe added suavely.

“Of course,” Alain nodded. “That’s the whole point, isn’t it?”

“I guess it is,” Phillipe smiled at Brian in a very different, almost gentle manner; as one would smile at a newborn babe, which, in Kindred terms, Brian was at the moment. “We ought to go now. You both need to rest – and time to fully establish your link. I shall inform the Prince that the Embrace has been successful.”

Since he’d taken part in the Embracing of young billionaire David Nabbit on Angelus’ behalf – with the Prince doing the killing but Phillipe supplying more than half of the Vitae necessary to make the new fledgling – he had the Prince’s ear, and the Camarilla put that improved relationship to good use.

“Bethany and I shall stay the night,” Victor Girard decided. “She might be needed yet, and I’d like to see how things develop – if it’s all right with you, Alain.”
The artist nodded. “Sure, use the guest rooms; you know where they are. Brian and I still have a long way to do.”

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In the following three weeks, Brian would learn how true that statement had been. Even though his Becoming was not the prolonged agony poor Owen was still going through, the pain of the changes was bad enough. The knife-sharp hunger of still starving tissues stabbed him again and again, the gut-wrenching pain sending him to near-frenzy several times, but Alain was there to catch him every time, and each wave was just a tiny bit easier to bear than the one before.

“You’re doing well,” Alain declared, kissing him unhurriedly.

“I don’t feel well,” Brian growled, fighting his increased aggressivity, the Wild as the vampires called their very nature. Sharpened senses, intensified feelings, both the good and the bad, weren’t easy to get under control. Especially for him who’d had control issues all his mortal life.

“You’re still changing,” Alain replied. “It takes time for the process to be completed. Believe me if I say that you’re doing better than most of my Childer have ever done.”

“You mean you have more than just Oliver and his lover boy?” Brian inquired, suddenly curious about any potential undead siblings.

“I used to,” Alain answered, his grief palpable. “They’re all dead now; have been for over a century. You’re the first I’ve truly chosen to Embrace. Oliver and his partner were a convenience for Angelus, though they were willing enough. They have each other, in mutual bond, and don’t need – or want – anyone else.”

“And Sarina?” Brian asked, as his Sire and the girl seemed close enough.

“Sarina isn’t mine,” Alain explained. “Rebecca Lowell Embraced her, out of a whim, then abandoned her when she got bored. I was asked to take her into foster care for the Prince – Angelus had known her from her mortal days – and since I needed his favour, I did as he bade.”

“Why did you need a favour?” Brian was a little flabbergasted. Alain sighed.

“I wasn’t trusted. Everyone knew I had lived with Yitzhak for years, and very few believed that I didn’t know he was with the Sabbat. In fact, I was accused of being with the Sabbat myself. The Justicars chased me across Europe; I had to come to LA to survive. This is a Free Anarch State where the Justicars have no jurisdiction. Victor vouched for me before the Conclave, but the other Primogens didn’t really trust me. So, the Prince’s favour was very important for me.”

“And what now?” Brian asked. “Do they still not trust you?”

“Some of them might not,” Alain said. “But the important people know me by now, and that’s what counts. My Childer got accepted by Prince and Conclave – you’ve no need to worry.”

“I’m not worried,” Brian said, making himself more comfortable in his Sire’s arms, “but these concepts aren’t exactly easy to adjust to.”

Like the concept of becoming more intimate with a woman than he’d ever been with any of his friends or bedmates. While his connection to Bethany had nothing sexual in it, the sheer sensuality of feeding from her excited his senses beyond imagination, and her creamy white neck when she threw her head back in pleasure while he drank from her was the single most erotic sight he could imagine. This was a whole new level of connection, one he could have never imagined. It was sensual and physical, completely asexual and yet beyond what casual sex could ever be. A new kind of
“Once you’ve done Becoming, I’ll teach you how to hunt,” Alain said, catching some of his thoughts through their link. “You mustn’t become dependent on volunteers, even though there are places, safe and clean ones, where you’ll always find blood dolls. It would be even more dangerous to become dependent on one blood donor – given enough time, it would make you incapable of feeding from anyone else. Besides, we’re predators – though ethical ones, at least those of us with the Camarilla. The Hunt is part of our nature… and you of all people have enough predatory instincts in you by design to enjoy it.”

That was probably very true, Brian silently admitted, feeling dark excitement filling his whole being. It seemed to him that his mortal life had been nothing else but a long preparation for what he was always supposed to become: a creature of the night, a born predator who preyed on the weak, who took what he wanted and was willing to pay the price.

It might sound morally ambiguous, but the hypocritical morals of the Kine didn’t concern him anymore. He got on top of the food chain now, and all he had still to be wary of were his fellow predators, the older and stronger ones of his kind.

He knew it would take time to learn all the intricacies of the undead society; the new set of rules by which he’d have to play in the future. But time was something he’d have aplenty now, without the burden and advancing age – and he was willing to learn.
Bad News

Chapter Summary

Brian is just starting to settle into his new life as a Toreador fledgling when a distress call from Pittsburgh disturbs the process. Ben’s AIDS has broken out, and Michael is falling apart. Brian is ready to go, but how could Alain let a newly-embraced fledgling out of his eyes?

Chapter Notes

Alonzo Solace is an original character of mine. He’s been modelled after the similarly-named character in Earth 2, and is, of course, “played” by a young Antonio Sabato Jr.

Title: Bad News

The phone was ringing insistently, petulantly. Brian, torn out from a very pleasant dream, groaned and stirred in his Sire’s arms, muttering half-conscious curses under his now nonexistent breath. Alain tightened his embrace around him and licked his neck, on the same spot where he’d bitten him earlier.

“Let it ring. The answering machine will pick it up in a moment.”

“It can be important,” Brian protested lamely but made no serious attempt to get away. Their lovemaking had been long and rather vigorous in this morning. Alain was still inside him, having fallen asleep during their last coupling, and still hard.

“So is this,” Alain ground his hips against the curve of Brian’s ass, his cock jerking in the younger man’s body, hitting Brian’s prostate. Brian hissed in mixed pain/pleasure; he was sore and worn out, but some things were just too hot to resist. Besides, vampire healing had its advantages.

In that very moment, however, the answering machine picked up the call, ruining the mood completely.

“Brian?” Debbie’s shrill voice all but screamed. “Brian, answer the damn phone, or so God help me, I’ll take the next plane to rip your dick off and shove it so far up your sorry ass it will come out your mouth. Answer me, dammit, I know you are there!”

In a second, Brian was wide awake – and no more interested in amorous actions.

“Sire, I really must answer this one,” he said pleadingly. “Deb wouldn’t make such a fuss if it weren’t important.”

Alain nodded and pulled out of him. He knew who Debbie was and what she – and her son Michael – meant to Brian. Sex could wait. They had eternity. But Brian’s mortal friends didn’t, and judged by
Debbie’s near-hysteric manners, something must have been very wrong in Pittsburgh.

Brian rolled over and picked up the phone. “I’m here, Deb, no need to be rude. What happened?”

“Brian, oh, thank God,” all hostility vanished from Debbie’s voice; it was low and nearly broken now. “It’s Ben… the AIDS has broken out by him, full-blown. It’s so horrible, Brian, it… it’s happening so fast…”

“Fuck,” Brian hissed. He didn’t care for the Nutty Professor, in fact he’d be glad to see Ben gone, but… “How’s Mikey taking it?”

“How do you suppose he’s taking it?” Debbie scowled. “Ben is his fucking husband, remember? He’s falling apart, that’s how he’s taking it. You must come home, now!”

“Deb, I can’t, not now…” he was a fledgling, brand new to the Dark, not even presented to the Prince yet. He’d be free prey for every stray vampire. Fuck, he couldn’t even Hunt on his own yet.

“Brian,” Debbie’s voice began to rise again, “Michael has always been there for you, no matter what sort of shit you’ve gotten into. Don’t you dare to walk away from him now, when he needs you most!”

“It’s not that simple, Deb…” He yearned to rush home, to comfort Mikey, to stand by him, but he wasn’t his own master yet. Not freed yet.

“Then make it simple,” Debbie demanded harshly, too many recent tears audible in her voice. “You’ve promised, Brian! You’ve fucking promised you’ll be there for him…”

His Childe’s anguish coming over through their bond clearly, Alain took pity on him. He snatched the phone from Brian’s unresisting hand. “Mrs Novotny? I’m Brian’s… partner. Things are indeed not that simple here at the moment, but I’ll see what I can do to get him home as soon as possible.”

Debbie was so surprised she could barely thank him before hanging up. Brian looked at Alain in wonder. “You’ll let me…?”

Alain kissed him. “I know what he means to you. What you two have is a rare gift; I wouldn’t take that from you. We’ll finish what we’ve begun, and then I’ll make a few phone calls to get you there safely. Now, turn around!”

Brian obeyed, knowing that his Sire would never let a good fuck unfinished, which was okay with him, as long as he got to go to Mikey, soon. Alain opened him with a firm hand and plunged into his aching hole with one thrust, hitting his prostate unerringly. Brian let his head fall onto the pillow and groaned. It hurt like hell, sure, but in a good way, proving his maker’s possessive love for him. Alain rode him hard and fast, as if wanting to make clear that his ass was owned and by whom.

“You’re beautiful, my Childe,” the older vampire murmured between hard thrusts, “and you are all mine. I might allow you to go to your childhood love, but never do you dare to forget whom you belong.”

His fangs dropped, sinking into Brian’s neck with surgical precision. Their link opened wide through the shared blood, his love and passion flooded the fledgling’s mind like a red-hot wave of fire. Brian cried out from the almost intolerable pleasure of the Kindred Kiss, spilling himself over his maker’s hands.

Finishing the act with a shudder that went through his entire body and licking the bite mark clean to seal it, Alain sent his favourite Childe to take a long, hot shower, and then picked up the phone and
dialled a number he’d known for years but never used so far.

“Casa de Garcia,” a female voice said. Alain recognized its owner as one of the Garcia household with whom he’d some dealings recently.

“Allison? Alain DeLaigle here. Can I speak with Salvador, please? I need to ask him a favour… a really big one.”

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Fifteen minutes later Brian emerged from the bathroom, still walking funny, despite accelerated vampire healing. His maker ordered him to lie down on his belly once more, and lovingly applied the herbal salve to his torn and bleeding anus.

“I’m sorry,” Alain murmured, kissing the dimples on the small of Brian’s back. “I got caught up in the heat of the moment. You’re too damn delicious… but not yet strong enough for such rough treatment.”

“It doesn’t matter;” Brian murmured, flexing his muscles under Alain’s mouth that was already wandering down the curve of his ass. “I’ll heal. I’ve suffered worse as a mortal. But Sire, I really need to go, soon…”

“Don’t worry. I’ve organized a flight for you. You’ll take off in two hours.”

“In two hours?” Brian panicked. That would mean high noon, and he was still a fledgling, more vulnerable to sunlight than an average vampire. “I’ll be toast before I reach the airport. And what about the plane itself? Where can I hide from the sun in a plane?”

“Calm down. Give me some credit, would you? I got you a vampire-safe plane, with tinted windows. Did you think I’d risk your safety?”

“Where did you get that from? The only such plane I know of belongs to…”

“…to Salvador Garcia, yes. He agreed to lend it to me, including his personal pilot.”

Brian rolled onto his back and gave his Sire a wary look. “He did? Out of the goodness of his undead heart? What have you promised him? My ass or my soul?”

“I’d never trade you for favours,” Alain replied angrily. “He wants a PR campaign for his Argentinian wines in exchange, and I promised him one, that’s all.”

“I can do that,” Brian agreed. “Is the booze any good?”

Alain shrugged. “How am I supposed to know? I only drink French wine. But you’ll sell it anyway. You can sell anything. Now, get dressed and go packing.”

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Alain drove him to the airport, where the private jet of Salvador Garcia – a beautiful, sleek machine – was already waiting for them, and so was its pilot. This was the first time that Brian met Alonzo Solace, an almost two hundred years old, beautiful Spanish Brujah, who not only was the pilot of the infamous Anarch leader but also his driver, shield-mate and long-time lover. He had to admit that the Spaniard was a walking wet dream; he got weak in the knees from the sight, despite his rather eventful sex life with his Sire.

[Be careful with that one, my Childe], Alain warned him through their link. [Brujah are unpredictable by their very nature, and no one has managed to figure out Alonzo since he entered the
Night, back in the 19th century. Do him if you want him, but always cover your back.]

[He is hot], Brian admitted, [but that’s not why I’m going to The Pitts. Another time, perhaps.]

[When you’ve grown stronger, much stronger], Alain agreed. Then he turned to Alonzo and spoke slowly, deliberately.

“I transfer to you the responsibility for my Childe’s well-being for the duration of this journey. You are to keep him safe, take him out Hunting and return him to me unharmed.”

Perhaps this was some kind of arcane Kindred ritual, since Alain didn’t add any savage threats about what would happen if Brian should get harmed in any way. Alonzo nodded formally and replied in the same manner.

“I take full responsibility for the safety of the Childe. I’ll feed him and protect him and return him to you unharmed, or my blood shall be wasted.”

The grave oath that even the most savage Anarch took very seriously soothed a little Alain’s anxiety. He loathed letting his much-loved Childe out of town before Brian would be fully trained, accepted by the Conclave and freed, but he knew that in this one thing the fledgling would disobey him and rather walk into the sun than abandon his childhood friend. So Alain swallowed the bitter pill and took the risk.

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They reached Pittsburgh at 16:00, local time. There was a rental car waiting for them – a normal one, but since The Pitts was having one of the countless annual rainy days, it wasn’t such a big problem.

“So, where now?” Alonzo asked, after having stored the bottled stuff in the ice-boxes in the car.

“Allegheny Memorial,” Brian sighed. “I’m sure that Mikey is there with Ben. That’s where they always go – they have a doctor there who’s a friend.”

“Okay,” Alonzo nodded, taking one of the bottles out of the ice box, “but you need to eat first.”

“I’m not hungry,” Brian replied impatiently.

“I don’t care,” Alonzo said. “You can’t walk into a hospital full of people, some of them injured and bleeding, without having fed first. You’d lose control over the Beast, attack people and leave a trail of dead bodies behind you. And if I had to kill you to prevail that, Alain would do indescribable things to me. I’d rather avoid that.”

Brian looked at him in deep shock. “You would kill me?”

“Oh, yes,” Alonzo replied coldly, “and I’d be within my rights. You’re a fledgling, given into my responsibility – if you turned out a danger for the Masquerade, it’d be my duty to destroy you, in order to protect myself and the others. I haven’t lived near two hundred years by being careless. So be quiet and feed, if you want to see your friend ever again.”

His eyes were cold like pieces of obsidian, and Brian had learned enough about Kindred in general and about Brujah in particular to shut up and feed. In exchange, Alonzo let him drive – it was easier than consult the city map anyway. They managed to reach Allegheny Memorial - a major medical centre in downtown - within visiting hours, and rode the elevator to the fifth floor, where – according to the receptionist – Professor Bruckner had his private room.

The rest of their once so close-knit little group was represented by the lezzies and Ted only, with
Justin in Italy (thank all deities) and Emmett still not allowed to travel. The absence of Mikey and Debbie was somewhat surprising, but perhaps they were within, at Ben’s bedside.

Only now did Brian understand the risks Alain had been taking by letting him out of eyesight, even with Alonzo at his shoulder. The strong antiseptic smell of the hospital attacked his senses painfully, but it still couldn’t fully suppress the scent of mortal blood running in the veins of everyone around him. Their strong mortal heartbeats sounded in his ears like the music of distant drums, their pull almost irresistible. This was the first time he was among mortals since his Embrace – not counting Bethany who knew exactly what she was doing and could protect herself more than adequately – and he understood with painful clarity how precarious his control over the Beast still was.

“Easy, little one,” Alonzo murmured in a voice too low for mortal ears. “The Beast is strong in your bloodline, but so are you. And you’ve just fed; give yourself time to adjust, and you’ll be fine.”

The reassurance calmed Brian down a little, and since his friends still hadn’t detected them, he took a few minutes to get his senses and instincts under control again. It wasn’t easy, but it was doable, after all.

“Good,” Alonzo murmured, “You’re doing well. Surprisingly well for such a new fledgling, in fact. Now, tell me who these people are. I didn’t know you were into women, too.”

“I’m not,” Brian replied with a wry face. “They’re just friends; and besides, they’re dykes – and what’s even worse, married to each other. The leggy blonde is Lindz; we went to college together. Smelly Melly is her… well, I almost said her hubby. She’s also a courtroom shark of the worst kind.”

“And the puny guy with the receding hairline?” Alonzo asked mercilessly. “Really, Childe, I thought you’d mingle with people of some sort of style. That guy looks so much like a book-keeper that it hurts.”

“He is one,” Brian said. “The book-keeper of my agency; and a good one, at that. He just has… confidence issues.”

Alonzo gave Ted Schmidt a pitying glance and shook his sleek, beautiful head.

“Barely Ventrue material,” he said, which went as a moderately bad insult among Brujah. “What a pathetic sight!”

“He does have his uses,” Brian replied indignantly, not wanting to side with this strange, arrogant vampire against one of his old friends, even though in his heart he agreed with Alonzo. “And he is reliable… most of the time.”

“So is an elderly pack-horse; still, I wouldn’t ride into a town on the back of one if I wanted to make a good impression,” Alonzo said judgementally. Brian gave him a bland look.

“Wrong century,” he said. “You old guys should keep tab on the changes of time a bit better.”

“I’m a pilot, aren’t I?” Alonzo asked.

Brian shrugged. “You metaphors are hopelessly outdated.”

“Perhaps,” the Brujah allowed. “It’s a cultural thing. When you keep socializing with people who are old enough to remember times you only know from history lessons – and that considering the fact that I’m more than two hundred years old – you tend to become a little old-fashioned in your mannerisms, too. Wait a century or two and you’ll see for yourself.”
Brian had a hard time not to giggle – given the place and the situation they were in, that wouldn’t have been very appropriate. Still, trying to wrap his mind around the fact that waiting a century or two was actually doable for him now, he sometimes felt like Alice falling down the rabbit hole.

In that very moment Lindsey finally discovered them, and came running to greet Brian, with a tremulous smile and teary eyes, her dark mascara smeared a bit, her lipstick leaving a red mark on Brian’s face. As was her wont, she was talking like a waterfall, in a quiet, subdued voice, emphasizing every other word as if she tried to capture Brian’s attention – which, to be honest, she never managed. Brian always liked to pretend he listened to her because he could shut down thinking while Lindz was talking in the background, but that was about all.

Melanie, her eyes also reddened, but dry at the moment – someone needed to keep her calm in a group of overly dramatic mothers and hysterical queers, she would have said if asked – followed her, with a dark, suspicious look aimed at Alonzo, as if she’d tried to figure out who he might be. Perhaps she thought him to be Brian’s newest conquest; after all, hadn’t Brian brought Justin to Gus’ birth when the blond kid had been nothing than his twink-of-the-night? But before she could make any vicious remarks, her eyes met with Alonzo’s, and whatever she might have seen there, she apparently thought it better to stay quiet, to Brian’s great relief.

Ted stood behind them, his mouth literally agape, and he was just this side of drooling over the gorgeous stranger. Brian withheld the urge to roll his eyes. Ted was so predictable that it almost hurt. Of course he would not know with whom – or what – he was dealing. Even as a mortal, Alonzo would have eaten him alive.

“‘Theodore,’” Brian said tersely, seeing Ted floating towards the Brujah, almost unconsciously. “Don’t.”

Ted blinked a few times, as if just awakening from some pleasant (and probably wet) dream, and stopped mid-movement.

“Oh… Brian,” he said feebly. “Good that you could come. Have you brought Em, too?”

“He couldn’t change his schedule at such short a notice,” Brian replied evasively. “He’ll call Mikey later. Where is Mikey, by the way? Within, with Ben?”

“Nah, Debbie dragged him off for a few hours of sleep,” Lindsay explained. “They should be back any moment now.”

“Who’s in with Ben, then?” Brian asked in surprise.

“They won’t let us in,” Lindsay said, a bit indignantly. “Only family members are allowed. With his immune system practically gone, we’d be a danger for Ben. But they have him under constant surveillance.”

“With other words: on a machine,” Brian gently remover her arms from around him and stepped back. “All the better. I’ll pay my respects to the Professor, then, while nobody is looking.”

“Brian!” Melanie protested. “You can’t…”

“Watch me!” Brian replied coolly and glanced back at Alonzo. “Ya comin’?”

“Sure,” the Brujah was already following him in. “I’ve promised Alain to keep an eye on you, haven’t I?”

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Standing at Ben’s bedside in room 225, Brian stared down in dread at the shrivelled husk that once had been a man. A strong, desirable man whom he’d taken twice in a row, four years ago, at the White Party. Had he not known for sure that this was, in fact, Ben Bruckner, he’d have difficulties recognizing this long, gaunt body, so fallen in flesh as if there had never been those impressive muscles, trained on with hard – and ultimately futile – work in the fitness studios. The lean, once vivid face was all sunken blue hollows and staring, blanched bones. The sandy hair – what little was still there of it – was thickly peppered with grey and lay lank and lifeless. The closed eyes seemed unnaturally large in that grey face, and veined like harebells, the lips shrunken to a shapeless line under the breathing tube in his nose. One large, bony hand was resting on the blanket, crumpled like the claw of a dying bird.

“Soon, he will go the way all flesh must go,” Alonzo commented quietly.

“Even Kindred?” Brian asked in the same low voice, audible only for keen vampire senses. Alonzo nodded.

“We live longer, much longer, and we live in the Dark, but in the end, we’re not so different from the Kine,” he said simply. “We are part of the same nature, and eventually, we shall end the same way. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust.”

“But we do live a lot longer,” Brian murmured. “Could it… could it save him if he became one of us?”

The Brujah gave him a surprised look. “You’d want to save him? What for? You don’t even like him!”

“But Mikey loves him,” Brian said quietly. “And he’s been good for Mikey, most of the time… better, often, than I could be.”

“I see,” Alonzo said after a long pause.

“So,” Brian pushed. “Could you do it? You’re old and strong…”

But Alonzo shook his head. “I’m sorry, Childe. Even if I’d be willing – which I’m not – it would be too late. He’s too far gone already. His body wouldn’t survive the Change. You know yourself what it’s like.”

Brian grinned humourlessly. “I should have known better,” he commented. “Once in my fucking life I try to be selfless, and it isn’t even doable…” he laughed in a self-mocking manner. But Alonzo gestured to him to be quiet.

“Ssh… he’s awake!”

And indeed, Ben’s eyes were opening languidly; recognition shimmered in his tired look.

“Brian,” he whispered, “thanks… for coming…”

“I didn’t do it for you,” Brian replied almost roughly. A ghost of a smile appeared on Ben’s hollow face.

“I know. But Michael… needs you… Always has… always will… go to him…”

“You heard the man,” Alonzo said, listening to the noises coming from the floor. “Go. “I’ll sit here and watch for a while.”
Brian hesitated for a moment. His sharpened senses now could recognize Debbie’s shrill voice, still at some distance on the floor, and an elusive scent that was achingly familiar, although he’d never been so conscious about it: Michael’s. He turned away abruptly.

“I’ll be back,” he said and left.

Alonzo pulled up a chair at Ben’s bedside and watched the dying man with detached curiosity. Death, still so far away for him – or so he hoped – had always fascinated him. Vampires usually died during a fight, in fire or in a cloud of dust, but humans were different. Only at the deathbed of a mortal could he watch the slow trickling away of life energy – the slow transition into the great unknown. Salvador found this… fascination of his morbid, but Alonzo didn’t care. Despite their centuries-long friendship, they were different people. He had the right to his personal idiosyncrasies.

He became aware that the object of his study was also studying him, from eyes large and clouded.

“Who… what are you?” Ben whispered.

Alonzo winced. Dying people could sometimes sense the Beast in vampires. Fortunately, they usually didn’t have to time to tell anyone about it – and anyway, who would believe them?

“Does it matter?” he asked.

“Brian… all Michael… has left,” Ben tried to explain.

“Don’t worry about him,” Alonzo said. “I’m no threat to him. On the contrary. I’m here to keep him safe.”

“What… are you?” Ben insisted. “You’re different.”

“I’m a vampire,” Alonzo replied simply. There was no need to lie. Ben Bruckner wouldn’t have the time – or the strength – to harm them. “And so is Brian. He’s been born to the night just a few weeks ago.”

“And you really… can’t save me?” the dying man asked.

“No,” Alonzo said bluntly. “The Change is brutal. You’d die a violent death, and an extremely painful one. Even for strong, healthy people, it’s a risky step.”

Ben closed his eyes again, as if even keeping them open would drain his waning strength.

“We… can’t escape death, after all,” he whispered.

“No,” Alonzo agreed. “Not in the long run anyway.”

After that, they waited together in companionable silence, the dying and the undead, both on their way to the great unknown. With the not insignificant difference, that Alonzo still had centuries to go, while Ben’s pilgrimage was nearing its end.

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Michael had been strong in all these agonizing weeks. Had watched Ben’s waning without as much as a single tear. He couldn’t break down. Couldn’t show any weakness. Couldn’t become hysterical as his mother had, repeatedly, undermining what little strength he still possessed. He had to remain strong. Ben needed him, his strength, his unconditional love, and he gave what was asked of him, even though it had become increasingly difficult. Michael Novotny was not one to go back on his given promises, and he’d promised Ben to stay with him, in good times and bad times, in health and
But when he saw the tall, radiant shape of Brian approaching him, he finally lost it, completely. He’d missed Brian so terribly all this time, while he had to deal with Debbie’s over-emotional reactions, with the demonstrative “support” of Lindsay and Melanie who never missed an opportunity to aim a jab against the absent Brian who, they’d said, didn’t care to come home and stand with Michael in these hard times. Or with Ted, who – although his relationship with Emmett was long over – still couldn’t deal with life without Emmett’s presence in it.

Now, however, Brian was there, despite Lindsay and Melanie’s predictions. Here he was, opening his arms to Michael, and Michael broke down in harsh, bitter sobs in the safety of those familiar arms.

Brian spared him the usual platitudes, and Michael loved him for that more than ever. While everyone else was forcibly “comforting” and bothering him with stupid questions, Brian simply held him in his arms, rocked him like one would rock a child. They could hear Debbie’s babbling in the background, but neither of them really listened to her.

“You’ve come,” Michael finally said, when he’d run out of tears.

“Have you ever doubted I would?” Brian asked quietly.

Michael shook his head. “That you’d want to stay away? Not willingly, never. But you have other obligations in LA…”

“None of which is half as important as being there for you,” Brian said, and Michael gave him a surprised look. They rarely spoke about their feelings for each other, certainly not Brian, and even less so in the presence of any possible witnesses.

“You’ve changed,” he said.

“More than you can possibly imagine,” Brian replied with a grim smile. “But we can discuss my issues later.”

“Looks good on you, though,” Michael judged, with a pale shadow of his usual charming smile on his exhausted face. He didn’t look so good, himself, which was understandable, given the circumstances. The concern for Ben had taken its toll: he took on a gaunt, almost lifeless appearance, and he’d lost a lot of weight, too, Brian realized, as if he hadn’t been thin enough already. He most likely slept too little, which showed: his beautiful eyes were hollow and shaded by dark circles. And his trials and tribulations weren’t quite over yet. No matter how long the doctors could delay the inevitable – which, in Brian’s estimate, couldn’t be very long now – the really hard times would come afterwards. As if the loss wouldn’t be bad enough in itself, Michael would have to deal with the well-meant but smothering “comfort” of his friends – and before all else, that of his mother. The events following Uncle Vic’s death had clearly shown that Debbie was completely unfit to deal with her own grief reasonably – and unwilling to respect everyone else’s. She would steamroll Michael with her own demonstrative grieving – unless someone acted quickly when the right moment arrived. And someone, in this case, meant Brian Kinney, willing and more than capable to support his friend… and determined to keep Michael on his side as long as possible. Preferably forever, but that was a topic for another time.

Right now, all he could do was to hold Michael tightly, stroking his hair, trying to rub away the agony and the desperation that Michael was feeling. Right now, nothing else was asked of him – his
presence was all that Michael needed, but *that* he needed desperately. For everything else, there would be time enough later.

A few minutes – or an eternity – later, the door to Ben’s room opened and Alonzo looked out.

“He asks for Michael,” he said simply, his keen eyes taking in the small, almost child-like shape resting in Brian’s protective embrace. In that very moment, he understood why Alain DeLaigle had called in the middle of the night to ask for Salvador’s plane and his pilot, as soon as possible. It was for *this* man. And Alonzo knew that they wouldn’t leave as long as Michael needed Brian, and not even Alain could change *that*.

“I’ll go right in, then,” Michael said, guilt shadowing his exhausted face. Alonzo gave him a good, hard look; then he nodded.

“Do it. Brian and I need some rest, after our somewhat… hurried lift-off, and I must look after the plane, too. But we’ll be back in, say, four hours. I assume you still have a den in this town, Brian?”

“Sure,” Brian said. He hadn’t sold the loft, thinking that he might need to return one day. Now he knew this would be the last time he used it. There would be no more returning to The Pitts for him – and if he had anything to say about it, neither would for Mikey.

But before he could burn all bridges behind him and whisk his friend away from this place, he had to sit out the current crisis. He had to wait patiently for Ben’s fate to be decided by the higher powers he didn’t really believe in, and stand by Michael in the times that would follow. They would be hard enough.
Chapter Summary

When Ben Bruckner dies back in Pittsburgh, leaving his devastated partner behind, Michael is in a strange state of mind. Brett Keller’s phone call comes like a life-saver, but the solution doesn’t meet complete agreement from the Pittsburgh crowd’s side – to put it mildly.

Chapter Notes

Thanks for the MichaelandBrian Yahoo Group for pointing out the various aspects of running a business.

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THE RECKONING

Ben Bruckner died four days later, peacefully, in his sleep. Michael had remained on his bedside till the last, shallow breath, holding his hand in mute support, although it was clearly visible – at least for Brian and for anyone who was willing to see the obvious – how much of his remaining strength it had cost him. Unfortunately, those people weren’t too numerous, as Emmett, the only one aside from Brian on whose unconditional support Michael could have counted, was half across the country.

In the following chaos, marked by Debbie’s constant wailing and tearful assurances of how she had loved Ben like a son and what a good man and good husband Ben had been, Brian quietly, inconspicuously, took over the organizatory tasks, relying heavily on Cynthia, as he’d always done. Starting with Ben’s funeral – for which the Professor, true to his own philosophy of living in the now, had never wasted a thought. For a man with a definite death sentence hanging over his head for years, Ben Bruckner had sure as hell been reluctant to think about the technicalities concerning his passing… and what dealing with such details would mean for his grieving partner.

Debbie, as expected, was no help at all. She wasted the time with bawling, self-accusations for not having wanted Ben in Michael’s life in the first place, steamrolling Michael with her unasked-for “comfort” and berating him for not showing the proper devastation, while trying to stuff as much food into anyone as humanly possible – and beyond.

She was loud, ever-present, smothering her son both physically and emotionally in the worst possible theatrical manner, and generally being a royal pain in the ass – and that not in a good way, Brian added mentally. On the third day after Ben’s death Michael couldn’t take it any longer and fled from his mother’s house to Brian’s loft, where he was taken in gladly and unceremoniously. He felt like a puppet whose strings had been cut. After his one, spectacular breakdown in Brian’s arms in the hospital, he seemed strangely subdued since Ben’s death. All he wanted was to be left alone; to dig himself in somewhere where no one could find him. Especially his mother.

Alonzo took a look at him and declared that he’d be off visiting some local friends all night – which
was a nice enough euphemism for Hunting, although there actually were some stray Brujah Anarch in The Pitts – and left them alone.

“I didn’t want to chase him away,” Michael commented, a little uncomfortably. Brian shrugged.

“Don’t worry about Alonzo,” he said. “He’s not a fuckbuddy and not even a close acquaintance. His boss wanted a campaign and loaned me his private jet in exchange, complete with pilot.”

“Wow!” Michael seemed properly impressed, coming out of his dull state for a moment. “You’ve finally done it! You’re really playing in the upper league now. I knew you’d get there, eventually.”

“It gives me the means to be there when you need me, and for that, I’m grateful,” Brian replied simply. “Now, let’s sit down, order some Chinese takeout and discuss the most important things that have to be done.”

“I’m not really hungry, Bri,” Michael said tiredly.

“And I don’t really care,” Brian answered. “You look like shit. You’ve lost at least twelve pounds, and it doesn’t become you. You’re exhausted and overstressed – you need to gain at least some of your strength back.”

Michael felt too tired to argue, and so Brian ordered food for both of them. Granted, he didn’t need food anymore, but there was no way to make Michael eat alone, and besides, the spicy food still had its attractions, even though it wouldn’t nourish his changed metabolism. Not entirely sure how his body would react to solids, he only ate some soup – better safe than sorry, he thought – and made sure that Michael would polish off a decent portion of everything.

“You’re worse than Ma,” Michael complained.

“Nobody is worse than your Ma,” Brian declared, relaxing on the couch with a tall glass of bloodwine and a cigarette, content now that he had his Mikey for himself, at least for the time being, and glad that Michael never drank wine – not since the Doctor Dave episode two years past. It would have been… complicated to explain why he wasn’t allowed to test Brian’s drink. “Deb is a force of nature; and a destructive one at that.”

“No kidding,” Michael sighed, leaning against him unconsciously, listening to his heartbeat as was his wont. Having recently fed, Brian actually did have a heartbeat, albeit a slower one than the average human being, so there was no chance to endanger the Masquerade. “Another day at home and I’d have gone mad.”

“Why the hell did you go home in the first place?” Brian asked. “You knew what it would be like, didn’t you? Deb performed the same circus after Vic’s death.”

“Of course I knew,” Michael sighed. “But I… I couldn’t return to the apartment, now that Ben’s gone. Too many memories…”

“You don’t have to go anywhere you don’t want,” Brian said. “You can stay here, in the loft, for as long as you want. It’s not so that I’d really need it, you know. And you have your own set of keys.”

Michael gave him a long, inquisitive look, showing some interest for the first time for anything. Of course, they had always been something special for each other, so it was small wonder that even in his indifferent state, Michael cared at least a little for Brian’s affairs.

“You’re not coming back, are you?” he asked quietly, and Brian shook his head.
“Not in the long run, no. I’ve outgrown The Pitts for good. But I’ll stay here as along as you need me – unless, of course, I can talk you into coming to LA with me.”

If the offer surprised Michael, he didn’t show it.

“Bri, I don’t know,” he said. “It’s too sudden… I’ve got a lot of things to take care of: my store, Hunter, the apartment, Ben’s things…”

“Take your time” Brian said. “I’ll help you with everything; well, actually, Cynthia will. She’s the right person for such tasks. What do you want to do with the apartment anyway?”

For what seemed like eternity, Michael remained silent.

“I don’t want to keep it,” he finally said. “In fact, I don’t want to see it ever again. But I’ll have to go there, eventually; to get my things, to have Ben’s things put in boxes and sent to his family – people who never wanted to see me,” he added with sudden, unexpected bitterness.”

“You don’t need to go there,” Brian said. “I can get your stuff for you – I know your things as I know mine. As for the rest – there are companies that take care of that sort of thing, you know. Unless you want to keep a few personal items, you won’t even have to set foot in the apartment.”

“I don’t want to keep anything that wasn’t mine… before,” Michael said. Brian raised a surprised eyebrow.

“Really? I always thought you to be a romantic. One to cherish keepsakes, like your Ma.”

“Up till now, I used to think the same, “Michael answered slowly. “But now… I just want to be done with that part of my life. To be over it.”


“Yeah… and I feel so fucking guilty because of it, you know?” he said. “I mean, Ben was my husband, right? I loved him, I really did. And now he’s dead, and I should be falling apart, shouldn’t I? He gave me what I always wanted: a stable relationship, a home, a family. I should miss him like crazy, shouldn’t I?”

“You don’t miss him, then?” Brian asked carefully, suspecting some untold tales behind Michael’s indifference – not necessarily pleasant ones. Michael smiled at him in a self-deprecating manner.

“To be honest, Bri, the only thing I really feel is relief. Whatever the others might have told you about us, things weren’t going so well lately. For quite some time, in fact. It started with his steroid abuse, then he took in Hunter, against my protests…”

“I thought you loved the Littlest Hustler,” Brian said in surprise. “You’ve surely risked more than enough for him.”

“I did – I do,” Michael agreed. “But to tell you the truth, Ben never asked me if I wanted to share our life with an underage whore when we’ve just started getting used to living together. Or if I wanted to become active in all those gay rights organisations. Or if I wanted to take part in events like that stupid Liberty Ride. He should have married Ma,” he added maliciously. “They had a lot more in common than he and I could ever hope for.”

“That’s a relief,” Brian commented. “It would seriously worry me if you’d been completely re-moulded by the Nutty Professor.”
“And then, that stupid, boring book of his got rejected,” Michael continued almost on autopilot, as if he hadn’t heard Brian’s comment at all, “and he couldn’t deal with it. He was so fucking jealous of my moderate success with Rage, so nasty about it. I… I think he was insulted that people liked it so much, although it was just a comic, while nobody but a few sycophants were interested in his great literary work. And when Brett Keller’s offer came…”

“…he lost it completely,” Brian finished for him. That part of the whole sorry tale he’d witnessed, first-hand. Michael nodded.

“He became very… demanding, as soon as it became clear that the Rage movie was a go.”

“Using his illness as an excuse to commandeer your every step,” Brian added. Michael closed his eyes.

“He did need me, you know,” he murmured. “He was so used to be in control, despite the virus. He thought he could outsmart it, with all that healthy food and Zen shit, but in truth, he was scared shitless in the inside, just never willing to show it. That would have been… improper for the cool, supreme Professor Bruckner. And Hunter was no help.”

“Of course not,” Brian agreed. “He is an annoying little shit who takes advantage of the fact that some people feel sorry for him. The most unlikable teenager right after my nephew. I’m sure Deb will be happy to ‘save’ him, just as she was happy to take in her precious Sunshine.”

“I can’t roll off my responsibility onto my Ma,” Michael said resignedly.

“Why not?” Brian asked. “Saving lost queer souls seems to be her vocation. And besides, she’s put every stray fag before you for a long time. Sometimes I really wonder if she’s still aware of the fact that you are his only son, not all those young sluts of Liberty Avenue.”

“Bri, you’re being unjust to Ma,” Michael protested, with suspiciously little heat behind the words. Brian raised an eyebrow again.

“Am I? Be honest, Mikey, when did she ever side with you – or with me, whom she assumedly loved like her own son – in any conflict? She tried to throw you at Doctor Dave, and later at Ben; and she tried, in league with the lezzies, to get me back together with Justin, no matter the costs. And she keeps treating you as if you were a stupid child. Including calling you names and hitting you upside the head in public.”

“Not to mention that she had me live with a lie for thirty years,” Michael said slowly. “With a phantom father who never existed.”

“The presence of fathers is overrated,” Brian said cynically. “You knew mine; trust me, you were better off without one.”

“But I wasn’t without one,” Michael pointed out. “I had a lie. A myth. A dead war hero to compete with. I’d have been perfectly happy as Michael Grassi, with Uncle Vic as an ersatz father, you know. At least his expectations weren’t impossible to meet. But a straight war hero I never knew…” he shook his heat. “That I could have done without.”

“I never knew you had such a hard time with this,” Brian said after a long pause. “You seemed to take it pretty much in one stride when it turned out that your actual Dad was an elderly drag queen.”

“I never gave it much thought,” Michael admitted. “I tried not to, and I had enough other problems in the recent years to keep myself occupied. Besides, after thirty years, what did it matter anymore? But I’ve had a lot of time to think lately, at Ben’s bedside. And now that he’s gone, there will be
changes. I just don’t know yet where to start.”

“Getting a change of scenery would be a good start,” Brian said. “You can hire someone to run the store permanently. You need a break; and besides, you’ll have better things to do with your time than sell comics. Like working on the *Rage* movie.”

“I don’t wanna give up my store,” Michael replied. “It’s something I’ve made to work for myself, and it works well. I’m proud of it, even if it’s just a comic store.”

“You won’t have to give it up,” Brian said. “I don’t give up *Kinnetik*, either. I just delegate the day-to-day business to capable employees. We live in the twenty-first century, Mikey, and there’s the Internet and e-mails and cell phones. You don’t have to actually sit in the store.”

“Yeah, but I *like* sitting there,” Michael said. “And what would become of Hunter if I left town?”

Brian shrugged. “You don’t really believe they’d allow you to raise him alone?” he asked. “It was the Professor’s position the judge took as an assurance, not your store. They might allow Deb to take him in – or they’ll give him back his *loving* mother.”

“She doesn’t want him anymore,” Michael said.

“Small blame to her – neither would I,” Brian replied bluntly. “But in no way will you be allowed to keep him alone, especially now that you’re gonna quit the apartment, among other things. Besides, he’s almost seventeen. Soon he’ll be legally allowed to stand on his own feet.”

“He’d end up on the street, just like before,” Michael said, depressed.

“Likely,” Brian agreed. “So what? You and Saint Ben – well, actually more you than Ben – have tried everything to help him, including running away with him, so that his mother couldn’t lay hands on him. How did he thank for it? By being an annoying, ungrateful brat.”

“He’s not ungrateful,” Michael tried to defend his fosterling whom he’d grown to like, despite everything. “He just has difficulties to show his true feelings, that’s all.”

Brian shook his head in exasperation.

“Mikey, when are you gonna learn that you can’t help people *against* their wish? Stop being the drag queen version of Mother Teresa and try to do something for your own fucking life for a change. Like *getting* a life in the first place, instead of being everyone’s doormat.”

“Bri, if you’re gonna go on like this, I’ll move on to a hotel,” Michael warned. “I’ve got enough problems; I can’t deal with your shit, too, right now.”

But his words lacked the usual heat, and he didn’t make any attempt to leave, either – and that worried Brian. He knew better than anyone that – contrary to common belief – Michael was well able to stand up for himself if pushed too hard. With an angry Michael he could deal – or with a devastated, crying, grieving one, for that matter – but this… this *blankness* frightened him. It had an eerie reminiscence of his own suicidal-depressive phase around his thirtieth birthday, and he hadn’t dealt so well with *that*, either. Without Mikey, he’d probably have died on that fateful day.

But how was he supposed to catch Mikey if Mikey was falling? It had always been the other way round.

The ringing of the phone came as salvation in the last minute. He glanced at the display: the caller ID seemed vaguely familiar, but he couldn’t place it right away. He picked up the phone, ready to give
the caller a thorough dressing down, should it not be a case of life or death.

“Kinney,” he barked.

“Brett Keller,” the familiar voice of the Brujah replied. “I’ve heard that you’re in Pittsburgh right now, and thought that you might be able to help me. I’ve been unable to reach Michael. Have you any idea where he might be?”

“Actually, he’s sitting right here, next to me,” Brian said in relief. “They had a… family emergency, and he put his cell phone off.”

“I know about that,” Brett said. “Alonzo has called in. Anyway, I really, really need to speak with Michael. It’s urgent. More than urgent.”

“Be my guest,” Brian offered his phone to Michael. “It’s Brett, Mikey. He says it’s urgent.”

Michael took the phone, a bit bewildered, and Brian made shameless use of his recently sharpened vampire hearing to listen to their conversation. After just a couple of sentences, he’d have kissed the Brujah director, had it been physically possible, because Brett Keller was telling Michael that they needed him for the preparations and the storyboard drawings weeks before the actual shooting would begin. Which meant that Michael should go to LA; preferably yesterday. Or the day before.

“But I can’t leave just now,” Michael protested. “The funeral is in five days’ time, and there’s so much to do…”

“Delegate,” Brett said bluntly, as if he’d listened to Brian; they both were merciless businessmen, after all. “I can’t stop the entire movie industry on your behalf. I’m sure Brian will be able to help. And after the funeral, Alonzo will fly you – both of you – back. That’s all the time I can give you. Use it well. The show must go on. There’s a lot at stake, and I can’t afford to take unnecessary risks.”

“B-but I have a foster son…” Michael tried to argue, but Brett interrupted him.

“Bring him. We’ll organize a babysitter on the set, or a tutor, or both, whatever he needs. Won’t be the first time.”

“Erm… he’s almost seventeen…”

“That makes it easier,” Brett said. “He’ll find the sets interesting; teenagers of his age usually do. And I’ll have studio security keep an eye on him, so don’t worry. Your only concern should be to meet your deadline,” and with that, Brett hung up.

Holding the muted phone with numb fingers, Michael turned to Brian in distress.

“Brett wants me in LA, right after the funeral,” he said, a bit dazzled. “Whatever am I supposed to do?”

“Board the plane with me in five days, what else?” Brian replied. “You’ve signed a contract, Mikey; the sharks of Hollywood won’t be impressed by your little family emergency. They’re ruled by money, and this time ungodly amounts of it are at risk.”

Never in his entire life, mortal or undead, had Brian Kinney been more grateful for the ruling power of financial necessities. What he’d have needed weeks, probably months for – namely persuading Mikey to move to LA with him – Brett Keller had managed with a simple phone call. Oh, Mikey would argue for a while, but in the end he would give in. Not only because the Rage movie was his
pet project, his favourite brain-child, but because he needed to get away from The Pitts desperately… and he knew it.

And Brett Keller had just provided the most excellent excuse possible for that move. After all, who in their right mind would argue with that much money?

“Ma will go ballistic, though,” Michael murmured, having already moved on to the practical issues. Brian nodded.

“No doubt. But she will calm down eventually and realize that you don’t have a choice in this. And even if she won’t… she has abused you long enough. It’s time for you to free yourself and learn to breathe again.”

“Ma didn’t really abuse me,” Michael protested. “She’s just… she’s what she is.”

“Exactly,” Brian agreed and started counting on his fingers. “Let’s see. There’s the slapping you upside the head like a stupid child – one. There’s the calling you names – two. There’s the never telling you that you’re actually good at anything, while mouthing off for years about her precious Sunshine – three. There’s the pushing you to move in with Doc Dave, after what? A couple of months? – four. There’s the taking Justin’s side over yours in everything – five. And last but not least, the fact that she made you believe that you’d never be good enough for me – six. Yep, sounds suspiciously like emotional abuse to me.”

“Well, she was sure like hell right in one thing,” Michael replied slowly. “In twenty years, I was never good enough for as much as a pity fuck for the great Brian Kinney. And don’t come me with that slogan of yours that one doesn’t fuck one’s best friend. Because that’s bullshit, and you know that.”

Brian felt as if someone had punched into his guts. With a boxing glove filled with lead.

“That’s what you think it was?” he asked in a low voice, with a glint of silver in his eyes; he was shaking with anger. “That I never wanted you? Jesus, Mikey, I always wanted you; sometimes so badly that it hurt! But what good would it have brought to act on it? You wanted things that I could never give you, cause it’s not in my nature. I can’t live in an exclusive relationship, and we both know that. I’d have broken your heart, and our friendship would have been over.”

“And what makes you think you haven’t broken my heart this way?” Michael asked with a humourless grin. “Fuck, Brian, it broke my heart every goddamn time when you dragged off your trick-of-the-night. And when Justin managed to worm his way into your life like nobody ever had done, it nearly killed me. Do you think I’d have run off with David to fucking Portland, had Justin not stood between us?”

“He never stood between us, tried as he might have,” Brian said. “Like everyone else, you’ve greatly overestimated Justin’s importance in my life. Regardless what the lezzies and your Ma tried to make me and everyone else believe, I never loved Justin.”

“You could have fooled me,” Michael commented dryly. Brian shook his head.

“Nah, Mikey, you’re mistaken. I tolerated the little twat because getting rid of him would have required more energy than I was willing to waste on him. Besides, he was a willing and convenient fuck. And after he’d gotten bashed – you were right, you know? I felt so fucking guilty; I couldn’t just throw him out on his ass.”

Michael winced. “He told you?”
“Sure he did,” Brian replied with a grim smile. “Perhaps he hoped to turn me against you. The little idiot.”

“Well,” Michael said slowly, “you did punch me at Mel and Lindsay’s eighth anniversary party, didn’t you? Just because I said nasty things about him… on your behalf, by the way. So, perhaps he wasn’t that wrong, after all.”

“Not exactly my proudest moment,” Brian admitted.

“It shouldn’t,” Michael said, his voice unexpectedly sharp. “You’ve nearly broken my fucking nose, Brian! No one has ever punched me in the face… well, save those idiots in high school, and you used to be the one who protected me there! What was I supposed to think?”

“The sad truth is,” Brian answered, “that you’ve spoken out loud what I was feeling myself at that moment. And I hated myself for thinking it. Hearing the same from your mouth…” he shook his head. “I’m so very sorry, Mikey. At that moment, I wasn’t a tad better than my goddamn father – something I’ve always tried not to become.”

“So, it was out of pity that you took Justin back after the Ethan thing?” Michael asked doubtfully. Brian shrugged.

“Well, I’ve gotten used to the little twat… and it was fun to make him do things he’d never think of himself. But thinking that I was in love with him, just because I fucked him more than once and took him in when that rabidly homophobic father of his threw him out – really, Mikey, just how naïve is that? It would be a low, even from the munchers… you of all people should know me better.”

“I thought I knew you,” Michael said. “But when Justin elbowed himself into your life – into our lives – suddenly everything was different. I still don’t understand how could you take him back after the whole Ethan thing.”

Brian shrugged. “In hindsight, neither do I. Perhaps I panicked when you’ve found Ben… was afraid to be left alone.”

“I thought you preferred to be alone,” Michael said.

“I used to think the same time,” Brian replied. “But being free of restrictions and being without you are two different things.”

That silenced Michael for a while. Then he smiled, almost reluctantly. “Now, who’s pathetic?” he asked.

“I am,” Brian admitted freely. “Getting soft at my old age and all that shit.”

“Old age, my ass!” Michael was laughing now. “I’ve told you on your thirtieth birthday that you’ll always be young and beautiful, haven’t I?”

“Mikey,” Brian said dramatically, drawing his best friend closer to him. “You have no idea how absolutely right you are.”

Michael laughed and opened up to him – how could he know how very true his prediction had become? The familiar warmth and taste of him exploded on Brian’s tongue with an intensity that the recently sharpened vampire senses could barely bear. The fledgling deepened the kiss, praying that he wouldn’t drop his fangs and cut Michael’s lips by accident. He knew if it happened there would be no way to keep the Beast on the leash, and he could kill Mikey in frenzy, just as Celeste had done with Emmett.
Luckily, the mere thought of it brought him down from his rush. He broke the kiss and took Michael’s now flushed face in his hands, admiring the moist, kiss-swollen mouth and that glimmer that was back in those dazed but beautiful eyes.

“Hey,” Michael said weakly, “I haven’t planned to get mauled here as part of my grief therapy.”

Brian raised an eyebrow. “So? Are you telling me you didn’t like it?”

“I would, but as you’ve told me often enough, I’m such a miserable liar,” Michael laughed again, and Brian’s heart leaped with joy at that long-missed sound. “Thanks, Bri. I really needed this right now.”

“Anytime,” Brian combed the dark hair with his fingers. He’d have loved to offer Michael more than just a kiss, but this wasn’t the right time to map out their possible future. Michael needed to come to terms with the things that had gone wrong in his life during the recent years before they could jump each other’s bones. They needed a clean cut between that which had been in The Pitts and that which might wait for them in LA.

“You might be hot, but you still look like shit,” he said instead affectionately. “Go, have a long, hot shower, and then go to bed. You’ll need your strength tomorrow and in the days after.”

“Don’t remind me!” Michael pulled a face. “Telling Ma and the lezzies that I’m leaving right after the funeral is not something I’m looking forward to. It will be a screaming match of epic proportions.”

“You have the perfect excuse,” Brian pointed out. “Blame it on Brett.”

“Nah, I don’t have to,” Michael said, walking towards the bathroom. “They’ll blame everything on you, as usual.”

“What’s new?” Brian asked cynically, admiring his best friend’s ass as Michael turned his back to him. It was one damn fine piece of equipment, despite the ridiculously baggy pants Mikey tended to wear. He’d have to work on Mikey’s fashion sense in LA. The future star screenwriter of Tinsel Town had to put up a stellar appearance. Besides, he’d like to show Mikey around in a more proper package and watch all the fags get cross-eyed from the sight. Perhaps he should introduce Mikey to Ash Rivers; now that was a guy who knew how to present himself.

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Hearing the rain-like sound of the shower, he thought it would be the right time to call Alain. He hit the number 2 on his speed-dial - #1 was still Michael’s and would always be. Alain picked up after the second ring.

“How are you doing?” he asked without preamble. Thank the display, he didn’t have to ask who called.

“As it can be expected,” Brian answered. “I can keep the Thirst under control; Alonzo looks into it. But I guess you’ve spoken with him already.”

“Twice a day, sometimes three times,” Alain said. Brian rolled his eyes, which was a useless thing, of course, as Alain couldn’t see him anyway.

“Really, Sire, is that necessary? I might be a fledgling still, but I’m not a baby.”

“Yes, you are,” Alain interrupted, “at least in Kindred terms. Besides, I wanted to remind Alonzo that I’m keeping tabs on you. Both of you.”
“Possessive, aren’t you?” Brian grinned. As a mortal, he’d have gone ballistic had someone stalked him as Alain was doing. As a newly Embraced vampire, he interpreted it as a reassurance that he could always count on his maker.

“You bet I am,” Alain’s voice revealed that he, too, was grinning on the other end of the line. “I can’t wait to take possession of your ass again… and all the assorted parts. Has Brett called you?”

“Barely an hour ago,” Brian said. “Mikey was a bit shocked at first, but he didn’t need much persuasion to move on.”

“When are you coming back?” Alain asked.

“In five days,” Brian replied. “Right after the funeral.”

“Good,” Alain said. “I’ll book a room in the D’Oblique for your friend.”

“That’s not necessary,” Brian said. “He’ll be staying with me. I do have a guest room, as you know.”

The silence on the other end of the connection clearly signalled his maker’s displeasure.

“Childe, I don’t think this is such a good idea,” Alain finally said. “For a number of reasons.”

“I don’t care,” Brian replied tersely. “You knew from the beginning that Mikey would always come first. He’s always been there for me, whenever I needed. And now he needs me – I won’t let him down, not a chance!”

“Don’t get obnoxious with me, Brian,” Alain’s voice was sharp and hard like steel. “I’m not one of your idiot buddies, and you’d do well to remember that! If I say it’s not a good idea, I mean it’s not a good idea, not that I won’t allow if. If you insist on having him here, we need to take precautionary measures, though.”

The few weeks spent in the Dark had already taught Brian to back off hurriedly when his Sire was in one of these moods. Even though he couldn’t feel their connection from this distance – that would have been impossible even for a millennia-old Methuselah – he knew that pissing off Alain was a very bad idea. The artist was good at keeping grudges and could make his unlife an endless misery, without physically hurting him… too much.

“What kind of measures?” he asked.

“The kind that are needed if we put a clueless human under the same roof with a newly-Embraced fledgling who’s still learning the intricacies of the Masquerade,” Alain replied dryly. “Despite what we might plan for him in the long run, it wouldn’t be a good thing to freak your friend out before he’s gotten used to us.”

“So, what can we do to help him fit in?” Brian asked.

Alain laughed. “He’ll already have the most important thing – you,” he said. “I’ll have to think about the mundane details, though, and to discuss them with Peppone and Sarina. I’ll tell you everything in time – and I expect you to stick to the rules, understood?”

“Yes, Sire,” Brian murmured obediently, feeling himself stir, like every time when Alain went into Alpha mode. Fuck, he missed his Sire already. Regardless of his more… tender feelings towards Mikey, his body yearned for Alain’s expert handling of it.

“Good,” he could feel that Alain was smiling again. “I miss you, too, Childe. See you in five days,”
and with that, he hung up.

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The day of Ben’s funeral was, fortunately, a rainy one, so that Brian didn’t have to worry about being exposed to the sunlight in the early afternoon. While the priest – Ben’s parents belonged to the Episcopal Church and they insisted on the ceremony and got their will, as Ben hadn’t left a will – was droning on, raining platitudes about a man whom he clearly hadn’t known, Brian was standing at Michael’s side, holding a large, elegant black designer umbrella over both of them and watched the grieving audience with disgust. Hypocrisy had always annoyed him, and his little dysfunctional family was giving a stellar performance right now.

Debbie was sobbing in the arms of his detective, who was trying to comfort him, although clearly not quite understanding the reason for such despair. Brian felt unexpected sympathy for the poor man. One could have thought that Debbie had lost her own son, not the man she at first hadn’t even wanted in Michael’s life. The thought that Michael might need support in this hour apparently didn’t occur to her.

Lindz and Mel were holding each other for comfort. Lindsay’s eyes were reddened, and Melanie, her usually thin frame shockingly large with Michael’s child, murmured little nothings into her ear, with the usual pinched expression on her face. Again, no thought wasted on Michael here; they were mourning for a lost ally for their gay rights movement, and the personal loss of an old friend was of secondary importance.

Ted was standing on Michael’s other side, trying helplessly to give comfort with his mere presence, little though that might be. But at least he was there, uncomfortable in the crossfire of hateful looks coming from Ben’s family, who glared at Michael as if he’d been responsible for Ben’s untimely death. As if he hadn’t gone through hell with the Nutty Professor (and not just in the last phase of his illness), never wavering in his love and support. Because despite Michael’s outburst a few days earlier, Brian knew that he’d loved that stupid husband of his, always forgiving, always looking for excuses for Ben’s shitty behaviour – just as he’d always done with Brian. That was Mikey’s nature, and even now, he was more concerned about Hunter who stood there, stone-faced and with an almost convincing mien of utter boredom, than for himself.

Brian glanced at the Bruckner family again. At Ben’s father, who had a shocking similarity to his son, minus the excess muscle and with grey hair – he had the same air of studied superiority about him too, an attitude that always made Brian’s fists itch. The older Bruckner was also a college professor somewhere in Minnesota, and by the sight of him an unbearable snob. He radiated indignant displeasure, as if being here alone would be an insult for his august person.

Ben’s mother was one of those Betty Ford wannabes who still tried to look thirty at the age of sixty or more, forgetting that no amount of beauty products and cosmetic surgery could make their neck and hands look young again, and who liked to appear on charity parties, wearing expensive clothes and tasteless jewellery, made up so thickly that they could be mistaken for Egyptian mummies. She held a lacy handkerchief in her clawed hand, symbolically touching it to her eyes but making sure she didn’t ruin her make-up. Her white hair had an unnatural blue glow, as if it had been polished for the occasion.

Their daughter, Ben’s older sister, was on her way to become a carbon copy of her mother. She was leaning on the arm of her husband, some kind of small-scale bank manager, with an expression of vague disgust on her face whenever she glanced in Michael’s direction. No, Michael definitely wasn’t the person the Bruckners would want in Ben’s life. Even if he’d been a woman, they would reject him, for coming from such a simple family, for never going to college, for not being an academic. That he was a man only added insult to injury in their eyes.
A small, warm hand touched Brian’s clenched fist, supportive, female. He glanced to the side and recognized Cynthia in a sudden flush of gratitude. She had always been his greatest supporter… well, right after Mikey, that is. And that while being straight as a board and never feeling the urge to appear on any gay-supporting events, just to prove that she was not a homophobe. She didn’t stand to him on some abstract principle. She stood to him out of friendship and simple, old-fashioned loyalty.

Plus, she had the sensitivity not to come in black, pretending to mourn for a man she’d never met in her life. She was here for Brian’s sake first, in Michael’s second, and didn’t care for anyone else present.

“Don’t kill them in front of so many witnesses,” she murmured, giving the Bruckner clan a glare of pure disgust. The idea was so absurd that Brian could barely hold back an inane giggle. Which must have been her intention – she knew him better than his friends, even, having been exposed to his nasty, snarky, aggressive side for many long years. She was practically bullet proof now – and they respected each other greatly.

“Remind me to make you the boss of the local branch when I open the LA office,” Brian replied in the same low voice. She gave him one of her rare, genuine smiles.

“What if I want to go to LA? Too?” she asked.

“You can if you want,” Brian said. “But there you’d be only an employee. Here, you can be the boss. It’s your choice.”

“I’ll think about it,” Cynthia said primly, playing hard-to-get. It was a joke, of course. Brian knew she didn’t really want to leave The Pitts. She had a family here, friends, well-established contacts. She wouldn’t give all that up and begin from square one again, unless it was absolutely necessary. But she’d provided a distraction, and Brian was grateful for that.

The ceremony, in the meantime, was nearing its end. The priest had finished his part, and now people were standing in line to throw their flowers on top of the coffin, already lowered into the grave. The line seemed to have no end, with Ben’s fellow professors and students coming on and on and forming a semi-circle around Professor Bruckner Sr. and the rest of the family, expressing their condolences, while the representatives of the local gay community did the same with Debbie.

Not one of them thought of Michael – or Hunter, for that matter – who were standing on the side, isolated, with only Brian, Ted and Cynthia to support them. Not a single one offered condolences to him. Not even the lezzies or his own mother.

For that, Brian could have cheerfully killed them all.

When the long line of black-clad mourners came to an end at last, Michael finally could have said his goodbyes to Ben, too – but he was unable to move. For the first time, all eyes turned to him, disapprovingly and a little impatiently. Brian nudged him gently, wanting to be over with the whole painful scene, but Michael just stood there, as if rooted deeply in the graveyard soil and couldn’t move.

Before the whole thing could have become too embarrassing, though, the murmurs unexpectedly quieted and the black mass parted like the Red Sea before Moses, giving way to a man. To a sleek, beautiful man with bluish-black hair and jewel-like eyes, clad in black leather pants and a blood red, flowing silk shirt. Alonzo Solace, holding a single, long-stemmed red rose in his hand, walked through them like a hot knife through butter, wrapped in an invisible aura of immortal power and almost animal magnetism.
He walked straight to Michael, took his hands and looked into his eyes.

“Let the dead mourn and wail over their dead,” he said in a quiet but clear voice that no one could pretend not to hear. “This, too, will pass. We came to this world alone, and alone we shall leave it again. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust. Remember that you are still alive and celebrate life as long as you can; for this is the way all of us must go one day: the good and the bad, the wise and the fool, the ugly and the pretty, the brave and the cowards. In the end, we are all alike. You, however, walk in the sunlight while there is still time.”

He lifted Michael’s chin with his free hand, kissed him on the mouth, long and hard, and then walked away, dropping the rose into the open grave on his way out.

Till the day of his Final Death, Brian Kinney couldn't tell how he had been able to suppress his hysterical laughter at that moment, seeing the absolute shock on the faces of Ben’s family and colleagues.

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“That,” Michael declared later, during the half-assed death watch in Debbie’s house, when they finally found a moment for themselves, “was a scene for the gods. I know I should probably be pissed off at Alonzo, but whenever I try to get angry at him, I see the faces of Ben’s fucking breeder family, and those of all the snobbish academics, and I just double over, laughing my ass off.”

“I bet your mother will blame me for it, too,” Brian said dryly. “After all, I was the one who’s brought Alonzo here.”

“I thought he was the one who’s brought you,” Michael said.

Brian raised an eyebrow. “When did such technicalities hinder Deb blaming me for everything?”

“Good point,” Michael agreed.

“Ready to return to the she-wolves before they realize that we’ve dared to speak a few words uncensored?” Brian asked, glancing towards the living room where Debbie, Lindz, Mel and Ted were sitting with Hunter, Gus and about a dozen of Ben’s college groupies.

“Not really,” Michael replied with a sigh, “but we need to drop the bombshell tonight if we want to take off for LA tomorrow.”

They went back to the mourning crowd that Debbie was still trying to force-feed, adamantly sure that large amounts of pasta, home-made marinara sauce and ice-cream were the miracle cure for all possible problems in everyone’s life. Michael nibbled on his pasta without appetite, knowing that it was better to pretend he was eating than trying to explain his mother that he was not hungry. Besides, concentrating on pushing the food around on his plate made it easier to shut off the conversation around him.

Conversation? Well, make it an eulogy about the great man Ben Bruckner had supposedly been. As if nobody else but him and Brian had been present all those times when the Professor had displayed less than stellar behaviour.

Perhaps they hadn’t really been present. Not consciously enough to see beyond the façade of love, fun and picket fences Michael had tried to keep up at any costs.

He was so deep in his thoughts that he hadn’t even realized that his mother was already planning out his immediate future. How he would step into Ben’s place in all those gay organizations and discussion forums. How he would help organizing demonstrations for the legalization of gay
marriage, give interviews to gay magazines and small, independent TV channels that showed interest for the topic. And so on. It was Brian’s voice that shook him out of his indifference.

“I’m afraid Mikey won’t have time for all that,” Brian was saying. “He’s needed in L.A. Brett Keller had called six times during the last four days,” which was a blatant lie, but the others couldn’t know that. “They want him to help with the pre-shooting preparations of the Rage movie, and that yesterday.”

For a moment, Debbie was too shocked to react. But only for one moment. In the next one, she practically erupted in self-righteous indignation like a volcano, calling Brian a heartless asshole and Michael an ungrateful little shit who couldn’t think of anything else than of his fucking comics, and anyway, when would he finally grow out of that silly childhood fetish and take over some responsibility.

That was the point when Brian stood, so abruptly that he turned his chair over.

“Are you listening to yourself, Deb?” he asked with such cold fury in his voice that – oh wonder of wonders! – Debbie shut her big mouth from the sheer shock of it. “Do you still know whom you’re frothing at? This is your goddamn son, for fuck’s sake! The same one who turned down a scholarship at the age of nineteen because he didn’t want to lie on your pocket. The same one who slaved in the fucking Q-Mart without complaining too much because it was a more or less safe pay. The same one who was always, always there for you, for Vic, for me, for every single one of you fucking hypocrites! Who endured Saint Ben when he was on steroids and rabid and dangerous. The same one who never turned his back on any of us, no matter how shitty we sometimes treated him – and that includes you, Deb, above everyone else!”

Debbie was still gawking, unable to do more than giving inarticulate protesting noises. Since he was now on the roll anyway, Brian went on.

“You’re speaking about responsibility?” he asked, shaking with anger. “You’ve kept tossing Michael at any halfway passable man for years, just to keep me available for your precious Sunshine! Have you ever considered that Justin does have a mother of his own, yet by favouring him you all but abandoned Mikey? What kind of mother are you anyway? Calling him names, smacking him in public and playing down everything he’d ever achieved in his life?”

“I never…” Debbie tried to protest, but there was no stopping Brian today.

“Yes, you have. You always treated him like a stupid child. As if working his way up through the ranks to the manager of a large department store and then to the owner of his own business were nothing! Well, let me tell you that it takes brains to handle all the day-to-day intricacies of running a business. It includes accounting, inventory, sales, payroll, scheduling, customer relations… and that’s just a short list! He’s done all this without help, juggling with work, Hunter’s foul moods and Ben’s ego trips, and still managed to be there for everyone else who needed a sympathetic shoulder.”

“Nobody argues about that, Brian,” Lindsay intervened smoothly. “Debbie just wanted to remind Michael that he has to stand in for Ben, too, in the future.”

“No, he doesn’t,” Brian said bluntly. “He doesn’t have to live Ben’s life, and nobody gives a fuck what Deb wants him to do. It’s Mikey’s life, and for the first time in thirty-plus years, he’ll actually get to live it. You spoke about responsibility – well, what about this? Mikey has signed a legally binding contract with Brett Keller and the Vignes Studios. They could – and believe me, they will – sue him, unless he gets his ass over to L.A tomorrow and sits down with the producers to do some work for which he’s already been paid. That’s called responsibility out there, in the real world, even if your warped mind can’t comprehend it.”
“I’m afraid Brian is right, Debbie,” Melanie said reluctantly. “I’ve helped to put that contract together... before Michael transferred the rights to Navital & Waters,” she added bitterly. “He’s agreed to help with the pre-shooting preparations, ad he has to go there, whether he wants or not.”

The last part must have been some futile attempt to build a bridge between mother and son, but Michael was having none of it.

“Oh, don’t worry, Mel, I do want to go,” he said coolly. “Why should I not want to go somewhere where people actually value me? To do something I didn’t hope to done, ever? No; I only have this one life, and I intend to make the best of a chance that won’t likely come again.”

“But-but you’ve just buried Ben!” Debbie protested.

“I have,” Michael said, “and nothing that I can do would bring him back again. I’ve done my best for him while he was still alive. Now that he’s gone, I won’t give up the chance to become something more than just the owner of a comic shop. I’m sorry if you can’t understand it, Ma, but I’m not willing to live in the past.”

Like you, was the unspoken addition, but even so, Debbie understood it all too well. He face was pale as dough, her much too dark lipstick like a wound in the middle. She opened her mouth, but Brian silenced her with an abrupt gesture.

“That’s enough, Deb. You’ve said all you wanted to say... and then some. It was unpleasant and nasty enough; there’s no need to spit any more venom. Like it or not, we’re leaving tomorrow, and that’s final.”

“More like tonight, actually.” the low, seductive voice of Alonzo corrected, and the Brujah sauntered into the living room, uninvited. “You should start packing, guys.”

“What, you want to fly in the night?” Michael asked, a bit worried. He didn’t like flying to begin with, and the idea of nighttime flying scared him. Alonzo shrugged.

“My plane, my choice,” he declared. “I prefer it that way – less traffic, more fun. Don’t wet yourself, little one; I have night eyes.”

Which was one of the most blatant euphemisms concerning undead lifestyle that Brian had heard, ever since he’d learned about the existence of vampires.

“Chill out, Mikey,” he said encouragingly. “I happen to know first-hand that Alonzo is good at what he does for a living. Now, say your goodbyes to the gang; we’re leaving.”
Reunited

Chapter Summary

Pre-shooting works start in LA, and Michael is reunited with an old friend and introduced to his new acquaintances. Meanwhile, Alain finds it necessary to teach Brian a lesson.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

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REUNITED

They left The Pitts shortly before sunset, leaving Hunter behind, after all – firstly because Debbie had insisted, and secondly because the teen himself preferred to stay in his familiar surroundings, at least for the time being. It had been agreed, though, that he’d spend the holidays with Michael in LA – a solution that satisfied all involved parties - with the exception of Brian, that is, who found the very idea of living under the same roof as the Littlest Hustler a repulsing one. But he’d endure the boy for Michael’s sake.

The physical and emotional drain of the recent weeks had finally caught up with Michael. He fell asleep right after the take-off and slept like a log till the minute they landed in LA. There Alonzo took his leave from them, as they were already awaited: Alain was standing outside the airport hall, leaning against his Corvette and smoking a cigarette.

Michael vaguely remembered the artist from his so far only trip to LA. Still, it surprised him – now that he wasn’t preoccupied with other things and had the time to look his fill – how gorgeous Alain actually was, with his deep blue shirt bringing out his icy blue eyes to full effect and the jet-black hair providing a great contrast to his pale, elegant face.

Seeing them leave Arrivals, Alain threw away his cigarette and came to greet them, kissing Brian long and deep in front of everyone. Michael, not knowing that the two vampires needed to reacquaint themselves with each other after a time apart that had been considered both unwise and dangerous for a fledgling still in the middle of his training, felt a pang of jealousy. It wasn’t like the familiar pain he’d always feel when Brian dragged off his latest conquest. This was worse, because he could see that there was definite commitment on Brian’s side as well – something he’d never seen, no matter what his mother and the lezzies might believe. He began to doubt whether following Brian here had been truly such a good idea.

But then Alain let go of Brian – who looked… well, flushed, another thing Michael couldn’t remember to have seen, ever – and turned to Michael.

“Welcome to LA,” he said. “I would offer you condolences but it would be pointless, as I didn’t even know your husband. All the same, I’m sorry for your loss and hope the change of scenery will help you to get over it.”

And he leaned in and kissed Michael, too, taking possession of the mortal’s instinctively opening mouth with easy confidence. He tasted of fine tobacco, old brandy… and Brian. It was a heady mix,
and Michael felt himself stir in response, to his utter mortification. Usually, he had better control over
the reactions of his body, but it had been so long since anyone – not to mention an expert like Alain
– had touched him. He was too overwhelmed to protest.

“Nice,” Alain commented, finally letting go of him and licked his lips in appreciation. “You’ve got
excellent taste, Brian.”

Michael blushed furiously but accepted the compliment at face value, as it was given. Alain then
ushered them into the Corvette, throwing Michael’s carry-all onto the seat beside him so that they
could sit together behind, and drove them to his house.

Although of simple origins himself, Michael had seen his share of elegant homes. David’s house, for
example, or the villa of the late George Schickl, where Lindz and Mel’s unofficial wedding had
taken place, thanks to Emmett. Alain’s house filled him with amazement nonetheless. It clearly had
been built with the multiple purposes of being an artist’s home, atelier and art school – and it was
elegant, functional and beautiful, the beauty expressed through layout and proportion rather than
through any unnecessary adornments.

His room within Brian’s apartment had the same clean, practical lines as the rest of the house – and
barely any furniture.

“You can buy whatever you need,” Brian said, “and once your stuff arrives from The Pitts, we’ll put
up Captain Astro and the rest of the superhero gang, too. Or you can decorate your office with
them.”

“I don’t have an office,” Michael reminded him.

“Actually, you do,” Alain corrected. “Not here, although you’re welcome to use any of the rooms
downstairs. But you’ll have your own office at the Vignes Studios before the shooting starts.”

“I will?” Michael was a bit baffled but clearly delighted by the possibility. Alain laughed.

“Of course you will,” he said. “Hey, you’re the screenwriter and the creative consultant of the movie
and of any sequels that might follow. That’s two jobs; the least they can give you is an office of your
own.”

“And all that superhero stuff will look great in it,” Brian added. “People need to see that you know –
and love – the genre. You, too, are playing in the upper league now, Mikey.”


“Don’t sell yourself under your true value, Mikey. You are the creator of Rage; the movie stands of
falls with you. Like it or not, you’re a big player in the game now.”

“Brian is right,” Alain nodded. “But business can wait. You’re jet-lagged, and you’ve got a hard
time behind you. Rest today. Your first studio meeting is scheduled for nine p.m.”

“For nine?” Michael repeated with a frown. “Are you all night owls or what?”

“More or less,” Alain laughed. “It’s not so hot and hectic as in daytime. Now, go and rest. We’ll
wake you in time to get ready.”

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When Michael was safely tucked in and out like a light, Alain took Brian to his own rooms. He
demanded a detailed report of all activities during his trip to Pittsburgh, shook his head in
bewilderment at some places and laughed his head off when Brian described how Alonzo had crashed Ben’s funeral.

“He’s a wild one, that Alonzo,” he said. “Were he not so devoted to Salvador Garcia, he could stir up serious trouble in L.A. Few people could ever resist him.”

“Have you had him?” Brian asked. Alain gave him an amused look.

“Well, it would be hard to determine who’s actually had whom,” he said, “But yeah, I used to have a light romp with Alonzo... more than one, in fact. For a while, he used to work as a model – not that he’d need the money, just because he had fun. Remember the bronze fountain in front of the main building of the Vignes Studios?”

“The bronze statue of the harp-playing faun in the tree?” Brian asked. That was one of Alain’s elder works, from his expressionist phase – a rather impressive one.

Alain nodded. “That was modelled after Alonzo.”

“Taking advantage of the fact that you had intimate knowledge of how your model’s body worked?” Brian grinned, remembering Alain’s art lesson at their first encounter.

“Exactly,” Alain laughed. “Now, get out of these clothes and have a shower. I’m planning to refresh my knowledge of how your body’s working. And we’ve got some serious talking to do.”

Brian hurriedly obeyed, his entire body humming with anticipation. He’d gone without sex for almost ten days in The Pitts and was now so horny it made him dizzy. To his disappointment, Alain was still fully clothed when he walked back into the bedroom wrapped in the silk robe he kept in Alain’s quarters. Even more ominously, a riding crop was laid out next to him.

“Alain… Sire… what’s this about?” Brian asked nervously. Alain had never hit him before – erotic spanking, which both enjoyed very much, didn’t count – and he couldn’t understand the situation.

“This is about you mouthing back at me through the phone,” Alain said simply. Brian frowned.

“I mouth back at you all the time,” he said. Alain shook his head.

“This is not about your filthy mouth or snarky style,” he explained. “Those I don’t mind. This is about challenging my authority, and that’s something I’m not willing to overlook. I told you that I found taking in Michael with you a bad idea, and you had the cheek to reply that you didn’t care. Which shows your serious lack of understanding the nature of our relationship. I’m your Sire; you’re my creation. As long as you’re not freed, what I say goes. You have neither the right nor the strength to challenge me. If you choose to do so, prepare to suffer the consequences.”

“So you’re gonna beat me up?” Brian asked incredulously, suppressed memories of his drunk, abusive father resurfacing with a vengeance.

“No,” Alain said. “One beats someone up in uncontrolled fury. I’d never raise my hand against you in anger. But I’ll discipline you to teach you your place in Kindred society – otherwise you’ll never survive on your own in the Dark.”

“Which still means that you’re gonna beat me up,” Brian said sourly. The thought to flee didn’t even occur to him. Not only because he’d never be able to match the speed of a vampire of Alain’s age; he was of an unknown yet very old line of Camarilla Kindred, and respect towards his Elders got hard-wired into him through Alain’s Vitae during the Becoming.
“There will be a great deal of pain involved,” Alain agreed. “But pain has a different meaning for us than it has for the Kine; you’ve already experienced how we walk the razor-sharp edge between pain and pleasure. That’s how we grow into our true nature.”

“Learning through pain, huh?” Brian said wryly. Alain nodded.

“I see you’re getting it,” he said. “Ready for your first lesson?”

“Nah,” Brian replied honestly. “I’ve tried this at Lady Heather’s and it didn’t work for me.”

“Lady Heather was not your master,” Alain said coldly. “I am. Now, get rid of that robe and bend over the desk. Those who accept their proper punishment obediently shall receive their reward, too.”

Around 8 p.m. Michael was waked by a beautiful, dark-skinned woman with chocolate eyes and surprisingly short-cropped hair. Her large, jade earrings cast trembling yellow lights upon her long, graceful neck, making her appearance somewhat… elusive.

“Hello,” she said. “My name’s Sarina Duplaix; I live here. Alain has asked me to wake you – your appointment is in less than an hour. Peppone will drive you to the Studios, until you can rent a car.”

“I thought Brian’s gonna drive me,” Michael said, a little disappointed.

“Not today,” Sarina replied. “He’ll fetch you after the meeting, though. You’ll be working with him and Alain, after all.”

“I will?” Michael asked, bewildered. He knew Brian was supposed to organize the ad campaign for the movie, but Alain? What had Alain to do with it?

“You didn’t know?” Sarina asked back in surprise. “Alain will be drawing the storyboard for your movie.”

“I thought that would be Justin,” Michael said. Sarina shook her head.

“Nah; Vera Vignes refused to take Justin under contract, and what she says goes in the Vignes Studios. They’ve bought the rights to Rage, which means they don’t have to work with any of the original creators.”

“Then why would they work with me?” Michael wondered.

“Perhaps because you’re the creative spirit behind the whole thing,” Sarina said. “Well, I’ve left some dinner in the microwave; it’s all set, all you have to do is push the button. Peppone will fetch you in twenty minutes. You’ll have just enough time to have a shower.”

Twenty-five minutes later Michael was sitting in Alain’s Corvette again, driven by Peppone, the artist’s friendly, talkative “cousin” and associate. They hit off at once, and Michael was thankful for Peppone’s constant chatter; it kept him from thinking too much.

Reaching the Vignes Studios, Peppone handed him over to one of the web designers, a tall, handsome, bald-headed black guy by the name of Diego Martinez, whose flamboyant shirt would have made Emmett proud. Diego then took him to the conference room where the meeting was to take place.

Edward and Vera Vignes were already there, and so were executive producer Edward Blount, director Brett Keller and an oriental-looking woman named Dawn Cavanaugh whom they
introduced as the director of photography and who gave Michael the creeps at once. A dozen other studio executives, casting directors, prop masters, CGI-experts and who knows what else joined them eventually, and when their number was almost full, Vera Vignes turned to Michael.

“And you know our assistant costume designer already, of course,” she said.

“I do?” Michael asked, slightly dazzled by all those new faces and unknown names.

“Well, I certainly hope so!” a very familiar voice trilled in excitement, and in the next moment, Michael found himself in the long-missed embrace of Emmett Honeycutt. He clung to his second-best friend and ex-roommate as if Em were his lifeline. They hadn’t seen each other since Emmett left Pittsburgh with Brian, months ago.

Alain’s arrival completed the creative circle, and the serious work could finally begin. Half of the discussion was a complete mystery for Michael; as little as he could understand, the others might have spoken in a foreign language. At least he could answer the questions aimed directly at him, as these concerned character and plotline – things he was familiar with. Still, he became more and more miserable by the minute, and his doubts about the rightness of moving to LA in such haste were increasing.

After the meeting, Vera Vignes gestured him to sit next to her.

“This was very confusing for you, wasn’t it?” she asked in a surprisingly motherly manner. Well, surprising for anyone else present, as Michael didn’t know her usual reputation.

“I feel like an idiot,” he admitted glumly.

“Nonsense,” she said. “Like every trade, the movie industry has its special language. It takes time to get used to it, but you’re going to learn it before you realize.”

“I hope so,” Michael said doubtfully. “It seems everyone else knows how these things are done, while all I have is an idea.”

“An idea upon which the entire movie will be built,” Vera Vignes said promptly. “The machinery is what serves the original thought, not the other way round. And if my people wouldn’t know their jobs to the root, I’d have fired them long ago. But if you really want to learn more about movie making, including the technical side of screenwriting, it’s still not too late to learn it. Both UCLA and the University of South California offer courses.”

“Am I supposed to go back to school at the age of thirty-four?” Michael laughed.

“Why not?” Vera Vignes asked, knowing that if Alain’s plans turned out as intended, Michael would indeed have time enough to earn more than just one degree. “We pay you well enough to cover your study fees – and some. You’re sharp enough to learn. And you look all about sixteen, so you won’t stand out of the college crowd.”

Michael laughed again, but the idea had already wormed itself into his mind and wouldn’t leave him alone.

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“She’s right,” Brian said later in the night. He’d come to fetch Michael, as Alain had other appointments for the evening, and now they were about to go clubbing. “You didn’t go to college when you were nineteen because you had to work for a living. Now is your golden opportunity to catch up and work in the same department, at the same time. You’d be a fool not to take it.”
“I dunno,” Michael said uncertainly. “What if I’m too old to start learning new things?”

“You’re not too old,” Brian said, “and these things wouldn’t be completely new to you, either. You’d just learn how to do the things you’re already doing on a more… professional level, that’s all. You’re still only thirty-four, for Christssake! It’s not too late to start a new career; and one that you’d actually enjoy.”

“Sayeth the man who tried to off himself when he turned thirty,” Michael said. Brian pulled a face.

“I didn’t try to off myself. I was just in a kinky mood. Besides, I’ve re-evaluated a lot of my former ideas since I’m here,” he opened the door of his sports car. “Hop in, Mikey, I’m gonna introduce you to some of the better places.”

He slid behind the steering wheel, hissing involuntarily as his ass made contact with the seat. Not even advanced vampire healing could deal within a few hours with Alain’s disciplinary measures… or with the following reward.

“Rough night?” Michael asked with false sympathy.

“More on the kinky side,” Brian replied, trying to find a less uncomfortable position. Fuck, but his ass hurt… and he was sore in the more intimate places, too. Unfortunately, the punishment also proved to be an incredible turn-on; he knew he’d now crave it in the future as much as he craved a good fuck.

Michael’s eyes, already the size of twin saucers, darkened in alarm.

“You’re fully into kink now?” he asked, clearly not pleased with the idea. “Like Ted with his Leather Daddy?”

“I’d thank you if you didn’t compare me with Theodore,” Brian growled. “Besides, his Leather Daddy was a fucking amateur. Alain is a master who’s honed his technique for a long time.”

“How long?” Michael asked sarcastically, as Alain really didn’t look like someone who’d be much older than them – probably not even as old as they were.

“Well,” Brian grinned, “he likes to say that he’s been permanently twenty-nine for the last five hundred years. I don’t know how many centuries he has spent with kinky stuff, though.”

Michael laughed so hard that his eyes teared up.

“You’re hilarious,” he said when he could speak again. “Still, getting your ass tanned just for the kick of it seems a bit… exaggerated to me.”

“Why?” Brian asked. “You used to allow the Nutty Professor to tie you up.”

“That was different!” Michael protested. “That was all about trust!”

“Who says what Alain and I have isn’t?” Brian said quietly. “Do you really think I’d allow just anyone to treat my ass with a riding crop and then fuck me raw?”

Michael was so shocked by that blunt statement that he couldn’t speak for a long time.

“Do you love him?” he finally asked.

“Not in the romantic sense of the word,” Brian answered. “Not the way I’ve always loved – and will always love – you. But yeah, we do have a strong connection on a different level.”
“Does that connection leave room for others in your life?” Michael asked. “Or have you actually stopped tricking?”

There was definite hurt in his voice. Hurt that Brian would change so much for someone else. He’d never demanded from his friend to change for his sake, but the same courtesy given to anyone else freely wounded him deeply.

“Of course it does!” Brian replied with a shrug. “We’re not exclusive. I won’t even call what we have together a relationship, not in the sense you had with David; or with Ben. This thing we have can satisfy a very specific, mutual need that we couldn’t satisfy elsewhere… not in the same extent anyway. But otherwise, we pretty much go our own ways. Alain is primarily interested in women in any case, and that alone means that he needs his own freedom.”

All of which was only part of the truth, of course, but at least Alain’s bisexuality was a factor that helped Michael to accept the bond between him and Brian.

“I’m still surprised that you’ve embraced his kinky side so fully,” he said, and Brian could barely hold back a guffaw at that unintentional pun.

“I only do kinky stuff with Alain,” he said. “In all other things, I’m still pretty much the same old Brian Kinney.”

“No, you’re not,” Michael said. “And I’m not entirely sure that I really like this new, advanced version of yours. What on Earth has led to these changes?”

“It would be too long to start on the what or why right now,” Brian answered. “But I can show you the place where it began.”

Then he started the engine and headed to La Lune Rouge.

Chapter End Notes

What Brian and Alain have isn’t a true BDSM relationship. It’s basically vampire training. That’s where the differences come from.
Chapter Summary

Michael is slowly finding his place within the movie industry. However, he’s having doubts about the wisdom of his decision to leave Pittsburgh in such a hurried manner, as Brian seems to have changed a great deal.

Chapter Notes

Velvet Vellour, just like Ash Rivers, is a canon character of the *Vampire: The Masquerade* game. I used some of her canon background, but not all of it, so she’s most likely quite different here. The bath tub scene was, of course, inspired by certain stands from the *Queen of the Damned* movie. The floor manager of the *Vesuvius* is “played” by Von Flores and named after the character the actor played in the series *Earth: Final Conflict*.

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ROOTS AND DOUBTS

Two months flew by as in a dream. The pre-shooting work was finished, the sets built, the costumes sewn, and Brett Keller was just about to start shooting the *Rage* movie. Sometimes Michael had the eerie feeling that he’d died and awakened to an alternate reality. He’d followed Vera Vignes’ advice and enrolled to some courses about writing and movie-making, and as a result he’d begun to move around Tinsel Town with more confidence. He was slowly but steadily building his connections within the movie industry; connections that would secure his future position as a screenwriter, even after the work with the *Rage* movie would end.

In his spare time – little though it was – he still worked on the *Rage* comic with Justin’s replacement, a gifted young comic artist, recommended by Alain... with the definite advantage that the overall look of the comic had a slight change for the better. It was a bit less brutal and a bit more professional, as the new artist had extensive drawing studies and years of experience under his belt, despite his relative youth (he was about Michael’s own age).

Michael had also begun to write the screenplay for *Rage II: The Black Widow* – the sequel to the *Rage* movie – because Brett Keller and Edward Blount wanted to save money by shooting a lot of scenes back-to-back, as long as the sets were standing and the costumes still available. These scenes, featuring mostly the three male stars, were supposed to be added to the DVD-release as teaser. But they shot other scenes, too, with Suzie Wong and Bai-ling, and even Sarina got made up and put into her future Spider Queen attire, in which she looked creepily gorgeous, to appeal to the male audience.

The PR campaign for the movie ran smoothly under Brian’s expert hands. The *Girard Fashion House* and the *Jade Flower* boutiques brought out toned-down, elegant versions of some movie costumes, and a new collection of perfumes was prepared to come out on the day of the premiere:
Zephyr for men and Lotus Blossom for women, with the pictures of the characters on box and bottle.

Diego Martinez had created a Rage website, covering both comics and movie, with all sorts of background information, an online shop for Rage merchandise (from action figures to mugs and all sorts of completely useless but very popular articles), a forum and a chat room where interested fans could talk to Michael directly once a week. He was also working on the Rage computer game, for which he needed to consult Michael regularly.

All these activities left little time for Michael to think about his life in general and about his strange relationship with Brian in particular. They worked together on various Rage-related projects, they even lived under the same roof, and yet they hung out even less than at the time when they’d both had other partners. Alain’s hold on Brian seemed very strong, and Michael was afraid of making any attempts to break it. He might fail, which would lead to losing their friendship as well – and that he couldn’t bear.

Now he finally understood why Brian had always hesitated to initiate anything but friendship between them in all those years… save a few occasions when he’d been either drunk or high. But that revelation didn’t really help things.

So he hung out with Emmett instead, which was great fun, just like in old times. Emmett had become a regular customer in the Asp Hole, and the other regulars, half of whom belonged to the movie industry anyway (and the other half desperately wanting to belong there) took Michael in with open arms. Literally. That provided him an active and interesting sex life – but didn’t fill the emptiness inside him.

“Sweetie, you’re running yourself ragged,” Emmett said worriedly.

“It keeps me distracted,” Michael replied with a shrug. “Keeps me from wondering whether I should have stayed in The Pitts, sitting in my little store, playing the grieving husband.”

Emmett’s eyes teared up in sympathy. He knew, of course, that Brian had to finish his basic Kindred training before earning his independence, so that he could be there for Michael the same way they’d used to be. Having interrupted his training for more than a week had been a setback and prolonged his dependent status. But Emmett couldn’t tell that Michael who still had no idea about the existence of vampires.

“Don’t give up just yet, sweetie,” he begged. “Alain and Brian are just going through… through a particularly intense phase in their relationship. That won’t last long, trust me. And then, things will return to normal again.”

“Em, I’ve been waiting for twenty fucking years!” Michael said tiredly. “How long am I supposed to sit on the sideline yet?”

“I don’t know, sweetie,” Emmett replied seriously, “but I can introduce you to someone who might.”

“Let me guess,” Michael said dryly. “Another eccentric old queen of an oracle like Mysterious Marilyn, right?”

“No,” Emmett said. “A lot better. You came by car?”

“Yeah, what else? This is LA. Where are we going?”

“To the Vesuvius. Don’t worry, you’ll like it.”

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The Vesuvius was an exotic dance club in West Hollywood; a well-frequented establishment, that – unlike the Asp Hole – was prepared to serve the needs of Kindred clientele, as most of the dancers were willing to serve as blood dolls for a sufficient fee. Emmett, who still had difficulties with Hunting (like other Sons of Discord before him, he lacked somewhat the necessary vampire aggressivity), was a recurring visitor - and a beloved one. Some of the male dancers liked him enough to volunteer as donors without expecting to be paid for it – at least not in money. They usually negotiated about a more… natural payment: sexual favours for blood donation, which satisfied both parties. But tonight Emmett wasn’t there to play. He wanted to speak the club owner.

“In the private playroom,” the floor manager, an extremely hot Latino in his mid-thirties, said. He was small, compact and beautiful, with a thick mane of jet-black hair and dark, almond eyes. According to his name tag, his name was Sandoval. He eyed Michael with interest.

“Another time, sweetcake,” Emmett told him, dragging Michael away.

The “private playroom” turned out a moderate-sized chamber with shuttered windows and a sunken bathtub in the middle of it, huge enough to offer room for at least five people. Its only occupant was at the moment Ash Rivers, who was floating in the water amidst a sea of roses – blood-red rose petals, to be more accurate, that covered the water surface almost completely. The heavy scent of the flowers filled the entire room. Ash’s eyes were half-closed, his bare arms resting upon the marble rim of the tube, and he seemed out like a light.

“Oh, dear!” Emmett rolled his eyes, which were emphasized by silver-and-blue eyeliner today, bringing out their colour to full effect, “he seems on a trip again. If Isaac hears of this…”

Michael, already familiar enough with the personal dynamics between film mogul Isaac Abrams and his errant protégée, nodded grimly.

“I hope he’ll be able to shoot his scenes at all,” he said.

As if answering his concerns, a dark-skinned goddess with beehive hairdo emerged from the rose bath, wearing a golden bikini and some sort of dramatic, water-proof eye-makeup in the style of an Egyptian pharaoh.

“Don’t worry, guys,” she said in a low, husky voice, nipping at Ash’s pecs playfully. “I do not drug my customers. The rose bath helps him relax, that’s all.” And she stepped out of the tub gracefully, shaking off the water like a big, elegant cat.

At first Michael thought he was looking at a drag queen of extraordinary beauty, as she was very thin, flat-chested and straight-shouldered for her five-foot-eight frame, with legs so endless that the eye grew tired from looking at them. But a second, more thorough look revealed that she was either a fully changed transgender person or a genuine woman – albeit a very unusual one.

She took a wide-cut robe of translucent white gauze off from a peck on the wall and wrapped herself into it, without caring to dry herself off first. Then she gestured them over to a low, marble-plated coffee table and picked up a crystal flute half-full with some ruby liquid with one hand and a long, thin, golden cigarette with the other one. She lit the cigarette from one of the thin, red candles that were burning in a silver candlestick and looked at her visitors with mild curiosity.

“Emmett, dearest, we’ve missed you lately,” she said. “Where have you been and who’s the hot stuff with you?”

“Caught up in the showbiz,” Emmett replied blithely. “Oh, and by the way, this is my friend, Michael Novotny. The screenwriter of the Rage movie, among other things.”
For some reason, that seemed to disappoint her.

“There go my hopes for the evening,” she said with a sigh. “It’s so unfair, really. Whenever someone really hot finds its way to town, Alain snatches them away before anyone else could get a chance.”

“He’s not into girls, Velvet,” Emmett grinned. “But I thought I’d introduce you guys to each other anyway. He needs new friends in town. And I think he might need a little guidance, too.” Turning back to Michael, he added. “Michael, this is Velvet Vellour. She owns this club, and she regularly performs here. One day you should see her dance; or perform poetry. But today, I brought you here because Velvet’s some sort of medium as well. I think she could help you gain a better insight into your own situation.”

“My pleasure, Michael,” the exotic beauty set down the crystal flute and proffered a slim hand to Michael, who shook it clumsily. He had the vague impression that kissing her hand would have been more appropriate, but such worldly gestures still didn’t come to him easily. Her amused smile revealed that she’d read him like an open book, at least in this matter.

He wondered if she was a psychic or something like that.

He couldn’t know, of course, but his guess came very close to the truth. Velvet Vellour – whose true name nobody seemed to know – was a Toreador Anarch of the 9th generation, with a Sire whom she adamantly refused to name, just as she refused to speak about her (mortal) past. This fact had soon led to the speculation that she might have been Embraced by some Sabbat Toreador but had turned her back on the sect. Her dismayed rejection of the violent Kindred nature might have been an overreaction to her origins.

She didn’t go Hunting – she didn’t need it. Her blood dolls - all of them utterly devoted to her, males and females alike - were all too happy to serve her needs, and she kept them in her thrall with the irresistible sexual magnetism of a true siren. All Toreador females had great powers of seduction, but the sirens had it magnitudes stronger – and didn’t hesitate to use it. Velvet Vellour was no exception. In fact, she used her natural sensuality as a tool to assure her own survival in the undead society too violent for her personal taste.

Like all Toreador sirens, she also epitomized passion, which she expressed through poetry and dance. Her poems had repeatedly been published as leather-bound, richly illustrated books, thanks to one of her mortal thralls, and had great popularity among fellow Kindred and in the Goth subculture. When she performed in the Vesuvius, the club was always full, and her fans all but worshipped at her feet. She also had an uncanny knack to make people do what she wanted them to do, be they mortal or Kindred. Many of the younger Anarch would have done anything to protect her. Such strong Dominance was unusual for someone so young in the Dark – she’d only been Embraced in 1994, after all – and it was assumed that she must have absorbed some Lasombra Vitae through vaulderie before leaving her pack, as she could also read the blood she tasted, which was, usually though not exclusively, a Lasombra trait. Phillipe Navital was one of the very few exceptions.

As a true Toreador, she seemed to thrive in the company of artists, writers, dancers and actors. Consequently she was a frequent visitor in the Asp Hole and a close friend of Ash Rivers, even younger in the Dark than she. Understandably enough, she was in league with Isaac Abrams, the most powerful Toreador Anarch in town – it was a useful alliance for her and a profitable one.

It was in the Asp Hole that Emmett had met her for the first time, and they’d hit off at once. As an Anarch, she was a lot easier-going on rules and traditions than the Blounts, and Emmett found that refreshing. Besides, they were closer in age, both in their mid-twenties when Embraced, both children of the same time. On the other hand, she had been drifting towards the Camarilla for a few years by now, the only place where she could find real protection from the Sabbat – especially if
rumours about her origins were true. Through Emmett she could be in touch with the Camarilla Toreadors without actually seeking them out – theirs was a connection of mutual benefit.

“So, you need guidance?” she asked, eyeing Michael with interest. “We can try a reading, I guess, although I can’t promise any straight answers… pardon the pun. The future is in a fluidic state, and even past and present are a lot less static than most people would think.”

Michael wasn’t impressed by all that mystical mumbo-jumbo, and he said so, before realizing how rude that must have sounded. Fortunately for him, Velvet Vellour wasn’t a sensitive one as mediums go.

“You’ll probably change your mind when we’re done,” she replied with a throaty laugh. “But we should relocate to the salon for the reading. It’s more private… and we won’t be distracted there.”

Michael shrugged. He didn’t really care where she was doing her esoteric stuff. Still, he wouldn’t reject flat out what she might say. The experience with Mysterious Marilyn had taught him to be careful, even with his doubts.

“Excellent,” she said, rising. “Ash, baby,” she added, glancing at the actor still floating among the roses, “I’ll have to leave you here for a while, but I’ll be back soon, I promise. Perhaps Emmett wouldn’t mind to keep you company in the tub.”

“I’d love to!” Emmett was shedding his clothes already to join Ash in the rose bath. Michael didn’t blame him, ‘cause honestly, a rose bath? For someone like Em, it had to be the epitome of luxury and decadence – both things Em embraced fully.

“I wonder how they’re gonna do the deed,” he commented dryly. Both Em and Ash were such bottoms it almost hurt to see. Michael preferred to be on the receiving end himself, but there was a difference…

“I’ll send them champagne for inspiration,” Velvet Vellour replied with a shrug and tossed lightly against the nearby wall. Well-concealed door wings swung open noiselessly, allowing them access to the adjoining salon – more like a small boudoir, actually, furnished with expensive elegance and refined taste.

“So, what are you gonna read?” Michael asked, taking the offered seat on the low sofa. “Cards? Tea leaves? My palm?”

“Really, darling, you shouldn’t expect something that mundane from me,” Velvet said in a reproachful tone. “I’m a medium, not some gipsy fortune teller – not that I wouldn’t respect Madame Zorza’s abilities; she’s great. But I’m playing in a different league – I’ll read your blood.”

“My what?” Michael was trying very hard not to freak out – with very poor results. What kind of weird shit were Brian and Em involved in, and why had they felt necessary to drag him into it as well?

“Oh, don’t be such a baby!” Velvet exclaimed. “This won’t hurt a bit… well, actually, it will, but you’ll enjoy it, I promise.”

Looking deeply into Michael’s eyes, she pushed up the Rage T-shirt to his armpits and playfully tugged on the small patch of dark curls between his pectorals. Her eyes turned silver, and Michael, mesmerised like a bird by a snake, was unable to protest, much less to defend himself. She hovered over him, licking his chest like a big, graceful – and deadly – cat, dropping her delicate canines but not showing them openly yet.
Completely at her mercy, Michael screamed when a razor-sharp fang pierced his nipple, white-hot pain shooting directly to his groin and making him hard as steel. Velvet made a purring sound deep in her throat, licking the small wound to close it, and then licked her lips, savouring the taste.

“Hmmm…” she murmured. “Delicious. There’s a lot of passion in you… and a lot of strength, too. I like that. But your resources are nearly depleted. That’s not good.”

“I’ve had a hard time,” Michael murmured, consciously ignoring the weirdness of the circumstances, because if he thought about the whole situation, he’d freak out completely.

“No shit,” she agreed unconventionally. “But you’ll pull yourself together, eventually. All you need is a little TLC.”

“You call this tender loving care?” Michael snorted.

“You call this tender loving care?” she replied. “I’m just having a little fun… which you’ll forget anyway.”

“I will?” Michael had his doubts about that.

“Rest assured, you will,” she nodded. “I’ll make sure of it. Now, let us talk about why you’re here.”

“Because Em dragged me in?” Michael suggested.

“Because you feel neglected by the man for whom you’ve left your old life behind,” she corrected.

“Because he’s not being himself, and it seems as if I wouldn’t even know him anymore,” Michael corrected her.

“I see,” she said. “Well, I haven’t met your friend in person yet, but I know his reputation. Or, to be more accurate, I know what he was like when he first came to LA. Before he gave himself into Alain’s hands. Would you prefer if he remained the same? Drinking and abusing drugs and all the nine miles in the night?”

“Yes,” Michael replied without hesitation. “I didn’t always like the life he used to lead, but at least it was his own choice.”

“So is the one he leads now,” Velvet pointed out. “I’ve known Alain for years – he’d never force anyone to submit.”

“It’s not in Brian’s nature to submit,” Michael said. “He’s been sexually aggressive all his life.”

“And did it bring him true satisfaction?” Velvet asked.

Michael shrugged. “He seemed content enough, going through the entire gay population of The Pitts.”

“Establishing his dominance,” Velvet nodded in understanding.

“Exactly,” Michael agreed. “That’s why I don’t understand how the Stud of Liberty Avenue could have morphed into Alain’s fucktoy.”

“You tend to see things in black and white,” Velvet said, “without recognizing all the shadows of grey in-between. Natural born subs tend to that sort of thinking; but it’s a rough simplification. Life doesn’t run in such simple categories.”
“If you mean that I’m a bottom, you’re right,” Michael shrugged. “But I don’t see why that would matter. Brian’s the ultimate top. What he seems to be doing with Alain is… unnatural.”

Velvet shook her head. “There is a difference between submission and being a bottom by nature,” she said. “You submit, because you enjoy submission. If Brian submits to Alain, it’s because he needs it, to establish balance. I don’t know a thing about his past, of course, but can it be that he’s picked up the dominant role out of fear and mistrust? Perhaps he never allowed himself to be vulnerable; possibly for very good reasons.”

“He never pretended with me,” Michael said slowly.

“Just with everyone else, right?” she asked. “And tried to find some sort of false balance in drugs, alcohol and promiscuity. Oh, I might not know him personally, but I’ve heard stories. This is a small scene, you know. He could have ended up like Ash – in fact, rumour says, he’s accepted Alain’s dominance after having met Ash for the first place.”

“And doing kinky stuff is supposed to help him?” Michael asked with a humourless laugh.

“This is not about kink,” she replied. “Not primarily, at least.”

“It sure as hell looks like that to me,” Michael said. “Brian has shown me that weird fetish club; I’ve seen enough. And now, if you really can make me forget this conversation, I’d prefer not to remember any of it.”

“Of course,” she said. “Look me in the eyes and relax. You won’t remember a thing.”

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Alain had always loved the Hunt. Watching his potential prey, choosing the right one, coursing his victim, seducing them or Dominating them into obedience – and then making them forget, after he’d drunk his fill. He’d honed his skills for half a millennium and was a highly developed predator now, very choosy about his prey and artistic in the execution of the task.

With Brian, the Hunt was an even greater pleasure. The fledgling had already come with well-trained powers of seduction, and he seemed to enjoy it as much as Alain did. And he had style. Instead of attacking the fist homeless person, as other fledglings would do, someone too drunk to even realize what was happening, Brian chose his prey from the young, half-naked studs in a gay bar, seduced him, fucked him, and only bit the guy in the height of his orgasm, when his blood was overflooded with adrenaline and endorphins.

“You’re a gourmet,” Alain said with satisfaction. “A true Toreador to the bone – making such a simple necessity as feeding to an act of artistic pleasure. I’m very proud of you.”

Brian shrugged. “Well, feeding is a fairly disgusting habit, so why not do it with style?” They both laughed with easy, newly-won camaraderie, two bloodsuckers in the night.

“It’s such a shame I have to make them forget, though,” Brian then added with a lascivious grin. “Usually, the tricks I fuck remember it till the end of their sorry lives.”

“When you’ve had more experience with domination, you’ll be able to manipulate them however you want,” Alain promised. “You can make them forget certain details and remember the rest, keeping your infamous reputation. But that takes time… and more training.”

“I understand that,” Brian said, slowly coming down from his high. “I don’t like neglecting Mikey, though. Right now, he needs me more than ever. I’ve taken him away from The Pitts – granted, with Brett’s invaluable help – because his mother and the lezzies would have smothered him completely. I
didn’t plan to abandon him.”

“You’re not abandoning him,” Alain said, “although I agree that the timing was the worst possible one… and not for the reasons you might consider. Your training was interrupted at a crucial point. Had you not gone to Pittsburgh, you’d be Hunting on your own by now, and be presented to the Conclave within the month.”

“Mikey needed me,” Brian said simply. “He’s always been there for me, no matter what. Now it was my turn to give support. It still is – if you’d only let me.”

“I will – when it’s time,” Alain said. “Right now, however, finishing your training is top priority. I can’t keep you in fledgling status much longer; that would make the Clan Elders think that you’re too weak, not capable of handling the Beast – and that could lead to your rejection.”

“Who cares?” Brian asked with a shrug.

“I do,” Alain replied, with a silver glint of anger in his eyes, “and you should, too. Because the Clan Elders happen to be the people with the big money and the big influence in the world of the Kine; so you need to remain in their good graces if you want to pursue your career any further.”

“What happens to a neonate who gets rejected?” Brian asked; the thought had never occurred to him.

“They’re considered Caitiff – without Clan, without family, without contacts or influence. Unless they join an Anarch gang, or the Sabbat, of course,” Alain added grimly, “and somehow I don’t think that’s what you’d want to do.”

The nightmarish image of Yitzhak in full monster mode appeared in his mind’s eye, and Brian shook his head mutely.

“Good,” Alain said. “Not that I’d be really afraid that they might reject you; you’re already involved in shared business with our Clan Primogen, not to mention several very influential Kindred from other Clans. But one can never be careful enough. There are some very conservative people among the Elders – and then, there’s Rebecca Lowell, who has considerable influence within the Clan, and who hates Victor and me on principle. She’d gladly take every excuse to harm us.”

“Why?” Brian only knew the actress from TV, but she’d impressed the hell out of him in the past. She’d been excellent in the role of Raven.

Alain sighed. “Well, now that her star as an actress is fading, she’s developed other ambitions. She’d love to become Clan Primogen, ridiculous as it is from a neonate; perhaps her Sire is behind the whole scheme, I’m not sure. In any case, Victor is in her way. As for me; well, Rebecca is Sarina’s Sire. She’s Embraced Sarina on a whim when barely more than a neonate herself, and without permission; then she got bored and abandoned her in the middle of the Becoming.”

Brian shuddered at that thought. Alain nodded.

“There was a big debate in the Conclave whether Sarina should be allowed to live or should be put out of her misery,” he said. “Fortunately for her, in the end the Primogens agreed to give her a chance, and I was asked to take her into foster care. Which is why Rebecca considers me a thief, someone who’s taken her Childe from her.”

“But she didn’t even want her anymore!” Brian said, understandably confused. Alain shrugged.

“Logic has never been one of Rebecca’s strengths. Besides, she also hates me because I’ve Embraced Oliver and his boy toy for the Prince. Oliver is Rebecca’s agent; but now he’s loyal to the
“And Rebecca isn’t?” Brian asked. “I thought all Camarilla vampires are supposed to, by default.”

“Kindred,” Alain corrected him automatically. “Watch your mouth in the company of the Clan Elders – as I’ve told you repeatedly, they’re a bit sensitive about semantics. In any case, yeah, Rebecca should be loyal to the Prince… at least in theory. But she won’t forget that the Prince refused to Embrace her when she asked for it, so it’s a shaky loyalty in the best of times. Rebecca’s Sire, Lorena was once hunted by the former Prince of LA, Victor’s Sire – unjustifiably, or so they say – and was thought to be dead for decades. There’s no way knowing what she’s planning or whom she’s in league with. But she’s a strong one – 7th generation – and she might have influence within the Clan, mostly among the Anarch. It would be a mistake to underestimate her.”

“Great!” Brian pulled a face. “And since Rebecca hates you as well as Victor, she’ll hate me by default, too.”

“Oh, I think she already hates you for your highly successful campaigns for Girard Fashions,” Alain grinned. “Don’t forget: we’ve originally brought you here to drive Rebecca’s fashion efforts out of the market – and your campaigns have done just that.”

“And I’ve made myself a real enemy,” Brian said glumly. “Within the Clan. Within the Camarilla. Before I even knew that such things existed.”

Alain nodded, suddenly deadly serious again.

“And a petty one, with a tendency to hold grudges,” he said. “Don’t worry, though. The Conclave of LA is more than just the Camarilla; we’ve got an Anarch Prince here, after all. Anarch leaders like Louis Fortier – who’s your business partner – and Salvador Garcia have great influence. All we have to do is to finish your training in time; once you’ve been accepted, Rebecca and her cronies can’t really harm you. But we have to finish it – do you understand me now?”

“Of course, but,” Brian began.

“No,” Alain interrupted, “no ‘buts’. Michael is in good hands with Emmett, for the time being. You will focus on your training, and nothing – or nobody – else. Have I made myself clear?”

“Yes, sir,” Brian replied sarcastically. Alain’s eyes turned ice cold in a moment.

“Brian,” he said evenly, the warning overtone very obvious, “you’re treading a slippery path here. Go on like this, and I’ll have to discipline you again.”

Brian flashed him a naughty grin. “Promises, promises.”

Alain shook his head in exasperation but couldn’t quite suppress a grin of his own.

“Childe, if all you want is to play why don’t you simply say so?” he asked. “You don’t need to provoke me every time.”

“I know,” Brian said, “but where would be the fun in that?”

Alain rolled his eyes. “Neonates!” he growled. “You still don’t seem to understand that challenging me would include no fun at all. I’m giving you a lot of leeway because that’s how you function best, but I won’t have my authority questioned. Not now, not later; and you’d better get used to that thought.”
“I thought I was supposed to be freed after finishing my training,” Brian said.

“That’s correct,” Alain replied. “Which means that no other Kindred would have the right to question your existence or harm you, as long as you don’t break Kindred law and unless the Prince calls a Blood Hunt on you. But you’ll still be my Childe, until your Final Death – or mine – and in certain things, I’ll still have authority over you.”

“Like fucking me whenever you want?” Brian asked sarcastically.

“That’s a fringe benefit,” Alain declared calmly. “Not the most important part, though. If you break the law, it’ll be my duty as your Sire to kill you – or be killed in your stead if I fail, unless a Blood Hunt is called, in which case whoever finds you first may kill you and absorb your very essence. This isn’t some modern-day law enforcement. The Prince is the jury, the judge and the executioner in Kindred society – well, theoretically. In practice, our Prince would send one of his Enforcers: either Spike, or Faith, the Sabbat Slayer, and even I’d be hard pressed to fight them. You won’t stand a chance.”

“I know, I know,” Brian said impatiently. “You’ve only told me this, oh, a hundred times or so.”

“And I’m gonna tell you another hundred times, if necessary,” Alain riposted. “Your generation has made challenging authorities an art form. The sooner you understand that it won’t do you any good among Camarilla Kindred, the better. Unless you’re strong enough to challenge your Elders, which, trust me, you won’t be for the next couple of centuries yet.”

“Well, this sucks,” Brian growled.

“No,” Alain said, smiling. “This is the way that leads to power. To long-lasting power. And you’re designed to wield that kind of power, eventually.”

“Yeah, sure,” Brian couldn’t help laughing. To his surprise, Alain seemed quite serious about the whole thing.

“You’ve played the power game all your adult life,” the artist reminded him. “Only the rules are different – and the magnitude of that which you’ll be able to gain. You can rise to great power within the Camarilla. You’re young, ruthless, intelligent, gifted. One day, you might become Clan Primogen, or even the Prince of a city of your own choice; with enough power to protect those you love. So don’t be a fool. You’ve got unlimited time. Watch, learn, build your network of influence. Play by the rules, and one day, the rules will serve you. What?” he asked, because Brian suddenly bent over with suppressed laughter.

“Nothing,” Brian replied, wiping tears of mirth from his eyes. “I just imagined myself returning to The Pitts, say, in fifty years, taking over ad business in the whole town and building my undead empire. It was just too hilarious an idea.”

“No,” Alain corrected seriously. “It was a long-term plan; and Pittsburgh is a reasonable choice. The Kindred population is very small there, and it has practically no Sabbat influence, as the city has never attracted our kind.”


“Perhaps,” Alain allowed. “But you know it well, and you won’t have much competition there. We’ve checked out the city before approaching you. It doesn’t have a Prince, and not even all Clans are represented. There are a few Ventru, a few Brujah, some of our own Clan and a handful of Nosferatu. Country Gangrel visit town sometimes, but they don’t stay. So, you’ve got plenty of time
and opportunity to ‘build your undead empire’, as you so eloquently put it. Preparing your return through business contacts and carefully suggested Embraces.”

“You’re serious about this!” Brian realized in mild shock.

Alain nodded. “Of course I am; and so should you. LA is a great place for an artist, but you’re more of a businessman, and in that area, there’s too much competition here. But should you want to return to Pittsburgh eventually and elbow your way to the top, your business associates here would support you with everything they have. Because that would widen their own area of interests – we don’t have much influence up North – and remove the competition for them.”

“I’m not a competition for them,” Brian protested. “Neither of them is in the ad business, and that’s all I do.”

“That’s all you do now,” Alain corrected. “But you’ll have all the time you want to enter other business interests in the future. They all know how ambitious and talented you are. They’d efficiently support you to use those excellent abilities somewhere else.”

If Brian thought about it, it made sense. He’d always known that his undead business partners only embraced him – ha! ha! – because he was useful for them, and not for some kind of personal sympathy. Still returning to The Pitts didn’t seem particularly attractive.

“To tell the truth, I was happy to leave The Pitts behind me, forever,” he said. “I like it in LA; I actually thought I’d stay here for good.”

“You’ll have stay here for quite a few years,” Alain said. “People who know you well would become suspicious of your tendency of not getting any older. But after a few decades, you can simply return as your own son, Brian Kinney II, and nobody will ask questions about your late Dad. Many of us do it the same way. And it will give you enough time to plan your glorious return in detail and prepare everything for the day.”

“Sounds plausible,” Brian admitted. “This is a concept I need to digest for a while first, though.”

“Of course,” Alain said. “For a neonate, it’s always a slow process to learn to think and plan in long-time terms. There’s no need to haste. You’ll manage just fine.” He patted Brian on the ass encouragingly. “Now, go and rest. It’s almost sunrise, and we’ve been out all night.”

“Will you join me?” Brian asked.

“Later, perhaps,” the artist said. “I’ve morning classes today; and besides, I prefer you well-rested for our… extracurricularly activities. You’ll need the rest for what I’ve got on my mind.”

“Promises, promises,” Brian teased again, but returned to his apartment nonetheless. He was still getting used to vampire lifestyle, and the Hunt had been exciting and exhausting at the same time.

On his way to bed, he risked a look into the guest room. Michael was sleeping on top of his unmade bed, wearing only his Superman boxer shorts and looking all about fourteen. He seemed to have a not entirely pleasant dream, and he was rubbing one of his nipples as if in remembered pain. That was strange, as he had no visible injury. Brian wanted to know what the reason could be, but he knew he shouldn’t wake his friend. Mikey slept way too little lately, and he needed the rest himself.

He shook his head in concern and went on to his won bed, wishing that his training were finished already. He missed Michael in his life – well, all right, unlife – more than ever before. This separation, while living under the same roof, had gone on too long.
Alain was looking through his teaching plans for his classes when the phone rang. It was Velvet Velour, which surprised him a little. Sure, Velvet had been drifting towards the Camarilla in these days, but the two of them had never been particularly close.

“Michael Novotny visited me tonight,” Velvet cut to the core at once. “Emmett has brought him, so that I can do a reading.”

“Have you?” Alain asked, suddenly very nervous. He didn’t know why, but he had the feeling that whatever Velvet had to say couldn’t be good.

“Of course,” she said. “That’s what I do… well, among other things. Listen, Alain, the situation is at a very precarious balance right now. Things can start spiralling down any moment. Michael is severely depressed, and keeping him away from Brian isn’t helping.”

“I can’t let them be together right now,” Alain reminded her. “Brian’s training…”

“I know,” she said. “I’ve tried to make Michael understand that this doesn’t mean he’s losing Brian for good.”

“And?”

“And he didn’t believe me. Alain, I think he’s regretted coming here in the first place, and he might be considering leaving again. Based on what I’ve heard from Emmett and what I’ve read from Michael, Brian won’t take that kindly.”

“Merde!” Alain cursed. “If Michael leaves now, Brian might take a walk in the sun.”

“My fears, exactly,” Velvet agreed. “I don’t even know him, so it’s no concern of mine. But Michael’s a nice one, and I’d like to spare him another loss of that magnitude.”

“Any suggestions?” Velvet might be a raw neonate of questionable origins, but she was also a medium, with more insight into people’s hearts that even half a millennium in the Dark would grant.

“The key is Michael,” she said. “Has always been, if I’m reading the signs correctly. You should talk to him. Privately. Try to assure him that he’s not losing Brian. That he shouldn’t leave town for good. ‘Cause if you fail… well, you won’t like the alternative.”
Acceptance, Part 1

Chapter Summary

At the urging of Velvet Vellour, Alain has a serious talk with Michael, to set some things straight – with mixed results. Brian prepares to be presented to the Clan Elders, when Michael gets a phone call from Pittsburgh.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

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ACCEPTANCE, Part 1

The shooting went well, and while Michael enjoyed being on set – especially as they allowed him to try in practice a lot of things he’d learned in his courses in theory – he wasn’t really needed there. Brett could always reach him when small alterations in dialogue were needed, but since they were both devoted to the project, it never took much time. So he spent his days alternating between the UCLA and his office in the Vignes Studios, and many of his evenings in the Asp Hole. Of Brian he still didn’t see much and Emmett, too, had made himself scarce lately. As content as he was with his new career, Michael was lonely – and he hated it.

Sure, there were the short, casual affairs with certain studio people or the regulars of the Asp Hole. He got to know other clubs, too, so he never lacked company. But Brian was painfully absent from his life, which was the biggest disappointment and the fact he hated most in the life in LA.

It wasn’t that he’d want to go back to The Pitts – even though he did call his mother almost every day and the distance seemed to do their relationship a great deal of good. He exchanged e-mails with the lezzies and Ted almost as frequently, and with the guy he’d hired to run the store on a weekly basis. So he was well-informed about what was going on back home… and felt no indication to return there. He liked LA and his new life. He just hated Brian’s absence from it.

And he hated Alain for making Brian need things that Michael couldn’t provide. He hated that fact so much that he secretly began looking for an apartment of his own. The whole situation had become too painful for him. If his hopes were to remain unfulfilled, at least he didn’t want to watch other people getting what he couldn’t have. Never again. The whole affair of Justin had taught him that.

He’d consulted his lawyers, Navital & Waters, who also represented some of the largest real estate agencies in town, and had already seen two passable apartments in the Marina area – the waterside held great attraction for him – when Alain unexpectedly visited him in his office.

“I’ve heard that you’ve looking for new accommodations,” the artist said without preamble. “Are you serious about it?”

Michael nodded. He didn’t ask where Alain knew it from – his business associates seemed to be a close-knit group, they were usually well-informed about each other’s affairs.

“I’ve outstayed your hospitality,” he said. “Besides, the whole… situation is awkward. I’d be better off on my own.”
“I agree,” Alain said. Michael gave him a scornful look.

“Somehow I thought you would,” he grumbled.

“Not for the reason you might think,” Alain replied. “To tell you the truth, I strongly opposed to Brian’s taking you in at this time. The timing couldn’t have been worse.”

“Oh, really?” Michael asked. “And why is that?”

“Are you aware of the… nature of Brian’s relationship with me?” Alain asked back.

Michael shrugged. “I know the two of you are deep into some kinky stuff.”

“No,” Alain said, “that’s just the manifestation. ‘We’re building up a relationship of dominance and submission, based on bondage and discipline. He does this voluntarily, because he needs it. I never forced anything upon him. And this won’t keep him from anyone else he wants to be with – the least from you.”

“That’s not what I’ve been seeing so far,” Michael riposted.

“Of course not,” Alain said. “You’ve arrived too early. For such a relationship to work, the… the neonate has to go through intensive training. It’s often unpleasant, and it takes time. You’ve dropped in when Brian was barely in the middle of it, and returning to Pittsburgh had set him back for weeks. But in about a week or two, his training will be finished, and he’ll be free again to pick up your friendship where it was left.”

“And what if I wanted more than just his friendship?” Michael asked quietly.

Alain shrugged. “It’s not my business. You’ll have to work out the parameters between the two of you.”

“You’ll let him?” Michael was honestly surprised; and very suspicious. Alain laughed.

“I don’t own him; nobody can own a man like Brian, unless they killed him and kept his ashes in a sealed jar. Besides, your claim is the older one. He might give me his body, but he’s given his heart and soul into your safekeeping when you were both fourteen. Nobody can come up against that and win – the least me.”

“Your hold on him seems tight enough to me,” Michael replied, still not quite believing in the peace offering.

“It is,” Alain agreed, “and he needs it. When he came to LA last year, he was on the verge of self-destruct. Drugs, booze, clubbing… you know the routine. He nearly got killed once – and that changed his view on things. He was finally willing to accept help.”

“By entering an abusive relationship?” Michael asked angrily. “Forgive me, but I think he’d had enough of that while growing up. I was the one who had to put him together whenever he couldn’t endure that fucked-up family of his and fled to our house. I treated his cuts and bruises, ‘cause he wouldn’t suffer anyone else to touch him, not even my mother, so don’t try to make me believe that he’d want to be beaten up now.”

“I don’t ‘beat him up’, ” Alain said patiently. “The relationship between master and disciple is a complex one, and I don’t blame you for not understanding it. One has to be part of it to realize what it’s all about. Neither am I trying to ‘make you believe’ anything. I just wanted to tell you why Brian has been so absent lately, and that his absence won’t last much longer.”
“But you’d still like to get rid of me, wouldn’t you?” Michael asked.

“No,” Alain replied. “You’re welcome in my house as long as you want to stay. If you weren’t, I’d have never let Brian take you in. I just think that it would be better for you – for both of you – if you had your own, independent home. But ultimately, it’s your decision to make. Whatever you decide, I’ll respect it.”

With that, he rose and left Michael’s office.

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“You’ve taken a great risk by going to him,” Phillipe Navital commented several hours later in the D’Oblique, where Alain and he were having their semi-regular business meeting. “What if he decides to stay? Brian won’t be able to fake mortal lifestyle much longer, especially when they’ll start spending more time together again. Once he’s been presented to the Conclave, he’ll have to go Hunting on his own, to build his own contacts within Kindred society – and Michel knows him too well to be fooled forever.”

“It doesn’t have to be forever,” Alain replied. “I intend to bring Michael over to our side, as soon as possible.”

“Which is decidedly not now,” Phillipe warned him seriously. “He’s not ready to learn about our existence yet, and won’t be for a while. You should separate him from Brian, for his own safety, and that soon.”

“I can’t force them apart,” Alain said. “Brian would follow him, and he’d make mistakes. Foolish, dangerous mistakes. He’s not strong enough to face the underbelly of LA alone. Not yet, not while he’d have to protect a mortal, too.”

“When are you presenting him to the Conclave?” Phillipe asked.

“During the next official meeting; in two weeks’ time,” Alain said. “Victor wants a presentation to the Clan first, though. He’s going to present Emmett as Edward Blount’s Childe to the Conclave at the same time.”

“Is that wise?” Phillipe asked doubtfully. He was one of the very few people who knew about the true circumstances of Emmett’s turning.

Alain shrugged. “I don’t see any problems. He needs to be presented, so that everyone would know he’s a Toreador (even if he’s not), and only Victor, the Blounts and the two of us know the truth. And the Prince, of course, but he’s promised Emmett his protection.”

“And Brian,” Phillipe added grimly, “since Emmett couldn’t keep his loose mouth shut.”

“Fortunately, Brian can,” Alain said. “I’ve explained him the situation. He’s used to look after his friends; and Emmett is one of his friends, as unlikely as it might seem.”

“Hmmm…” Phillipe let his analytical lawyer’s brain work on the facts for a while. “If I understand correctly, Emmett’s also a friend of Michael’s, right?”

“Actually, he’s always been more Michael’s friend than Brian’s,” Alain replied. “The two even used to be room-mates for a while, back in Pittsburgh, and apparently, it worked well enough. Why?”

“Perhaps the arrangement would work again – as a temporary solution,” Phillipe suggested.

Alain raised a sceptical eyebrow. “You’d trust Emmett around Michael but not Brian?”
“They’re friends,” Phillipe answered. “Just friends, plain and simple, without any underlying sexual
tension. Michael desperately needs a friend right now, and I don’t think that either Ash Rivers or
Velvet Vellour would be the right ones to fill that gap. Emmett’s eccentric but not a fool… and he’s
very loyal. We should give it a try, unless you want Michael to leave town – which would not be a
good idea, for various reasons, not all of which have anything to do with Brian.”

“Perhaps,” Alain allowed. “But how are we going to bring them under the same roof again? Because
I doubt that Michael would appreciate any suggestions coming from me.”

Phillipe grinned. “I don’t blame him. But he’d accept suggestions from me, as I’m his lawyer.
Besides, he’s already turned to us to find the right place for him. I’ll consult the Blounts and Emmett,
and we’ll work out a plan.”

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The talk with Alain had strengthened Michael’s decision to move out of the artist’s house and into an
apartment of his own. However, his efforts were cut short by another urgent phone call from
Pittsburgh. This time it wasn’t devastating news, but still worrisome a bit. It looked like his and
Melanie’s baby would be born some weeks earlier than expected, and if he wanted to be there at the
birth, he needed to board the first possible plane.

The thought not to go didn’t even occur to him, so the only remaining questions were when and with
whom. Brian wanted to go with him, of course, but this time Alain was adamant in his refusal.

“Remember what I told you about Clan politics,” he said warningly. “You’re about to meet the Clan
Elders next Thursday. If you don’t appear, you won’t have a chance to be accepted. Can you
guarantee that the child will be born before than and that you’d be back in time?”

“Of course not,” Brian scowled. “But Mikey was there when my son was born, and I was so fucking
depressed that I’d have jumped off the hospital roof without him. I owe him not to let him face the
same experience alone.”

“He won’t go alone,” Alain said. “Emmett will go with him. It’s taken care of.”

“So, Emmett is allowed to go, but I’m not?” Brian asked. “What kind of brilliant plot would that
be?”

“Emmett’s training has been finished last month,” Alain explained calmly, “and he’s already been
introduced to the Clan Elders. They’ve accepted him, so all he needs is the Prince’s approval – a
formality, as Angelus had allowed him to live right after his Embrace. Which means, he can afford to
leave town, as long as he gets back for the next Conclave meeting. You can’t.”

Brian was just about to explode, but Alain stopped him before he could start it.

“Brian. Don’t. This is not up to debate. You’ll stay. Period. Either voluntarily, or in chains in the
basement. Your choice.”

“You gotta be kidding!” Brian thought he hadn’t heard right.

“No at all,” Alain replied coolly. “You’re a stubborn fool, and I usually let you get away with a lot.
But not this time. I will chain you down in the basement if I have to. In any case, you won’t leave
town before your presentation, and that’s final. Get used to the thought, because nothing’s gonna
change it.”

Brian was furious, but there was nothing he could do about it. He was sure that Sarina and Peppone –
and whomever else Alain might employ in this scheme – would conspire with his Sire to keep him
restricted, had he tried to escape. Besides, deep within he knew that Alain was right. He needed to make the best possible impression at his presentation if he wanted to be granted an unlife to begin with. In his current status, the Prince or the Conclave could still order his destruction – in theory, at last. And while he was reasonably sure that Alain wouldn’t kill him, no matter what the Conclave decided, the outlook of living on the flight for the next couple of centuries didn’t really have any attraction for him. He required power, money and his creature comfort. So he chose to shut up and obey.

Needless to say that Michael was bitterly disappointed by the perspective of revisiting Pittsburgh and facing their old crowd – not to mention his mother – without Brian. Even though Emmett’s presence comforted him greatly.

“I hate this, Em,” he complained, while boarding the night plane to The Pitts. “Doesn’t he know I’ve only come here because of him?”

“Of course he knows, sweetie,” Emmett tried to placate him. “And trust me; he did want to come with you. Sarina says, he and Alain fought about the issue viciously. She has good ears, you know…”

“But he still gave in,” Michael accused bitterly.

“He had no choice,” Emmett said. Michael gave him a weird look.

“What does it mean he had no choice?” he demanded. “Em, is there something you’re not telling me?”

“Several somethings, in fact,” Emmett confessed willingly. “They’ll tell you all about it, when the time’s right; it’s not for me to discuss any of this. But please believe me as your friend when I tell you this: there is something Brian needs to get done within a short time. But there’s someone – the only one – whom he needs, and that’s you.”

“Yeah, sure…”

“No, Michael,” Emmett said very seriously. “I’m not making this up, and you know it. You’re his lifeline. And should you be thinking of staying in Pittsburgh, you should also take into consideration that he’d not survive your leaving. Now less than any other time.”

Michael shook his head. “This is ridiculous.”

“No, it’s not,” Emmett was still deadly serious. “Michael, if you ever trusted me, do so now. I’m telling you that Brian has arrived to one of the most important crossroads of his life – and whatever choices he’s gonna make, he’ll need you. More than ever before. You’ve been on his side for so long – don’t leave him now.”

“Since when have you become Brian’s advocate?” Michael asked, his irritation obvious.

“Not his,” Emmett said. “Yours. In a very short time, you’ll be able to get what you’ve been longing for all your life – or, at least, for the last twenty years – don’t screw it up now. You’re so very close; please, please, have just a little more patience.”

He spoke with such unusual and grave intensity that Michael – who’d half made up his mind to return to Pittsburgh already – became uncertain about it again.

“All right,” he finally said. “I’m willing to sit out this one crisis yet. But not another one after that. Never again.”
Like all important events related to the Camarilla, Brian’s presentation was scheduled to take place in the Conclave room above the D’Oblique. After all, this had been once the domain of Don Sebastian, the Toreador Prince of LA. His domain, his design (pompous and old-fashioned) and the centre of his power – until the Anarch Revolt, during which he’d got killed and diablerized by Salvador Garcia. From that time on, LA had been a Free Anarch State. Cyrus’ short princedom couldn’t change that, and the current Prince, a former Anarch himself, had chosen to respect the status quo.

“What the fuck is diablerie anyway?” Brian asked, checking his appearance in the large mirror. He was wearing his best Armani suit for the occasion, firstly because he preferred Armani, and secondly because wearing a Girard creation would seem like sucking up to the Primogen and antagonize the opposition. Besides, it would be a cheap move, and Brian Kinney didn’t do cheap.

“Something you shouldn’t even consider,” Alain replied. “It means to drain a fellow Kindred until he or she dies in your hands. I would make you absorb your victim’s powers, their very essence. This is a Sabbat practice, and it’s punished by Final Death in these days.”

“But it could make someone really strong, couldn’t it?” Brian asked.

“Which is exactly why it’s forbidden,” Alain said. “Can you imagine the kind of monster a serial diabolist would become? Growing in strength after each new victim? Even the Sabbat are wary of such people and try to get rid of them, had they grown too strong. They’re not safe for anyone.”

“And you guys still tolerate Garcia, even do business with him?” Brian frowned.

“Salvador is not a serial diabolist,” Alain replied. “As far as we know, he only did it twice. Once during the Spanish Civil War, to revenge his Sire, and then with Don Sebastian, in 1944. The Anarch Revolt was a violent time; many people did horrible things they’d never do under normal circumstances.”

“You too?” Brian asked carefully. His Sire never spoke about those years, was probably still mourning his murdered Childer.

Alain nodded. “Once, back in the sixteenth century. To make sure that the murderer of my Sire was utterly destroyed. But I didn’t absorb his essence… I wouldn’t want that with me for eternity. I simply watched him bleed to death and combust. Now, are you quite done? We need to hurry up. The Elders have a thing for punctuality.”

“Who’s gonna be there, other than Victor?” Brian asked, trying not to be nervous – and failing.

“In theory, everyone up to Ancilla Blood – that is, up to the 8th generation – is entitled to take part in the presentation of a new Clan member,” Alain replied. “That means Lorena, Rebecca Lowell’s Sire, with Rebecca and probably her other Childer, if any of them are still alive; then Joaquin Murietta, an LAPD detective of the 6th generation and your buddy Diego, who’s Joaquin Childe. I assume Isaac Abrams would be there, as he has great influence among the Anarch side of our Clan. Edward Blount, although of Young Blood, will be allowed to participate due to his position – and of course, Christopher, should he choose to appear.”

“Why wouldn’t he?” Brian asked. “And who’s he anyway?”

“Christopher Houghton is – was – the Sire of Don Sebastian, and he’s the Sire of Joaquin Murietta,” Alain explained. “He’s almost as old as I am, near four hundred, and what’s more, he’s of Ancient Blood – 5th generation. He would be an incredibly powerful Kindred, a true monster and the unchallenged king of this city, had he not been Embraced at the age of thirteen. Having the body of a
teenage boy forever makes him vulnerable, despite his age and Kindred powers, and a liability for the whole Clan. During Cyrus’ princedom of terror, he was held hostage for the rest of the Clan to behave.”

“And you folks did behave, for such a brat?” Brian asked incredulously. Teenagers, even mortal teenagers, were a plague. A four-hundred-year-old teenage monster must have been magnitudes worse. In Brian’s opinion, the Clan should have been happy to let him killed by the self-proclaimed Brujah Prince.

“Watch your tongue!” Alain warned him. “Christopher only looks like a kid. He’s got four centuries to hone his survival skills. He’s clever, ruthless and generally vengeful towards the rest of the world, so be very, very careful around him. He’ll hate you at first sight, for what you are, just because he never got the chance to become someone like you.”

“How influential is he anyway?” Brian didn’t like the perspective at all. Alain shrugged.

“Hard to tell. Aside from Lorena, everyone else is Don Sebastian’s progeny, which theoretically should put them into the same league as Christopher. However, Isaac hated Don Sebastian, so he probably wouldn’t support his grand-Sire in anything. Lorena would oppose Victor for Rebecca’s sake in almost everything, while Joaquin Murieta, a very conservative Kindred, might support Christopher out of old-fashioned loyalty, although he personally likes and respects Victor. It’s really complicated.”

“No shit!” Brian growled. “Do you think I’d have a snowball’s chance in Hell to be accepted?”

“Of course you do, don’t be paranoid,” Alain said. “They might hate each other on multiple levels, but they won’t break the law. The Camarilla types have nor reason – or excuse – to reject you, and Isaac likes you. The only uncertain factor is Lorena, because of Rebecca, but she’ll be in the minority.”

Brian didn’t find the chances too promising. But he had to go through this, no matter what. And he’d be damned if he was to show any fear while facing these blood-sucking relics of times long gone.

“All right, then,” he said, taking a deep breath. “Let’s go. I’m as ready as I ever will be.”

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The return to Pittsburgh – even though only temporarily – was a strange thing for Michael. On the one hand, everything seemed more real to him, now that he was back in his familiar surroundings – he’d missed them like someone would miss a pair of well-worn, ugly but comfortable pair of shoes. On the other hand, things weren’t quite the same as they had been earlier.

For starters, he was staying in Brian’s loft now. Granted, with Emmett as his room-mate, which again was a pleasantly familiar situation. But the loft without Brian was an empty shell – and he felt the pain of its emptiness almost physically. Not the loft alone, in fact; the whole town seemed empty without Brian’s vibrant presence.

Emmett used the chance to visit the Babylon again and meet the seemingly endless crowd of his ex-lovers with whom – unlike Brian with his tricks – he’d kept a friendly contact. Michael, however, didn’t feel like clubbing at all. Neither Woody’s, not the Babylon was the same without Brian, which was a brand new experience. When Brian had first left for LA, Ben had still been alive and demanded Michael’s full attention, so he’d barely had any time to miss his friend. He felt the loss twofold now.

“Brian was right,” he said to Emmett glumly. “I am pathetic.”
“No, sweetie,” Emmett replied, making a pirouette in front of the large mirror in his shimmering, translucent shirt. “You’re in love. And so is Brian, even if he’s too stupid to admit it. Yours is the greatest love story never told.”

“I wouldn’t say never,” Michael said slowly. Emmett stopped mid-pirouette, his mouth hanging literally open.

“He has? Sweetie, why haven’t you….”

“Because it wasn’t what you think,” Michael replied tiredly. “You know him; he keeps everything that counts to himself.”

“He does love you, you know that,” Emmett said. Michael nodded.

“Yeah. Always has, always will. But being in love with me… I don’t know. And even if he is – I’m not sure I could deal with it right now. Which is why I’ll be moving out of Alain’s house, as soon as we’re back in LA: I need distance.”

“Good for you!” Emmett nodded in agreement. “You need to sort your feelings out, after Ben having died and stuff. Still, I don’t think that being totally alone would be the best idea.”

“Neither do I,” Michael admitted. “In fact, I hate the idea of being alone, but what else can I do? It’s better than staying at Alain’s.”

“Perhaps,” Emmett agreed. “What about moving together with an old room-mate, though?”

“I thought you stayed with the Blounts,” Michael said in surprise.

“I do,” Emmett replied, “and I like them, I really do. But they’re cramping my style – they’re just too old-fashioned for a tropical flower like myself,” he added, grinning, and Michael had to laugh, too, because it was just too true. He had to deal with Edward Blount in movie-related issues, and he couldn’t imagine how the producer and Emmett survived under the same roof. Aside from the sex, of course.

“Besides,” Emmett added lightly, “I fell like being more… independent again, and I’ve made enough cash to finally afford an apartment of my own. Well, half an apartment.”

Michael thought about the idea for a moment. Actually, living with Emmett had always worked well for him. A single guy couldn’t wish for a better room-mate. And he was single now, wasn’t he?

“All right,” he said, “I guess it could work again. Just you and me, like in old times.”

“Wonderful!” Emmett said excitedly. “You’ll see, we’re gonna have a grand time! Well, I’ve gotta go. See you in the morning?”

“I certainly hope so,” Michael said with a tired sigh. “I’m gonna see my mother tomorrow, and I sure as hell could use some support for that.”

Emmett bent his arm and showed his biceps. “See that? Your personal bodyguard, always willing and ready.”

“Yeah, the question is just willing and ready for what?” Michael laughed, feeling a hundred per cent better, just from being with Emmett again. “No, be gone and have fun. I’ll try to have a good night’s sleep before entering the den of the lioness.”
The Toreador vampires of LA are recurring characters of my “Pathways in the Dark” universe. Their names are borrowed from VtM canon, but I turned them into somewhat different characters.
Acceptance, Part 2

Chapter Summary

Michael returns to Pittsburgh and has to face a few less-than-pleasant encounters. In the meantime, Brian meets his Elders and other undead celebrities.

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ACCEPTANCE, Part 2

Christopher Houghton had chosen to appear on Brian’s presentation, after all. For someone Embraced at the age of thirteen, he looked at least sixteen, Alain found, due to his height, his thin, haughty face and some carefully applied make-up that served well to make him seem even older. He wore a white suit that would have made Elvis cringe and his dark hair in fake Elvis-fashion. Despite his ridiculous outfit, his dark eyes revealed the arcane powers and the malevolent distribution in that youthful body.

It was hard to imagine that this youngling was the Sire of the late Don Sebastian and thus the grand-Sire of Victor Girard. Or that he’d somehow managed to turn a strong, athletic, handsome Latino man like Joaquin Murietta into a vampire. While Christopher might have succeeded in seducing a decadent fool like Sebastian Dominguez, Joaquin had always been a ground-solid person. Alain wondered what might have motivated him to accept the Embrace from such a seemingly young kid.

In any case, Christopher’s bloodline was in definite majority among the Clan Elders. Even if one considered that Isaac would oppose his grand-Sire on principle, he was Christopher’s progeny, just as Joaquin and Victor. This unpleasant, arrogant youngling was their Elder, and while Isaac, Anarch to the bone, could afford to defy him, Victor and Joaquin could not. Diego didn’t really count. Just like Rebecca, he might be an Elder by generation, but he still was a neonate by (Kindred) age, and thus not a really important voice in any decision.

Alain eyed the… other factions warily. Edward Blount was a known quality; he didn’t need to be concerned about him. But the two women… Lorena was, at first sight, nothing special: a seemingly young woman of about thirty, dark-haired and dark-eyed, perhaps with a bit of Latino blood in his veins – until one really looked into those dark eyes of hers. The way she seized up Brian was that of a prize fighter sizing up a new opponent. Alain didn’t like it a bit. Rebecca Lowell, on the other hand, apparently was still playing her “Raven” alter ego, clad in black, white-faced like a ghost, with a lipstick so dark red it seemed almost black. Her page hairdo made her face look even more like a lifeless mask. She eyed Brian with open disgust which, or so Alain hoped, would be reason enough for Victor’s faction to support the fledgling.

With the exception of Christopher, of course. There could be no way to overlook the thinly-veiled hostility with which the Elder glared at Brian. To a certain extent, it was even understandable. Brian was showing his best side right now: elegant, self-confident, but on just this side of arrogance, beautiful, aglow with success… everything the Clan could wish from a neonate who was supposed to move in the world of the Kine undetected and to make an impact for Clan interests.

Everything Christopher could never be. And that fact worried Alain to no end.

He wasn’t afraid that Christopher would officially speak up against Brian’s acceptance into the Clan.
According to Kindred law, the teenage monster who still considered himself the ranking guardian of the Camarilla in LA, could not do that. After all, Brian’s Embrace had been decided by prominent Clan members and sanctioned by the Prince of the City. And even though Christopher probably considered himself more worthy for Princedom than the reformed Anarch monster that was currently running the office, his main supporter, Joaquin Murietta, was a stickler to the law – both as a high-ranking Kindred and as a police detective. Whatever Christopher might be planning, he had to obey the law – at least on the surface. Unfortunately, there were other methods. LA had an extensive demon population, most of them malevolent, many of them more than willing to kill a fledgling vampire – if the price was right.

With a sharp pang of discomfort Alain realized that he’d have to do something about Christopher, and that soon.

He couldn’t do that on his own, of course. He might be physically stronger than the child monster – though even that was by no means certain – but Christopher knew arcane rites only vampires of very low generations were familiar with. Yes, he was Camarilla, but the much newer Sabbat rites had come from somewhere. Alain needed a strong ally in this campaign.

Spike, who had already eliminated one child monster, would be one possibility. Faith, the Sabbat Slayer would be another one, assumed that Alain could make the Prince understand the danger that Christopher represented. Unfortunately, Christopher wasn’t a newly-made vampire like the Anointed One had been; Spike wouldn’t be able to catch him unaware. And as for the Slayer – she might be a vampire now, but not so long ago she had been an ill-fated human girl. She would hesitate to kill someone looking like a young boy. Even if that someone was a ruthless monster.

No, Alain needed stronger, older, more ruthless allies in this case. Allies who’d be well-versed in ancient rites, thaumaturgy and magic. The help he would need against Christopher would only be found within Clan Tremere… or the Nosferatu. And he happened to know just the right person for the job.

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To say that Michael was not looking forward to meet his mother again would have been the understatement of the century. But there was no way to avoid her for the duration of his stay in Pittsburgh, and so it was easier to face her right away and be done with the venting, the accusations, the berating, the tears, the wailing and whatever else of her rich repertoire she would choose to confront him with. Emmett’s presence was a relief in any case, and so was the fact that he’d ordered Ted to be there and help shielding Michael as well as possible. Even though no one was ever capable of stopping Debbie on the warpath once she got into screeching mode. Not even Emmett, whom she genuinely liked and who’d done nothing to raise her ire… yet.

So, understandably, Michael’s stomach had shrunk to the size of a shrivelled lemon already when they finally entered the Liberty Diner for breakfast. At this time there was a small crowd customers there, as always, which promised quite the audience for Debbie’s grand scene. As always. Ted, however, had saved places for them at his own table.

“Lindz and Mel are coming a bit later,” he said, after kissing Michael on the cheek, “so it’s just us pretties at the moment. It’s good to see you again, Michael. What’s LA like?”


“But what if the first part turns out a flop?” Ted, ever the pessimist, cautioned.

Michael shrugged. “I’ll get the money anyway. But Brett Keller doesn’t produce flops.”
“So, you and Justin are financially secured, no matter what?” Ted tried to clarify things. Michael shook his head.

“No, just me. Justin hasn’t got anything to do with the movie. He’s flown out of the entire project early on. And besides, he’s in Italy now, with a scholarship to the Belle Artes.”

“What?” the screech coming from behind them would have put a vengeful banshee to shame. Debbie burst forth from the kitchen like a force of nature… a particularly destructive one. Her eyes were blazing in self-righteous indignation, and though one would believe it impossible, her wig was even more tousled than usually. “You little shit, how could you do that? How could you have my Sunshine fired? It was the chance of his fucking life, and you had to ruin it for him, hadn’t you?”

“You managed to get Justin dropped out of the movie?” Of course, Lindsay and Melanie had to arrive in this strategic moment; and, of course, Lindsay had to take Justin’s side, as always, without caring to look at the whole picture. “Oh, Michael, how could you…?”

“Let me ask you the same question, Lindsay,” Michael forced himself to remain calm and reasonable, while all he really wanted to do was to scream in frustration. “How could you always assume that whatever goes wrong with Justin would be my fault? Granted, I don’t particularly like that self-absorbed, arrogant little snot, but when did I do anything to harm him?”

“You’ve always tried to break him and Brian up,” Debbie said accusingly. “You could never accept that Brian loved my Sunshine.”

“Not according to Brian, he didn’t,” Michael replied with more patience than he’d ever thought to be capable of. “Justin had managed that entirely on his own, by lying and breaking his own stupid rules, and leaving Brian – twice. Just as he’d managed to screw up his chance – and very nearly mine, too – with the studio bosses in Hollywood.”

“I can’t believe that,” Debbie protested. “Sunshine could always wrap anyone around his pinkie finger. He’s super smart, sexy and talented. How come that the only time he didn’t succeed was when you had to do something with the whole thing?”

“I hate to crash your rainbow-coloured illusions, Ma, but not everyone is impressed by spoiled, rude little brats,” Michael replied, still clinging to the shards of his patience, although it was becoming increasingly harder every moment. “People like Vera Vignes are a bit… intolerant towards young nobodies who try to get into the pants of her star director during a serious business meeting. Very few people get the chance to meet the boss of the Vignes Studios in person – she only gets involved in the really big projects and leaves the rest for the studio executives. Justin got that chance – and screwed it up, cuz all he was interested in was getting fucked by Brett Keller. Which he didn’t get, by the way – Brett doesn’t do twinks – but he sure as hell tried his worst. I wasn’t there, myself, but studio people who were said he’d behaved like a cheap whore.”

“That’s not true!” Debbie fumed. “Sunshine would never…”

“Your precious Sunshine was taught by Brian Kinney,” Michael said dryly. “Of course he behaved like a whore. It’s the trademark Kinney method to seal a deal. The only difference is that Brian actually does seal the deal before getting in the pants of the customer.”

“In any case,” Emmett took over breezily, “Vera Vignes flat-out refused to do anything with Justin. Brett Keller practically begged her on his knees to allow him to do the movie anyway.”

“And you know that – how exactly?” Melanie asked nastily. Emmett gave her a brilliant smile.
“I fuck the executive producer, my dear – that’s as much ‘insider’ for you as it gets. Anyway, Vera gave the project one last chance. That was when Michael got called to Hollywood for the first time. He came, he spoke about *Rage* – and he won. The studio bosses ate from his hand after the first ten minutes, and the movie was a go.”

“Are you telling me that people liked *him* but they hated *Sunshine*?” Debbie all but gagged in disbelief. Emmett’s friendly face froze to ice in a moment.

“Debbie, honey, I love you to pieces, and I’ll be eternally grateful for everything that you’ve done for me,” he said in a voice like steel, “but I have to tell you something I’ve wanted to tell you for years. You’re either deliberately blind or completely nuts. You don’t deserve a son like Michael, and since all you’ve been doing lately is treating him like shit, in a short time you won’t have him anymore.” He stood. “Excuse me, but I’ve completely lost my appetite. Don’t expect to see me here again any time soon. You coming, Michael?”

“Not right away,” Michael replied. “I have to discuss a few things with Lindz and Mel. Let’s meet in my store, say, in one hour?”

“Excellent,” Emmett fished his cell phone out of his pocket. “That gives me the time to make some business calls. In one hour, then.”

“Okay,” Michael turned to the lezzies. “Well, let’s discuss parental duties in the meantime.”

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“What is this place?” Brian looked with interest at the old-fashioned industrial building. It did look like an old house at first sight, but his trained eye told him that it had been either recently redecorated or completely re-built, so that it kept its old-fashioned flair while providing all conveniences of the 21st century. There were several plaques right and left from the front door, signalling the presence of *Angel Investigations* – which, Brian knew, was actually the cover business of the Prince of the City – *Nabbit Enterprises* (one of the biggest computer firms of California, owned by young billionaire David Nabbit) and *schrecknet.com.ca*, of which Brian had never heard before. Well, he had heard it mentioned by Isaac Abrams, back when they were trying to win Ash Rivers for the *Rage* movie, but he still had no idea what it could be.

“That’s where we’re going,” Alain replied. “The haven of the Nosferatu Primogen. One of the very few Kindred in LA who can keep Christopher in check – and after your presentation to the Clan Elders, I’ve come to think that it will be necessary.”

“I don’t see why,” Brian said. “Everyone was rather… civil to me.”

“Exactly,” Alain agreed. “And that’s what makes me worry. I’d be calmer if they’d questioned and criticized you all the time. Joaquin is a straightforward guy, but Christopher and Lorena… I need an advantage on them - and strong allies to keep you safe.”

Brian shuddered, remembering the cold monster in the body of a teenage kid and that seemingly harmless woman who’d been anything but really harmless.

“I still don’t understand why they would want to harm me,” he said.

“To weaken our side: Victor, me, the Prince,” Alain explained. “I’m afraid you’re just a pawn in Clan politics, Childe… although they certainly hate you personally, for your success, too.”

“I’m so honoured,” Brian commented dryly.

“It’s not so different from what’s going on in mortal society,” Alain replied with a shrug. “We just
have more time to plan our moves and are harder to kill, that’s all.”

“Would they…” Brian didn’t finish the sentence. The thought of some ancient monsters planning his violent and painful death was not a reassuring one. Alain shook his head.

“Not openly, they wouldn’t. They can’t prevent your acceptance by the Conclave, either, since it’s a gathering of the Clan Primogens, and our Primogen is Victor who’s a great supporter of yours. But there are other ways – and I’ll try to find help against those here. Come.”

They went straight to Angel Investigations. Alain knocked on the beautiful stained glass door and entered, without waiting for an invitation. They came into a large, shaded anteroom, separated from the actual office by a huge window in the wall, furnished with antique-looking stylish desks and bookshelves that made an interesting contrast to the up-to-date high-tech equipment the employees used. There were also lush potted plants, although Brian wondered how they could live with so little light in there, and a few Tiffany lamps of stained glass, just to make the whole room look more elegant.

One of the desks faced the door directly. A stereotypical valley-girl sat behind it, wearing hip clothes and a plastic smile. She looked like the cardboard secretaries in dumb TV-series with her long, straight blonde hair, overdone make-up and the empty expression on her smooth, oval face – only that she was a vampire, too. Brian recognized her as one of the standard models from the stored drawings of Alain’s students. According to her name tag, she was called Harmony Kendall.

The other desk stood a little on the side, with a scholarly man seemingly in his mid-thirties sitting behind it. The man was completely bald, with distinctly long earlobes and old-fashioned eyeglasses. He was wearing a dark grey three-piece suit with a white shirt and a black tie, and looked like a college professor, down to the golden tie-pin and pocket watch chain. An undead college professor.

Which he actually had been, until some two hundred years back a rogue Nosferatu forcibly Embraced him in the basement of his own college. Having lost his former life, he remained a bookish person, and in time he became a name-worthy Nosferatu scholar and, more recently, the Primogen’s right hand. The others jokingly called him Four-Eyes, because of his glasses, and that was the only name he ever used among his kind.

He glanced up at Alain over the rim of said glasses, guessing correctly that the Toreador was looking for him and smiled vaguely. The point of a fang appeared for a moment, proving the rumours that Nosferatu weren’t able to assume completely human form. Brian glanced at his hands, saw the heavy talons on the ends of his fingers and wondered how difficult it could be to work on a keyboard with those.

“Can I help you?” Four-Eyes asked politely, with a very educated Boston accent.

“We’ve come to see Hawk,” Alain replied. “I’ve called earlier… Alain DeLaigle.”

He didn’t introduce Brian. A fledgling, still not presented to and accepted by the Conclave, didn’t count in Kindred terms. Officially, he didn’t even exist yet.

Four-Eyes consulted the termin-planner on his desk, nodded, and grabbed the phone receiver, hitting the intercom button.

“Visitor for Hawk,” he said simply. “Yes, the scheduled one. Good; I’ll tell him,” he hung up and looked at Alain. “Isis will be here in a moment to show you the way,” he said and returned to his work, ignoring them completely.
Isis turned out a fragile Hindu woman of indefinite age and exotic beauty – a true miracle among the Nosferatu – save for the fact that she was completely bald, too. Even the unnaturally long earlobes suited her. Brian was reminded of Persis Khambatta as the Deltan woman in the first Star Trek movie. She wore the traditional sari – a blood red one – several golden bracelets on her wrists and ankles, elaborate earrings and multiple strings of pearls around her long, graceful neck. The customary red spot was tattooed between her delicate brows. She moved with the timeless grace of a temple dancer, which she had been in her mortal life.

Folding her hands in the traditional Hindu gesture of greeting, she bowed to Alain.

“Namaste,” she said in Hindi, in a high, child-like voice. “Follow me, please. You are expected.”

She shepherded them into the elevator at the end of the office, closed the grid, and they rode the thing to the basement. It opened directly into a huge, shadowy room that was apparently study and library in one, filled with furniture made of dark, polished wood, hundreds of old books… and the lingering smell of fine, very expensive cigars. In a corner, a punching ball hung from the ceiling, which was a fairly strange contrast to the overall picture of old-fashioned elegance.

The Nosferatu Primogen, who now rose from a comfortable dark leather armchair, was a huge, intimidating black man with a bald head, a bulbous brow, elongated earlobes, large teeth, a short-cropped goatee and heavy talons, even in his near-human disguise. The Becoming of the Nosferatu, or so Brian had been told, was the most brutal one from all the Camarilla Clans, the Change deforming the once human body to a recognizable monster… although rumour said that Hawk hadn’t been much better-looking in his mortal days than he did now.

He’d once been a professional boxer, then a hired gun for any mob boss in Boston who wanted his services, then a somewhat reluctant help to an ex-cop and idealistic private investigator called Spenser. After the death of his mortal friend a couple of years earlier, he turned his back on human society for good and returned to his own kind – just in time to become the Nosferatu Primogen of LA after Cyrus’ failed princedom. Now he was one of the most feared vampires of the city, both as a former Enforcer of the Nosferatu Justicar and as a skilled alchemist.

Which was the very fact that Alain wanted to use for his advantage and for Brian’s protection.

“Alain,” the Nosferatu nodded his greeting. “It has been a long time.”

“Almost a century, give or take a few years,” Alain agreed. “I need your help, Hawk.”

“I never thought that this would be a social visit,” Hawk grinned, showing large, even teeth… and two wicked canines in the process. “People usually don’t socialize with us.” He didn’t seem to mind the fact terribly, and Alain knew better than to make cheap excuses. “So, who’s your problem?”

“Christopher,” Alain replied. “And Lorena.”

The hairless brow of the Nosferatu rose in amusement. “You’re about to join an exclusive club with rapidly increasing membership here, babe. Those two have become the problem of more people one would think it possible for someone not of the Sabbat.”

“Whit those two as allies, who needs the Sabbat?” Alain commented cynically.

“True enough,” Hawk said. “Now, have a seat and a glass of bloodwine and tell me about the nature of your problem.”

Alain accepted the offer. Isis brought bloodwine in crystal goblets, asked if she’d be needed later, and at Hawk’s negative answer retreated discretely. While Alain explained the problem, Brian tried
to guess just how big this underground apartment might be and how many of the Nosferatu might live there. He’d been told that Nosferatu, the eldest of all Clans and the closest to the primeval form of vampires, were solitary monsters. These here, though, seemed to have a small colony… and some of them, like Isis or Four-Eyes, weren’t even particularly ugly.

*They must be of Weak Blood,* Alain suggested through their link. *That might be the reason for the lack of some characteristic traits. Pay attention now, little one; being impolite to Hawk would be… unwise.*

Brian realized that his Sire was right and forced himself to listen to the conversation again. There was no way to tell what the Nosferatu was able to notice.

“Lorena might be a lasting annoyance, but she’s not a real danger,” Hawk said thoughtfully. “She’s mainly a thorn in Victor’s side, but Victor is old and shrewd enough to deal with her. Christopher, though… he’s the best example why the law forbids the Embracing of children – and rightly so. Every single one of these undead brats I’ve ever met had either turned mad early on or was evil beyond imagination.”

“So, what can we do against him?” Alain asked.

“I can’t kill him for you without a sound legal reason,” Hawk answered bluntly. “Although I must admit that I’m sorely tempted sometimes. But we’ve all sworn to live by the Rules of the Camarilla, and that means certain… restrictions.”

“Can we *find* a reason then?” Alain asked. Hawk shrugged.

“We can try. And we can make sure he knows we’re watching him. That will keep him in check for a while… until we find something we can use against him. Or he becomes tired of the game and leaves the city.”

“He won’t leave,” Alain said. “This is not just about the safety of my Childe. Christopher has a grudge against many of us – including the Prince who, in his opinion, is usurping his rightful place.”

“Angelus can take care of himself,” Hawk replied. “And I’ll let it known that Clan Nosferatu protects your progeny. That will keep the hired killers at bay.”

“I’m in your debt,” Alain said. “What is your price?”

“There’s nothing you could offer me,” Hawk answered. “I have everything I need – and what I don’t have yet, I can get without your help. However, keeping up law and order in LA is a great interest of mine, and you’re a useful ally in that… that’s enough.”

“You’ve always believed me,” Alain said. “Even when others thought I were with the Sabbat.”

“I watched you for a long time for my Justicar,” Hawk replied with a shrug. “I knew who you were and where you stood. And that’s why I’m gonna support you and your progeny – in the Conclave and outside of it, if necessary.”

He rose. Alain and Brian followed suit, recognizing the dismissal. The graceful Iris reappeared and escorted them off her Primogen’s haven. Once on the street again, Brian took a deep (albeit now unnecessary) breath.

“I know the guy’s on our side, but he definitely gives me the creeps,” he said. “I’m not that eager to meet him again. He’s every bit like the rumours about him… and more.”
“The Nosferatu don’t take sides,” Alain replied. “The only side they take is their own. If Hawk didn’t think me a useful ally to keep up the order of the Camarilla, he wouldn’t move a finger to help me protect you. You’ll be very smart to keep out of his way.”

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Before meeting with Michael in the comic store, Emmett had a commission to take care of. A commission entrusted to him by Edward Vignes, the unofficial representative of the handful Camarilla Ventrue in LA. While the real Ventrue power lay in Anarch hands – namely in those of Louis Fortier and his undead family – the few Camarilla types followed the Vignes, even though there were too few of them to have an actual Primogen.

For that reason, Emmett had to visit one of the elegant restaurants he’d only ever seen from the inside during his short, happy affair with the late George Shickel. Clad in a for him atypical, restrained way, Emmett entered the place with a slightly fluttering stomach. He felt uncertain in this milieu without George like a fish out of water.

“I’m looking for Horatio Ballard,” he told one of the snobbish waiters. “We’ve got a previous arrangement.”

The guy’s manners changed at once – this Ballard character had to be a regular here – and he led Emmett to a quiet table and the elegantly greying man sitting at it.

“Your visitor, Mr Ballard,” he murmured and vanished smoothly again.

Emmett saw with surprise that Horatio Ballard had a vague similarity to dear George, even if he was younger, barely fifty. In mortal years anyway. He wasn’t terribly old for a vampire, either – some hundred and twenty years in the Dark or so. He came from a well-respected bloodline, though, being the progeny of the late Prince of Chicago, and had excellent contacts to different cities through his numerous Brood siblings.

Aside from that, he was also the owner of the restaurant in which they were currently sitting, and one of the well-known, solid businessmen of Pittsburgh. For which reason Emmett had been sent to meet him… to test the waters, as Edward Vignes had said.

“Emmett Honeycutt, right?” he said, rising and shaking Emmett’s hand. “Edward Vignes has announced you. I understand that you’re the progeny of the Blount bloodline?”

“Exactly,” Emmett replied blithely and avoiding to reveal any details. “They’re with the Camarilla, just like the Vignes, and the Camarilla wants to extend its influence to the Pitts.”

“That’s nothing new,” Ballard said with a shrug, “but there have never been enough of us here. That’s why all my Childer and Brood sibs sought their luck in other cities – some of them in LA, by the way.”

“A strong presence can be built, given enough time,” Emmett chose his words carefully. “Perhaps some of your Brood would be willing to join you in a city where Kindred are scarcely present and positions within the Clan are still free to be taken.”

“Says he who’s left the city himself,” Ballard riposted dryly.

Emmett shrugged. “I could be persuaded to return, eventually,” he answered, batting his eyelashes prettily. “In forty years or so, when I’ve been safely forgotten, that is. And so are the others.”

Horatio Ballard looked at him intently.
“I feel an elaborate plan being forged behind all this small talk,” he finally said.

Emmett nodded. “And you’re right, of course. I don’t know the details myself – I’m barely more than a fledgling and was only entrusted with this… message because I can come home without raising any suspicions.”

“Does Edward have any particular suggestion about this?” Ballard asked. Emmett nodded again.

“Of course. The first step would be to strengthen the Ventrue presence in town. If our intel is correct, you still have two of your Brood-sibs here in the Pitts…”

“Joe Peterson and Lorraine Matthews,” Ballard supplied. “Joe is my driver and bodyguard and Lori my secretary… as far as the Kine are concerned.”

“But no Childer?” Emmett asked.

“One,” Ballard said, “but just a neonate. Barely a year in the Dark. He’s a lawyer – a good one – and works for the firm of his father.”

“That could lead to complications,” Emmett commented. Ballard shook his head.

“Not likely. The father has a terminal illness, won’t live longer than another six or eight months.”

“But the other lawyers in the firm…” Emmett said.

“One of the junior partners is a Toreador like yourself,” Ballard replied. “The rest of the employees can be replaced… or Embraced, if necessary. Why? Do you have a lawyer as a possible neonate for me?”

“Not a lawyer,” Emmett said with a sigh. “A book-keeper. But he’s not an easy case. He has… self-confidence issues. And a porn addiction. And he’s a recently healed Crystal Meth user.”

“Why would I wish to Embrace such a loser?” Ballard asked bluntly.

“Because all he needs is structure and guidance,” Emmett replied sharply. “He’s a good man, and he’s a wizard with numbers.”

“That alone doesn’t make someone good Ventrue material,” Ballard pointed out.

“Perhaps,” Emmett allowed. “But he’ll be needed later, and he’s needed here right now. We can’t take him to LA for months or years – he’s the only one of us who actually still lives in the Pitts, and we need him to keep things running until our return.”

“Who’s we?” Ballard asked. “I’ve never heard of you guys, so forgive me if I don’t really see the reason why I should become involved in your little scheme.”

“Does the name Brian Kinney ring a bell?” Emmett asked.

Ballard stared at him in surprise. “Kinney? The ad exec? The same one who first very nearly helped that brick-headed Stockwell to become mayor and then spent all his money to ruin his own campaign? The owner of Kinnetic?”

“The very same,” Emmett said.

“Well, I’ll be damned,” Ballard murmured. “So Kinney got Embraced, eh? I’m not surprised. The man was born Toreador; had here been any with balls enough to Embrace him, he’d have been one
of us for years. Who’s his Sire?”

“Alain DeLaigle.”

“Hmmm,” Ballard was obviously searching his memory. “I’ve heard about him. Unknown bloodline, but an old and strong one. A good choice, I’d say. And Camarilla to the bones, despite the evil rumours about him. Oh, this makes so much more sense now!”

“Does it?” Emmett asked in honest surprise; he hadn’t been told the detailed plans for the future, and, to be honest, he didn’t really care. Conspirations were not exactly his thing.

Ballard nodded. “Oh, yes. Tell Edward Vignes that I’m not adverse to their plans. Unlike my Sire, I never had the ambition to become Prince. I’ll cooperate. Now, tell me more about this… candidate of yours. Assuming that I’m willing to consider Embracing him – what would be the best approach?”

Emmett thought about it for a moment – then he broke into a broad grin.

“Seduce him,” he replied.

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Michael didn’t know what he’d expected from the meeting with Lindz and Melanie… not really. But he most certainly hadn’t expected it to take place within the respectable walls of Fallin & Fallin, one of Pittsburgh’s most renowned private law firms. And he definitely hadn’t been prepared for being represented by said law firm’s junior partner and golden boy, Nick Fallin himself. In fact, he hadn’t been aware of having a legal representative at all.

He told so, studiously ignoring the unbelieving looks of Lindz and Melanie.

“Actually, I don’t represent you,” the handsome blond lawyer with the permanently troubled expression on his face said matter-of-factly. “I represent your unborn child; a task assigned to me by Legal Services of Pittsburgh.”

“I seriously doubt that Legal Services could afford to hire someone from Fallin & Fallin,” Melanie commented dryly.

“Under normal circumstances you’d be right, of course,” Fallin Jr agreed. “Accidentally, though, I also work for Legal Services.”

“Oh, right, I remember now,” Melanie’s expression was positively smug. “You’ve been sentenced to fifteen hundred hours of social work for drug abuse, right?”

“Ya,” Fallin Jr replied with an indifferent shrug, “but that was years ago. I found out during that time that I actually like the work, so I still do it in my spare time. I’d warn you not to underestimate me, Ms Marcus. I happen to be very good at what I do.”

“I still can’t understand why Legal Services would want to assign one of their lawyers to our case!” Lindsey clearly didn’t like the situation – and she was very nervous, too.

“We’ve been aware of your… family situation for years,” Fallin explained, “but we’ve only learned about the way you’ve been trying to shut the natural fathers of your children out of their life a short time ago.”

“Oh, great!” Melanie rolled her eyes in disgust. “The vengeance of Brian Kinney has come upon us. I’m quaking with fear.”
“Not exactly,” Fallin corrected. “We’ve learned about it from one of our clients – a certain James H. Montgomery.”

“Hunter?” Michael exclaimed. “What has the little brat done again?”

“No need to worry, Mr. Novotny,” the lawyer gave him an unexpected smile that could have charmed off the pants of militant lesbians – present company excluded, of course. “Your ward is all right. He wanted a legal insurance that his mother won’t be able to come any closer to him than half a mile, that’s all. But he’s told us how the two ladies wanted you to sign the papers that would allow you no rights whatsoever in your child’s life… just as they’ve done it with Mr. Kinney, while still cheerfully accepting his money. I’m here to prevent that from happening.”

“Does Legal Services fear that we won’t be able to raise our children between the two of us?” Melanie demanded.

“That’s not the point, although you must admit that your record isn’t exactly spotless in that area,” Nick Fallin said. “The point is, Mr. Novotny wants to contribute. He wants to have a role in his child’s life. And the child has a right to his or her father, if said father is available and willing. It’s that simple, and you know it as well as I do.”

The pinched face of Melanie made it clear that yeah, she had known it all the time. She and Lindsey had just hoped that they could keep that fact from Michael – and keep the baby for themselves.

Things developed quickly from that point on. Melanie might have been a shark in he courtroom but was still no match for someone with Nick Fallin’s talent and experience. Within two hours, the parental contract was signed, everything worked out neatly, and Michael could lean back and wait for his child to be born. Which was only a matter of weeks by now.

“Not that I’m not grateful,” he said to Fallin Jr, after the lezzies had left, “but who’s really hired you to do this?”

The young lawyer gave him another one of that radiant smiles.

“Well, a good friend of me got a phone call from someone in LA, and since I owed the man a favour, I accepted the assignment,” he said. “But it was my pleasure anyway. You’ll make a good father, I’m sure about it.”

“How can you know?” Michael asked doubtfully. “You haven’t even met me before.”

“I talked to people who know you,” Nick Fallin replied. “Besides, you wouldn’t fight for your parental rights so hard if you weren’t interested in your child.”

“Erm…” Emmett, who’d been uncharacteristically quiet the whole time, raised a hand tentatively. “Tell me if I’m wrong, but does that friend of yours happen to be called Horatio Ballard?”

“As a matter of fact… yes, he does,” Nick Fallin grinned at him and left.

“You’re hopeless,” Michael laughed.
“And you love me for it… you all do,” Emmett beamed at him, and Michael couldn’t help but agree, because it was the truth.

The ringing of Emmett’s cell phone interrupted their teasing. Em picked it up.

“Emmett Honeycutt… oh, Victor, hello! What’s news? What? When? Oh… that’s an awfully short time to get a decent plane, you know. Nah, I can do it, of course, but… I see. Yep, I’ll be there on time. Bye, Victor.”

He hung up, pocketed his cell phone and gave Michael a troubled glance.

“Well, sweetie, we’re having a problem,” he said glumly. “Victor needs me back in LA – preferably yesterday, or the day before.”

“Is something wrong?” Michael asked worriedly. Emmett waved off his concerns.

“On the contrary. A project we had been waiting for for quite some time has emerged sooner than expected… and I’ve got a binding contract with Victor’s firm.”

Michael nodded in understanding. “You must go, Em. We both know what those sharks in Hollywood are like.”

“Yeah, but will you be all right here, alone?” Emmett asked doubtfully.

Michael shrugged. “I’m legally secured now, and the birth can be expected any time. When I stay in the loft, there’s little chance to run into Mum too often.”

“But your are coming back to LA, aren’t you?” Emmett asked. Michael nodded.

“Don’t worry,” he replied. “There’s not much left for me in The Pitts, save that baby. I’ll come as soon as it’s safely settled. I don’t want to give up my child, but I don’t give up my career, either. That’s what airplanes are for.”

“Call me when you’ve got that flight ticket,” Emmett said sternly. “I’ll come and fetch you at the airport – and take you straight to your new home.”

“That’s a deal,” Michael said with a faint smile. “Take care, Emmett… and don’t worry about me. I’m a big boy.”

“That,” Emmett declared sourly, “is one of the infamous Last Words, you know. I’ll call you as soon as I’ve arrived in LA.”

“Do that,” Michael agreed, “and good luck with the new project.”

“Good luck with the baby,” Emmett replied, before going on the phone to find the next night flight to LA.
Truth & Consequences

Chapter Summary

Michael finally gets what he's always wanted - but things are never as simple as they seem. Meanwhile in Pittsburgh, Ted's fate is being decided.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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TRUTH & CONSEQUENCES, Part 1

Michael arrived to the LA airport at 19.35, but at this time of the year there was still bright sunshine – aside from the usual smog covering the town, of course. He’d just spent three weeks in Pittsburgh, witnessing the birth of Jenny Rebecca, Melanie’s daughter. His daughter. He’d spent a lot of time in his store, enjoying the reunion with his most faithful customers. Signed a lot of Rage comics and merchandise articles. Visited some old friends.

He’d even reached some sort of truce with his mother, thanks to Carl Horvath, although Debbie still wasn’t quite willing to forget – or forgive – everything that had been said on Ben’s death watch. Unsurprisingly, Lindsay and Melanie had been on Debbie’s side. They still couldn’t forgive Brian for taking Michael with him to LA, instead of trying his utmost to get Justin back. But at least there hadn’t been any screaming and name-calling this time when Michael left again.

The way back to LA had been long and boring without Emmett’s witty presence. Michael only hoped that one day he’d be told what his friends were actually doing in LA when he wasn’t with them. Being left out like that distressed him greatly, especially as he didn’t have anyone else to turn to for comfort and company.

He’d have tried to talk Ted into spending his holiday in LA. But for the first time in a long while, Ted seemed so happy with his new best friend that Michael didn’t want to separate them, not even for a short period. With Ted’s track record, the whole thing might not last long anyway. At least Horatio Ballard, a handsome, well-educated and successful businessman in his late forties, was a good match for Ted, both in age and interests.

Michael couldn’t know, of course, that Ted’s becoming fast friends with Ballard had been anything but an accident. In fact, it had been initiated by Edward Vignes, in order to extend the Camarilla’s influence to Pittsburgh. Horatio Ballard was an 8th generation Ventrue, some hundred and seventy years old, and he had some brood siblings and a grand-Childe in LA. The latter one, David Geduld, was a powerful Anarch, but on friendly terms with the Camarilla and didn’t mind to help building contacts with his grand-Sire.

As the oldest, most influential Ventrue in Pittsburgh, Horatio Ballard could count on becoming the Clan Primogen there, should the town’s undead population ever grow large enough to require a Prince. As Clan Ventrue usually was the backbone of the Camarilla, Ballard needed to build a brood in Pittsburgh first, though. Edward Vignes had suggested Ted as the first candidate, as the LA faction wanted people who’d be loyal to Brian. They had decades to plan this and build their base slowly, before sending Brian home to take over.
But Michael didn’t know this, of course – neither did Brian yet, for that matter – so he was just happy that Ted had finally found someone who seemed to really value him. He only hoped that this time Ted wouldn’t screw it up with something stupid.

Leaving the airport, Michael headed for the parking lot. Before leaving for LA, Emmett had promised to bring his car back in time, so that he wouldn’t need to take a taxi. But what he saw instead of his own compact navy-blue Metro was Brian’s Corvette – and Brian himself, leaning against the car, smoking a cigarette… and smiling.

Spotting Michael, he threw away his cigarette and came to great him in the way he’d always done: with a strange mix of gentleness and arrogance.

“Hello Mikey,” he said. “About fucking time you came back.”

“Look who’s talking,” Michael replied snappishly. “Has your master let you off the leash for today or what?”

“Yeah,” Brian said with a slow grin. “I’m my own man again. And you’re a father. So, feel like celebrating?”

“Not really,” Michael answered. “I’m jet-lagged and bored and I don’t even know where I live right now. Emmett was supposed to leave me the car with address, key and a route description here.”

“I’ve persuaded him to leave me here instead,” Brian said. He leaned forward and touched foreheads with Michael. “C’mon, Mikey, I’ll drive you home.”

The long-missed, familiar gesture began to crumble Michael’s best intentions to keep Brian at arm’s length for a while. But he wasn’t going to give in that easily again.

“My home,” he clarified. “Not yours and Alain’s.”

Brian nodded. “If that’s what you want, yeah.”

“Would I have said it otherwise?” Michael snapped, more than a little irritated. “Now, are we gonna leave or do I have to call Emmett first and a taxi second?”

“Don’t bite my head off,” Brian said defensively, his joy visibly dimmed. But Michael couldn’t care less.

“Brian, I’m tired,” he said testily. “I’ve been fighting with Ma and the lezzies all the time and honestly, I’m in no mood for your mind games. I want to go home, have a bath and go to bed. Can we just do that?”

“Sure,” Brian shrugged and opened the car on the passenger’s side. “Get in, I’ll drive.”

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The new place was every bit as gorgeous as Emmett had described it through the phone. It wasn’t exactly in the Marina, but close enough to see the beach from the large balcony, without being bothered by the noise. The spacious living room offered enough room for a dozen people to have a party, while the generous bedrooms had windows to the North – an important factor for undead residents, although Michael still had a long way to go before realizing the reason. The bathroom had a tube with Jacuzzi and a separate shower cabin. Only the kitchen was way too small, separated from the living room by a tall counter – which was the reason why they had got the place for such a relatively low rent. But Michael didn’t really mind. Cooking wasn’t one of his personal hobbies anyway.
The vampire-friendly aspects of the flat were completely lost on him, of course – although Brian hoped the day when he’d learn to appreciate it, will come, in the not too far future – but he did find it cozy and home-y, especially his own bedroom. His belongings had already been transferred there from Alain’s house and arranged the same way they used to be. Including the large cardboard image of Captain Astro in full fly right above the bed, and the action figures on a shelf.

He liked it. It was as if he’d regained a part of his childhood, after having to accommodate to partners with a lot more snobbish tastes. Most people would probably have said “refined”, but Michael was not in a particularly forgiving state of mind. Snobbery was snobbery, and both David and Ben had been fucking snobs. In their own way, they both had looked down at him – for not having gone to college, for his interest in comic books, for his simple tastes in food, clothes and movies… for a number of other reasons he didn’t feel up to facing right now. They both said they loved him, but in the end, they just wanted to fuck him. And to possess him, so that they could mould him according to their own tastes.

“A penny for your thoughts, Mikey?” Brian’s quiet voice awoke him from his brooding. He shook his head.

“Nothing terribly interesting.”

Brian’s face darkened for a moment. Was it anger? Or sorrow? It was hard to tell, and Michael didn’t want to guess. He didn’t want to put up with Brian’s shit any longer.

“Are you still mad at me?” Brian asked. “I told you how sorry I was that the recent weeks weren’t exactly what you might have hoped for, but I really didn’t have much room to make any move under the given circumstances. I do have that freedom now, though.” He waited for a moment; then, as Michael didn’t answer, he added with a certain urgency. “Mikey, talk to me! What is it that you want?”

In that unexpected moment of perfect clarity, Michael realized his chance – and, for the first time in his life, he actually seized it.

“I don’t want that much,” he replied with a brittle smile. “Just what every other man in Pittsburgh can have… or has already had. To be fucked by the great Brian Kinney.”

The bluntness of his answer shocked Brian for a moment. Granted, there had always been a certain tension between them, but they never spoke about it. Not with such brutal honesty.

“Mikey, we’ve discussed this before,” he said. “You’ve always wanted more than I’d ever be able to give.”

“No,” Michael said. “We haven’t discussed it. You have discussed it, decided that it was a bad idea and declared that we won’t do it. You wanted to keep me on your beck and call, because that’s what friends are for, in your opinion. You never asked me what I wanted.”

“That’s not true, Mikey,” Brian protested, more than a little hurt. “I’ve offered you, more than once…”

“Yeah, whenever you were stone drunk, high like a kite, or wanted to hurt me,” Michael interrupted. “It was never genuine, and you know that.”

“You’re wrong,” Brian said quietly. “It was always genuine. I just never had the courage to speak up, unless I was stone drunk or high like a kite.”

“Then prove it!” Michael demanded.
“Now?” Brian asked in surprise. “Just like that? Out of the blue?”

“That’s how you always do it, isn’t it?” Michael riposted. “And you’re neither drunk nor high right now. I want you now… and if you’re not willing to give me at least as much as you were always eager to give any trick in The Pitts, you can just fuck off my life. I’ll not be denied any longer, Bri. This game has gone on for too long already.”

Brian thought for a moment, but he didn’t really have many choices. Michael had taken over the ruling of the game (which, in itself, was amazing enough), and he had to adapt… or lose his friend (and long-time lust object) for good. Michael was not joking, that much was very clear.

“All right, Mikey,” he said. “Have it your way. But don’t blame me if the results don’t meet your expectations. I’m what I am… nothing less, nothing more.”

“And I am old enough to make my own mistakes and have my own regrets,” Michael replied. “Try not to disappoint me. You’re Brian Kinney, for fuck’s sake – that should be enough for everyone.”

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At the same time, back in Pittsburgh, Horatio Ballard and his undead associates were discussing Clan politics. Meant were his Brood siblings, Joe Peterson and Lorraine Matthews, his youngest Childe, Nick Falin, the representative of the local Brujah Alwin Masterson, who happened to be Nick’s boss at Legal Services, and Jonas Mooney, a Toreador, who worked for Falin & Falin, the law firm of Nick’s father.

Save from Masterson, who was Anarch to the bones, all welcomed he possibility of Camarilla presence in the town that had been ignored by both sides due to the way too minor Kindred presence. Since even Masterson preferred the Camarilla to the Sabbat, however, he, too, promised his tentative cooperation.

No one of them had any objection against the person of Brian Kinney as the prospective Prince of the City. The wonderfully ruthless and courageous coup against Stockwell clearly showed Kinney’s potential, and his financial success was a proof that he would, one day, become a strong leader for the undead community – given the right tutelage.

“He is still very young,” Ballard said, “both in mortal and Kindred terms. He has much to learn about how both societies work. But he has time. He won’t be able to return for decades yet; not until most of those who knew him as a young man have died.”

“Considering the fact that that means the entire male population of Pittsburgh, that can take decades,” the Brujah commented cynically.

“He will need those decades, in order to grow in knowledge and strength,” Lorraine replied. “Not even a city with such an small Kindred population would accept a fledgling Prince. If I understand Horatio correctly, it will be our job to prepare the city for the taking. Is that right?”

Ballard nodded. “I’ll see if I can cajole our surviving Brood sibs to join us. We need more of our kind here.”

“Somehow I doubt that the Jacksons would be willing to leave LA for our sake,” Lorraine said. “They’ve established themselves as one of the lead street gangs – Pittsburgh would be a number too small for them.”

“Besides, they’re Anarch,” Joe Peterson pointed out. “We’re supposed to strengthen the Camarilla here. What about Tommy Hinds, though? He still lives in the States, and he has spent nearly a
“I thought we were supposed to make new Childer,” the Brujah said with a frown.

“That’s correct,” Ballard replied. “But we can’t have a city filled with fledglings alone. We need at least a few Elders, to establish a proper hierarchy.”

“What about this Schmidt character the LA crowd wants you to Embrace?” Nick asked. His Sire sighed.

“He is… well, pitiful would be the right word. I just hope our Blood will help him to grow a backbone; otherwise I might be tempted to kill him as a total failure. He’ll need a lot of training to be of any use, and I probably won’t get around Blood Binding him.”

“Why do they want to keep him if he’s such a loser?” the Brujah asked in bewilderment.

“Oh, he’s very creative and reliable in his day job,” Ballard answered. “They need him for financial reasons. Besides, they seem to like him, despite his less than endearing qualities. I just wish they’d asked someone else to Embrace him.”

“You don’t have to do it, you know,” the Brujah reminded him. Ballard sighed.

“Unfortunately, I do. Cooperating with these people means that a lot of very old money will be infused into my business. Even if we mostly deal with the Camarilla in LA, they are in association with such powerful Anarchs as Louis Fortier, who, as I’m sure you know, practically owns the Bank of Lyon. Or the Viscontis, who own several banks in Italy. All they want from me is to make a completely inadequate Childe – well, inadequate, unless we want to take over the porn industry.”

Nick Fallin laughed, displaying his considerable charms that he usually hid behind his troubled mien.

“Oh, I remember!” he said. “Was he not the owner of that low-style gay porn site, what was it called? Jerkatwork.com?”

“The same one,” Ballard nodded glumly. “I’m all for making money, but I’m a monster of the old school; I like to keep up a certain standard.”

“Well, at least he likes opera, too,” Nick replied blithely. “He never misses a premiere, it’s said. And he’s member of various libraries and book clubs. He can’t be so bad.”

“Trust me: he is,” Ballard replied. “I’ll have to lead him with an iron fist if I want him to survive among us. And frankly, I don’t feel inclined to play Leather Daddy. It’s not my style.”

“I can help you out with that,” Petersen, a large, balding Viking type in his late thirties, offered with a feral grin. Ballard rolled his eyes.

“Don’t temp me, Joe! It’s hard enough as it is,” he said.

“I don’t understand why would they not want to bring over Kinney’s assistant instead,” Nick said. “That Cynthia whatshername. She’s pretty enough, smart enough for two, and as tough as nails. She would make an excellent Ventrue.”

“Perhaps they didn’t think beyond the small circle of Kinney’s personal friends,” Lorraine shrugged. “Or perhaps they haven’t even heard of her. But we don’t have to wait for a wink from LA, do we? As long as the city doesn’t have a Prince, we can Embrace whomever we damn will.”
Ballard shook his head. “I can’t. Not right now. I’ve just made Nick a year ago, and have to concentrate on this Schmidt, which is painful enough. He tries to get into my pants all the time, and I won’t be able to feed him this platonic friendship thing for too long."

“Then Embrace him now,” the Brujah suggested bluntly. “Drain him, and when he’s almost dead, offer him unlife. Then put him under a Blood Bond at once; that way, he’ll be forced to obey you, no matter what. Isn’t that the Ventrue way?”

“Not the Camarilla way, I’m afraid,” Ballard sighed.

“If you weren’t the only male vampire on this planet who’s not into guys, it could make things so much easier,” Peterson grinned. “You could just fuck him into oblivion, and he’d bare his throat for you happily.”

“I can’t help it if it’s not in my nature,” Ballard declared, a bit annoyed. “You know I’m an exception among our kind. If I had it in me, the Change would have brought it forth. It has not. So, you can just accept that I’m not wired that way and leave me alone with my old-fashioned ways.”

“You can give him to Joe, once you’ve Embraced him,” Lorraine suggested. “He’d train him properly… in everything.”

“No doubt,” Ballard replied dryly. Peterson rolled his eyes.

“Oh, c’mon, Horatio, you know I won’t harm him. And I’d make a much better regnant than you could ever hope to become.”

“That’s true,” Ballard admitted. “Let me think about it. In the meantime, Lorraine’s suggestion concerning this Cynthia does have its merits,” he looked at his Childe. “I’ll make her your project, Nick. Learn everything about her. Pursue her. Seduce her. When she’s ready, I’ll step in and Embrace her.”

Nick Falin nodded. Unlike in his mortal days, the thought to offer to do the task himself didn’t even occur to him. He was still a fledgling, a baby in vampire terms, far from being fit to make a Childe. His Sire was a hundred and eighty; it was the privilege of the Elders to make Childers.

“Lorraine should befriend her first,” he said. “We then can work on her in tandem, to bring her down from the zero calory diet and from overdoing the cosmetics. In a year or so, she could become a natural beauty again, who looks like a woman instead of a starved rat. It would do her a wealth of good.”

Ballard nodded in agreement. He was a gentleman of the early 19th century, and as such, he preferred women in their more… natural state. It surprised him a bit that Nick would share his preferences, though.

“Very well then,” he said, “let’s do it. But what about the other Clans in the city? How well are they represented?”

“All we have are a handful of Anarchs,” the Brujah replied.

“Clan Toreador isn’t much better off,” Jonas Mooney added. “Although we do have a few Camarilla types in the upper class; mostly in the club scene and in entertainment.”

“There is a band of City Gangrel near the Liberty Avenue,” the Brujah continued, “led by a certain Cody Bell. They’ve been Embraced by some unknown Anarch a year or so ago, and then abandoned, as it is custom with the Gangrel.”
“Cody Bell?” Nick frowned. “You mean the little idiot who founded the ‘Pink Posse’, supposedly to keep the queers of Liberty Avenue safe?”

“Afraid so,” the Brujah replied. “We’ll have to deal with them, sooner or later. They’re an instabilizing factor; things can get out of hand quickly around them. And that’s why we’ll need someone within the police.”

“I hope nobody suggests Embracing Stockwell!” Lorraine shuddered.

Masterman shook his shaggy head. “Nah, we need someone who’s more… low-key. A detective, perhaps. Or a uniformed cop in the right position.”

“That would be doable,” Ballard said thoughtfully. “Lawrence has awakened from his torpor a few days ago. We can fake the right sort of papers and plant him in the police, as nobody knows him in town.”

“Lawrence?” Lorraine repeated in shock. The natural grandson – and favourite Childe – of Horatio Ballard was thought to be killed in 1993, in the fight for Chicago, which the Camarilla had lost, big time. “I thought he was dead.”

“So did I,” Ballard replied. “Seems we were both mistaken. He apparently lay in torpor in the Kindred clinic in LA all these years and has just regained consciousness. He’ll come here as soon as he’s strong enough to travel.”

“That’s unexpected good news,” Peterson said. “Lawrence has always been a strong and reliable one. But how do you intend to fake the necessary papers? Unfortunately, we don’t have any Nosferatu in town to do the deed.”

“Our… associates in LA are going to lay the paper trail,” Ballard explained. “Joaquin Murieta will create a suitable background within the LAPD, and Four-Eyes, the Nosferatu scholar, will do the rest.”

“That’s all well and nice for you,” the Brujah said, “but what about the other Clans in town. Granted, we are practically Anarch, but you’ll need us if you want to keep the Gangrel vermin under control. What about strengthening the Toreador and the Brujah presence, too?”

“That will be necessary,” Ballard agreed. “I would suggest, though, that in the absence of a Prince, we discuss potential candidates among ourselves for a while. We must present a united front, after all.”

The Toreador agreed. Masterman mulled it over for a moment, then nodded.

“If it’s mutual, then I can live with it,” he declared.

“Good,” Ballard said. “I’ll inform Edward Vignes that things are on their way. The details only concern us.”

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Michael awoke in the middle of the night and felt… different, although he could not guess why. The pleasant soreness after a long, hard fuck – well, more like an entire series of long, hard fucks – was nothing new. After all, one of Ben’s personal quirks had been to prove his physical fitness by sex marathons, and he had been a big boy… in all departments.

The pliant weight of Brian pressed against him was nothing new, either. They had slept in the same bed countless times, usually when Brian had been terribly upset by that abusive bastard of a father.
and needed comfort desperately.Granted,they usually hadn’t slept together naked.But that mere fact would not make Michael nervous.He’d asked for it,hadn’t he? Asked? He’d demanded,blackmailed,threatened,had fucking fought for the chance to finally get naked with Brian,after all those years of waiting and yearning.

And,after twenty years,he’d actually got what he’d always longed for.And it had been better than he could have imagined.He was sure that he still had that ‘fucked by an angel’ expression on his face,and it wouldn’t have surprised him if he found out that he was actually glowing in the dark.

Brian wasn’t a legend for nothing.He rose (heh, heh!) to the challenge to make his reputation a well-deserved one,and it had been obvious that he was using all his considerable skills to ensnare Michael.Michael snorted to himself.As if it would be necessary! He readily admitted that after twenty-some years,he was sold and conquered anew.

So,what was wrong?

With infinite care,he rolled Brian onto his back,wondering briefly why he would be a little cool to the touch.He had decades-long practice in handling a sleeping Brian without waking him up.The pliant body rolled under his hand easily,and Michael indulged in the pleasure of admiring the beauty of his sleeping best friend for a few moments.It was a sight to behold indeed…but something was different.

Michael’s eyes wandered from Brian’s curiously still face to the smooth expanse of his chest…and he froze.Now he realized what had been wrong all the time.

Brian was not breathing!

Chapter End Notes

I’m sure that everyone recognized the borrowed characters from "The Guardian".Horatio Ballard and his undead family are game characters,but I’ve gave them a slight twist,as usual.
Truth & Consequences, Part 2

Chapter Summary

Michael finally gets what he's always wanted - but things are never as simple as they seem. They have to reveal him everything, offering him the usual choices, but Michael is not in his right mind to choose just yet. So, this being LA, they give him time to think about it.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

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TRUTH & CONSEQUENCES, Part 2

Emmett was engaged in some definitely decadent activities – decadent even in his own terms – with Ash Rivers, when his cell phone rang. With a sigh, he reached out of the opulent bathtub and picked up the phone. To his surprise, it was Michael – a Michael breaking down in hysterics.

“Oh, God, Emmett, he’s not breathing!” he wailed. “What am I supposed to do?”

“Calm down, sweetie,” Emmett tried to soothe his own nerves. “Who’s not breathing?”

“Brian, who else?” Michael sobbed. “We’ve… we’ve finally done it, Em, we were at it half the night, and when I woke up he fucking wasn’t breathing, and he was… he was so cool to the touch…”

Emmett suppressed the urge to say ‘as he’s supposed to be’, and tried to keep Michael talking to him, in the hope that Brian would wake up and do something, when he’d made such a stupid mistake.

Which was a strange thing in itself. Brian had always been a light sleeper, even in his mortal days, unless he was very, very drunk, or stoned, or – or with Michael! Of course! Emmett mentally slapped himself. Only with Michael would Brian lower his defences so far that he could sleep through even Michael’s wailing.

Wait a minute! What had Michael just said? That he and Brian… half the night… Ooh, that was definitely not a good thing!

Under normal circumstances, Emmett would have loved to hear the story of their first night together, in all its gloriously dirty details. He was a perv, after all, and proud of it. But having a fledgling vampire alone with a clueless mortal, after some serious physical activity, and Brian had been out in the sunlight in the previous afternoon… nonononono, that was not good, not good at all!

“Listen to me, sweetie,” he interrupted Michael, trying to speak as calmly as he could, despite his own rising panic. “I’ll be there with you, as soon as possible. Now, I want you to leave the flat at once, lock the door behind you, and wait for me in that cocktail bar on the opposite side of the street. Do you understand me?”

“But Em, Brian… he needs help…” Michael protested.
“No, he doesn’t,” Emmett interrupted him again. “But you will, if you don’t get away from there, now!”

“What…?”

“Michael, I don’t have the time to explain… you don’t have the time. Just get the hell out of there, and make sure you’ll have people around you. Lots of people. I’ll tell you everything, just leave, please!”

“But…”

“No buts, Michael. I’m deadly serious. Promise me that you’ll do what I told you to do.”

“I promise, but…”

“Later. I’m leaving now… and so should you. Run!” With that, Emmett hung up, just to hit Alain’s number on the speed-dial, praying that the older vampire would have the cell phone on him.

To his eternal relief, Alain picked up the phone after the second ring.

“Emmett?” he asked in surprise. “Is something wrong?”

“Afraid so,” Emmett mentally thanked the genius who’d provided cell phones with displays; it made lengthy introductions unnecessary. “How fast can you get to my place?”

“Depends on the nature of the emergency,” Alain replied. “How bad is it?”

“Michael thinks Brian is dead,” Emmett summarized the problem. “ Obviously, Brian is seeping so deeply that not even Michael’s screaming at me through the phone has waken him… so far. But he will wake up, soon – and he’ll be hungry.”

“I’ll fly,” Alain decided, once again demonstrating his unparalleled ability to deal with first things first. “Have you told Michael to leave?”

“I have,” Emmett said, “but I’m not sure he’ll listen.”

“All right; I’ll meet you there. Hurry up!” Without wasting any more time, Alain hung up.

Emmett climbed out of the bathtub in haste, to get dressed and on his way home without further delay.

Emmett’s strange reaction had freaked the shit out of Michael, to be honest. What was wrong with Em anyway? Brian wasn’t breathing, he was probably dead, and Emmett was worried about Michael? That didn’t make any sense.

On the other hand, Emmett had been there with Brian, ever since they’d left the Pitts together. He knew more about the things that happened behind the scenes. And he had sounded seriously worried, which didn’t help to calm down Michael’s nerves a bit. For all his nelly breeziness, Emmett wasn’t one to panic easily. Yet he had sounded definitely panicking in the phone.

Something was very, very wrong with the whole situation.

Usually, Michael wasn’t prone to abrupt decisions – well, save that one time when he’d run away with Hunter – yet right now, he had the urgent wish to be somewhere else. Preferably far, far away. Emmett had told him to run, and all his instincts that had helped him to survive in a still fairly
homophobic society were screaming at him to do just that. But he couldn’t simply leave, without taking a last, hard look at Brian. If these people were as good at covering their tracks as he believed them to be, he might not have another chance.

Yeah, it was probably foolish, but Michael had never left Brian behind before, no matter what. He would not begin with it now. Even if going back to the bedroom was as stupid an idea as Emmett’s panicky tone had suggested.

However, the decision was taken off his hand, as the closed (though still not locked) bedroom door was torn out of its hinges as if flown away by some unknown force of nature, and thrown across the living room like some dried autumn leaf. And standing there in the doorway was Brian, shirtless but wearing his expensive Fortier suit on his bare body, looking like… like nothing Michael had ever seen before, although he’d seen Brian in all possible degrees of undressed state.

It was Brian – and yet it was not. As if illuminated by some harsh, blue light, he seemed paler than ever, his beautiful features angular and hard, mirroring some savage need Michael could not even begin to understand. His hands were curled to fists, so tightly that blood was seeping from under his fingernails where they were pressed into his palm. He breathed harshly and laboured through his half-open mouth… and two long, sharp canines like those of a dog or some other large predator, were clearly visible behind his curled-back lips.

Michael felt fresh panic rising from the pit of his stomach. What sort of drugs was Brian on? First he’d stopped breathing, and now, after he’d come by, he was snarling like some mindless beast. And what was that, that business with the… the fangs? People often teased Michael about his sharp, slightly elongated eye-teeth, calling him a vampire, but his “fangs” were nothing compared with the ones Brian was displaying right now.

“Bri,” he tried shakily. “What’s happening to you?”

His voice seemed to wake Brian from his fugue. He blinked a few times, looked from Michael to the door now lying on the living room floor, and groaned.

“Mikey,” he said through clenched teeth, “get out of here! Now, before it’s too late!”

“Too late for what?” Michael asked in confusion. “Are you on some new shit again, or whatnot?”

“Actually, it’s rather old shit,” Brian replied. “For fuck’s sake, Mikey, get out! I don’t know how long I’m gonna last, and I really don’t wanna hurt you!”

“Hurt me?” Michael was seriously panicking by now, which was unfortunate, because panic tended to lame him, instead of inspiring him to any useful action.

Of course, Brian gnashing his teeth – including the long and pointy canines – and becoming silver-eyed, didn’t help things. And was that an inhuman growl coming from deep his throat?

For the first time in twenty years, Michael was scared shitless of his best friend. He actually feared for his life. Brian, the old Brian he’d used to know, would never harm him (even though he had hit him once, in a fit of outrage). But this… this creature was not Brian; not entirely. Hell, he didn’t even look entirely human! What sort of drug could cause such frightening changes?

For the rest of his life – and, although he didn’t know it yet, that was going to be a very long time – Michael would ask himself again and again whether Brian would have killed him in that terrible moment or not. Whether he would have had the strength to withstand the Beast roaring with hunger inside him. He always hoped that the answer would have been ’yes’, but he could never be entirely
Well, at the very least Brian was trying.

Luckily for them both, the test that Brian might or might not have failed never came to its extreme. When Michael had already given up hope, a small, dark… something, by the shape of it some kind of bird, swooped in through an open window. And in the next moment Michael readily admitted having gone mad, because the bird somersaulted in mid-flight, and when it hit ground, it wasn’t a bird anymore, but Alain DeLaigle in person. An apparently royally pissed Alain DeLaigle, sporting the same set of silver eyes and elongated canines as Brian.

From that moment on, things began to take a really weird turn, and Michael’s brain simply shut down, unwilling – or probably unable – to try understanding things that denied simple human comprehension. Alain grabbed Brian’s arm (and Michael noticed with morbid fascination that the artist’s otherwise well-manicured fingers were now sporting long, curved talons that cut deeply into Brian’s flesh) and stared into Brian’s eyes as a snake would stare at a bird it wanted to devour.

Even the effect seemed to be the same. As if under a spell, Brian seemed to calm down, although his eyes remained silvery, and his canines did not retreat. His fist loosened, and Michael noticed the talons on the end of his fingers as well. His palms were bloody, where those sharp things had been pressed against them.

“It’s all right, Childe,” Alain said in a low, almost hypnotic voice. “You can feed in a moment. Do you think I can let go of you now?”

Child? Why was he calling Brian a child? Wasn’t Brian the older one of them? Or is that some kind of weird ritual between the two of them? Some kind of role-playing?

Brian nodded, though the gesture was still a bit frantic. Alain let go of him, ready to grab him again if necessary. Then, to Michael’s honest shock, he drew a heavy talon across his own wrist and offered the bleeding cut to Brian.

“Here, Childe,” he said. “Feed and find yourself again.”

Michael watched, swaying between horror and awe, as Brian grabbed Alain’s bleeding wrist with both hands (talons fully extended now), brought it to his mouth, latched onto the small wound and began to slurp the upswelling blood. Alain didn’t seem to mind. In fact, the way he threw his head back in ecstasy spoke of a pleasant experience. Still, Michael had the vague feeling that he might become sick.

What sort of weird practices do these two indulge in?

Alain’s eyes opened again and turned to him, burning with an unholy silver gleam.

“Do you want to give it a try?” the artist asked in a low, seductive voice.

Michael did an involuntary step backwards.

“I don’t know what weird shit you guys are on, and I don’t even want to know,” he said, his voice acquiring a slightly hysterical overtone. “In fact, Bri, I don’t wanna have anything to do with you as long as you’re on this stuff. You’re gonna make an anti-drug therapy, or we’re done with each other for good.”

“I’m afraid it’s not that simple,” Alain replied, his voice gently amused now. “You see, this… stuff, as you call it, is extremely addictive. I’ve been ‘on it’ for the last five hundred years or so; and there’s
no way to undo the Change. Ever.”

Michael stared at him in shocked disbelief. Even with the weird fangs and talons, Alain looked so… so normal, so calm, so much his everyday self, that if not for the silver eyes and the rest, the whole thing could have been some morbid joke. Sure, there were such things as silver contact lenses, but still…

“You’re insane,” he finally said.

“No,” Alain replied calmly. “I’m undead, and so is your friend. A vampire, as you mortals like to call us. We prefer the term ‘Kindred’, though.”

“We?” Michael echoed, simply because he couldn’t really think of anything else to say.

“Our kind,” Alain specified. “There are more of us than you would believe. You’ve worked with Kindred closely ever since you came to LA for the first time.”

“Yeah, sure,” Michael snorted. “And I’m still alive… why exactly?”

“We don’t kill our Vessels… the humans we feed from,” Alain said. “Well, some of us do, but that’s against Kindred law, and such beasts are exterminated. We police our own people, because living among mortals undetected is our best chance to survive.”

“No,” Michael said determinedly. “You’re not going to feed me some stupid story. I won’t go for it. There’s no such thing as vampires, only in idiotic movies, and whatever sick shit you’re involved in, I don’t wanna be part of it.”

“I’d reconsider if I were you, sweetie,” a familiar voice said, and Emmett waltzed in, cool as a cucumber, not showing any signs of surprise at the sight of Brian slurping Alain’s blood.

Michael whirled around and glared at his friend. “Stay out of this, Emmett!”

“Sorry, can’t do,” Emmett replied blithely and gave his well-manicured hand a studious look. A talon extended from his index finger; he retracted it after a long moment, giving Michael ample time to notice it.

“You, too?” Michael gasped.

“Actually, I was the first,” Emmett said nonchalantly. “Brian came well after me.”

In the meantime, Brian had finished the bloodsucking act and licked Alain’s wrist clean. The small cut closed before Michael’s very eyes, even the scar fading to nothing within the minute.

“What… what was that?” Michael asked. It had to be some trick, he assured himself. Stage magicians did such things all the time.

“Kindred heal fast,” Emmett answered with a shrug. “Something or other in our saliva… you should ask one of our doctors about it. We heal the ones we drink from the same way.”

“You really should give it a try,” Alain added calmly. “That’s the only way to understand. I could tell you about Kindred history and laws all day long, and you wouldn’t get a clue. In this particular case, experience is the only thing that could make you see who – or what – we truly are.”

Michael rolled his eyes. “You really think you could make me believe in this weird shit?”

“Mikey,” Brian interrupted. “Do you trust me?”
Michael hesitated. To be honest, at this very moment he wouldn’t trust Brian – or either of the other two – as far as he could throw them.

“I’d like to,” he said slowly. “But you guys aren’t making it easy.”

Brian came closer to him, took his hand in his own, turned his palm upside and, lifting it to his lips, kissed the pulse point. Now that he’d fed – and from his Sire, no less – he cold withstand the lure of Michael’s blood, being pumped through his friend’s veins by a generous heart.

“Would you allow me to taste you?” he asked quietly. “I could have done so while you were out, you know… but I’d never touch you without your consent… in any way.”

“T-taste me?” Michael stuttered. “Slit my wrist like Alain has just done to himself?”

“No,” Brian said soothingly. “That was feeding. I’d just nick a vein with the tip of a fang… you’d barely feel any pain at all. No more than by getting a shot against some bug.”

“It’s called the Kiss,” Alain injected. “It’s what makes us to what we are. We don’t simply use mortals as a food source. Through the Kiss, we also share their emotions… and the mortals we touch this way experience ecstasy beyond their imagination.”

“Ecstasy, my lily white ass!” Michael snorted. He could barely resist the urge to snatch his hand away and run until he could run no more. They’d never let him get away, of course; he knew that.

“You’ll never know, until you’ve tried it,” Brian murmured against his wrist, his cool breath tickling Michael’s skin. “Besides, I’ve got a soft spot for your lily white ass, you know that.”

Their eyes met for a second, and Brian’s eyes were familiar again: hazel, without any tint of silver. Michael felt himself relaxing, for the first time since he’d awaken beside an eerily silent, not-breathing Brian.

“That’s the safest way for you to understand – and perhaps accept – what I’ve become,” Brian added. “And it will be pleasurable. I promise.”

“And it won’t hurt?” Michael knew he was being stupid and childish, but he couldn’t help it. The whole thing was just too weird to take in.”

That slow, singularly sweet smile he’d known for the last twenty years (he and probably nobody else) spread across Brian’s face.

“Only in a good way,” Brian answered, and Michael was undone by the warmth and sensuality in his voice again.

“All right,” he said. “Do it, before I change my mind.”

During the whole time, Alain was watching them intently. He knew what a leap in faith this was for Michael, who’d lived surrounded by all sorts of Kindred in happy ignorance ever since coming to LA: It was only his unconditional love for Brian that made him agree to the blood-sharing, even though Alain was sure he still didn’t believe the vampire thing. But Brian wanted this, and so Michael was giving it him. It was that simple.

Michael’s aura, usually a warm golden hue, darkened to deep amber as Brian lifted his wrist again and began to lick the big vein to the surface. Brian’s own aura, most of the time a tightly-wrapped cold blue one, was tingled with gold now, as always when in the company of his childhood love, and had extended twice its regular width.
These two completed each other in a way Alain, in all his five hundred years of existence, had never seen before. He had no doubt that neither would be able to exist without the other one.

Emmett moved over to them, with the noiseless grace of his now undead nature, and hugged Michael from behind, in mute support. Alain remained in his place of observation. This was a moment of intimate familiarity between these two young men, a familiarity grown from years of friendship and trust. In this circle, he had no place.

Michael leaned back against Emmett thankfully, his free hand clutching to Emmett’s arm that was holding him. He jerked, more in surprise than in real pain, as Brian’s fang nicked the vein. It was barely more than a pinprick, sending a jolt of heat through his entire body, right to his groin. A thin trail of blood welled up on his pale wrist, and he froze when Brian began to lap it up, playfully like a kitten.

He had to admit that both the sight and the feeling were beyond hot. He felt himself hardening, slowly but steadily.

Unexpectedly, Brian now grabbed his wrist with both hands and sank his fangs deeper into the flesh, sucking lightly. Michael trashed in Emmett’s iron hold as the sharp pain of the bite transformed into equally sharp pleasure, burning along his every single nerve like wildfire. He could feel the hot wave of Brian’s pleasure reflecting in his mind, and that was almost more than what he could bear. He vaguely realized that he was moaning, but he really couldn’t bother to care. This was just too good, too hot.

“Carefully, Childe,” Alain warned in a low voice. “You’re losing control rapidly.”

He added a much sharper warning, one like a mental whiplash – now that Brian had just fed from him, their link was particularly strong – to snap his Childe out of his haze. Angelus had made adamantly clear that no more… accidents would be tolerated. There had been too many of those lately, and the Prince was emphatically displeased about that fact.

Understanding the warning, Brian withdrew his fangs from Michael’s flesh with a reluctant sigh, licking the small puncture wounds closed and sealed. Michael was still trembling in Emmett’s arms, coming down slowly from his adrenaline- and endorphin-induced high.

“That was… quite something,” he finally muttered. “I… I think I need to sit down now.”

Emmett helped him to the nearest armchair, and Michael practically plummeted into it, still breathing heavily.

“You were right,” he looked at Alain. “I needed the experience. Words couldn’t describe this.”

Alain nodded. “And what do you think now, that you’ve experienced it?” he asked.

“I’m still freaked out, big time,” Michael admitted honestly, “and still not entirely willing to believe the whole thing. I… I need to give this a great deal of thought. And I need to talk to Brian… and to Emmett.”

“It’s not an easy thing to accept, especially in a century that’s so unwilling to believe anything beyond the material,” Alain said. “Take your time. I’ll leave you alone to sort it out. I’ve got an appointment with Phillipe anyway.”

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“Do you really believe that Michael will accept the Embrace eventually?” Phillipe Navital seemed more than a little doubtful about that.
They were sitting in the D’Oblique, this being one of their semi-regular meetings, a recurring
occasion to discuss Camarilla politics in a generally Anarch city. Aside from being long-time friends,
they were also allies in Clan politics.
“I’m having my doubts, too,” Alain admitted. “There’s precious little unlife could offer him – he’s a
man of very simple pleasures, all of which he can get as a mortal as well.”
“Aside from Brian,” Phillipe commented. “I think we both agree that nothing about Brian is ever
simple.”
Alain nodded. “Aside from Brian, yes, and immortality to make up for the years they’ve so foolishly
wasted.”
“Still,” Phillipe said thoughtfully, “if he only accepts because of Brian, his unlife is going to be a
never-ending misery. Perhaps I lack imagination, but I’m having a hard time to imagine him living in
the Dark. If anyone ever needed the Sun in their life, it’s certainly Michael.”
“This worries me, too,” Alain replied. “He seems to enjoy the Californian summer so much, and he
was so excited about moving to the Marina… I don’t doubt that he’d willingly give it up for the
chance to spend eternity with Brian, but I’m afraid that after a while he’ll come to resent his choice.
And even not considering his importance for Brian – though it’s hard to ignore, even in theory – I’d
hate to see him take a walk in the Sun.”
“There are other possibilities,” Phillipe pointed out. “You could make him a ghoul. That would allow
him to keep his life as it is now – well, more or less – and it would stop his aging just the same.”
“Brian is still too young for a Kindred to create a personal ghoul,” Alain said.
“But you’re not,” Phillipe replied. “And if you make him, he’ll be able to get his fix from anyone of
your bloodline – including Brian.”
“Perhaps,” Alain allowed. “But Kindred and ghoul are not equals; and I don’t think that Brian would
accept Michael’s inferior status in our family, even if Michael might.”
“He wouldn’t be inferior if he were the One Vessel for Brian,” Phillipe said. “On the contrary, that
would make him a most valued member of your family.”
“And it would also create a fatal weakness for Brian,” Alain replied. “If he depended on Michael’s
blood singularly, all any idiot had to do to destroy him would be to kill Michael.”
“Surely you could protect Michael,” Phillipe said.
Alain nodded. “Mais oui, I could. But he won’t be willing to live in protective custody, not that I’d
blame him for it. I couldn’t do that, either.”
“Still, this is an option that you should offer to him,” Phillipe insisted. “This, or simply being a ghoul
for a while. You could still Embrace him later, when he’s figured out what he’d prefer. If he’s willing
to accept any part of our existence, that is.”
“I hope he is,” Alain replied seriously, “because mortal or undead, Brian won’t be able to exist
without him. Just as he won’t be able to exist without Brian.”
“Does that fact bother you?” Phillipe asked carefully, knowing Alain’s possessive nature from
personal experience.”


“I can’t deny it,” Alain replied honestly. “But since this is my only choice to keep Brian, I’ll have to learn to live with it.”

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Unsurprisingly enough, in Michael and Emmett’s apartment, the three friends were discussing the same thing. Michael had finally been told the whole story – in minute detail, and, in Emmett’s case, with colourful descriptions – how his two friends had become citizens of the undead society. Understandably, he freaked out a bit again when told about Emmett’s Embrace-by-accident, and he’d sworn secrecy for the sake of his friend. He really didn’t want murderous female assassins going after Emmett and killing him brutally.

However, it was Brian’s decision that troubled him even more.

“Why, Bri?” he asked forlornly. “Why would you choose a life like this? I mean, Em didn’t really have a choice, but you? You had everything you’d ever wanted. And you were offered a free choice, unlike Em. You could have refused, couldn’t you?”

“Yeah,” Brian said. “They didn’t force me, if that’s what you mean.”

“Then why?” Michael insisted. “Was it because of Alain? Does he mean so much to you that you’d even throw away your fucking life to be with him?” There was definite hurt and jealousy in his voice.

“Nah,” Brian replied with an unexpected grin. “Actually, it was because of you.”

Michael glared at him as if looking for clear signs of insanity in his face.

“Me?” he repeated blandly. “What the fuck have I got to do with your insane decision to become a vampire? Hell I still don’t entirely believe the whole thing!”

Brian tried to find an answer that would have been true without being soppy or too embarrassing – and couldn’t. Thankfully, Emmett, who considered soppiness a virtue, hurried to his aid.

“Well, he finally realized that he’d been as much in love with you all these years as you’ve been pining after him,” he explained with disarming simplicity, “and began to despair all over those wasted years. Becoming an undead monster of the night gave him enough time to woo your properly and remain with you till the second coming of the Antediluvians.”

Michael rubbed his temples, feeling the first signs of a particularly vicious headache coming.

“Em, you’re losing me. What does his being a vampire change? I’ll keep aging; and I’ll die in a few decades anyway.”

“Not if you join the club of undead queers, you won’t,” Emmett pointed out logically. “It’s not so bad, really. Okay, sunbaths are out of the question, and the diet isn’t very variable, but other than that, the two of us manage just fine.”

Michael shook his head. “You’re both nuts,” he said.

“Nah, not really,” Emmett replied breezily. “Think about the possibilities. Granted, the two of you’ve wasted fifteen years of potentially great sex. But you could have centuries to make up for it – and let me tell you, enhanced vampiric senses make the experience more intense than you could ever imagine.”

“I’ll take your word for that,” Michael said dryly. “Somehow I don’t feel the urge to become a
blood-sucking fiend, though… no offence intended,” he added hastily.

“None taken,” Emmett replied with a shrug. “Everyone freaks out a bit at first – well, those who are given a choice, at least,” there was a slight bitterness in his usually cheerful tone when he said that. “But most people find the offer appealing, after having had time to think about it. The not getting older and not dying part more than makes up for the lack of sunbathing and the liquid diet.”

“But what if I decide against it, even after having thought about it long and hard?” Michael asked.

“It’s your choice,” Brian answered. “Nobody will force you to do anything; and we can still stay together for the rest of your life.”

“But we’re not even together yet,” Michael reminded him mildly.

“True,” Brian agreed. “The question is: do you want us to be together? Now that you know what I’ve become?”

For a very long time, Michael didn’t answer. The other two didn’t pressure him. This wasn’t an easy decision for anyone; it wasn’t easy for a mortal to live with a vampire… or to follow him to the night.

“I don’t want to lose you, Bri,” Michael finally said. “But don’t expect any long-time decision from me just yet. Let’s continue step by step and see what the future brings.”

Brian released an unnecessary breath he wasn’t aware he’d been holding.

“Works for me,” he said, giddy with relief. “Little steps it is.”

Chapter End Notes

The “One Vessel” is a concept I found somewhere in a fanfic and found it interesting. Basically, it means that a certain vampire only feeds from one particular person. If the vampire chooses his or her “One Vessel”, s/he becomes unable to feed from anyone else. As a consequence, if that person dies, the vampire won’t survive, either.
Michael has a hard time to accept that his best friend/new lover is now a vampire. The Kindred in LA do their best to show him his possible choices, but it’s the return of an old acquaintance that finally forces him to make a decision.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

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TRIANGLE, Part 1

Michael spent the next couple of days in a semi-permanent state of shock. Which, considering the circumstances, was understandable. One doesn’t discover every day that one’s best friend for decades/newly found lover/whatever is a blood-sucking fiend of the night.

So yeah, Michael did feel entitled to a little panicking. Hell, everyone would have panicked in his stead!

For a while, he seriously considered renting a room on his own somewhere. He felt ashamed about if - after all, Emmett, too, had been his friend forever, and they had always gone along as roommates splendidly. But the memory of Emmett casually extending a talon was simply too much. He could not bear to stay alone with Emmett in the apartment… or with Brian, for that matter.

Fortunately, Emmett was as understanding as always.

“You’ll need time to adjust, sweetie,” he said gently. “I’ll move back with the Blounts for a while… and leave my keys here.”

“I don’t want to drive you out, Em!” Michael protested. “This is as much your place as mine.”

Emmett patted his arm reassuringly.

“I know, honey,” he said. “But, you see, I have dozens of places where I can crash… and where I’d be happily taken in. You need time and peace to think about everything… and you need to feel safe. You don’t feel safe with me or Brian around, do you?”

Michael shook his head miserably. “I’m so sorry, Em…”

“Don’t be,” Emmett interrupted. “It’s understandable… and, frankly, it’s justified. We are undead monsters who need to drink the blood of living beings, in order to survive – if our existence can be called life at all. Actually, it’s called unlife,” he corrected himself, with more than a little bitterness in his usually so cheerful voice. “We’re already dead, after all.”

“Can we perhaps not discuss that part just yet?” Michael gulped nervously. “I’m having a hard enough time to deal with the fact that you guys are vampires now – that vampires actually exist in the first place. I don’t need to brood over the details right now”
“You’ll have to face the facts about our existence sooner or later,” Emmett warned. “But I see your point. I’ll leave you alone for a while. When you need someone to talk to, you know how to contact me.”

He threw Michael a kiss and waltzed out of the apartment. But Michael didn’t call him in the following days. Michael didn’t call Brian, either. He shut himself into his office in the Vignes Studios (although it would have seriously lessened his comfort, had he known how many undead employees the Studios actually had) or into his apartment, and he studiously avoided just about everyone, unless it was work-related. He didn’t even answer the phone when at home.

After almost two weeks of this voluntarily hermit life, one afternoon the phone rang in his office. It was Alain.

“We need to talk,” the artist said without preamble. “Since I know that you’re a bit uncomfortable around us right now, I’d suggest a public place. Have you ever been to a club called A Taste of LA?”

“No,” Michael said. “What kind of place is that?”

“A club where we meet our mortal acquaintances,” Alain replied, “A… safe house, if you want. You have nothing to fear there… and I think you’ll find the environment interesting,”

He gave Michael the address and explained how to find the place. It sounded easy enough, even though Michael had never visited that part of the city.

“I know I’m probably the last person you want to see right now,” he added, “but it’s really necessary that we talk.”

“Necessary for whom?” Michael asked.

“For you, for me – and for Brian,” Alain replied simply.

That took the wind off Michael’s sail.

“All right,” he said. “I’ll be there. What time?”

“What do you think about six p.m?” Alain asked. “We could have dinner and talk over it like civilized people.”

“I thought you were on a liquid diet,” Michael commented sarcastically.

“I am,” Alain replied, completely unfazed. “But that won’t be a problem. The personnel there can serve the right stuff for both kinds of clientele. They’re used to it.”

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The club A Taste of LA was located at 1920 N. Main Street, in East Los Angeles, and operated as a combination of coffee house and travellers’ aid station for newly arrived Kindred from all over the world. It also served as a recruiting station for Salvador Garcia; or, to be more accurate, for the Anarch groups that still looked up to him as their leader and the galion figure of their case. Angelus might be the legally elected Prince of LA, as far as the Camarilla was concerned, but Salvador Garcia was the uncrowned king of the Eastern City, and even the ministers of the other parts of the town thought twice before challenging him in any way.

He lived in a huge, Spanish-Californian style mansion with some of his progeny, his wife, Countess Visconti, and his oldest friend and ally, Alonzo Solace. The club was run by his ghoul managers, Murray and Alexis Goldfarb – two Jews whom Salvador’s Sire had saved from a pogrom in Prague,
a long time ago. After Ferdinand’s Final Death in the Anarch Revolt in Barcelona, Salvador had practically inherited his Sire’s excellent network of ghouls – including the Goldfarbs – who had simply transferred their loyalty to the heir of the family.

The club itself occupied the entire ground floor of the building and resembled a European coffee house, down to the taste of the coffee served here. It had a well-tended wooden floor, and the tables were widely spaced to allow for private conversations. The lights were kept low, the background music was discrete, the waiters quick and skilled. It was a well-run and much-frequented establishment.

When Michael entered the club it was already half full, although its best hours were during night. He spotted Alain at once. The artist was sitting at a table in the middle of the floor, nursing a glass of red wine – or something that looked like red wine. Michael refused to consider the other possibilities.

Nervous – and even a little hostile – he crossed the floor to Alain’s table.

“You wanted to talk,” he said. “So talk.”

“I wanted to talk like civilized people,” Alain replied. “Sit down; you’re drawing attention, and the management doesn’t like that. Behave and order something. The food here is said to be rather good.”

Reluctantly, Michael lowered himself onto the empty seat on the opposite side of the table. He didn’t want to spend more time with Alain than absolutely necessary, but he didn’t want to be rude, either. Or to draw unnecessary attention. The management was most likely of the blood-sucking kind, and he thought it better not to provoke them.

A young man – more a boy than a man, actually – came to their table to take Michael’s order, and Michael caught his breath for a moment, because the boy was incredibly beautiful – like a girl, or like an angel from some old legend. He couldn’t have been older than seventeen, with smooth skin as pale as mother-of-pearl, lush waves of dark hair, huge dark eyes and long, thick eyelashes.

“Alain,” he said in a husky voice and with a shy smile. “Murray said you were here – it’s been a long time.”

“Nice to see you, too, Alexis,” Alain nodded. “This is Michael, one of our new associates.”

Alexis Goldfarb blushed. “Nice to meet you, Michael,” he said. “What would be your pleasure?”

Michael suppressed his first instinct to say you and asked for the menu card. Alexis promptly produced it, pointing out the specialties of the house and giving short descriptions what the individual food items were like. Then off he went to bring Michael’s dinner.

“He’s pretty,” Michael commented, looking after him with appreciation, “but isn’t he too young for such a job? How old is he anyway? Sixteen? Seventeen?”

“He has been seventeen for the last two hundred years or so,” Alain replied calmly.

Michael lost any possible interest in the boy at once. “Does it mean he’s a vampire, too?”

“No,” Alain said. “He’s a ghoul.”

“A what?”

“Ghouls are something between mortals and Kindred,” Alain explained. “Basically, they continue their mortal lives almost unchanged. They just stop aging on the day they are made, and they need to
drink the *Vitae* – the blood – of their maker on a regular basis.”

“When they are made?” Michael repeated blandly.

“It’s a process similar to the Embrace,” Alain replied. “At least where the exchange of mortal blood and Kindred *Vitae* is considered. Have Brian and Emmett explained you how a Childe is made?”

Michael nodded mutely. That was something he’d tried not to think about in the last couple of weeks… and failed.

“Well, when a ghoul is made, the candidate doesn’t get sucked dry,” Alain said. “But the Becoming is still unpleasant; the human body needs time to adapt to our *Vitae*.”

“But what do you need these ghoul things for?” Michael asked.

“They are our mediators to the mortal world,” Alain replied. “They can go to places where we can’t, they can walk in the sun for an unlimited time. In exchange, they receive the same limited immortality as we – however, without our special powers.”

“They still get the better part out of this whole undead business,” Michael said. “Get to stay in the sun, can eat normal food…”

“True,” Alain said, “but there is a serious catch. A ghoul can only take in the blood of his or her maker… or that of someone from the maker’s bloodline. Without that *Vitae*, they would die. We, on the other hand, can feed from anyone – unless we choose a ghoul to be our One Vessel.”

“Your *what*?” Michael felt the mother of all headaches coming his way.

“The person we would feed from exclusively,” Alain explained. “That is the sign of the ultimate trust from the side of a Kindred; for after a long enough time, he becomes completely dependant on the blood of his One Vessel. So much so that if his One Vessel dies, the Kindred will die, too, because he’d be incapable of feeding from anyone else. There’s no stronger, deeper bond than that of a Kindred and his One Vessel, not even that of the Sire and his Childe.”

“And you’re telling me all this… why exactly?” Michael asked suspiciously.

“I want you to know all your choices within Kindred society – and I want you to weigh them against each other carefully,” Alain replied. “I’m sure you won’t give Brian up, now that you have him where you’ve always wanted him, so I’m trying to arrange myself with the various possibilities. Because I won’t give him up, either.”

“I won’t exactly say that I had him where I’ve always wanted him,” Michael said dryly. “But I’ve realized that I’d never have him exactly there. He’ll never be exclusively mine. That’s not in his nature. I’ve just… come to terms with the fact and decided that sharing him is still better than not having him at all. Even if it still hurts like hell to see him with others. Of course,” he added wryly, “I never dreamed whom I’ll have to share him with. I might have changed my mind, had I known the truth.”

“I can imagine that this must be a shock for you,” Alain said. “The people of this century are so closed-minded that the mere existence of the supernatural is near-unimaginable for you. My generation had it easier in that area. Monsters and demons belonged to our daily life like saints and miracles. This modern culture of yours is primitive, superficial, and it lacks any deeper meaning. I feel sorry for you, I really do. But if you join my household, you’ll have centuries to learn.”

“Join your household as what?” Michael asked. “A vampire like you? A ghoul servant? Or as your
personal food source? No, thanks; I don’t think I’d be interested in any of those choices.”

“Let me be brutally honest with you,” Alain leaned back in his chair and steepled his fingertips together. “I’m sure you’d make a beautiful Childe; not to mention a great asset for the Vignes Studios, either as Kindred or as a ghoul. However…”

“…you’d never think of making me part of your household, were it not for Brian,” Michael finished for him. Seeing Alain’s raised eyebrow, he chuckled mirthlessly. “Hey, it’s okay. You want him – who doesn’t? And unlike most other people, you understand that I’m part of the package. Just as he’s part of the package, whoever wants something from me.”

“Did your husband understand that?” Alain asked bluntly, and Michael nodded.

“Yep. That’s why we lasted as long as we did… not that it would have been easy.”

“I see,” Alain said. “Well, don’t you think it’s time that you finally made your move and claimed what’s been yours all these years?”

“You mean Brian?” Michael laughed, with a certain amount of bitterness. “No one owns Brian.”

“I do,” Alain corrected icily, “and he knows it. He’s my childe, my creation. Mine to fuck – and mine to kill, if he breaks Kindred law. We’ve talked about this before: I have his submission, but you have his heart, and he won’t be happy without you. I want him happy, so I’m willing to give him you for eternity – if you are willing to pay the price.”

“It’s the price that worries me,” Michael said. “There are too many unknown factors. I have no idea what it might include – and I’m not up for nasty surprises. I’ve had my fair share of those in the recent years.”

Alain nodded. “That’s understandable. Which is the reason why I brought you here. Murray and Alexis can tell you in loving detail what being a ghoul means. And Brian and Emmett can tell you more about the life of a Kindred fledgling. What it includes. What the restrictions are.” He rose because he spotted Alexis, bringing Michael’s food. “Dinner’s on me. Enjoy… and think about your choices, long and hard.”

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Back in Pittsburgh, in the once-infamed gay sauna that had served as the headquarters of Kinnetic for the last two years, Cynthia Moore leaned back in her leather armchair and popped her back in relief. Thirteen hours behind the desk were a bit much, even for a workaholic like her. But since Brian had moved to LA, she’d practically run the agency on her own, and being a perfectionist meant longer working hours for her than for any of the other employees – with the possible exception of Ted Schmidt.

But while Ted was just naturally pedantic (not to mention anal retentive) and perpetually afraid of being fired for any mistake he might have made, Cynthia wanted to prove herself. To show that – despite being a woman, which was still a serious disadvantage in the ad business, at least in Pittsburgh – she was at least as good as anyone she’d worked with at Vanguard. She was honest enough to admit that she was not as good as Brian, but honestly, who was? But she didn’t want to be considered anything but second best after her boss.

Ted was, admittedly, a great help. Not just in the book-keeping, at which he was sheer unbeatable. He also helped her to prepare the presentations and sat with her in the business meetings, providing the solid male presence certain clients still wanted. This demand irked her to no end, but she was a realist. She knew she won’t be able to change that attitude any time soon, and it would have been
stupid to lose good business opportunities because of her hurt pride. At least Ted didn’t try to push himself into the foreground.

For tonight, she was nearly done. The only meeting left was a business dinner with Horatio Ballard, one of the town’s most important businesspeople, whom Ted had managed to befriend on some concert or opera performance… she wasn’t sure. It didn’t really matter, either. What mattered was Mr. Ballard’s resulting interest in *Kinnetic* and his willingness to give the agency a chance. Cynthia had been working on the contract with a certain Ms Lorraine Matthews, who seemed to have a position similar to hers on Ballard’s side. Tonight was only an excuse to make the final touches before the contract would be signed.

Mr. Ballard had informed her that he’d be bringing Ms Matthews and his lawyer. Not having a date at the moment (by her workload, private life was just out of question), Cynthia opted to take Ted. One did not go to a working dinner alone. Especially not when one was a woman. In the world of business, that would have hinted at a certain lack in success, and she couldn’t afford to make such a false impression. Even if her private life was a disaster.

One could say *one* thing in Ted’s defence: at the very least: he was reliable. He arrived on time – actually, ten minutes too early – he was clad with conservative elegance and was not easily confused by the arsenal of eating utensils the restaurant had placed on their table. He also turned out to be a pleasant conversationalist who was capable of talking about opera with Horatio Ballard, about fashion with Ms Matthews and about finances with Ballard’s lawyer.

Said lawyer was no one less than Nick Fallin himself, the junior partner and heir apparent to the renowned law firm *Fallin & Fallin* that only accepted the very influential and the very rich as their clients. Cynthia had heard of them before, of course - who had not? – but never worked with them. Not even *Vanguard* had been important enough for them, and *Kinnetic* wouldn’t be worth their notice as a rule. Brian must have made some excellent contacts in LA for someone like Horatio Ballard to choose him as a potential partner. This was a golden opportunity for *Kinnetic* to conquer the upper league of Pittsburgh’s business circles. Cynthia was determined *not* to lose that opportunity.

To her surprise, Nick Fallin turned out a very charming young man – as soon as the contact was signed and he unbent enough to lose that permanently troubled expression he seemed to wear as a business suit during work, that is. After dinner, he led Cynthia to the dance floor and kept flirting with her in a light-hearted way that was flattering and amusing at the same time. Now that the contract was signed and her bonus secure, Cynthia enjoyed the evening very much.

There was *one* thing, though, in which she didn’t want any misunderstandings.

“Just so that we are clear,” she said to Nick Fallin, “I do *not* seal a deal the way my boss used to.”

The lawyer grinned. “You mean with a quickie in the washroom?” he clarified. “Oh, yes, we’ve heard about Mr. Kinney’s peculiar business methods. Well, he’ll have to learn that some of them are just *not* acceptable in our league. I’m glad to hear that you’ve got a little more… *class* in that area.”

“I have to,” Cynthia said. “I’m a woman, you know; it’s hard enough to prove myself in a branch so completely dominated by males. I was lucky enough that I met Brian - I mean, Mr. Kinney - early on. He saw my abilities, not my… other assets, since he’s not interested in women. I must admit it was a true relief.”

“I can imagine,” Nick Fallin replied. “Still, I’m surprised that a bright and attractive woman like yourself would have to choose someone like Mr. Schmidt to accompany her on a business dinner.”
Cynthia shrugged. “Most men expect their partners to accept that they have to work insane hours. Very few of them are willing to accept if the woman is the one who works long. My ex-husband didn’t belong to those selected few.”

“Well, don’t give up,” Nick said. “Not all men are misogynistic idiots, you know. Not even those who like women.”

“I hope so,” Cynthia replied. “I don’t intend to spend the rest of my life in celibacy.”

“That would be a criminal waste indeed,” Nick agreed, and laughing, they rejoined the others at the table. The evening was a success, with both sides of the partnership hoping for further cooperation.

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Two days after Michael’s meeting with Alain in A Taste of LA, he was called to the Vignes Studios to meet the movie’s chief sponsor, a wealthy businessman by the name of Rodney Reynolds, and a few representatives of the press. The meeting took place in one of the larger conference rooms, as several independent movie-makers, directors and producers had signalled their interest in the project. A gay superhero movie was an absolute novelty in the dream industry of Hollywood that based much of its products on remakes and repetition, so it was no wonder that people were curious.

In the end, it was quite the crowd that Michael had to face – a fact that would have made him nervous like hell, had he not been preoccupied with other aspects of his life. Aspects that made him even more nervous, to tell the truth.

First, he was introduced to Reynolds, a middle-aged man in an Armani suit, and his accountant, a manic-looking, balding guy named Rex Wellesley, who could have been an exaggerated caricature of actor Robert Picardo. There was another businessman called Greystone: clean-cut and quite good-looking, if not for the lifeless appearance of his ice-blue eyes and the fact that he was wearing gloves, despite the Californian heat.

“He’s a bit… eccentric,” Vera Vignes explained in a low voice, “but he wields very real economic and political power throughout LA due to his extensive business holdings. We don’t like him very much, but it’s not easy to get done anything without his unspoken approval, as he owns an entire chain of movie theatres.”

Michael nodded in understanding and greeted the man politely. He couldn’t know that Greystone was, in fact, a Gangrel antitribu and a member of the Sabbat, who only wore his gloves to hide the hint of webbing between his fingers. Not all Sabbat were animalistic, bloodthirsty monsters (at least not all the time), and some of them were influential – and powerful – enough so that both the Camarilla and the Anarch Ministers were forced to tolerate their continued presence.

The really important representatives of the press were mainly women, and every single one of them most intriguing on her own way. The most influential one was Patricia Mercury, the thirty-eight-year-old heiress of the global Mercure Hotel chain and to a vast newspaper fortune. She was the same type as Sharon Stone: tall, long-legged, blue-eyed, ash blonde and ice cold – just looked even better and was, apparently, shrewd and ruthless. Her clothes were individually designed by the Girard Fashion House and seemed almost embarrassingly simple, which is always the strongest proof for being very, very expensive.

Delphine Delacroix, a delicate redhead who spoke with a French accent that would have made Inspector Clouseau cringe, represented one of Ms Mercury’s magazines, the Hollywood Reporter, where she had been a music and lifestyle columnist for quite some time. She also wrote theatre and movie reviews and counted as quite merciless, despite her lovely appearance. People would never suspect her to be a vampire, and one from Clan Tzimisce at that, but in fact, she dated back to pre-
revolutionary France. She came with a respected Ventre businessman involved with studio insurance, whom nobody would have picked for a vampire, either. Nonetheless, Phillipe Pescillon was one, and had known Delphine from her mortal days.

The other star reporter was a woman of her late thirties, by the looks of her: Ita Glitz, the gossip and lifestyle columnist for *Variety Magazine* (also owned by Ms Mercury who found it a good idea to create her own opposition and thus keep the magazine sells on a high level) and thus Delphine’s greatest rival. Michael remembered to have met her in the *Studios* before, where she was always treated with wary respect – more so than any other journalist. She was said to have an uncanny knack for ferreting out the most shameful secrets of the stars and starlets of Hollywood, which was the reason for her infamous reputation. Michael couldn’t know, of course, that some of those details required vampiric disciplines to uncover – Ita was supposed to be a Toreador – but he did find her creepy.

There were quite a few other reporters, mostly from the gay press, but those Michael knew already and had no reason to fear. They had been eating from his hand for months. The main goal of the day was to convince the straight press – and investors – that a gay action hero was both interesting and profitable. Money was the only thing they were concerned about, and it was Michael’s job to convince them that their money would be invested safely.

At first, the interview was going well enough. Reynolds, Greystone and Pescillon were mostly interested in the financial side of things, as expected. They asked purely profit-related questions about the fan base of *Rage*, about the interactive website Diego Martinez had created for comics and movie, about the merchandising and the possibility of filming a sequel or making a TV-series, in case the first movie turned out a blockbuster. Vera Vignes, Brett Keller and Michael answered the respective questions easily enough.

But then Ita Glitz began to ask questions about the “creative differences” between Michael and Justin, “the original artist” of *Rage*. She seemed to have a dogged interest in those differences, in their relationship to each other… and their respective relationships to a certain Brian Kinney. Michael started to feel very uncomfortable. He didn’t want the creation of the *Rage* movie to be portrayed as a lovers’ spat, but had the bad feeling that this was exactly what would happen if they allowed the reporter to continue her attacks.

Unfortunately, he had no idea how to stop her. Aggressive women always made him nervous and Ita, who looked and acted as Kyra Sedgwick in the worst scenes of the crime series “The Closer”, realized that and turned it against him with great skill.

Finally, Vera Vignes had had enough and saw the right moment to interfere.

“Let me set something very clear,” she declared. “Removing Mr. Taylor from the project was my decision. He’s a talented artist, I’ll give him that, but he’s immature, undisciplined and completely incapable of teamwork. I’ve kicked his ass out of the Studios months before Mr. Novotny would come to LA: It was I who didn’t want to work with that selfish little brat. I wanted *Rage* to be an action movie, not cheap porn.”

“What’s wrong with porn?” a middle-aged man with a vague resemblance to Mick Jagger on a particularly bad day asked from the background.

Vera Vignes gave him an icy look. “Obviously nothing where your little trash studio is concerned, Jean-Vincent,” she replied with obvious distaste. “Some of us, however, do have a vexed interest in things that happen above the belt line.”

The audience laughed, and other reporters raised their hands to ask other questions. To Michael’s
relief, those questions concerned the movie, its plot, its casting and the planned sequel rather than his private life. Still, he didn’t like the direction in which Ita was digging.

“Neither do I,” Vera Vignes replied when he shared his concerns with her. “She’s a real bitch and has no conscience at all when she tries to outdo Delphine in her column. Small wonder that Denni dunked her into a swimming pool once.”

“She did?” Michael eyed the delicate French woman with new respect. “I think I might like her.”

“No, you won’t,” Very replied dryly. “She’s every bit as bad as Ita - just less skilled perhaps. In any case, we need to find out who Ita’s source of information is. The… triangle between you, Mr. Kinney and that Justin has never been discussed in the Studios. The only ones who knew about it are my brother and Edward Blount, myself and Brett Keller.”

“Couldn’t it be one of them, to attract more publicity?” Michael had already learned that even bad press was considered desirable in Hollywood, as it kept public curiosity for a person or a project alive.

But Vera shook her head. “We do respect each other’s privacy. Besides, they all like you very much, and Ita seemed to want to make you look bad. Someone either wants to have the movie torpedoed before it hits the theatres – or they hate you, personally, very much.”

“Can we do anything against it?” Michael asked. “I don’t really mind if people talk about me – well, not too much – but the movie… it’s important for me.”

“Don’t worry,” Vera said, her jaw set. “I’ll set Isaac Abrams on Ita. He wants the movie to be a great success, as it could mean the spectacular comeback for Ash – he’ll see that Ita stops, if she ever wants to write for any magazine in Hollywood again.”

“And what about her source?” Michael asked.

“Of that,” Vera said grimly, “I’ll take care myself. That is, I’ll have Sam Spade do it for me.”

“The studio security chief?” Michael asked with a frown. ”The guy with the odd resemblance to Elvis who’s always munching on something?”

“That’s a nervous habit,” Vera replied. “Sam used to be an LAPD homicide detective – and a good one, too.” Before a crazed Assamite Embraced him on a whim, into a Clan that never accepted males. Small wonder that Sam ended up as an antitribu and chose to work with the Camarilla. “He still has his contacts. He’ll find Ita’s source – and then we’ll deal with it.”

A few days later Vera Vignes’ trust in the security chief’s abilities proved well-founded. The Elvis look-alike walked into her office and produced his results proudly.

“It seems that Ita has the details from Jean-Vincent,” he said. “At least they spend an awful lot of time together.”

“That seems unlikely.” Michael shook his head. “I’ve never met this Jean-Vincent character before. I’m not sure about Brian, but even if he fucked him once - which I doubt, as Brian has high standards - he’d never tell a trick anything about himself… or me.”

“Oh, but Jean-Vincent isn’t the primary source of information in this case,” Spade said, sucking his lolly. “He’s found a new assistant, and they seem to be very chummy with each other. I’m sure the kid is the one keeping Kinney’s dirty laundry in the cupboard.”
“What kid?” Michael asked. He had the bad feeling that he already knew, though.

“Some blond think with a mouth like a hoover, or so Jean-Vincent likes to boast,” Spade replied with a shrug. “He calls the brat Sunshine, which is a real stupid nickname, if you ask me.”

Chapter End Notes

Salvador Garcia, the Goldfarbs and the club A Taste of LA are borrowed from the “Vampire – The Masquerade” RPG. However, my take on them is anything but canon. They also feature in “The Anarch Chronicles”, and Salvador in several other “Pathways” storylines. The other characters on the press conference are also from the online RPG, but I’ve changed their backgrounds a bit.
“Sunshine” is a really existing character in one of the online RPGs. He has, of course, a different identity than the one I gave him. But the name was too good an opportunity to let it slip *g*.

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TRIANGLE, Part 2

“Are you sure, Sweetie?” Emmett asked doubtfully.

Michael shook his head. “No, of course not. But it would be too much of a coincidence, don’t you think? This ‘Sunshine’ character arrives in LA, and soon the press begins to spout out crap about how I’ve supposedly mistreated Justin.”

“But Vera Vignes set those rumours right, hasn’t she?” Emmett asked. Michael gave him a tired look.

“Em, just when do people give a shit for official declarations when there is perfectly good, juicy gossip to believe in?”

“True,” Emmett admitted. “So, what do you want me to do?”

“You have better contacts to the half-world than I do,” Michael replied. “You could stretch out your antennae a bit? I want to know if this ‘Sunshine’ is truly Justin, and what kind of relationship does he have to that porn director… beyond the obvious, I mean,”

“Won’t that be a bit too obvious if I approached them?” Emmett was still not sure about the whole thing.

Michael shrugged. “You used to be a porn star. He’s a director of porn movies. He won’t suspect a thing.”

“But Justin will know whom I’m spying for, if he truly is Sunshine,” Emmett pointed out.

“Yeah, but if he is Sunshine, then we already have our answer, haven’t we?” Michael said logically.

Emmett sighed. “All right, I’ll see what I can do.”

Michael gave him one of those brilliant smiles. “Thanks, Em. I won’t forget that. Oh, and… do you think you’d be willing to move in with me again?”

“Really?” Emmett stared at him in open-mouthed surprise. “You’re ready to share living space with a vampire?”

“I’ve had weeks to get used to the idea,” Michael replied with a shrug. “The thought still freaks me out a little, but – you’re my friend. And I can see that you’re basically still the same person. So… just no nibbling while I sleep, understood?”
Emmett laughed. “Michael, I don’t Hunt. I use volunteers… blood dolls, as we call them. And you know I’d never do that to a friend.”

“I know,” Michael laughed, strangely relieved that his voluntary hermit existence would come to an end, “or else I wouldn’t ask when you are moving back in.”

“As soon as I’ve felt around this Jean-Vincent character,” Emmett promised. “I won’t be delayed by the logistics of moving until then. After all, I’ll need a convenient strategy to approach the Porn King of LA.”

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“No, you won’t,” Edward Blount declared in a tone that brooked no argument. “If you as much as try to speak with that… that abomination, I’ll break every single bone in your girlish body.”

But he had to learn that – like so many people before him – he’d underestimated Emmett. For all his Southern Belle mannerisms, Emmett could be as stubborn as a mule and as tough as nails. Especially if one of his friends was in trouble.

“Excuse me,” he replied languidly, “but I thought I’d be my own vampire by now. So how come that you’re starting to give me orders and threatening me again, out of the blue? I can socialize with whom I want.”

The big, handsome Toreador gave a derisive snort. “Your own vampire? Don’t be ridiculous, Childe! The Conclave only accepted you as a courtesy to Victor and because Angelus wanted them to. You wouldn’t survive in the Dark on your own for a week – you aren’t even able to Hunt properly!”

Emmett shrugged. “I’m not into the killing and maiming and generally wreaking havoc part – so what? I’m doing well enough with the blood dolls for someone who’s never wanted to become a bloodsucking fiend of the night. Besides, people like me as I am.”

“Camarilla Kindred like you, you little idiot,” Edward Blount retorted angrily, “and even of them mostly those from the fashion and movie industry. Jean-Vincent is an antitribu, a follower of the Sabbat – he’d eat you for breakfast if he caught you alone.”

“Why would he?” Emmett asked. “He has no reason to harm me.”

Edward Blount rolled his eyes. “Have you forgotten everything we taught you, idiot Childe? The Sabbat don’t need a reason; they’d kill you just for the fun of it – or to piss Victor off.”

“If they are so bad why don’t you guys throw them out of the city or kill them dead? Oh, wait, I forgot – we are dead already, all of us,” Emmett said acerbically.

In the next moment he felt himself lifted off his feet and his foster Sire shook him so roughly that his teeth rattled.

“Don’t get obnoxious on me, Emmett, or by Caine, I’ll teach you some manners the hard way!” Edward hissed. “You’re my responsibility; I’ll drain you till the verge of Final Death before I’d let you waltz into the den of a Sabbat monster. Jean-Vincent is a ruthless killer, one that enjoys the killing. Why in seven hells do you want to get know him anyway?”

“Michael thinks this new assistant of him, the one who slipped Ita the gossip about him and Brian, might actually be Justin,” Emmett admitted.

“Justin Taylor?” asked Edward Blount with a frown. “The annoying brat who used to draw the Rage
comics for Michael? *He’s* Sunshine?”

“He might be,” Emmett said. “Michael’s mom used to call him that. He might use the name just to piss Michael off. We need to know for certain.”

“Wrong,” Edward Blount corrected. “*Michael* needs to know. Perhaps Brian and Vera Vignes, too. *You* don’t. It’s not your business, so don’t get involved.”

“Michael is my best friend,” said Emmett indignantly. “*So it is* my business.”

“And I’m your sire and your guardian, and I say it isn’t,” replied Edward Blount. “But since you’re being unreasonable, I’ll have to bring in stronger arguments, it seems.”

Lightning-fast, he grabbed Emmett, slammed him against the wall and, tearing his shirt open, he sank his fangs into the younger vampire’s jugular, drinking deeply, until Emmett’s knees gave in from the heavy blood loss. Then he lifted the seriously weakened neonate like a rag doll and threw him across the room. Emmett landed on the bed with a painful *thud*.

“Next time you show me this kind of disrespect, I won’t stop here,” Edward Blount warned him before leaving. “Don’t try to leave the house. You’d be caught, and then I’d be *really* displeased. You don’t want to learn what that’s like.”

And he locked the door after him. Emmett didn’t even try to move. He was too weak… and too frightened. Until now, the older vampires had been fairly lenient to him, so he tended to forget that he owed his Elders obedience. Especially as the goodwill of said Elders was the only thing that kept him alive… well, *undead* at the very least.

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After two days without as much as a phone call from Emmett, Michael became worried. It was uncharacteristic for Emmett to do the vanishing act without warning, so he feared that his friend would be in real trouble. He had no idea that *he* had been the source of said trouble, of course.

Since he was still sorting out his feelings toward Brian’s new… *nature*, he couldn’t bring up the strength to ask him. As he had no idea that he was working with Kindred in the Studios – unlike Brian, he wasn’t a *resistor*, so the vampires could suggest away any oddity he might have noticed – he didn’t dare to ask anyone else, fearing to give away his friend’s secret. That left Alain and his household, the only other persons he knew to be vampires, and as much as he hated to ask the artist for help, his concern for Emmett was stronger than his aversion towards Brian’s Master.

To his mixed relief, Alain was available within three hours and agreed to meet him on ‘neutral territory’, as he put it. The neutral territory, in this case, was a quiet little diner in West-Hollywood, owned by one of Louis Fortier’s ghouls but visited by mortal patrons… well, mostly.

The waitress came to take their orders but Michael didn’t feel like eating; he was way too nervous. So they both ordered a drink – the usual red wine with dubious additions in Alain’s case and a beer for Michael, which order seemed to startle the waitress for some reason. Apparently, the usual clientele didn’t prefer beer there. After that, Michael got straight to the point.

“Is Emmett in trouble?” he asked bluntly.

Alain raised a surprised eyebrow. “Why should he?”

“Because I haven’t heard of him for two days, and it’s not like him to vanish like that,” Michael said. “Usually, he calls at least four times a day. So, what’s happened?”
“Nothing I’d know about,” Alain replied. “When did you see him the last time and under which circumstances?”

Michael described his last encounter with Emmett, and Alain nodded in understanding.

“I see,” he said. “I’d say his sudden disappearance can only mean that his… guardians have made certain steps to keep Emmett from doing what you’ve asked of him.”

“Why?” Michael asked in bewilderment.

Alain looked at him seriously. “Because what you’ve asked of him would be very dangerous, and we protect our progeny from unnecessary dangers until they become capable of protecting themselves.”

“Dangerous? I only asked him to…” Michael trailed off and suddenly became deathly pale, his voice barely more than a whisper. “This… this Jean-Vincent character… he’s a vampire, too?”

“Not just any vampire,” Alain replied dryly. “He’s a Sabbat; one of those who’ve fully earned our bad reputation among mortals. He’s a killer and it doesn’t really matter to him whether he kills mortals or other Kindred.”

If possible, Michael became even paler. “I had no idea… I’d never have asked Emmett…”

“You had no way to know,” Alain interrupted. “Emmett should have asked his Elders before agreeing. He’s a mere neonate and a fairly weak one at that.”

“Is he…” Michael hesitated. “Will be be… punished?”

Alain shook his head. “No. I think they’ve simply shut him away to prevent him from doing something foolish and dangerous. I’ll ask a few questions and call you later about it.”

“You’d do it?” Michael asked in surprise.

Alain shrugged. “Why not? I’ve got a long-lasting grudge with the Sabbat, and any way to thwart their plans is welcome for me. Besides, I won’t do it for free, you understand. I demand a bonus from you.”

“A… bonus?” Michael repeated nervously.

Alain leaned forward in his chair, that predatory, silver gleam appearing in his eyes again. “Just a little taste,” he murmured, catching Michael’s wrist and bringing it to his mouth, kissing it right above the big vein.

“What are you doing?” Michael was slightly panicked. “We’re in a public place!”

“So what?” Alain murmured, licking his wrist to lure the big vein to the surface. “They’ll probably think we’re gay. You’ve got a problem with that?”

And before Michael could have done anything, his fangs dropped and he sank them into the vein, barely nicking it. The sharp pain shot through Michael’s entire body like a bolt of lightning, making him instantly hard, and then the pleasure of the Kindred Kiss washed over him like a hot wave. The mixed pain/pleasure was so intense that he nearly came into his pants.

After a moment, Alain withdrew his fangs and licked the small puncture wounds closed to heal without scarring.
“We’ll definitely have to work on your stamina,” he said, licking his lips to enjoy the aftertaste, “but you taste delicious.”

“Better than Brian?” Michael didn’t know what had made him bait the vampire, and he regretted it right away, but Alain took no offence.

“Differently,” he replied simply. “Brian tastes like an old, warm brandy: spicy and intoxicating. You taste like mulled wine: spicy, too, but also sweet… it could become addictive, given the time.”

“Well, you should find another addiction,” Michael quickly became defensive again. “I’m no one’s personal slurpee.”

“I don’t consider you a food source,” Alain replied, clearly amused. “Not mine anyway, although I wouldn’t mind a snack from time to time – you are truly delicious, and I’m told not for feeding purposes alone.” He drank some wine, sloshing it around in his mouth before swallowing to wash away the taste of blood before leaning across the table to kiss Michael. “I intend to know the other delights you can offer – however you may choose in the end.”

Michael was too paralyzed with shock to resist, and after the first moment of surprise, also too honest to deny that he enjoyed being kissed within an inch of his life by Brian’s maker… master… whatever. Alain was a very… educated kisser, which one could expect from someone with more than half a millennium of experience under his belt, and Michael hadn’t allowed anyone to touch him since the shocking revelation of Brian’s new nature. Besides, it filled him with almost childish satisfaction that Alain was now showing some personal interest for him, instead of just tolerating him for Brian’s sake.

The waitress rapped her knuckles on the tabletop to get their attention. “Boys, stuff it or get a room. This is a diner, not a darkroom.

Alain let go of Michael unhurriedly. “Perhaps next time, Nellie,” he said, handing her a credit card. “Excellent wine, by the way. Louis’s own vintage, I assume?”

“What else?” the waitress booked off the small item and gave the card back. “You want a kist to be send to your house as usual?”

Alain nodded. “That would be nice, thank you.” Then, as she left, he turned to Michael again. “Please, keep a low profile, for safety’s sake. I’ll see into the issue and call you when I’ve learned anything.”

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It took Alain another four days to find out anything of importance. Under normal circumstances Michael would have climbed the walls with anxiety during this time, but to his relief, Emmett called him again, saying that he was basically all right but couldn’t speak long, and Michael shouldn’t worry.

That, of course, only made Michael worry even more, but there was nothing he could do. He took Alain’s warning to keep a low profile seriously, because what little he’d heard about the Sabbat in general and that Jean-Vincent person in particular made him very scared. But he did worry very much; so much that he took a couple of days off and didn’t even answer the phone, burying himself in work writing the screenplay for the Rage sequel. At least that kept him occupied most of the time. Not even Brian’s calls did he answer. He just didn’t have the nerve to deal with the situation. Not yet.

On the fourth day, Alain finally called him again, and they met in the small dinner again as it was
easy to get there for both of them.

“I’ve checked out this mysterious ‘Sunshine’, or at least I’ve tried,” he told Michael without preamble. “But it seems that nobody has actually seen him outside Jean-Vincent’s studio, where he appears to be kept all the time… which is typical for the Sabbat to treat their herd.”

“Their what?” Michael frowned.

Alain leaned forward and lowered his voice as if not wanting anyone to hear them. “Michael, the Sabbat are different from us Camarilla types in many ways, as I’ve already told him,” he said. “They consider mortals as cattle; so whether this ‘Sunshine’ is Justin Taylor or not, Jean-Vincent surely treats him as his personal property. He’d use him as a fucktoy and a food source – if the little brat is very lucky, perhaps as a favourite pet – until he gets bored with him.”

“And when he does get bored with him?” Michael asked. “What then?”

Alain shrugged. “Depends on the twink’s personal talent. He could be turned, which is the Sabbat version of the Embrace, made a ghoul or kept as a blood doll… or simply killed and thrown into a garbage bin. There are various possibilities for him to survive, though.”

“Each of which would make him part of your world,” Michael said slowly, “getting him closer to Brian again, while discrediting me and Rage at the same time. Clever; but Justin always had been single-mindedly ruthless when he wanted something. Or someone.”

“You believe he still wants to get Brian back?” Alain asked in surprise. “In case he is this ‘Sunshine’, that is.”

“I’m sure he is,” Michael replied. “It would be too much of a coincidence. Besides, he’s been obsessed with Brian from the day on they first met.”

“He should have realized by now that the whole thing is fairly hopeless,” Alain said.

Michael shook his head. “You don’t understand. Justin simply can’t accept the fact that one doesn’t make things work just because one wants them. Often enough, he got his wish by being selfish and aggressive – and so he kept behaving that way, with the help of numerous women who, for some reason, seem to adore him no matter what.”

Alain was silent for a few endless moments. Then he looked at Michael intently, like a snake trying to enthrall a bird.

“If you consider him such a threat, you should fight against him,” he said. “Our ‘world’, as you call it, is open for you, too. And we have ways and resources that mere mortals don’t have. Use them!”

“How?” Michael asked bitterly. “I’m still trying to come to terms with the fact that Brian and Emmett are now vampires. I’m not ready to make a decision just yet. This isn’t something about which I could change my mind later, should I decide to join the Lost Boys in any way.”

“That is understandable,” Alain nodded. “I don’t think you’d be ready to accept the Embrace, either. Not for a long while yet; perhaps never. But I can give you a taste – literally – of what it means to be acquainted with a particular Kindred bloodline.

“What do you mean?” Michael was scared to death and fascinated at the same time.

Alain gave him another one of those hypnotizing looks, and this time his eyes had a definite silver gleam.
“I can give you a taste – a very small taste, because you wouldn’t be able to bear more – of my Vitae… my own blood,” he explained. “It would make you feel sick to your stomach, yes, and you’d feel as if your intestines were on fire.; but it would also give you a glimpse of the power contained in our Blood… and of the connection between all those of our line who regularly share blood with each other.”

Michael felt his stomach turn over from the mere idea and was sure that he looked somewhat green around the gills. But his curiosity was definitely piqued now.

“What do you mean with connection?” he asked. “Can you guys read each other’s thoughts or whatnot?”

Alain nodded. “We can if we wish, and if the other one is willing. We can also share feelings. Emotions. Desires.”

“And I’d be able to read Brian, too?” Michael asked with ill-concealed longing.

“Not from a little taste, you won’t,” Alain replied. “You’d only be able to get a glimpse from me. But that would give you a general idea what it’s like.”

Michael shot him a doubtful look. “I’m not so sure I’d like to take a look at your mind,” he said.

“Quite frankly, you creep the hell out of me. No offence intended.”

“None taken,” Alain grinned. “Actually, I’m flattered. But don’t worry, it won’t last long. In a few hours, it will be gone again.”

“And it won’t harm me in any form?” Michael asked suspiciously.

“Define harm,” Alain said. “But I won’t lie to you. Have you once tasted my Vitae – or that of any other Kindred, in fact – it would leave a hunger in you that no mortal pleasure would be able to satisfy. We call it ‘a touch of the Wild’, for this is how it works with any mortals who taste Kindred blood. That’s why they all choose to come over into our ‘world’ sooner or later, one way or another.”

“So, doing this would ease my way to your world,” Michael said slowly.

Alain nodded. “That’s the real purpose, yes.”

“But won’t it take the decision out of my hands, too?” Michael was decidedly uncomfortable with that thought.

“No,” Alain said. “It only opens the door for you. Whether you go through it or not, is and will always remain your choice.”

“It will draw me to your world, though,” Michael said.

“Of course,” Alain replied. “As I said, that’s its purpose. We’re a species that breeds by transforming humans into our kind. We need a way to show possible candidates what our unlife is like. This is a risk you’ll have to take if you want to understand us… to understand what Brian has become.”

“It seems to me that I’m taking one risk after another where Brian is concerned, ever since I’ve come to LA,” Michael commented dryly.

“That’s true,” Alain said. “But one has to, if the prize is worthy. The question is: how worthy do you consider that which you might have with Brian in the future. Every other thing depends on your
“Then I don’t really have a choice,” Michael said.

“Love like yours rarely has,” Alain replied simply.

Michael gave him an odd look. “Voice of experience speaking here?”

“You have no idea,” Alain answered with a sigh. “Five hundred years haven’t been enough to help me getting over that one loss.”

“Five hundred years?” Michael repeated, completely flabergasted. “And you still haven’t got the guy to notice you? Man, but being undead really sucks!”

“He’s dead,” Alain replied with a sad little smile. “He wasn’t one of us, you see. I accepted the Embrace from some stray Toreador to be able to protect him and to stay with him. He never knew who – what – I was, although he sometimes wondered why I wouldn’t age.”

“He must have been very important for you,” Michael said.

Alain nodded. “You don’t meet a genius like Leonardo every day. Not even back then, when geniuses were a lot more common than nowadays. Once you were enthralled by him, you were hooked and couldn’t leave, no matter what.”

“Leonardo?” Michael, having visited Europe with David and learned something about art by default in the process, made a quick calculation. Five hundred years ago… “You mean Leonardo da Vinci? You were involved with that Leonardo?”

“There was only one Leonardo in the entire history of art,” Alain replied, “but we weren’t ‘involved’, as you understand it. I was already in my mid-twenties when we met, and he… preferred younger muses. No, not that way, either. He surrounded himself with very young admirers: beautiful younglings whom he patronised and on whose admiration he thrived. He was inspired by their beauty, but he never touched them – not that I’d know of it, and I spent a lifetime as his apprentice, secretary and personal bodyguard.”

“And he never knew what you felt for him?” Michael asked.

Alain shrugged. “Perhaps he did. I’m not sure. But he never cared about my feelings. He was the Maestro; he considered admiration as his rightful due. Plus, he was a very private person. He didn’t like to share his feelings or even show them.”

“But you stayed on his side for a lifetime,” Michael said. “It must have been hard to see him grow old and die, without returning your… affections. At least Brian knows that I’ve always loved him. That would comfort him, should I choose to remain mortal.”

“I think you underestimate your role in Brian’s life… well, unlife in these days,” Alain replied seriously. “He was telling the truth about not having been able to manage life without you. That part has never changed, not even beyond death and rebirth as a Kindred. Should anything happen to you, Brian would take a walk in the sun.”

Michael frowned, not understanding the typical Kindred euphemism at first – then he blanched as he finally did.

“You are fighting dirty,” he said accusingly.
Alain shook his head. “No, I don’t. I’m just making you realize the full importance of your decision. You’re holding his life in your hands – you always have and always will. But mortal hands are weak. I don’t want you to drop him.”

“I won’t do such thing!” Michael protested indignantly.

“Not willingly, of that I’m sure,” Alain replied. “I’d just prefer to give you the strength to hold him safely.”

“I see,” Michael said. “You’d accept me in his life… unlife… whatever, just so that you can keep him.”

“That about sums it up,” Alain agreed, “and I’ve already admitted this to you several times. For the first time since Yitzhak’s betrayal – another long story for another time – I’ve finally found someone I actually care for. I’d do anything in my power not to lose him.”

“I understand that,” Michael said. “Believe me; no one understands it better than me. It’s the same for me, you see. I’m just not sure the whole undead business is within my power.”

“I can see how it could be frightening,” Alain replied. “But in the end, if you want to keep him as well, there isn’t any other way.”

“Which means I ought to try the vampire blood thing, eh?” Michael asked doubtfully.

“It could help, yes,” Alain said, “although it’s not strictly necessary.”

“Well, that’s encouraging,” Michael said sardonically.

They were quiet for a while, each of them sipping on his drink, deep in his own thoughts. Finally Michael shifted in his chair.

“All right,” he said reluctantly, “I think I ought to give this… this thing a try, at least. For Brian’s sake.”

“Are you absolutely sure?” Alain asked. “The craving, once you’ve tasted my Vitae, cannot be undone.”

“I realize that,” Michael said, “and if I want to be honest, the thought freaks me out, big time. But I need to find a way to protect Brian, and if this helps…”

“I can protect Brian,” Alain said, but Michael shook his head.

“By all due respect… no, you can’t. It’s my job; it has been since we were both fourteen. I must do this… or try, at the very least. There’s no-one else whom he would trust.”

Alain gave him one of those long, piercing looks… then nodded.

“All right. It would be awkward to do this in the atelier house, but I’ve got a small haven in West-Hollywood, too.”

“Let’s go,” Michael said, pale but determined.

They paid the bill and left the dinner together, Alain having a supportive hand between Michael’s shoulder blades. Neither of them noticed the young man hiding in the shadows who stared after them with bitter satisfaction.
They said that Kindred were generally bisexual - especially the males - and that was true for most of them. Some of them preferred one gender a little more, however, and there were a few rare individuals who were exclusively straight (like Horatio Ballard in Pittsburgh) or exclusively gay. Camarilla Kindred respected one’s preferences as a rule; Brian was still glad to have Alain’s foster Childe as his new assistant. Sarina, while generally open to both directions, lacked the predatory instincts of female Toreadors who had a hard time to accept no as an answer, and was more than willing to keep their working relationship an entirely platonic one.

Plus, she was completely immune to Brian’s temper tantrums. Being infested with – and nearly killed by – demon spawn (while still a mortal) apparently changed one’s perspective. Fledgling vampires from one’s own household weren’t considered as a real danger anymore.

While Sarina’s main goal was to become an actress, and she also did some modelling for the Girard Fashion House, she had needed a day job to earn a living. At first Brian hadn’t liked the idea of introducing her to the ad business, but soon enough he had to change his mind. She was smart, ruthless and attractive, not to mention willing to learn. After a somewhat bumpy start they had gone along fabulously. The fact that she had zero interest in him as a man helped a lot.

They had finished the last touches on the campaign for Salvador Garcia’s Argentinean wines – the one Alain had promised the legendary Anarch leader in exchange of the loan of Garcia’s vampire-safe jet and pilot some months ago, so that Brian could go to Michael when Ben had been dying – and Sarina left to study her role for the Rage sequel. She had already been selected to play the title role in Rage II – The Black Widow, in case the first movie proved to be a blockbuster indeed, and was now taking acting classes to make a good impression on the silver screen. As Michael had already charmed the investors into financing a potential sequel, Brett Keller wanted to shoot a lot of scenes back to back in advance and produce a lengthy and detailed trailer for the second movie. That way they saved a lot of time and money, and could merchandise the trailer via Internet, even if the first movie flopped. Which was unlikely, but not entirely impossible. Rage was an unusual concept, to say the least.

After Sarina had left, Brian contacted first Cynthia, then Ted via teleconference to see how things were going in The Pitts. What he learned sounded good. Horatio Ballard and his business empire could feed Kinnetic alone for years, and there were plenty of other offers for his little ad firm. Vanguard had to give way in several different areas, and that filled Brian’s undead heart with evil glee. His former boss and partner would have to learn yet what Kindred contacts were worth.

Finally, he opened his mailing program to shift through the spam folder. He did this once a week, as spam filters sometimes managed to catch important messages by accident. After deleting dozens of ads for the newest SlimFast diet, herbal Viagra and penis enlargement pills, he found such a message. The subject line was a somewhat provocative question: Are you sure your Mikey is still faithful?

It sounded like a lot of other spam messages – it was amazing how many private investigators were willing to sniffle after one’s cheating spouses and partners – but it was the name “Mikey” that caught his eye. He checked the sender’s address which was atruefriend@aol.com, obviously a fake one. After a moment of hesitation he opened the anonymous message. It said:

Your doe-eyed little bitch is getting fucked by your Sire. Are you going to let them make a fool of you? Then you’re the one who is truly pathetic.

For a moment he couldn’t believe his eyes. But the barbed thorn of suspicion was already caught under his skin. What if it was true? Michael might not believe in his own attractiveness, but Brian
knew there were many who fell exactly for that slender, boyish type. And few could ever withstand those beautiful, liquid dark eyes…

He tried to reach Alain through their link, but his Sire was either on the other side of the town or blocking him. He grabbed his phone and called Alain’s number, but his Sire’s cell was off. So he finally called the house to ask after Alain. It was Peppone who answered his call.

“He’s gone out to meet someone in West-Hollywood,” the Italian Toreador said. “He’s called half an hour ago and told me he’s gonna spend some time in his personal haven. Is there a problem?”

“No,” Brian replied slowly, the phone suddenly very cold in his numb hand. “No problem at all. I’ll talk to him later.”
Alain’s secondary haven was an abandoned warehouse in West-Hollywood: an ugly, two-storey concrete building from the outside, with a simple brass plaque signalling the ownership of the DeLaigle Art School and Studios. From the inside, it looked like a medieval castle… or, at the very least, like the Great Hall of one.

When Alain opened the small door cut into the huge steel gate and gestured him to go inside, Michael had the feeling that he was entering a different world; a long-gone world that had somehow been frozen in time. What looked like a shapeless concrete cube from the outside was within a single enormous room with an arched ceiling high above their heads. The arches had been obviously hand-built at a later time, of red brick; yet with the greyish-white of the concrete walls they looked surprisingly authentic. The long, narrow windows between the arches were made of stained glass, each depicting a different scene, the meaning of which Michael didn’t understand. But they kept out the direct sunlight efficiently, breaking it down to a rainbow of different colours – it was a beautiful sight.

The walls were covered with plaster and painted with murals in the somewhat naïve style of pre-raffaellite painters. The elongated figures of people clad in medieval garb had an endearing quality, and the scenes in which they had been set were lively and delightful. The floor was covered with mosaic to two-thirds of the hall and with wooden planks in the rest.

The furnishing was sparse at best. A long trestle table with two benches stood in the middle, with a heavy, masterfully carved oakwood armchair at the head. On a sideboard of the same craftsmanship were dishes of glass, silver and zinc; Michael was no expert but he would have sworn that they were as old as Alain himself. There was a chest for clothes, and in the farthest corner stood a huge four-poster bed, large enough for four persons if necessary, hung with beautiful, albeit somewhat faded tapestries. Next to the bed a narrow door led to another room.

There were no lamps in the hall, but two intricately wrought silver candlesticks stood on the bare table, and heavy bronze candelabra in all four corners. There were two beautiful sets of armour on poles left and right of the front door, as if two armed knights would be guarding the hall (which actually had a very reliable alarm system).

“This is very different from your house,” Michael commented.

Alain nodded. “The house serves the person who I have become. This place, however, is my home. The home of the man I once used to be. My refuge from a world that has changed too much for my comfort.”

“Do you change into old costumes, too, when you are here?” Michael asked. He meant it as a joke, but Alain apparently didn’t.

“Of course,” the artist said. “And so will you. For me, these are not costumes but an integral part of the life I once lead. What we’re about to do is an ancient ritual; we can’t desecrate it with modern clothing.”

Michael rolled his eyes, not entirely sure whether this was a manifestation of Alain’s weird sense of humour – something Brian had mentioned occasionally – but the artist seemed utterly serious about
the issue. Well, perhaps such things were taken seriously among vampires – who was Michael to know?

“All right,” he said with a shrug. “What do you expect me to wear?”

“Less,” Alain replied with a sudden, predatory grin, and Michael understood that it had been a weird joke, after all, and he wasn’t going to wear any strange medieval garb for this to happen.

“You are weird,” he said, shaking his head.

“I’ve been told so on occasion,” Alain replied mildly. He opened the chest, took out a plaited blue cotton shirt that had long, baggy arms, held it against Michael and nodded. “It will do. Wear this.”

“And nothing else?” Michael asked sarcastically.

Alain’s eyes turned silver for a moment. “You won’t be needing anything else.”

For some reason that announcement frightened Michael, his mind providing several reasons for the request, but he wasn’t going to back off now. As a small, fragile boy, he’d been overly careful all his life, and stayed that way as an adult, barely taking any risks and usually at the wrong time. Now, on the threshold of the biggest risk of his life, he couldn’t back-pedal right before the first step.

There was one detail that made him a bit uncomfortable, though.

“Are you going to watch?” he asked, his hand hesitating over the first button of his shirt.

Alain nodded with a gleeful expression on his face. “Oh, yes. I’ve seen very flattering mental images in Brian’s mind; I want to know whether reality is even close to them.”

Michael felt himself blush involuntarily but began to undress with a definite lack of grace. He wasn’t clumsy as a rule – well, not much – but the situation was embarrassing. He’d undressed in front of guys he’d barely known before, and Alain wasn’t exactly a stranger (not with his intimate relationship with Brian); still, Michael knew he was being judged, more so than he’d ever been in his life, and that made him nervous. Alain watched him closely, with the detached interest of an artist, which made the whole situation even more unreal because really, getting naked with an unpredictable vampire wasn’t something a guy would do on the regular basis.

Finally Michael was naked, and Alain walked around him without hurry, examining the view from several different angles.

“You are built like a runner,” he said. “Brian is biased, of course – one always is when looking at someone through the eyes of love – but you do have a touch of eternal youth about you, which is very appealing. A bit more flesh on your bones wouldn’t harm, but all in all you’re more than adequate.”

“Adequate for what?” Michael asked, fed up with the weirdness. He felt like a chunk of meat, displayed on the butcher’s counter. “For crazy vampire sex or for human sacrifices?”

Alain raised an ironic eyebrow. “I didn’t know you would be interested in either. But I meant as a model, actually. I’ve received a commission from the Otis College of Art and Design, for a bronze Hermes sculpture. I accepted, as I feel like doing something classic for a change, but I haven’t found the right model yet.”

“And if I’m not interested in posing for you?” Michael asked.
Alain shrugged. “Then don’t. It’s your decision… although it would be a great sculpture.” He pushed the shirt into Michael’s hand. “Put this on, get on the bed and wait for me.”

Michael found himself obeying without protest. The shirt felt surprisingly well on his bare skin – it was more like a tunic, actually, and almost knee-length, with a lengthy opening in the front that reached down half the way to his navel. He clambered onto the huge bed, sitting on it with his legs crossed and dragged the hem of the shirt over his bare knees nervously.

“Why are you acting like a frightened virgin?” Alain, too, was disrobing, but languidly, allowing him to see his full. And it was worth the sight. For a five-hundred-year old, the artist certainly looked great: sleekly muscled under pale skin and nicely endowed, too, although not overly so. He shrugged on a shirt (or tunic) similar to the one Michael was wearing, just in a creamy white colour. It suited him very well, and as he raked his fingers through his hair to loosen the black tresses, all of a sudden Michael was looking at a completely different person.

It wasn’t the sardonic lead artist of the DeLaigle Art School and Studios any longer. It was Alain DeLaigle, a lesser French nobleman of the fifteenth century; a young artisan of the greatest period of European art. One who’d seen Botticelli, Michelangelo, Leonardo, Raffaello, Donatello and all the others in person. One who had to learn to survive the rule of the Borgias in Firenze. One who’d heard the preaching of Savonarola and watched the fanatic monk die on the pyre.

It was Alain DeLaigle, the five hundred year old vampire who had seen it all and lived to tell the tale. Well, perhaps not lived exactly… but endured all that and more, and now existed in a world so alien for him as living on Mars would have been for Michael.

The ramifications of those facts nearly blew Michael’s mind. As much as he had used to suffer from David’s snobbish attitude, that had been the only period in his life when he had truly touched culture beyond comics and superhero movies. And now here he was, facing a person who’d seen all those great works in the museums in the making.

“Yes,” Alain said as if reading his mind. “This is what I once used to be, but I’m also all that which I’ve become in the last half millennium. The short, insignificant lives of your kind, your so-called culture, is but a dance of mayflies in my eyes. You create nothing of lasting value, and in a few decades, you’ll be forgotten. All of you.”

“What do you want of us, then?” Michael asked, more than a little insulted. “Why do you go through all the pain to bind us to you? Why have you made Brian a vampire, if we’re all so shallow and worthless in your eyes?”

“I’m a Toreador and an artist, and as such I reveal in beauty,” Alain replied. “I’ve Embraced Brian to conserve his beauty and his anger, for both will enrich Clan Toreador greatly. But he has already reached his limits. I’ve frozen him in his perfect shape, like an insect in a piece of amber, before he would begin to decline - and I’m content with the results, having gained a companion I intend to enjoy for a very long time… even as we count time. You, however, have something he no longer has.”

Michael gave him a disbelieving look. “And that would be?”

“Potential,” Alain said. “Potential that has always been thwarted: by your friends and family, by less than ideal circumstances, by your shallow surroundings… even by your love to Brian. I can help you to unfold all that which still slumbers in you, undetected. You’re still at the beginning of your journey. Some people start late – but it’s a journey worth to make.”

“And all I have to do is to join the Lost Boys, right?” Michael commented dryly.
“It would give you the necessary time,” Alain said. “As I said, you’re not ready to accept the Embrace yet; nor would it be in your best interest right now. You need to walk in the sunlight for a long while yet. But as a ghoul, you’d stop aging and can explore the possibilities that lie before you, while leading the same life as before.”

“Except the small detail that I’d have to drink your blood regularly,” Michael said with a disgusted grimace.

Alain nodded. “Except that, yes. Would it truly be such a high price?”

“I don’t know,” Michael shrugged. “Am I not here to figure out just that?”

Alain suddenly broke into a wide grin. “Yes, you are. So, why don’t we get it done before continuing this theoretical debate?”

He stretched out on the bed next to Michael and kissed him unhurriedly. Michael didn’t protest, and when Alain pinched his nipple through the thin cotton of the blue shirt, he arched into the touch. It hurt a little, but in a good way… he felt himself harden already.

“You’re very responsive, mon amant,” Alain murmured, pushing him onto his back and sliding a hand under the shirt to reach between his legs playfully. “We’ll have to explore those possibilities, too… but there will be time for that later. Now, pay attention. When I kiss you again, I’ll cut my tongue just a little with the tip of a fang. You’ll have to swallow my Vitae on your own; I can’t force you. Don’t worry, the small wound will close immediately; you’re in no danger to drink too much. Do you understand?”

Michael nodded wordlessly, his nerve endings already on fire from the expert touch of that cool hand on his heated skin. If Alain had asked permission to drain him dry, he’d have bared his throat willingly. He didn’t understand it – he only knew that if asked, he would do it.

But Alain didn’t ask anything like that from him – not yet anyway. Michael accepted the deep-tongued kiss, opening up obediently to the questing tongue, and felt the tip of a razor sharp fang grazing his lower lip for a moment. He shivered with fear and anticipation. Then he tasted something slick and coppery on his own tongue, and at first he nearly threw up. The feeling was too weird for words, and vaguely disgusting.

He remembered, though, that he was supposed to swallow Alain’s blood on his own, and with a gargantuan effort, he overcame his disgust and did so. He shuddered when it slid down his throat, like some cool, living thing, but forced himself to keep it down, although his first instinct would have been to spit it back, right into Alain’s face.

“I’m drinking blood, he thought with morbid fascination. Like a vampire. Like… like Brian…

Alain looked at him critically. “Well, you’re a little green around the gills, but that was to be expected,” he said. “Unfortunately, the worst part is just about to come.”

Michael wanted to ask what the vampire meant – but in that very moment it hit him with the force of a truck. He was burning up in the inside, as if his intestines would have been flooded with liquid fire, his limbs went into cramps, and he curled up involuntarily into a tight ball of raw agony, whimpering in misery. It hurt more than he’d expected. More than he could have imagined, in fact.

Alain scooted closer to him, hugged him tightly and placed little kisses onto his hair, temple and neck.

“Hold on just a little longer,” he murmured. “The effect will lessen in a moment… and then you’ll
receive your reward.”

“What reward,” Michael groused between bolts of stabbing pain in his belly. “A pity fuck? Thanks, but I’m so not interested.”

“Don’t worry,” Alain’s voice was low and seductive, almost a purr. “I don’t intend to have pity with your pretty ass.”

It was such a cheesy pick-up line, it had so much… well, normalcy to it that Michael couldn’t help but laugh through his agony.

“That’s better,” Alain said. “Now, try to relax and take deep breaths. You should be feeling by now.”

“Feeling what?” Michael asked in confusion.

“Me,” Alain replied, and in that very moment, Michael could really feel him. Or, to be more accurate, he could feel a second consciousness existing parallel to his own, one that could only be Alain’s.

In a way, it was like looking down the aisles of a shadowy old library, filled with ancient memories instead of hand-written tomes. It had an age about it, like touching history with one’s bare hands. Not for the first time, yet for the first time for real, he realized that many things of which he’d had abstract knowledge at best (or not even that, considering his rather low-level education) had once been part of Alain’s daily life. That the historical events of the last five hundred years had been eyewitness news for the vampire.

The thought was frightening and fascinating at the same time, like so many other aspects of Alain’s complex personality. And yet Michael felt drawn to it, drawn to him, like a moth to the flame.

“Is this what Brian sees when… when you share blood?” he asked haltingly, the weirdness of his own question not even recognizing with him any longer.

Alain shook his head. “No,” he said with definite regret. “Brian has no interest for my past. The best I can expect is to share my present with him – and, hopefully, my future, if I can keep him. But that, ultimately, depends on you… on your personal choice. He won’t survive the loss of you.”

Until now, Michael would have considered that statement as simple emotional blackmail. But now that he’d become privy to Alain’s emotions, even though only temporarily, he understood that the vampire was deadly serious. To his honest surprise, he also discovered something else, though: a definite interest from Alain’s side for himself.

Alain wanted to fuck him. There was no doubt about that at all.

“I thought you only tolerated me for Brian’s sake,” he said, unable to hide his surprise.

“It started that way,” Alain admitted, petting him absent-mindedly. “I’ve come to value your assets, though.”

“My… assets,” Michael repeated slowly.

“I don’t mean your ass, pretty as it is,” Alain clarified. “I mean your courage. It’s not easy to live and work with vampires, especially for someone who doesn’t have suicidal tendencies; yet you’re doing exactly that. That deserves respect.”
Michael was stunned. Absolutely stunned. Respect was one thing he never got much in his whole life. Not from his mother, not from his friends, not from his lovers… or his husband. Sometimes he had the feeling that not even Brian truly respected him. Yet this virtual stranger, this five-hundred-year-old vampire who’d met the greatest minds of human history in his unnaturally long life… *unlife*… whatever… this unusual person apparently thought that Michael deserved respect.

That was something new. But he found Alain’s physical interest in him every bit as flattering. After all, in five hundred years Alain must have fucked half the planet…

“Not really,” Alain said, having read his thoughts easily. “Not everyone has the same ambitions as Brian. In fact, I never fucked anyone I wasn’t at least remotely interested in.”

“But you want to fuck *me*?” Michael asked, still a little dubious.

“Oh, yes!” Alain said. “Don’t be so surprised. If you weren’t eminently fuckable, Brian wouldn’t be interested in you; and you know that.”

“Well…” Michael wished he could be that sure, but Alain silenced him with an impatient gesture.

“Yes, you do. Stop selling yourself under your price. And yes, I’m going to fuck you so thoroughly you’re gonna walk funny for a weak at least – *if* you’re up to it, that is. We vampires aren’t into vanilla sex. I won’t hurt you deliberately, but it could get a little… violent, should I get carried away. Are you willing to take the risk?”

Under normal circumstances Michael would have answered with a clear and determined *no*. He didn’t have masochistic tendencies, and while he didn’t mind a little pain sometimes to sharpen the edge of pleasure, he was decidedly *not* into getting hurt in earnest. Right now, however, the heat of Alain’s *Vitae* was still burning in his veins, almost unbearably, and that burning had made him reckless.

“I… I want to know what it’s like,” he said.

Alain gave him a long, searching look… then he smiled. It was a decidedly predatory smile.

“Very well,” he said, his eyes turning silver. “On your knees then, youngling. I’ll take that pretty mouth of yours first.”

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Having learned Alain’s whereabouts hadn’t exactly put Brian’s mind at ease, on the contrary. He knew his Sire only used that secondary haven for *very* personal purposes, and he had the nagging suspicion that solitary meditation of five hundred years’ worth of memories wasn’t currently Alain’s main agenda for retiring there. Especially since Mikey still wouldn’t answer his calls. Not even the mailbox was on. Mikey must have shut off his cell completely.

No, Brian couldn’t be *sure* that his best friend – nowadays also the object of his desire, depressingly out of reach – was currently with his Sire. In theory, Mikey could have simply forgotten his phone; he could have been anywhere in Tinsel Town, from working on the *Rage* website with Diego to going on some inane shopping tour with Emmett or spending some time with Ash Rivers and his exclusive circle of fellow degenerates… the list could go on and on. Mikey had become quite popular among the self-declared stars of Hollywood.

Yet for some reason Brian was sure that Mickey was with Alain, probably getting nailed to the mattress in that very moment. His Sire had blocked him for the major part of the day, but Brian had noticed Alain’s growing interest for Mikey… and was afraid. He knew from first-hand experience
how irresistible his Sire could be in full seductive mode, and Mikey, starved for attention, would be easy prey for Alain’s seduction skills.

He just couldn’t understand why Alain was doing this. Was it a way to show his belligerent Childe that everything that was Brian’s also belonged to him by default? Or did he really want Mikey for himself? Unlike most people, Brian could certainly understand that. Michael’s beauty was less visible, more subtle than his own, but an artist like Alain would notice it… and doubtlessly appreciate it,

At any other time Brian would have been proud that someone whose opinion he valued would notice how wonderful Mikey really was. Right now, however, he was desperately jealous… something he wasn’t allowed to feel. Though freed, he was still a mere fledgling; all which was his did belong to his Sire as well.

The main problem was that he still wasn’t sure that Michael was his in the first place. And after finally having made a step into the great unknown between friendship and – well, something else… he dreaded the thought of losing Mikey to anyone. Even to his Sire. Especially to his Sire.

He knew that driving to West-Hollywood and banging on the front door of Alain’s private haven would only earn him a harsh punishment, and as his ass still wore the fading marks of their last disciplinary session, he didn’t really want another one just yet. He wanted to talk to someone, to voice his frustration, to rage and curse and to have a sympathetic ear for his fit of tempers. He refused to discuss it with Emmett, not wanting the whole gay community of LA being informed within the hour, so he chose the only remaining option.

He gave Phillipe Navital a phone call.

He’d be the first to admit that this counted as a fairly extreme reaction for him – he most certainly wasn’t the type for ‘sharing his feelings’. In fact, the mere thought made him shudder with disgust. But he felt terribly out of his league in this situation, and Phillipe was old and powerful, even as Kindred counted those things. Besides, he’d been the first vampire with whom Brian had got involved – in several different senses of the word – and they remained causal friends, even after they had stopped being intimate. Brian hoped that if anyone, Phillipe would help him navigate around the pitfalls of his current status.

They met in A Taste of LA, as this was a particularly discreet place for vampires to talk undisturbed – not to mention neutral territory, where most factions of Kindred society were welcome. Phillipe ordered his favourite vintage of bloodwine – one that contained a very small percentage of actual blood, barely enough to take the edge of the Thirst off – then he looked at Brian with mild curiosity.

“So, what is this about?” he asked. “Or rather whom? Alain or Michael or both?”

“Michael… both… I don’t really know,” Brian replied with a sigh. “Perhaps it’s nothing. Perhaps someone just wants to sow discord between us…”

“You’d make more sense if you’d tell me what happened,” Phillipe interrupted. “Preferably in chronological order.”

That sounded like the sensible thing to do, and so Brian told him everything that had happened since his first – and so far only – time with Michael. Due to his close ties to other important people of the Camarilla – and the fact that his law firm represented the Vignes Studios – Phillipe then was able to fill the gaps.

“You’re in a somewhat… delicate situation,” he said when Brian had given them all the facts.
“You’ve been adamant to have Michael here with you; and it was your careless behaviour that has made him aware of our existence. I don’t know whether you realize it or not, but you’ve actually broken the Masquerade. Under an old-fashioned Ventrue Prince both you and your... *friend* would be dead by now, and Alain perhaps too, should he refuse to destroy you. You’re fortunate that we have an Anarch Prince here, whose main concern is not to let anyone be Embraced against their will.”

Brian remembered the dark vampire he’d seen in the Hyperion for a moment, almost a year ago, and shivered. He had been attracted to Angelus, Prince of the City, very much but had been emphatically discouraged by Spike, the Prince’s Enforcer. He’d only met Angelus one other time, on the Conclave meeting where he’d been accepted as a member of Clan Toreador, but he knew, for the first time in his life, that the Prince was way beyond his league.

Alain liked to call himself a monster, albeit a civilized one. Angelus was a monster; a certified one according to history files. A reformed monster in these days - one of whose grip on civilized manners were everyone’s guess, though, at least when his Beast emerged.

Or so the urban legends among the LA Kindred said. Which didn’t lessen Brian’s interest in the Prince of the City the least – on the contrary. He’d always been drawn to danger like a moth to the flame, and becoming a Kindred only increased that particular craving in him. Sure, he was still a baby in Kindred terms, with little to no hope to catch the Prince’s eye just yet – one didn’t capture Angelus’ attention by be merely pretty – but perhaps one day...

“Don’t even think about that for the next hundred years or so,” Phillipe, who’d come to know him, his cravings and his appetites fairly well during the last year, warned him seriously. “You wouldn’t survive an encounter like that. Besides, don’t you think that you are using double standards here? You come to me to whine about Michael possibly sleeping with Alain, and in the next moment you’re all about getting into the Prince’s pants – are you insane or pathologically self-centered or what?”

Brian shrugged, albeit a little uncomfortably. “I can’t help it, Phillipe. It’s my *nature*.”

“If we’d all act on our instincts, we could be bacteria,” Phillipe said sternly. “It seems to me that you still have to learn a great deal about what being Kindred – being *Camarilla* Kindred – truly means. First and foremost, it means discipline. Without discipline, you can never hope to keep the Beast under control. Sure, we can have anything we want... but if we don’t want to become monsters like the Sabbat, we need to keep our cravings under control.”

Brian gave him an incredulous look. “We’re talking about casual sex, Phillipe, not about a rampant blood-sucking orgy!”

“Exactly,” Phillipe agreed. “You seem to believe that you can continue your life in the Dark the same way you used to live as a mortal... well, you’re mistaken. Kindred law is harsh – if you step outside your boundaries, you won’t be given another chance. Alain has been very lenient with you so far, but if I were you, I wouldn’t cross him when it comes to his prerogatives as your Sire. It could end badly for you.”

“But why does he have to take Mikey form me?” Brian asked bitterly. “He could have anyone he wanted – including me. Why has it to be Mikey?”

Phillipe gave him a long, almost commiserate look.

“What makes you think that Alain was the one who started it?” he asked. “You take your friend for granted – but what if he got fed up with that? He’s a successful screenwriter now. That, and the
courses he finished at the college, and with good results may I add, have boosted his self-confidence and broadened his horizon considerably. He’s no more the meek little man you could pull close or push away as it suited you all those times.”

“But I... I love him!” Brian whispered. “He knows it. I finally came around to even tell him! Why would he turn away from me now?”

“Who says he turns away from you?” Phillipe asked. “For me, it seems rather that he tries to understand our world – your world. Going to Alain for answers was the logical step.”

“But what... what if he falls for Alain?” Brian asked miserably. “I don’t mind if they fuck, that’s just sex, and it doesn’t matter. But you know Alain... how seductive he can be... and Michael is still so innocent! What if he falls for him? I... I can’t lose Mikey, after all this time!”

“In that case,” Phillipe replied with a faint smile, “I suggest that you start wooing him in earnest.”

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Michael woke up with the feeling as if a tank had rolled over him somehow during the previous night... not that the feeling would have been entirely unpleasant. His jaw ached, true, his ass was sore – deliciously so – and he was still a little light-headed from the blood loss. Nonetheless, he also felt great; he couldn’t remember to have ever been so thoroughly sated in his life. There was something to say about vampire stamina, he thought, absently rubbing the spot where Alain’s fangs had repeatedly pierced his skin. Having five hundred years to refine one’s technique probably didn’t harm, either.

“Are you all right?” a deceivingly soft voice asked, and Alain, wearing that silly semi-medieval shirt again, came around the bed curtains and handed him a glass of red wine. “Here, drink this.”

Michael pulled a face. “I don’t really like wine.”

“Drink it nonetheless,” Alain replied. “It helps with replacing all that blood you’ve... donated last night. Or would you prefer iron shots?”

“God, no!” Michael protested and drank the wine with very obvious distaste. “Gah, this is awful. Do you undead guys all drink this stuff?”

“Usually,” Alain said. “It allows us to feed publicly and discretely. Only another Kindred can make a difference between regular red wine and bloodwine by sight alone.”

“Bloodwine?” Michael repeated.

“The scale goes from red wine laced with just a little blood to real blood diluted a little with red wine,” Alain explained. “Eateries owned by Kindred usually offer as many as six different versions, depending on the customer’s wishes. Don’t worry,” he added, grinning, when he saw Michael getting a little green and giving the now empty glass a dubious look. “Yours was red wine, pure and simple.”

“That’s a relief,” Michael said honestly. “But since we’re talking about the bloodsucking part already... does sex with a vampire always include a big sucking orgy like last night? ‘Cause that could lead to serious anaemia in the long run.”

“No,” Alain climbed into bed with him again. “Last night was a little unexpected, even for me.”

“It was?” Michael asked in surprise. “Come on, I couldn’t have been that good. I’m not Brian, after all.”
“No,” the vampire agreed. “You’re something else entirely. Something rare and precious.”

“Yeah, right,” Michael said with a self-deprecating little laugh.

But Alain remained very serious. “I’m not joking, Michael,” he said. “You’re a true submissive – someone who finds delight in submission – and such people are extremely rare.”

“Oh, come on!” Michael laughed. “I know more bottoms than I could possibly count; it’s not so that I’d be something special.”

“Between simple bottoms and a true submissive are worlds,” Alain corrected. “You’re definitely the latter: you find fulfilment in giving up control to your partner, in figuring out what he wants or needs, and in giving him exactly that. This has nothing to do with liking to be fucked. You’re also gifted with mild empathic powers.”

“Me?” Michael laughed. “No way!”

Alain nodded. “Yes, you. That enables you to get along with almost everyone, even with Brian. Especially with Brian, since you’re one of the very few people who can see beyond his masks.”

“Well… there’s some truth in that,” Michael admitted.

“Which means that you’re no longer safe as a mere mortal,” Alain continued. “True submission is an incredible turn-on for vampires, as we usually get off on power. You’re practically made to become a vampire’s plaything, with such a tight ass and such breakable bones, and now that many of our people have become aware of your existence, you might have to make your decision sooner rather than later.”

Michael shrugged. “I should stop sleeping with vampires, then.”

“That would be wise,” Alain agreed, “but hardly enough. You let Velvet Vellour read your blood. She knows now what you are, and she won’t keep it secret if she can hope an advantage from telling about it. Word about your rare nature will get out, eventually, and then… undead doms will fight bloody duels for the chance to possess you – to make you their slave. You’d most definitely not like that, as you are, in my opinion, not into extreme pain.”

“No,’ I’m not,” Michael said with an involuntary shudder.

Alain nodded. “I thought so. But you do enjoy some delicate little pain at times, don’t you?”

“Sometimes,” Michael admitted with a blush. “Ben used to tie me up from time to time, and I liked it; liked the mutual trust that it expressed. Until he began to use steroids. I never allowed it afterwards. He became unpredictable, and I just didn’t want to get really hurt.”

“Submission, in its very core, doesn’t mean accepting to be hurt by your partner,” Alain said. “It’s the complete, uncompromising surrender of one’s will to a chosen master. It might or might not include bondage and discipline or S/M, and it can be restricted to their sex life or extended to the sub’s whole existence. It’s always up to the partners included: what they like, what they need, what turns them on, and so on. Obedience works on a completely different level than kinky games.”

“Name me an example,” Michael said.

Alain combed the small patch of dark hair on Michael’s chest with his fingers.

“This, for example,” he said. “This… pelt mars your boyish perfection. So if I were your dom, I’d
sometimes order you to shave it. On the other hand,” he tugged on a few wiry hairs hard enough to cause a little pain but not hard enough to truly hurt, “I might allow you to keep it time and again, so that I can torture you a little. Or if I got bored with it, I could demand that you have it permanently removed.”

“I see,” Michael said thoughtfully. “But you already have Brian as your sub – what would you need another one for?”

Alain laughed. “Oh, Brian’s anything but submissive by nature. I have to break him from time to time, because he desperately needs to give up control or else he’d start spiralling down on his self-destructive path again; but for him submission is a battle of trust he has to fight hard for every time. It’s not easy, for either of us. I hate to hurt him, but I have to, if I want him to survive in Kindred society. He’s too dysfunctional to stand on his own.”

“That still doesn’t explain what you’d need me for,” Michael said.

“We need you to balance us out – both of us,” Alain replied. “Without you, we might destroy each other one day. We have too much in common.”

“Yeah, sure,” Michael tried to laugh it off, but he could see that Alain truly meant it.

“Look,” the vampire said. “Brian needs you, and you need him. We can agree in that point, can’t we?” Michael nodded. “I want to keep Brian, but I can’t keep him alive – or, at the very least, undead – without your help. And I’d like to enjoy you again… assuming that you liked what we did last night.”

Michael nodded. “It was the best sex of my life,” he admitted with a blush.

“But not better than with Brian,” it wasn’t a question from Alain’s side.

“That’s different,” Michael said evasively.

Alain nodded. “Of course. You love him. There’s no shame in that – on the contrary. It’s the greatest gift a person could give another one. But he isn’t made for a twosome bond, and you know that. It’s not in his nature.”

“I know,” Michael said. “Believe me, I know. I’ve come to accept it, if I didn’t want to lose him entirely. Now, are you suggesting a triangle? A permanent one?”

“In a sense,” Alain replied. “Kindred are not monogamous by their very nature; neither are we jealous as a rule. Not where simple, physical sex is concerned. What we consider as important is the bond between us – something we only share with those really important for us. With those we love.”

“You mean you don’t mind whom Brian fucks, as long as he doesn’t let them into his mind?” Michael asked. It reminded him uncomfortably of Justin’s stupid house rules.

“That’s an extreme simplification, but yes, you can see it that way as long as you don’t have the chance to experience the real thing first hand,” Alain said. “I’ve given you a taste of it – you have realized, I think, the sheer intimacy of it. You should understand by now why we wouldn’t want outsiders to see it.”

“I do,” Michael said,” but I still don’t want to become a vampire. “Not yet… perhaps never. Last night was fantastic, and what you’ve shown me of the bond was overwhelming. I admit, but I love the sunlight, and real food, and beer… I’m not willing to switch to liquid diet.”
“Then use your other option,” Alain said. “As a ghoul, you can keep all that, and stop aging, and gather new powers. As part of my household you’d be also as safe as it’s possible in this insane world. You could count not only on my protection and that of the rest of our family, but the Camarilla as a whole and that of the Prince himself. What are you so afraid of?”

“Of the fact that a decision like this can’t be undone,” Michael answered. “And I like my life as it is. For the first time in a long while, it’s actually a good life. I don’t want to change it.”

“Life – even unlife – is full of changes,” Alain said reasonably. “And you… you have changed your entire life before. When you went to Portland. When you came here. Even if you decided to go back to Pittsburgh, it wouldn’t be the same.”

“I know that,” Michael replied a little impatiently. “But moving to a different place and becoming a different species isn’t exactly the same thing.”

“No,” Alain agreed. “But you aren’t usually afraid of hard decisions, or so I am told.”

“You shouldn’t believe everything you’re told,” Michael commented dryly. “In the heart of my hearts, I’m just a cowardly little fag who’d still be in the closet, had Brian not forced me out at the age of thirty. Of thirty!”

“To which he had no right,” Alain said, and it surprised Michael a little, because it echoed his own feelings all those years back.

“It was for my own good,” he said, instinctively defending Brian, as he always did against others. Even if he agreed with them.

“Perhaps,” Alain said. “But that still didn’t give him the right to make the decision for you.”

“And what you are doing?” Michael asked, amused. “You’ve been doing your damned best to make life among the undead appealing for me, haven’t you? Including trying to numb my mind with incredible sex.”

Alain nodded, grinning. “Of course. And I certainly hope that it worked. But the decision is still yours. I’ve just showed you some of the… benefits of living with Kindred.”

They both laughed. Then Michael glanced at his watch that was lying on the bedside table… and bolted.

“Shit! I have to be in the Studios in two hours’ time. That’s barely enough to fetch my car, go home, have a shower, change and…”

Alain interrupted his panicked rambling with a long, hard, deep-tongued kiss.

“Don’t panic,” he said. “I’ve got a bath here, and I can lend you some fresh clothes. Go, have a shower. I’ll prepare some breakfast in the meantime, and then I’ll drive you to the Studios.”

“Is that part of the service if one starts socializing with the undead?” Michael teased.

Alain slapped him on the bare ass… playfully but not too gently, leaving a red handprint on one white cheek. “No,” he said. “It’s only practical. Now hurry up, I’ll need the shower too.”

Rubbing his stinging asscheek, Michael laughed and did as he’d been told. Maybe living with the undead wasn’t that bad, after all, if getting thoroughly spoiled was part of the package.
Within the next hour, they both showered and put on clean clothes – the ones Michael borrowed were a little big, but not so that it would bother him too much – Michael had breakfast, and they left the haven together. Alain’s car was standing right next to the entrance, but even if he’d have been exposed to the sunlight longer than just that short way, it wouldn’t have harmed him, as he was well-fed.

He’d drunk from Michael several times during last night. He hadn’t planned to, but the young man’s taste was intoxicating. He’d have to watch himself around Michael if he didn’t want to get carried away. Angelus wouldn’t tolerate any more… accidents, and besides, he meant it when he said he’d respect Michael’s choices whatever they turned out to be. He could only hope that the young mortal would make the right decision. He didn’t want to lose Michael, now that he’d come to know him, and not just because of Brian anymore.

“Hop in,” he instructed the still somewhat bleary-eyed mortal, opening the car’s door for him and kissing him unhurriedly. “You’re the one in a great hurry, aren’t you?”

Michael laughed, kissed him back and got into the car. Alain slid behind the steering wheel and started the engine. Neither of them noticed the young blond twink with the camera in the shadow of the abandoned industrial building nearby.

Justin Taylor allowed a dark little smile to appear on his youthful face as he checked the photos he’d just shot on the small LCD screen of his digital camera. They were good pictures, especially those shot of that parting kiss. There was definitely some tongue involved. Time to send Brian more proof, he thought. Digital cameras really made things so much easier.

He left his hideout and went to his rent car. That silly New Age occult shop owned by that aged hippie would open soon. He could use one of the public computers there to upload the photos and mail them to Brian. No one would be able to track him down, and the best part of the deal was that he wouldn’t even have to pay for it… or for the extravagant drugs he could get there from the owner. That stupid old fart would give anything for a piece of ass.

He grinned broadly, got into the car and started the engine. The 'Brian and Michael Soap', as Melanie liked to call it, would get off the air, soon. It was an old programme that had run way too long already. And with Brian being a vampire now, they’d have all the time in the world, once Michael was out of the picture.

Becoming the thrall of Jean-Vincent had been a good decision. He was part of the Kindred world now, and would get Brian back, eventually. Time no longer played an important role.
Chapter Summary

Justin gets more than he’s bargained for. Meanwhile, Phillipe Navital helps Brian to figure out who’s sending him the anonymous mails, and a new business opportunity is offered to Michael.

Chapter Notes

Warning: This chapter contains particularly strong elements of violence, with very disturbing images. Read at your own risk.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

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SUBMISSION, Part 1

Brian woke up after a night of most relaxing sex with Phillipe. He’d gone to the lawyer’s haven on the previous evening because he’d needed something solidly familiar, and Phillipe was a known quality. Besides, sex always helped him to relax, especially if drugs and booze were no options. Which they weren’t anymore. Vampires had a much higher tolerance for alcohol – in fact, it was near impossible for someone of such a strong bloodline as his to get drunk on booze alone, unless consumed it purely and through an IV drip – and Alain felt strongly about mind-altering drugs.

Strongly enough to make pre-emptive measures. Basically, he’d told Brian to break the habit or he’d break his bones. Every single one of them, one by one. And Brian knew his Sire well enough to know that Alain had meant it literally. After all, vampires healed quickly.

Therefore the only familiar way to relax was sex, and with Phillipe it always was a lot of fun. The Ventrue had a fine technique and the usual Kindred stamina, and he was willing to switch. Since Brian had to submit to his Sire nine times out of ten, he’d felt like playing the dominant partner for a change and Phillipe had no objections. They’d known each other intimately for a year or so already, and it was easy to find ways that satisfied them both.

“It was a most agreeable night,” Phillipe commented in his usual understated manner at about an hour before sunrise. “Becoming a Kindred seems to have increased your natural abilities… but that was to be expected. The Change doesn’t make us different persons – just members of a different species.”

Brian grinned. “Only you can have a philosophical discussion during post-coital bliss.”

“I didn’t intend to,” Phillipe replied, stepping into the bathroom to have a shower. He was the most fastidious person Brian had ever met, human or undead. “It was just an observation. I enjoyed our little get-together. You may call on me whenever you feel frustrated.”

“Perhaps I will,” Brian said. “Can I use your laptop, too? I’d like to check my mail.”
“Naturellement,” not the least bothered by his own nudity, Phillipe walked back into his living room that also served as his home office and typed in his password. “Be my guest!”

“Aren’t you afraid that I’ll be spying on your fiendish lawyer’s secrets?” Brian asked, logging in to the mailing programme.

Phillipe shrugged. “They’re individually encrypted and protected by different passwords. You’re welcome to try, though,” and with that, he went back to the bathroom.

When he emerged again after his shower, Brian was staring at the laptop’s screen, petrified. Filling the screen was a snapshot of Alain and Michael, kissing passionately in front of Alain’s car. In the background some nondescript industrial building could be seen, perhaps a warehouse.

“It’s just come via e-mail,” Brian said without looking up. “That’s Alain’s private haven, isn’t it?”

Phillipe nodded. “It seems so, although I haven’t been there since he finished the place.”

“I’ve never been there,” Brian said sullenly. “He never took me there.”

Phillipe shrugged. “Have you asked? Perhaps he’d have shown it you, had you shown any interest. The place has a great personal importance for him.”

“I’m not very good at asking,” Brian admitted.

“You might want to learn how to do it,” Phillipe suggested. “It could solve some problems… and prevent misunderstandings. Do you believe that this little message comes from your ex again?”

“He’s not my ex,” Brian snapped. “Just an annoying little stalker who wouldn’t accept no as an answer. Too bad I can’t send the police after him.”

“That won’t be a good idea,” Phillipe agreed. “We must keep a low profile to protect the Masquerade. What you need is a good PI – preferably an undead one – to collect evidence, so that we can make our move.”

Brian laughed humourlessly. “I can’t really walk into Angel Investigations and ask the Prince to help me get rid of my stalker,” he said.

“No,” Phillipe agreed. “The Prince and his family are specialized in bigger things like that: demon infestations, Sabbat massacres and general mayhem of the similar kind. But there are other Kindred who deal with smaller annoyances, and I think that Mick St. John is your man.”

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Mick St. John climbed the wall of the New Age occult store Aquarius without any effort and made himself comfortable on the flat roof of the little one-storey building. Through the air ducts he could see everything that was happening down in the shop, and his acute vampire hearing enabled him to follow potential conversations between the shop owner and his customers.

He vaguely remembered having met Bernie the Monkey – now in his early sixties – decades ago. At a time when Bernie still had been a vampire wannabe and belonged to Joseph’s personal herd. Before the then-young man would mess up his brain with drugs so badly that Joseph had to declare him a security risk, wipe his memory and set him out.

Apparently, Bernie had been completely caught up in the New Age movement since then. And apparently, he hadn’t given up on his precious drugs, if his puffy face and reddened, swollen eyes were any indication. He’d also become rather flabby in all the years in-between, and his long hair
had turned iron grey. He was anything but an attractive man, and so it had surprised Mick that the young blond thrall he’d been hired to follow would have anything with him.

The request coming from a respected member of the Camarilla elite had surprised him, to tell the truth. He was a clanless Anarch, forced into unlife without being asked first, without his consent. In a city under tight Camarilla control he’d have been destroyed decades ago – which was why he’d chosen LA as his dwelling space, the last fortress of Anarch freedom. Here, under the rule of an Anarch Prince, he had nothing to fear – at least not from the Camarilla and its allies. And he didn’t want to meet his Final Death – not yet. He could protect the clueless mortals from his own kind or from the predators in their own rows – and he was reasonably content to do so.

Rarely did the Camarilla contact him (although he did sometimes do small jobs for Anarch leader Salvador Garcia), and he’d been surprised that all they’d wanted him to do was to keep watch on some blond twink. Even if said blond twink was the plaything of Jean-Vincent, which made the whole job all the more interesting.

Mick hated the Sabbat and what they represented, despite the fact that – technically – he’d be counted as one of them: someone of such uncertain origins he didn’t even know which Clan his bloodline originated from. Not that he’d care. He gave his undead existence as little consideration as possible, working on the main – and some would said hopeless – agenda to become a human being again. There supposed to be a way – an arcane process called the shansu – and some said that even the Prince of the City had thought about walking that path once. Well, Angelus might have given up on it – Mick St. John definitely hadn’t.

The way to shansu, he’d been told, led through protecting the innocent and the helpless against vampires, demons and evil mortals alike. Becoming a PI was his way to follow that path and, so he hoped, eventually reach his ultimate goal. Although why the Camarilla types might have thought that this Justin character would match his usual profile was beyond his understanding. The twink had obviously chosen to become Jean-Vincent’s boy toy, for whatever insane reason, and if he found it a good idea to offer his ass to Bernie the Monkey for the questionable advantage of using the computers of the Aquarius, that was his problem, too. And Bernie’s, should Jean-Vincent realize that his little bed-warmer was cheating on him.

Mick couldn’t understand how the Sabbat vampire had failed to smell the foreign scent on the twink – unless, of course, he used Blondie to star in his third-class porn movies, in which case even a bloodhound would have a hard time to sniff out all the people who’d done the youngster. It was possible, of course, that Jean-Vincent simply didn’t care, but somehow Mick doubted that. The Sabbat were jealous of what they considered their property; cattle generally weren’t allowed to make their own choices. Perhaps it was just a matter of time for Jean-Vincent to do something really… drastic about the whole affair.

Still, that didn’t explain why the Camarilla was interested in Blondie in the first place. Like any good PI, Mick had studied Justin Taylor’s file, given him by his employers, even listened around in the circles of artist wannabes, both mortal and undead, but couldn’t find anything of true interest. Blond twinkles like him were a dozen a dime in LA. Granted, the boy did have some decent artistic talent, or else Alain DeLaigle would never have accepted him as a student, but so had hundreds of other budding artists in town.

Well, as long as Navital & Waters paid him full for such a simple observation, he’d keep doing it as long as they wanted. Mick glanced at his watch. If he kept his usual schedule, Blondie would arrive within twenty and thirty minutes, to let himself in with the spare key and do whatever he was doing with the computers. Mostly editing pictures and sending e-mails to various people. It was rather dull, really.
Mick sighed, chose a more comfortable position on the roof and opened his sharp vampiric senses, so that he would alert him for the twink’s arrival. It was only then that he realized the all-too-familiar stench of death somewhere down below within the house – and the presence of a powerful vampire nearby.

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The filming of the *Rage* movie was winding down to its end, but Michael knew they would be a lot of work yet before it could hit the theatres. Currently, they were watching the last dailies, he and Brett and Edward Blount: the scenes recently filmed with Suzie Wong in the role of the blind female swordfighter, Dragonfly.

The role had gone through quite a few changes since its original conception. Dragonfly had started as a psychic blind woman with slight preternatural abilities but had become a much more martial figure in the end. Now she was a fighter in the best Japanese action movie tradition; one that balanced out her lack of sight with the unnatural sharpness of her other senses.

To play the part of the blind woman more convincing, Suzie had trained for her scenes blindfolded and had opaque contacts during filming that only allowed her to see light and shadows. The end results were stunning. Trained in several martial arts, before all else in aikido, Suzie developed an artistic, well-choreographed art of moving and fighting that was practically unique.

Her shared scenes with Bai Ling – who played her roommate… soul-bounded… lover… whatever in the movie – turned out spectacular, too. Although the only onscreen body contact between them was the touching of fingertips (which was how they communicated telepathically, as Bai Ling’s character was supposedly mute) the air literally sizzled between them with sexual tension. Granted, they were bisexual like most vampires, but they didn’t have any interest in each other privately. On the big screen, however, they were hotter than a pair of volcanoes. Even Michael had to admit it, although he’d never in his life had any interest in women, lesbian or otherwise.

He wondered why the eroticism between the both actresses didn’t bother him at all, while he’d often found the public display of affection between Lindsay and Melanie so embarrassing. Part of the reason must have been the fact that he looked at the artistic beauty of the two exotic flowers with a professional eye. Not to mention the fact that he had not to fear competition from their side where Brian’s attentions were considered.

Perhaps that was the reason why he could never truly grow fond of Lindsay, while he’d used to get along with Melanie well enough – aside from the Justin issue, that is. Because even Lindsay had had Brian, despite being a woman, while he hadn’t. Because Lindsay had a child with Brian, which he could never have, even if they had got together. Because both Lindsay and Melanie had the cheek to berate him about Brian and take Justin’s side against him every time. Because Brian had to sign over his parental rights over Gus to keep Lindsay on Melanie’s side, or else he, too, would have lost Gus completely, while the two women had no problems with accepting Brian’s money. What fucking bitches!

He shook his head in disgust, forcing his attention back to the dailies. That made him notice the door opening and Vera Vignes leading in two Asian-looking (presumably Japanese) visitors and offering them seats in the back rows. One of them was an elderly businessman in a conservative – and very expensive – Armani suit. Michael already knew him from seeing: Yoshida Ozaki, one of Little Tokyo’s most prominent businessmen and the owner of a local bank. As such, he had excellent contacts in both the Japanese and the Korean community in LA and did his best to counteract the growing Chinese influence in town.

The other visitor was a petite Japanese woman in her late twenties, barely taller than five feet, with
her dark hair pinned up in a traditional style. In her extravagant black business suit – a unique Girard model – she looked like a silk painting.

“Who’s that?” Michael asked in a low voice. She had to be important if Vera Vignes took the effort to bring her here personally.

“Mika Ishimaru,” Brett replied after a sideway glance. “She wants to sponsor a spin-off to the Rage movie, focusing on our two female Asian characters.”

“She’s got that much money?” Michael was impressed.

Brett shrugged. “Her father was a Yakuza obayun – basically a gang boss – in Osaka, a great defender of the samurai tradition. He came here in 1987 to establish a steady Yakuza presence in LA but was assassinated when tried to infringe Chinatown. Mika, playing her father’s lieutenants against one another, managed to preserve most of the family business. She has a series of night clubs, restaurants and other cash businesses; all very well-suited for money laundering, I guess.”

“And Vera intends to make business with her?” Michael was a little taken aback by that.

Brett shrugged again. “All big money is a bit dirty, one way or another, and moviemaking isn’t cheap. Besides, we can’t know for sure. The thing is, she’s a competent businesswoman, with extensive training in academic pursuits, and she also worked with a personal defence trainer for years. She does have some experience with traditional Japanese forms of combat and wants a big action movie with our exotic couple, made in the best tradition of the Hong Kong cinema. There is a big market for that in the Asian communities of the States, and if done well, such a movie would make us enough profit to give the Rage sequel a kick start.” He gave Michael a shrewd look. “Would you be interested in writing the screenplay?”

“Me?” Michael said in shock. “I don’t know a thing about the Hong Kong cinema!”

“You can do something about that,” Brett pointed out reasonably. “It’s called research. We can get you copies of the best movies with the greatest female stars; we can get you in touch with the screenwriters for brainstorming, and as for the rest... you’ve got a degree in moviemaking now. Use it.”

Michael laughed. “I’ve only learned the basics, Brett! A lifetime won’t be enough to learn everything I’d need to learn about moviemaking.”

“You can have a lifetime... and more than that,” Brett retorted. “It’s up to you, really. As far as I know, Alain is more than willing to give you the chance.”

For a moment, Mick St. John hesitated. He was still young as vampires go, and confront a powerful Sabbat – because he had little doubt who else could have been hiding in the house – would have been suicidal. Besides, the human down below, most likely Bernie the Monkey, because who else could it have been, was already dead. It wasn’t as if he could have been helped in any way.

So, what was there for Mick St. John to do? Blondie would arrive in minutes, walking straight into the clutches of a seriously pissed-off Sabbat. Mick could feel the boiling wrath of the other vampire even from such distance. No, the Sabbat didn’t like their sheep to flirt with other shepherds – or even with other sheep, for that matter. Blondie could call himself lucky if Jean-Vincent simply intended to kill him – not that that seemed likely. Based on the stench, there had to be quite the carnage going on down below. And once the Sabbat started on a killing spree, they weren’t easy to stop.
Mick realized that his choices were limited at best. For the first time, he regretted having refused to carry a phosphorous gun, the only weapon that could kill vampires safely, aside from beheading and fire. He could have alarmed the Prince’s Enforcers; every Camarilla vampire and those who sympathized with the Camarilla knew the emergency call number, but waiting for reinforcements would have taken too long.

On the other hand, he knew he wouldn’t have a rat’s chance against a powerful Sabbat on his own. Not face to face, at least. All he could count on was the moment of surprise. Not that he’d have been particularly worried about the blond twink – he wasn’t eager to put his unlife to risk for such a selfish little prick – but his sense of duty didn’t allow him to let the kid be torn apart alive.

Decision made, Mick St. John began to descend from the roof in the best noiseless manner he was capable of.

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Justin was walking towards the Aquarius in a jolly good mood. Jean-Vincent hadn’t returned from the Hunt in the previous night, which meant that he’d spend the day in one of his other havens. Which, on the other hand, meant that Justin was free to do as he pleased all day, without waiting for permission from his master – or needing to lie to him.

Not that Jean-Vincent would care much about his daily activities – unless he needed some ‘artistic’ input for his current movie, which usually meant help to choose positions or other such activities; he was making cheap porn, after all – but he tended to be a control freak, and Justin liked his freedom. That was the reason why he organized his private business through the computers of the Aquarius, even if it meant he had to allow Bernie to fuck him in exchange, which was, frankly, quite disgusting. But his youth and his good looks were his only capital – it would take years before he could live off his art alone, especially after having screwed up his relationship with Alain DeLaigle and associates beyond repair.

Of course, all that wouldn’t matter once Jan-Vincent had turned him into a ghoul. That would keep him young and pretty forever, with plenty of time on his hands to get Brian back. If he had to wait for Michael to grow old and die, he would. Time wouldn’t be a matter anymore and besides, as soon as Michael began to turn grey and wrinkled, Brian would lose interest in him.

And that was only the slowest, least preferable solution. It would be much better if Brian got properly pissed about Alain and Michael cheating on him. His fucking Sire and his best friend – that had to sting, and Justin was determined to help getting the kettle to boil. If Brian got mad enough, he might even break up with both of them and turn Justin into his personal ghoul, so that they’d stay together for… well, forever.

Whistling jauntily and slightly off-key – as much as he’d admired Ethan’s music, he couldn’t carry a tune himself for his life – he opened the back door of the Aquarius with the key Bernie had given him and entered the storeroom. It always had a strong scent, as Bernie kept here his supply of exotic herbs, incense sticks, teas and all that esoteric stuff. Justin hated the smell, but this was the shortest way to the store itself, where the computers stood. Besides, the smell kept the sniffing dogs from finding the really good stuff.

This morning, however, it was stronger than usual and seemed to come from the store itself. That stupid old fart had either spilled something particularly vile in his drunken stupor or was smoking pot already. Justin had a fairly relaxed attitude towards drugs (it would have been hard not to, considering the time he’d used to spend in Brian’s company), but what Bernie was doing in that area was a bit too much, even for him.

Even though it provided him with a nice side business that helped paying his bills.
“Hey, Bernie!” he called out, opening the door to the store, “are you in here?”

He got no answer, so he entered the store to see whether the old hippie was stone drunk, high as a kite or possibly dead from a heart attack. What he found, however, was a scenario from a horror movie. From a cheap and especially bloody one.

The first thing he spotted was Bernie’s head… placed atop a tall Chinese vase, wire-rimmed glasses still sitting askew on his pointy nose, his long, grey hair spread all over the counter. His lifeless, watery blue eyes were dimmed like opaque glass, but the terror was still mirrored in them.

Bernie’s torso, clad in one of those hilariously-coloured Hawaii shirts and Bermuda shorts, was thrown carelessly in front of the counter, like that of a broken doll. Again, like a broken doll, it lacked all extremities. The bloody limbs were randomly arranged on the various shelves of the store, arms still wearing those stupid good-luck-charm bracelets and feet still stuck in rainbow-coloured rubber sandals. Blood was dripping from the counter, the shelves and the various items in-between and was pooling on the floor.

The stench of death was unbelievable.

And in the middle of this slaughterhouse, Jean-Vincent was sitting calmly in a wickerwork chair, wearing his usual non-descript jeans, black shirt and worn leather jacket. His plain, round face, slightly wrinkled around his mouth – he had been beyond forty when turned – seemed calm and indifferent, too. But in those slanted eyes of his glittered cold madness, and Justin began to understand for the first time the magnitude of his own stupidity.

“A little late for such profound realizations,” the creature sitting amidst the carnage said casually; after all that blood-sharing he could snatch up Justin’s panicked thoughts easily. “As they say, hindsight is fifty-fifty, isn’t it? You know, boy, I’d have looked the other way if you’d just offered your perky little ass to that… thing,” he waved in the general direction of the late Bernie’s separate body parts with a hand that was sporting vicious talons all of a sudden, “after all, half the city has already been there, so why should one more dick matter? But no, that wasn’t enough for you, was it? You had to meddle with drug business, and cause me to have a very… unpleasant visit from the Setites who control the drug import in LA. And did you really think that I wouldn’t catch you selling pirate copies of my latest movie through the Internet? Do you think I’ve survived so long by being stupid?”

Justin was too petrified with horror to even think of any convincing answer, left alone speak. Jean-Vincent nodded with terrifying satisfaction.

“Thought so,” his voice was so… normal, so business-like that it freaked Justin out more than even the direst threats would have, making him nearly piss himself from fear. “Well, you were mistaken, obviously,” the Sabbat vampire continued in the same casual tone. “I’m not some pathetic human to give up any important things for a piece of blond boy ass. Yours was good, but the costs involved turned out to be entirely too high for my liking. So you’ll understand that I’m writing off my losses.”

And with that, he rose and extended a clawed hand towards Justin who was unable to move or even to scream for help. Not that he could have hoped anyone to hear him.

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Mick St. John was grateful for the fact that vampires didn’t need to breathe. He’d have been puking his guts out by now otherwise; not to mention that Jean-Vincent would have heard his panting in the moment he entered the store. It was also fortunate that the Sabbat was drunk with bloodlust and totally focused on his next victim, or else he’d have noticed Mick’s presence. Vampires had a sixth sense for each other; it was an instinct that came with the Change.
But the Sabbat seemed too busy with his mortal prey to watch out for his own kind, which gave Mick the advantage he’d wished for. What he needed now was a suitable weapon – not an easy problem to solve in the seconds left from Blondie’s life. Vampires were notoriously hard to kill, and an old and powerful Sabbat represented a category on its own.

Beheading would have been the best, but Mick seriously doubted that Bernie, a devout follower of the outdated hippie philosophy, would keep anything like a sword or an axe around. Setting the shop on fire wouldn’t work, either – it was too slow, not to mention that it would have killed him, too, and probably Blondie as well.

Looking around frantically for something – anything – that he could use as a weapon, Mick suddenly spotted a candlestick on the counter. It was an antique piece that stood out of these esoteric surroundings like a sore thumb; had he had the time, Mick would have wondered where Bernie the Monkey had got such a precious thing. Stolen, most likely, or accepted as payment from someone who’d lifted it during burglary, perhaps. In any case, it was made of silver, and it had three long, razor-sharp spikes where the candles were supposed to be stuck. Long enough to reach the heart of a man through the ribcage – or that of a vampire.

Time being the essential factor at the moment, Mick dropped his human disguise and rushed for the candlestick with his best vampire speed. Even so, he was almost… almost too late. In the very moment he made his move, the Sabbat whirled around, also wearing his true face – and a nightmarish visage it was! Ready to tear him to pieces.

Mick had less than a second of advantage on him - but for a vampire that was enough. He ducked to avoid the Sabbat’s talons and thrust the candlestick upwards with all his strength, stopping the other vampire in mid-leap.

Silver cannot kill vampires, but it can paralyze them. So can any pointy metal object rammed through their hearts. A silver dagger – well, in this case a candlestick – was enough to paralyze even an old and powerful Sabbat. The undead had their own specific weaknesses, and they knew how to utilize those against each other best. That fact had saved Mick’s life… unlife… whatever… repeatedly in the last sixty years.

He carefully stepped away from the paralyzed Sabbat and fished his cell phone from his pocket, hitting #1 on his speed-dial: the alarm for the clean-up service.

“Mick St. John,” he said to the vampire on duty. “I’ve got a Sabbat situation here,” he gave the address. “You better hurry up to get here before someone calls the police. The Sabbat had a little… fun before I arrived. It’s… well, ugly, even as we see things. Blood, carnage, body parts everywhere, the full nine miles.”

“Any mortals involved?” the vampire on the other end of the connection asked.

“One,” Mick replied, “but he was the thrall of the Sabbat, so worrying about the Masquerade is a moot point.”

“All right,” the vampire said. “The team is on its way. I’ve sent the Nosferatu; they know best how to deal with that sort of thing. Get the mortal away from there. Make him forget if you can.”

“I can’t,” Mick said. “I’m of Weak Blood, and I’m fairly young for one of us – Domination isn’t my forte.”

“Then find someone who can,” the vampire said. “Whatever the Prince might think, panicked humans with knowledge about us are a danger for our existence.”
“I can take him to Joseph,” Mick offered. “He’s old enough to…”

“No,” the vampire interrupted. “He’s been too careless lately. Take him somewhere safe, try to calm him down, and report back later. This is serious; don’t screw it up!”

“It’s not my style,” Mick retorted, slightly insulted by the lecturing. Usually, it was the other way round; usually he had to clean up after the stupidity of other vampires.

He hung up, without waiting for an answer, and turned his attention to the terrified blond twink. He sniffed and pulled a face. The little idiot had in fact pissed himself! Not that Mick blamed him because really, the carnage and Jean-Vincent, who was still not the Final Death kind of dead, could have frightened much braver people out of their minds. Still, it was disgusting. Someone who socialized with the undead on a regular basis should have known that it wasn’t a safe thing to do.

God beware us from groupies and vampire wannabes,” he thought sourly. Blondie here had not only chosen to sell his tight little ass to a vicious Sabbat, he’d also managed somehow to cross important members of the Camarilla… Mick would have loved to know whom and why.

Which reminded him that he ought to call his employer about the unexpected – and not very pleasant – twist in the job. Like all Camarilla sympathizers, he had the number of Navital & Waters saved in his cell phone. The law firm had both mortal and vampire employees, with the practical result that they could be reached around the clock. Also, they would know what to do about the knocked-out Sabbat. They were used to deal with that sort of thing.

At the fourth ring, a female voice answered the phone. “Navital and Waters,” it said with a strong Spanish accent. “Can I help you?”

“I’m afraid I’ll have to speak to Mr. Navital personally,” Mick said. “I’m Mick St. John. I’m working on a personal project of his, and things have just taken a, say, unexpected turn. I need instructions.”

“Just a moment, please,” the woman with the Spanish accent spoke to someone in French, and then Phillipe Navital came to the phone in person.

“You have news?” he asked.

“You can say that,” Mick replied wearily. “When Blondie and I arrived at the Aquarius, Jean-Vincent had already taken the place – and the owner – apart. Literally. The sight is… disturbing, to say the least.”

“I see,” Navital paused. “You’ve called clean-up, I presume?”

“Of course,” Mick said. “But I’ve got a Sabbat with a silver candlestick spike in his heart here, and I don’t know if clean-up is really up to deal with that.”

“No, I don’t think so, either,” Navital agreed. “I’ll call the Prince. Can you remove the hard drives of all the computers there in the meantime? We might need the data… and it would be better if the police didn’t find anything. We’ve got our people at the LAPD, but…”

Mick shrugged, although the lawyer couldn’t see that, of course. “Sure, I can do that. What should I do with Blondie?”

“Take him to the Hyperion,” Navital suggested. “The Prince can decide what to do with him. He is… well, he was… a Sabbat dependent, after all.”

“Gladly,” Mick said. “I’m happy I won’t have to deal with him. He seems high maintenance.”
“According to a friend, he is,” Navital replied. “Can you wait for the Enforcers? It wouldn’t be good if some mortal busybody stumbled over that scene and tried to *help* the Sabbat.”

“I will,” Mick promised, “just tell them to hurry up. I don’t feel comfortable here.”

Chapter End Notes

Mick St. John is, of course, a guest star from the TV-series “Moonlight”. I just couldn’t withstand the temptation to include him. If you want visuals from Bernie the Monkey, think of Brent Spiner as the crazy scientist in “Independence Day”. Jean-Vincent is, of course, “played” by Jan-Michael Vincent from “Airwolf”. They are both RPG characters, and it’s game canon that Bernie was killed by Jean-Vincent, according to the LA by Night website.
Chapter Summary

Justin gets more than he’s bargained for. Meanwhile, Phillipe Navital helps Michael in his struggle to make the right decision.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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SUBMISSION, Part 2

It was to Mick St. John’s great relief that the clean-up service arrived within twelve minutes. A troika of black-clad Nosferatu, looking very much like extras to a really cheap vampire B-movie, emerged from the sewers and quickly and efficiently disposed of Bernie’s assorted body parts and the blood that was practically everywhere in the shop. After Blondie had puked into the waste paper basket twice, Mick decided not to watch the process, either. Some things could make even a vampire sick.

Barely were Bernie’s mortal remains carried off to be burned in some crematorium where the Nosferatu had interests, the Prince’s Enforcer arrived, too. Mick had never met Faith the Sabbat Slayer before, although he knew her reputation, of course. Every vampire in LA knew. Perhaps even those dwelling beyond the entire state of California. She was something they hadn’t had since the days of Caine himself.

A Slayer gone rogue after her first Watcher had been massacred by the demon Kakystos. A Slayer who had allied herself with a mortal who’s sold his soul to the Dark Powers a century earlier, so that he could turn into a giant demon snake. A Slayer who had tried to kill her fellow Slayer first and tortured her second Watcher-to-be, who’d tried to unleash Angelus’ Beast on the world, so that she’d finally belong somewhere. A repentant Slayer, broken out of prison by Angelus himself because she was needed in the good fight against evil - which sounded strange but was true nonetheless. Embraced and Blood Bound to the Prince at her own request, so that she could have help with controlling her violent tendencies that had caused her so much trouble in the past.

She was an enigma in the world of the undead, and Mick had expected her to be mysterious, perhaps even disturbing and frightening. He had not expected her to be so hauntingly beautiful, though, with a pale, heart-shaped face framed by dark locks, liquid dark eyes that had mirrored horrible memories from her past, and a full, sensuous mouth. She wore sorrow and darkness about her like an invisible cloak, but she positively radiated power all the same. Mick thought that the Lasombra trait in the mixed heritage of the Aurelians manifested in her rather obviously.

She came in with long, purposeful strides, black coat swirling around her shapely legs in an almost theatrical manner, showing off a short denim skirt, a lacy black blouse and high-heeled black boots. She looked around in the half-cleaned shop with slight distaste, then down at the incapacitated Sabbat… and her eyes became hard and dark like obsidian.

“I know this one,” she said in her husky voice. “He’s the swine who forces underage girls to work in hardcore movies. The agency has been after him for a while, but we could find no hard proof against him.”
“I suggest we don’t wait for a proper process, then,” Mick replied, “as much as he’d enjoy a nice, sunny cell…”

“Fine with me,” she said, and to Justin’s blank horror, she pulled out a long sword that looked like a Japanese *katana* from under her long coat. “I thought wooden stakes might not be efficient enough in this case,” she added as an explanation, “although I do prefer working with them.”

“Not in this case, they probably wouldn’t,” Mick agreed. “Do it any way you like. He’s all yours.”

“I like to hear that,” she replied, “although I wouldn’t mind to get a guy whom I could, you know, *keep* for a while from time to time. Not one like this, though. Shall we…?”

“Be my guest,” Mick said, and she whirled around with a deadly grace and beheaded the helpless Sabbat with a clean, elegant blow. Jean-Vincent burst into a small fountain of dry ash as soon as his head was severed.

“‘Ashes to ashes, dust to dust,’” Faith quoted ironically. “See, that’s what I like in killing vampires… I mean, Sabbat,” she corrected herself, still unused to make the distinction. “They don’t make such an ugly mess as demons when they die.” She gave Mick a quick smile. “When the freaks are done here,” she meant the Nosferatu clean-up team, “you are expected in the *Hyperion*. Angel wants to speak with you.”

That little bit of information made Mick a little nervous. Angel – or Angelus, as most Kindred knew him – was known for his violent dislike of stray vampires. He’d arranged himself with the Camarilla and the most powerful Anarch leaders to keep the Sabbat out of his city as much as possible, but he was said to be suspicious towards unattached individuals. Mick hoped that having delivered Jean-Vincent would buy him some favour by the volatile Prince. With his uncertain origins, LA was one of the very few places where he would be tolerated by other vampires; he’d have hated to leave.

Faith must have guessed what he was thinking because suddenly she smiled at him. This time it was a genuine, surprisingly gentle smile, almost vulnerable – it changed her entire face, showing who she could have become in a different life, had the harsh fate of the Slayer not been laid upon her shoulders.

“Oh, don’t worry,” she said. “He’s not that bad, actually… unless you cross him, of course, but you haven’t so far. On the contrary, you’ve just done him a favour. But I won’t make him wait if I were you. That makes him… cranky.”

No, Mick definitely didn’t want to make the former Scourge of Europe cranky. But he still had some unfinished business here. Like cannibalising the computers and get Blondie some dry undies. He told so.

“I can’t really bring him before the Prince in this condition,” he pointed out.

Faith shrugged. “Why not? It’s not your fault – and it may teach him a lesson not to mess with the Fang Gang next time.”

Somehow Mick doubted that Blondie would draw the right conclusions from the lesson. The twink didn’t seem to be the type to learn from his own mistakes… or to learn at all, period. Still, he wasn’t going to bring the kid before the Prince in such condition, even though Angelus might have seen a lot worse.

“I have to wait for clean-up to finish anyway,” he said. “I can change Blondie’s diapers in the meantime.”
“All right,” Faith replied, “I’ll see you in the Hyperion, then. And do hurry up.”

The offer to write the Rage spin-off for the Japanese market had surprised Michael greatly. He could handle his own brain-child in its various incarnations well enough by now, but a story with all-female leads was not exactly his field of expertise. He was afraid he wouldn’t be able to write them convincingly. After all, what did he know about women? His own mother and the lezzies were hardly the right role models.

Although Melanie would make a nice template for a vengeance demon if needs must be, he thought wryly.

On the other hand, as Brett had pointed out, accepting the job would bring really big bucks, both for them personally and the Vignes Studios; money that could help financing the Rage sequel without having to be too dependent on the main sponsors and having to make too many compromises towards them. Besides, he didn’t want to sell the rights for any of his characters to a third party. He wanted to have control over their development in the future, too.

So he sat down with the actresses to talk with them about the characters and found their input very helpful. Especially Suzie Wong was excited about the chance to make a movie with Dragonfly and the Jade Flower in focus, and as she was the more important of the two, it reassured Michael a bit. If they could create another successful movie, there was room enough for further sequels. After all, both women were vampires; it wasn’t as if they’d have to worry about getting older and not being able to play their characters again in a few years to come. Since Michael was practically done with the script for Rage II – The Black Widow, he had some free time to develop plot ideas for the spin-off as well.

His willingness to write the script made Vera Vignes supremely content, and they met Mika Ishimaru and her associates in the evening to work out the details. Both Henry Waters and Phillipe Navital were present, which clearly showed how important this deal was for the Studios – they rarely called both their lawyers to the field, since one of them was usually more than capable to hammer out a deal.

“You really think I’ll be able to come up with a convincing script for a Japanese-oriented movie?” Michael asked, still a little nervous, after the sponsors had gone.

Edward Vignes grinned at him. “The only one who doesn’t know that you will are you, Michael,” he said. “You’ve come to this meeting with complete plotlines and additional character sheets already, for God’s sake!”

Michael shrugged. “That’s how I work on my comic,” he explained. “Continuity is important, and so is character development if you’re working on a serial, or else you’ll lose a great deal of your readers. I can’t risk that. People read the comic for the characters in the first place.”

“And that’s why your script will be great as usual,” Edward Blount replied. “Because you’ve got the eye and the patience for the detail. Don’t worry about the action sequences; that’s Brett’s job. Concentrate on the plot and the characters. If the movies turn out real blockbusters, which I don’t doubt for a moment, we may be able to make a TV-series as the next phase. Or two: twin series, with multiple crossovers, like with Hercules and Xena.” Needless to say that Blount had been one of the executive producers of said successful shows.

“Keep that thought for later,” Vera Vignes said. “Let’s finish the movies first, that will be work enough, and see how they’ll do in the theatres. If the first movie does bring the success we all hope it will, we can begin to shoot certain scenes back-to-back for a potential series, though. Now that
Raven has ended, there’s a vacancy for genre shows, and since we have the sets already…”

“In any case, we need Brian to prepare the campaigns for both the new movies and the shows well in advance,” Edward Blount suggested. “We’ll have to launch them right after the first movie hits the theatres – unless it flops, of course, which I doubt very much. Neither Brett, nor I produce flops.”

“There’s always a certain amount of risk involved when we’re launching someone this new,” Vera Vignes said, “but you’re right. That’s exactly why an aggressive campaign is so important. People tend to believe that they need things if they hear it often enough. Michael, make Diego work on the Rage website hard. We need to keep the interest alive. Are the interviews with cast and crew ready for release?”

“They’re all in the box,” Michael replied. “We’ve got the lead actors in the chat room for a few times, and Brett too. Merchandising is well on its way. Diego has standing orders for costume replicas, T-shirts, posters, cards and other collectible items. And the comic sells better than ever before. This new artist Alain had suggested does great work… plus I don’t have to fight with him all the time, which is nice.”

“Very well,” Edward Vignes stood. “Then we’re done for now. I’ve got another meeting in forty minutes, so if you’ll excuse me…”

The others rose, too. Studio bosses always had a lot to do, and the Vignes siblings and Edward Blount were no exception. Even if they had the advantage on their mortal colleagues not to waste too much time with eating. Liquid diet definitely had its advantages.

After they’d left in the company of Henry Waters, Phillipe Navital held Michael back.

“Michael… stay with me for a moment. We’ve got some… private stuff to discuss.”

“Oh?” Michael asked warily. “Is it about Brian?” He knew that Brian and the lawyer had an on/off thing between them.

“In a manner,” Phillipe answered. “But mostly, it’s about you and Alain… and what you intend to do about this little love triangle of yours.”

And with that, he flipped his palmtop open, showing Michael a snapshot of him and Alain, kissing passionately in front of Alain’s private haven.

“Brian has been getting photos like this via e-mail for a while,” Phillipe added. “And now we’ve finally found out who’s been sending them.”

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The foyer of the Hyperion – once a hotel in the best Spanish-Californian Art Deco style, now the local House of the Legacy hunters and the Prince’s secondary haven, both under the disguise of the Luna Foundation, a really existing charity organization – impressed Mick St. John greatly. Whoever had been responsible for the reconstruction of the building, he or she’d done an excellent job. The furniture looked as authentic as in his mortal days, yet at the same time he spotted discreetly hidden pieces of a high-tech security system… which was understandable, considering what the Legacy usually dealt with. The really surprising part was the fact that they apparently worked in league with the Camarilla in this city which, to Mick’s knowledge, never happened anywhere else.

They were welcomed by a harmless-looking, skinny Englishman with a posh accent, bespectacled and wearing a conservative three-piece suit. However, the heavy signet ring on his hand with the L symbol of the Legacy hunters revealed that there was more about him than one would have guessed
at first sight… much more. He introduced himself as Wesley Wyndham-Price, and it clicked in
Mick’s head immediately, his respect for the man going up several notches. So, this was the Precept
of the Los Angeles Legacy House; the ex-Watcher of the rogue Slayer, who nonetheless had the
courage to work with the Slayer-turned-vampire who’d tortured him, and with the former Scourge of
Europe.

That was a lot for a mere mortal to bear. Despite his meek looks, the man had to have balls of steel.

“We’ve lent Angel our conference room to deal with this problem,” he said, calling the Prince by his
more… civilized name, as mortals usually did. The thought that Angel and Angelus were basically
the same person - just with a different attitude - made them uncomfortable, so they tried to avoid
facing that fact.

The conference room of the Legacy House was marked by the same creative anachronism as the rest
of the Hyperion: expensive, stylish furniture met high-tech. The Prince sat at the head of the dark,
polished conference table, flanked by his two senior Childer: Drusilla, the Archon of his House, a
deathly pale, dark-haired woman in a long, white gown that was at least a century and a half
outdated fashion-wise, and his chief Enforcer, Spike, also known as William the Bloody, who in
striking contrast looked like the boss of a biker gang. A particularly vicious one.

The Prince himself was clad entirely in black and seemed to have a rather expensive taste in
clothes… comfortable Armani slacks, in this case, and a silk shirt. His ruggedly handsome face,
framed by spiky dark hair, looked unnaturally pale among all that black, even for a vampire; his eyes
were dark and cold. Although he was barely more than half Joseph’s age, he seemed to radiate a
dark aura of power, noticeable only for other vampires and psychic mortals. Mick had to stomp
down his own rising panic forcibly. Never had he met anyone of his own kind who’d have raised
this kind of fear in him. From the corner of his eye he could see Blondie shaking in his sneakers.
Hopefully, the little fool wouldn’t soil the pants borrowed from the late Bernie’s stock, too.

Deciding that proper manners were in order, especially if he wanted to stay in the city (preferably not
in the form of a pile of ash), Mick came to a halt at the lower end of the table and inclined his head in
the most formal manner he could come up with. Fortunately, while relatively young for a vampire,
he’d once belonged to a mortal generation that still knew what proper manners were.

“My Prince,” he murmured respectfully, “you wanted to speak me?”

Angelus nodded, clearly pleased by that display of respect. “Come closer,” he said, extending his
hand towards Mick in the manner of a mafia don. Knowing what was expected from him, Mick
kissed the ring symbolizing the Prince’s office and touched the hand wearing it with his forehead.

Angelus then gestured towards one of the nearby chairs. “Sit,” he ordered, “and have a glass of
bloodwine with us. Younglings like you need to keep up their strength, and as I hear you’ve had a
rough morning already.”

The patronizing manner irritated Mick a little, but he was wise enough to keep his mouth shut.
Besides, the bloodwine was excellent: a good vintage, with a relatively low percentage of actual
blood in it. He briefly considered whether feeding through a syringe was really such a good idea.
Perhaps Joseph had been right; as long as there were volunteers…

“Now,” Angelus interrupted his thoughts, shooting Justin a very displeased glance, “I want to hear
the full story, from the beginning.”

After a moment of thinking, Mick placed his empty wine glass on the table and began to speak.
Michael looked at the photo on Phillipe’s palmtop with mild annoyance.

“Well, that answers the main question,” he said. “That porn director’s ‘Sunshine’ is Justin, after all.”

Phillipe nodded. “And he’s apparently stalked you – all three of you – for quite some while.”

“Seems to be a hobby of his where Brian is concerned,” Michael commented dryly. “Aren’t there laws against this sort of things?”

“There are,” the lawyer answered, “but you’ll understand that we prefer not to go to mortal courts if we can solve the problem otherwise.”

“And how, exactly, are you planning to do that?” Michael asked. “By turning him into dinner? Cause Justin’s not the kind of guy who’d listen to well-meant advice, even if it could spare him a great deal of trouble. I know what I’m speaking of – I’ve often tried to reason with him, but it never worked.”

Phillipe frowned. “You’ve tried to tell him to stay away from Brian?” he wanted to clarify.

Michael shook his head. “No. I tried to warn him not to expect from Brian anything he wasn’t capable of delivering. Like romance. Or an exclusive relationship. He didn’t listen. He never does.”

“Didn’t you want the same things from Brian?” Phillipe asked.

“No,” Michael replied simply. “Oh, I longed for it, sure, I even dreamed of it, but I always knew it will never happen. It’s not in his nature.”

“It’s even less so now,” Phillipe warned. “It’s not part of the Kindred nature in general. Many of us have long-term relationships, friendships and love affairs alike, that go back decades, even centuries, a few of us are even legally married, but I can’t remember having met a monogamous vampire. Ever.”

“I know,” Michael nodded. “I’ve long accepted that about Brian, undead or alive. I might not like it, but if the only way to have him is to share him, I will share. I’ve tried the platonic thing, and in the long run, it’s not all that people say about it.” Suddenly he laughed. “You know, it’s funny. The only one Brian has ever been exclusive with is me, and until recently it hadn’t even included sex at all.”

“Your friendship?” Phillipe guessed correctly. “Yeah, I know about it. It’s a beautiful and rare thing among mortals – well, former mortals in Brian’s case – but if you think it didn’t include sex you’re mistaken. You might not have acted on it, technically, but it has always been there between the two of you: the sparks, the chemistry, a profound feeling of belonging together.”

Michael shrugged. “I’ve always loved him,” he said as if it were the most self-explaining thing in the world. For his, it actually was.

“And he’s always loved you, in his own flawed way,” Phillipe said. “He still does; the question is: do you still do?”

“Of course I do, what are you talking about?” Michael protested.

“I mean,” Phillipe said slowly, “that now you also have Alain in your life. He’s chosen you, not for Brian’s sake anymore, but for your own self. That can be a heady feeling. I used to be in your place a long time ago, so I know what it means to have Alain’s attention focused on me. How… intense it can be. Becoming a part of his family, in whatever manner, can be your golden opportunity to get
back together with Brian, and that for a very long time, but you must understand that you’ll never be an exclusive couple. Brian belongs to Alain now; nothing can change that, not even Final Death. They are Blood. And you, too, will belong to him if you accept his offer. Will you be able to live in such a tight threesome bond?’

“I don’t know,” Michael admitted. “I… I liked it what we did together, Alain and me, and Brian… well, he is Brian. Assuming I’m willing to live with them both – would Brian be able to bear it? Whether he admitted or not, he was always jealous of my partners, and this isn’t just some tricking… it’s really serious, isn’t it?”

“It is,” Phillipe nodded, “but Brian isn’t the key: you are. He’ll have to learn to share: to share you with Alain, and to share Alain with you. Because if you accept to become his, Alain will never let you go, either.”

“I’m not gonna become anyone’s possession!” Michael declared forcefully.

“Not possession; bond-mate,” Phillipe corrected. “Whether as a Childe or as a ghoul, you’ll become part of Alain’s bloodline – part of his very being. There’s nothing more intimate than the bond between Kindred who share the same blood. Not even sex.”

“Is this why it didn’t work out between you and Alain?” Michael asked.

Phillipe laughed. “That and the fact that two Alpha wolves never manage in the same pack,” he said. “We are both very dominant, despite our willingness to sometimes switch in bed. After six years we simply stopped trying and decided to remain friends instead.”

“That works?” Michael asked doubtfully. “After six years?”

“Oh, yes,” Phillipe replied. “We are both mature monsters; besides, six years count as a really short affair between Kindred.”

“It’s so strange,” Michael said slowly. “The way you count time… the way you see things… I wonder if I’ll ever understand you.”

“Not until you become one of us,” Phillipe answered seriously. “We are a different species. Even though we look human – well, most of the time – we aren’t humans any longer. We have different urges, different abilities… and a vastly different morale.”

“And that’s exactly what makes me wonder whether it would work for me,” Michael pointed out.

“You do have the potential to become an excellent Toreador one day,” Phillipe said. “About that there’s consensus among us. We can also see that you’re not ready yet to go all the way – that’s only reasonable. But becoming a ghoul would make you share their Blood and help understand our ways – with the further perspective to became one of us later. If you choose to, that is.”

“And if I stop share their blood, I’ll die,” Michael said sourly.

Phillipe shrugged. “As a mortal, you’ll die anyway, rather sooner than later as we count time. The only difference is dying old and broken versus dying young and good-looking.”

“Oh!” Michael said; he’d never looked at the problem from that angle before. “So, assuming I decide to attach myself to Alain’s Lost Boys in any way, does it mean that I’ll start fucking anything on two legs as Brian does?”

“Mon Dieu, quelle horreur!” Phillipe laughed. “Of course not, what are you thinking? The
Becoming only changes *what* we are, not *who* we are. It only means that *if* you chose to go to bed with someone else, you wouldn’t be plagued by any unnecessary guilt attacks, because you’d know that it wouldn’t really count. Not in Kindred terms.”

Michael tilted his head to one side, his dark eyes sparkling with mischief. “Like if I dropped my pants and let you do me on your desk, here an now, just because I felt like it?” he asked.

“If that’s what you need, why not?” Phillipe replied with a shrug. “Is that what you need right now? I can clear the desk in a minute.”

That completely unflappable reaction made Michael laugh so hard he’d nearly wet himself.

“I’m not quite *that* desperate,” he said. “It hasn’t been so long since Alain worked me over well and truly. What I really need is some distance from both him and Brian, so that I can make my decision in peace, without being influenced by... by wanting to be with either of them so much that it hurts.”

“In other words, you need to be laid by a third party to clear your mind,” Phillipe said, still in that matter-of-fact manner.

Michael laughed again. “Something like that, yeah. Are you volunteering?”

Phillipe shrugged. “Why not? You’re cute, and I’ve done the same for Brian, several times. It was very enjoyable, for both of us.” He saved his work and powered down his laptop. “If you are serious about it, we can relocate to my haven. It’s not far, and I’ve got bottled supplies there so that I won’t have to Hunt tonight.”

“You can always drink from me,” Michael offered, surprising himself as much as the lawyer. “I’m getting used to being nibbled on.”


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Justin had never been so frightened in his entire life. Not even after the episode with Chris Hobbs that had almost caused his untimely death. Not in the same morning, facing the clearly insane Jean-Vincent in the shop decorated with Bernie’s assorted body parts. Even *that* was more comprehensible (because, hey, crazy killers *did* exist in the normal world) than standing there, watched by the Prince and his Childer, while the other vampire, the one who’d saved him, was giving chapter and word of his entire life for the Prince to judge him.

He wasn’t used to face judgement. He was accustomed to get away with almost everything, because he was young and cute (which made the women adore him, even though he wasn’t interested in them) or because he had a willing ass and a talented mouth (which brought most men to his side, at least the gay ones). He was used to get whatever he wanted, regardless of the price. Sometimes the price had been fairly high, like in the case of Chris Hobbs. But usually, he’d managed to have someone else pay for him, be it free accommodations in Debbie’s house or Brian financing his education when his father refused to do so.

That didn’t seem to be the option now. This time, he’d have to face the consequences of his own stupidity.

His rescuer – presumably some undead PI – had apparently done his homework. He’d somehow succeeded in digging out every shitty little detail of Justin’s life, starting with the episode when he’d stolen Brian’s credit card and run off to New York with it, through his patrols with the Pink Posse to
his latest stunt of stalking Alain and Michael and sending photos to Brian of them. There were small
details Justin had long forgotten himself, but it seemed that other people hadn’t, and the vampire
detective had collected and presented them all.

Justin found it unjust that they discussed his life as if he were some sort of petty criminal. After all,
Brian hadn’t pressed charges concerning the credit card episode, and the Pink Posse was an act of
self-defence for young queers. However, for the first time in his life he was sensible enough to keep
his mouth firmly shut. The dark vampire the others called the Prince didn’t seem like someone who’d
take youthful insolence kindly. Even the bleached biker type seemed to be wary around him, and
bikers weren’t generally easy to intimidate, be they alive or undead.

“Thank you,” the vampire Prince said when Justin’s rescuer finished his report, “that was…
informative.” He had a light baritone; surprising, coming from such a large body. He looked at the
woman on his left. “What do you think, Drusilla?”

The woman came closer to Justin and began to circle him in an almost trance-like manner; and Justin
began to panic in earnest, seeing the madness glittering in her dark eyes. She was clearly insane, the
extent of which could only be guessed.

“Poor little duckling,” she cooed in a soft singsong voice. “He’s so confused… so delusional… He
believes he can play with us as he plays with his little peers… play us against each other… use us for
his own purposes… bend things to his liking… He’s so very wrong… the stars say he’s lost, lost
forever…”

“You should let her wipe the whelp’s mind, Angelus,” the biker vampire said in a bored manner.
“He’d betray us to the Sabbat… or to any other adversary in the moment he hopes to gain any
advantage from it.”

The Prince sighed. “You know I don’t like to meddle with people’s minds, Spike. It can have
unexpected side effects. The more they need to forget, the more unpredictable are the results.”

“Perhaps the little duckling would be happier if he could forget everything,” suggested Drusilla
sweetly, eyeing Justin like the cat the canary before dinner. “Perhaps I should wipe his mind clean of
all those nasty, nasty details of his former life. To make him pure and innocent like a newborn baby
again. He’d be so much happier that way, the poor dear.”

The Prince shook his head. “That would destroy his ability of independent thinking.”

“So what?” the biker vampire asked with a shrug. “He’s nothing but a little parasite… and a useless
one at that. But he’d make excellent cattle… as a steady food source, with an always ready piece of
arse and a willing mouth, he could service the male members of the household just nicely.”

The image of being a lobotomised fucktoy in a vampire household terrified Justin so much that he
couldn’t suppress a frightened whimper. He prayed that they’d just kill him then and there, rather
than expose him to such a terrible fate. The biker vampire Spike – and what kind of name was that
anyway? – grinned in evil satisfaction.

“Stop it, Spike,” the Prince ordered. “It’s disgusting.”

“Why?” Spike shrugged. “The Prince is entitled to have a personal herd, and if we feed him well,
Blondie will last a long while. He’s still young. Or you could turn him into a ghoul and use him as a
long-term blood bank.”

The Prince gave him a withering look. “You don’t really think that I’d share the Blood of the
Aurelians with a useless piece of blond boy ass in any way, do you?” he asked icily. “By right we should kill him on the spot; he’s assigned himself to the Sabbat voluntarily…”

“But you’re too queasy to kill humans if there’s another way,” Spike finished for him. “We still might have to kill him later, ya know. Dru’s good at this sort of mojo, but a partial mind-wipe is still a tricky thing. He just knows too much.”

The Prince nodded. “I know. Let’s try the complicated thing first, though. Take him to the soundproof room below and Dru can try her skills on him. We’ll see how it turns out.”

“All right,” Spike grabbed the petrified Justin like a rag doll and threw him over a leather-clad shoulder. “But if it doesn’t work, he’s mine, right?”

“Sure,” the Prince replied with a shrug. “It’s your job to deal with Sabbat leftovers.”

The bleached blond grinned. “And people wonder why I love this job,” he said, sauntering out of the room with a now screaming and kicking Justin over his shoulder. The insane woman followed them with a dreamy smile that made Mick shiver… and not in a good way.

“Do you think she really can clean the boy’s mind from everything Kindred-related?” he asked doubtfully, for Blondie had indeed seen too much of the life in the Dark.

“There are no guarantees by such an extensive mind-wipe,” the Prince admitted, “although Drusilla is very good at these things. She’d been a psychic already before I turned her. She’ll plant false memories in the boy’s head, and then Riley – my youngest Childe – will take him home. Still, I’ll have the Nosferatu watch him. If the memories resurface… well, we’ll have to find another solution.”

“What about letting the Nosferatu Embrace him?” Mick suggested with a little malevolence; he’d come to utterly detest Blondie during the short while of the observation job. “Becoming ugly and misshapen forever would be much harder on him than simple death.”

“I don’t want to punish the Nosferatu so cruelly,” the Prince replied. “They are too useful for me,” he added with an unexpected grin. “Let that be my problem from now on, though. I wanted talk with you about your future.”

“My future?” Mick replied in surprise.

The Prince nodded. “You’ve done me – us all – a great favour. And you’re very good at your chosen profession. I’d like you to work more closely with my people in the future.”

“In what way?” Mick asked. “I could hardly take on any role within Camarilla hierarchy. I’m a Caitiff; I don’t even know which Clan my bloodline might belong to.”

“Neither did Caine, if our scholars are not mistaken,” the Prince answered with a shrug, “and my bloodline is of grossly mixed origins, too. I’ve accepted the role of the Prince because I wanted to protect the innocent and to help the helpless, as the slogan of my agency says. Against our own kind, if necessary, but also against human predators who can sometimes be a lot worse. Personally, I’m not that big on Camarilla protocol, but if respecting it keeps the influential Camarilla types on my side, so be it. Whether you formally join the Camarilla or not is of little importance, since you already live according to its rules; but I’ll officially accept you if that’s what you want.”

“It’s worth thinking about,” said Mick carefully, not wanting to bind himself in any way before he’d figure out what the Prince really wanted from him. “But I still don’t understand how I could be of your assistance.”
“That’s simple,” the Prince said. “I need you to be my eyes and ears in places where I can’t go myself. “Angel Investigations has become too well-known in certain human circles that contain people who prey on the weak of their own. There are places where I can’t investigate; nor can my human associates. We’d be recognized right away. But you’re relatively unknown, even among us, and I doubt that most of my mortal adversaries even know that you’re a vampire… if they’ve noticed your existence at all. I’ll need you in those places. Mostly for observation jobs, which’s what you mostly do. Officially, the assignments would come through Phillipe Navital’s firm, so that you won’t be directly associated with me. Interested?”

Mick hesitated for a moment. Oh, he was interested all right; being associated to the Prince of the City, even unofficially, would cement his status in LA, and it would also mean that the Camarilla would accept him, unspoken at least. Of course, it would limit his independence a little, but the advantages outweighed the disadvantages by far.

“Yeah,” he said, a bit dazzled by the rapid changes of his unlife, “I am interested.”

Chapter End Notes

In the "Pathways" universe Angel has remembered his responsibility towards Drusilla, who has been partially cured from her madness. Partially being the key word.
FOR THE NEXT COUPLE OF DAYS Michael withdrew from his undead associates. He wasn’t needed for that phase of the post-production work, and he’d already delivered the first draft for *Ragee II – The Black Widow* to Edward Blount, so he could afford to take some much-needed time off to think about things. Sure, he still had to work on the plot sketch for the *Dragonfly* movie and the latest *Rage* issue also needed the final touches, but he didn’t have to labour 7/24 to meet the deadline, and – for the first time in months – he actually did have a little time for himself.

He was glad he’d invited Emmett back to their shared apartment because lonely brooding wasn’t exactly his thing; it made him depressed. He needed someone to talk to, and Emmett was the ideal audience for that sort of thing. Sure, he was a vampire now, but save from the change of his diet (meaning switching to the liquid sort) Emmett hadn’t changed so much.

[The Becoming doesn’t change who we are, only what we are], Phillipe had said (or something like that anyway), and Michael had to admit that, at least in Emmett’s case, it was certainly true. Emmett was still the same colourful lovebird that he’d always been – only that now he was an undead lovebird. Still colourful, still easily excited and still willing to help his friends wherever he could.

And he was still Michael’s friend. A good and dear friend, who – though he didn’t need to eat anymore – was happy to cook for Michael every other day. A friend, who, although he preferred chick flicks personally, willingly watched Japanese and Hong King fantasy/action movies with Michael, discussing the finer points of each one with him.

A friend who knew a great deal about the world of darkness in which he lived now, and into which Michael was half-ready to make forays. Also – unlike Brian – he was capable of delivering the uncomfortable truth without being hurtful or insulting.

“Look sweetie,” he said on the fourth day gently but firmly, “you need to make up your mind. At least they’re giving *you* a chance,” his bright smile dimmed for a moment; becoming a vampire by accident was something he still hadn’t come to terms with; and he had the feeling he wouldn’t for quite some time yet, despite having accommodated to his new existence fairly well all things considered. “Besides, what’s wrong having two men like Alain and Brian competing for your
affections? I know many guys who’d give an arm for half the chance, you know.”

He suppressed a pang of envy bravely. He loved Michael like a brother, but sometimes he also wished he would be wooed like that by at least one person. Nobody had done that since the death of George, the poor dear. His torrid affair with Teddy was a different thing – something he wouldn’t want to experience again. It had been sick and hurtful in too many ways; he was glad that they could save their friendship in the end… well, most of it.

Perhaps Brian had been right after all. Perhaps one really shouldn’t fuck one’s best friend. Of course, Brian was just about to do his damnedest to break that cardinal rule of his, so…

“I know,” Michael said ruefully, steering Emmett’s easily distracted attention back to the topic. “And I know that I’m perhaps a selfish prick. It’s just… If I accepted, it…”

“…would change your life forever?” Emmett finished for him with a raised eyebrow. “Newsflash, Michael: life is change. The only people who do not change are dead people.”

“You mean undead?” Michael tried a lame joke.

“No,” Emmett said, his tone uncharacteristically serious. “I mean dead people. Of the Final Death kind of dead, as we’d say. Even vampires change and grow with the time; perhaps not physically, but we do change… or so the Elders say. We change more slowly, of course, we can afford to take our time, but we do so, too.”

“I’ll have to take your word for it,” Michael said, “but having to change isn’t what bothers me about joining the Lost Boys anyway.”

“So? What is it then?” Emmett clearly didn’t have a clue.

“If I submit to Alain, if I became a member of his household, it would mean to accept that Brian will never be just mine,” Michael said slowly.

“So what’s new?” Emmett still didn’t understand the problem. “You’ve known that for twenty years or so.”

“Yes, but until recently the chance to have him at all was like, zero,” Michael pointed out.

“And now that you’ve got the chance you’re getting greedy?” Emmett asked.

“No,” Michael replied. “Now that I’ve had him, I know that I won’t be able to give that chance up, not even if it means that I’ll have to give up what meant to be the Dynamic Duo – just him and me, and the rest of the world didn’t count. It was a childish dream, perhaps, and it never was entirely true, but it fucking hurts to let it go. It has been the only thing I had for so long…”

“Oh, sweetie!” Emmett was all support and understanding in a second again. “Of course it hurts! I know what it’s like… I only had George for a very short time, but it was something I’ll probably never have again… something precious. But life goes on, honey, and so must we.”

“Is it true, Em?” Michael asked in a child-like manner. “Would I really not care if I became one of you? Would I be able to think of him with someone else and not hurt anymore?”

“I can’t tell, sweetie,” Emmett replied honestly. “I never was the one-guy-for-life kind of person. But I do know that among Kindred the only thing that really counts isn’t sex – it’s Blood.”

“It must suck for you, then… pardon the pun,” Michael said.
Emmett shrugged. “Not really. Fostering works fairly well, and the Blounts consider me as close as Blood. They share frequently, too. I can’t complain.”

“Especially when a hunk like Edward Blount acts as your foster Sire,” Michael grinned.

Emmett grinned back at him. “You’re getting used to the terminology, I see. But you’re right, of course; that does make the whole thing a lot more… palatable.”

“You’re incorrigible,” Michael laughed. “Thank God, though; I wouldn’t want you any other way.”

“You want me?” Emmett treated him with a curiously raised eyebrow. Michael laughed and swatted him on the biceps.

“Not that way, you idiot! But it’s good to have you around again, no matter what you’ve become in the meantime. You’re still… well, you.”

“I’m doing my best,” Emmett replied in his best prima donna manner, “although it’s a heavy burden, I’ll tell you.” And they both laughed.

Later, when Michael had left to discuss some finer points of the Dragonfly plot with Brett Keller, Emmett decided to give Brian a call. He could only reach the mailbox, but that didn’t particularly bother him.

“Hi Bri,” he said to the machine breezily. “I think I know how you can motivate Michael to… to see the light… pardon the pun. I suggest you ask some more… experienced fiend of the night about the importance of the One Vessel. Bye.”

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“The One Vessel?” Phillipe repeated slowly. “Who has told you about that?”

Brian shrugged. “Actually, it was Emmett. He called me, but my cell phone was turned off, so he spoke onto my mailbox. He suggested that I asked one of you older guys about it.”

“I see,” Phillipe said doubtfully, because a fledgling like Emmett wasn’t supposed to know about such things yet, but that couldn’t be helped now. All he could do was to set things straight in Brian’s head, who, fortunately, was intelligent enough to understand the ramifications.

The lawyer stood, opened the door to his antechamber and said to his Kindred secretary, a beautiful, exotic Cuban woman who had the night shift. “Maria, Brian and I have something important to discuss. It won’t take very long, I’ll be able to realize my next appointment, but please redirect any calls to Henry for the next thirty minutes. Thanks.”

He returned to his desk and sat again.

“You’ve probably already heard that some Kindred, especially older ones, can suffer from certain feeding restrictions,” he began. “There are the ones like the Count, for example, who can no longer digest mortal blood, so they have to keep a herd of young vampires around them, on whom to feed. Others can only feed on mortals of specific age or gender… there are many such variables, particularly among us, Venture… alas.”

“And what does that do with me?” Brian asked. “I’m neither old, nor a Ventrue… or a crazed Sabbat.”

“I’m coming to that,” Phillipe said. “Not all these feeding restrictions are involuntary. Sometimes a vampire chooses to feed from one person exclusively. This person is then called One Vessel or One
Blood, and the bond between a Kindred and his or her One Vessel is the only known one closer than even the one between Sire and Childe… or that of regnant and thrall."

“You know that from personal experience?” Brian asked.

Phillipe shook his head. “Very few of us have ever entered a relationship like this. Because, you see, there is a great risk involved for the Kindred in question. If this symbiotic relationship goes on long enough, the vampire becomes incapable of feeding from any other source than from his or her One Vessel. Which means, should that person die, the vampire will die, too – slowly and very, very painfully. Starving isn’t a pleasant way to go… unless one takes a walk in the sun when it becomes too much, that is.”

“Why would anyone enter such a relationship, then?” Brian asked, shivering from the thought. Simple Thirst was bad enough, but starving to death… no, he wouldn’t want that.

“Out of love, mostly,” Phillipe replied. “Usually, the One Vessel is made a ghoul, so that he or she wouldn’t age and die; or they get Embraced after a while. But even so, the dependence of the Kindred from their One Vessel makes them terribly vulnerable. An enemy could simply kill the One Vessel, without having to bother with fighting a strong and potentially dangerous vampire. That’s why entering such a bond is the ultimate expression of trust and love from the side of the Kindred partner.”

“And also the only way a vampire could be truly exclusive with a partner,” Brian realized with a jolt. That was something he actually could do. He liked the Hunt, it was exciting and arousing, and the results most satisfying, but he could give that up for a greater good.

Phillipe nodded. “That’s true. But if you’re planning what I think you’re planning, you should consider it very carefully. Should he ever find a reason to leave you, that would be your death sentence.”

“That’s okay,” Brian replied with a shrug. “I wouldn’t want a life… unlife… whatever… without him in it. Mortal or undead, he’s always been my rock. I’d never have made it without him.”

“Then you should consider this, too,” Pierre said very seriously. “Should word come out that he’s your One Vessel, it would make him a target for all your enemies. Right now, you aren’t important enough in the Kindred world to really endanger him, but one day you will. You’re being groomed to become the Prince of Pittsburgh in a few decades – and if you move there, he’ll have no other chance than follow you. He’ll have to give up his own interests to serve yours. His entire life will have to focus on your fate… that’s no small thing, especially now that he’s finally found his true calling work-wise.”

Brian remained silent for quite a while. “Does Michael know about this?” he finally asked.

Phillipe shrugged. “I’m not sure. Alain and I have discussed this possibility, shortly after Michael’s arrival in LA, but I don’t know whether he told Michael about it or not. I know he’s interested to make Michael a ghoul at the very least, to preserve him for the bloodline, but I think the other thing is something you need to discuss with Michael personally.”

“But if what you say it true, how could I ask of him such an enormous thing?” Brian asked.

“The step would be an enormous one for you as well,” Phillipe pointed out. “You’d be taking a considerable risk, you know.”

“He’d be worth it,” Brian said, “but I don’t want to endanger him.”
“Brian, you’re Kindred; a Camarilla vampire, at war with the Sabbat,” Phillipe reminded him. “Simply knowing you endangers him in a manner. But ultimately, it’s not your decision – it’s his. I suggest you talk to him, because if you wait too long, it might be too late.” He glanced at his wrist watch. “Well… if you’ll excuse me, I have work to do. I’m expecting an important client within the next five minutes.”

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Michael delivered the first draft of the Dragonfly movie a day before the deadline, and was relieved to do so. Hong Kong cinema wasn’t really his style – he couldn’t wait to return to Rage again. Fortunately, both Vera Vignes and Brett Keller seemed to like the draft, and stated that there wouldn’t be many changes needed in the final script. All that research concerning Japanese culture and legends had paid off, after all… and having Internet wizard Diego helping him a real asset. Michael, too, was happy with the results.

“Do you have a moment?” Brett asked, after they’d left Vera’s office. “I want to pitch a story with you. Dawn gave me a horror story that could work as the basis for the third Rage movie… a very different one this time.”

“For Christssake, Brett!” Michael laughed. “We haven’t even finished the first move yet, are shooting the sequel already… well, sort of… and you want me to start on a third one? Isn’t that a bit early?”

Brent shrugged. “That’s how Peter Jackson filmed the LOTR trilogy, and it worked out well enough, didn’t it? Now I’m not planning anything quite that epic, but it doesn’t hurt to have another script ready, just in case. You write it, you get paid for it, and we’ll see if and when it actually gets filmed.”

It was Michael’s turn to shrug now. “If you find someone stupid enough to pay for it, I’m game. Let me take a look at that draft.”

They went to Brent’s office, and the Brujah director handed Michael a thin booklet, with the picture of some nondescript pyramid on its cover. The pyramid was richly decorated with human skulls, and in the inside, there was a naked figure tied to a stone altar. The title said “The Sacrifice by Owen Thurman”.

“I thought it was a draft or a plot sketch, not a printed story,” Michael said in surprise. “What’s it about?”

“A clueless young man getting into the clutches of some weird cult and nearly getting sacrificed to a demon in the old-fashioned Mayan manner… you know, cutting out his heart… that sort of thing,” Brett replied. “Dawn says she could add visuals that would make the people bite their nails and wet themselves with fear in the movie theatres. I think she knows the author or something. But it’s decently written for a new author, and if we could make the basic story part of the Rage universe somehow…”

“The Rage universe,” Michael repeated with a broad grin. “I like the sound of that, you know. Well, perhaps we could twist the first movie a little, so that people would be left uncertain about the fate of The Thrall – we can use the already filmed death scene later – so that he’d supposedly recover in a secret lair for a while. Then he could gather a cult around him and try to bring Shadow back, using human sacrifices.”

Brett stared at him, his mouth literally hanging open. “You never cease to amaze me,” he said when he could speak again. “How do you do it?”

“I didn’t mean that,” Brett said, although he was laughing, too. “I meant how can you come up with all these ideas at a whim of the heart?”

Michael shrugged. “It’s how I always work. Sometimes I have a hard time to write down all my ideas before I’d forget them.” He grinned at Brett. “Well, if I accept Alain’s offer, time wouldn’t be the problem anymore, I guess.”

Brett nodded. “I thought he’d want to Embrace you, sooner or later. Even if he wouldn’t have Brian to consider, you’d be a real asset for Clan Toreador.”

“Hey, slow down!” Michael laughed, although he had to admit that he was absurdly pleased by that comment. “We’re not quite there… and we won’t be for a while yet. We’re still talking about the smaller step… the lesser evil, if you want to put it that way.”

“I don’t,” Brett replied, clearly amused, “but you apparently do. Well, that makes sense. Making you a ghoul would give you the time to consider whether you want to become a Kindred eventually or not. It would keep you from aging and in touch with Kindred society.”

“I dunno if it’s really such a good idea,” Michael said uncertainly. “I mean, wouldn’t that make me a second class member of Alain’s family? I mean, he does have Childer and foster Childer left and right, who’re all proper vampires…”

“Kindred,” Brett corrected. “Get used to the proper vocabulary; it can mean life or death when dealing with our kind. The Prince wouldn’t care, but your own Elders could react… unpleasantly to being called vampires. That word is associated too closely with Sabbat monsters for their comfort, and they tend to be… vengeful.”

“Even the ones like Vera Vignes?” Michael asked.

“Especially the ones like Vera Vignes,” Brett emphasized. “They’re old and wealthy and influential and well-respected, both in Kindred and mortal society. They don’t want to be reminded that in the depths of their undead hearts they, too, are bloodsucking monsters. As Archon Raine, the late Prince of San Francisco used to state: ‘Monsters we are, less monsters we shall become.’”

“And is that true?” Michael asked doubtfully.

Brett shrugged. “That’s the declared goal of the Camarilla, especially the Ventrue among us; but they’ve always been hypocrites, so you shouldn’t always believe everything they say. However, you needn’t to worry about your possible place within Alain’s family. Childer might have a higher rank in the official Kindred hierarchy, but status is a different matter entirely.”

“I’m not sure I understand what you mean,” Michael admitted.

“Let me show you an example,” Brett said. “Angelus – our current Prince – has got Childer left and right, as you’ve so eloquently put. Some of these are his own Enforcers and the Archon of his House. Some of them have been with him for more than a century, and some are of utmost importance for the fight against the Sabbat. And yet the most important person of his household is not any of those old and powerful Kindred, but his personal ghoul: a brave and intelligent woman of great beauty who possesses what we call the second Sight – she’s a seer as well as a scientist. The Prince loves her very much, and they are soul-bound in a manner that is rare among our kind.”

“But they are…” Michael hesitated. “They’re not exclusive, are they?”
Brett shook his head. “The Prince can’t afford to be exclusive with anyone… or to feed from one source exclusively. That would endanger both him and his partner beyond reason. Besides, his Childer need his attention… or his control. But the Prince is always a special case anyway.” He glanced at the calendar on his desk. “I’m sorry, Michael, but I have to go now. Would you mind giving this horror story a closer look and sketch me up a skeleton plot? I’d really like to see if we can use it for a Rage movie… and how.”

Michael promised to do so, and Brett let him go, with the thin booklet under his arm and a lot to think about in his head.

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Michael used the next couple of relatively calm days to read the story – and he was morbidly fascinated by it. Whoever this Owen Thurman might be, Michael had the uncomfortable feeling that he knew what he was writing about – from first-hand experience. The description of the victim’s terror and suffering was too intense, too… personal to be merely the figment of somebody’s vivid imagination.

I need to meet this guy, close up and personal, if we want to make the movie credible, Michael thought, working on the first sketch of a possible plot that would fit neatly into the “Rage universe”, as Brett had called it.

Michael still loved the sound of that; loved it more with each passing day, truth be told. It meant that Rage – just like Superman, Batman, Captain Astro and the others – had become a fandom of its own, with a wide and active fanbase; that it now occupied its permanent little corner in the great and complex world of comics. A little corner that was expanding steadily under the expert hands of Hollywood moviemakers and earned him bucks he had never dreamed of.

It was a pleasant thought that gave Michael great satisfaction. Everybody had always belittled and patronized him for his “childish” love for comic books: his own mother, David, Ben, his friends, sometimes even Brian. And now it had been proven that he wasn’t just a little loser geek with a weird hobby. He had made a career none of the others could expect to come even close to, and it had made him rich beyond their imagination.

Apparently, there were more geeks out there than even he would have believed. Geeks who just happened to love Rage.

He laughed quietly when the doorbell rang and he went to answer it. Probably Em, having forgotten his keys again, he thought fondly. It seemed that becoming a vampire – Kindred, he corrected himself mentally – had not helped with Emmett’s short-time memory (or the complete lack of it) at all.

But it wasn’t Emmett who was standing on their doorstep. It was Brian, looking every bit as gorgeous as always, wearing designer sunglasses to his casual clothes, to protect his sensitised eyes against the sunlight. Being undead did have its disadvantages when it came to the little pleasures of mortal existence.

“He commented crankily. “Trust him to find the least vampire-friendly environment possible. Sometimes I really think he has a death wish… or he is completely nuts. Not that the two things would be mutually exclusive, of course,” he added.

“It’s nice to see you, too, Bri,” Michael replied patiently. “Have you come to discuss Emmett’s mental state with me?”
“Do I seem to be in a suicide mood?” Brian riposted, waltzing into the hall without waiting for an invitation. There had never been need for such things between the two of them. “I came because we need to talk, Mikey.”

“We do?” Michael tried to fake surprise and failed miserably, which earned him a derisive snort from his best friend. They knew each other too well to be fooled by any sort of pretence.

But Brian didn’t seem to be in a great hurry to breach the real topic. Instead, he picked up the booklet with the horror story and leafed through it with interest.

“So, Owen has chosen to deal with the trauma in a creative manner,” he said. “Well, it’s not surprising, I suppose. He’s an English major, after all; literature is what he does for a living… or will do so, once he’s graduated.”

“You know the author?” Michael asked, his surprise genuine this time.

Brian nodded. “I’d met him before… before I joined the Lost Boys. He’s a Childe of Angelus, our Prince. He was Embraced out of necessity, on the very brink of death. Things are still not that easy for him, due to his hurried and somewhat unorthodox Embrace. Too bad; he’s a nice guy, actually, and intelligent, too.”

“You mean,” Michael said slowly, “that this isn’t just a story?”

Brian shook his head. “Oh, no. He very nearly ended up as human sacrifice, and they are still trying to flush all that ceremonial poison out of his systems. Don’t ask me how… I don’t know and I don’t even want to know.”

“I suspected so much,” Michael murmured. “The descriptions are just too realistic to be mere fantasy.”

“No, they aren’t,” Brian said. “I’m told the poor guy is still suffers horrible pain at irregular intervals. Who gave you the story anyway?”

“Brett,” Michael answered with a shrug. “Apparently, he got it from Dawn Cavanaugh, and he wants to use the basic plot for a third *Rage* movie.”

“A third movie?” Brian repeated with a frown.

Michael nodded. “In which *Shadow* probably returns. Due to the human sacrifices his followers offer him. Oh, we’ll have to make quite a few changes, but if the author is willing, we can make a good story out of it.”

“It could work,” Brian agreed. “Although it wouldn’t hurt to see how the first movie does in the theatres before filming several sequels.”

Michael shrugged again. “Vera and Brett want to do this and I get paid for the script anyway, even if it’s going to collect dust in some drawer for years, so it’s their risk.”

“True enough,” Brian replied. “And I’m sure you’ll give them a great script.”

“Flattery will get you nowhere,” Michael said sternly. “Stop obfuscating, Bri. It’s not like you, not usually. So, why don’t we make ourselves comfortable, so that you can tell me why you’re *really* here?”

“It’s not that easy,” Brian replied, visibly nervous… which was another first between the two of
them, and it made Michael scared. Very scared.

“You have changed your mind about the two of us, haven’t you?” he said, defeated. It was to be expected. He’d hesitated too long to make up his mind.

But Brian shook his head.

“On the contrary, Mikey” he said. “To tell the truth, I’m here to… to propose. I just don’t know how to do it properly.”
Submission, Part 4

Chapter Summary

Brian proposes, offering the most any Kindred could ever offer. Now it’s up to Michael to make the right choice.

Chapter Notes

Father Philip Callaghan is a canon character from “Poltergeist: The Legacy”. In the “Pathways” universe, he returned to the States and took over the parish church where Angel looked for an exorcist in Season 1. His friendship with Angel and Angel visiting the church has been established in my earlier stories.

Sister Maura is the unnamed old nun who was capable of recognizing Angel as a vampire.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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SUBMISSION, Part 4

“You came to do what?” Michael was sure he’d been hallucinating just a moment earlier.

“I came to propose,” Brian repeated, and even he had to admit that it sounded… somewhat unconvincing, coming from his mouth.

“I thought you didn’t believe in gay marriage,” Michael said sarcastically.

“I don’t believe in marriage, period,” Brian corrected, “regardless if it’s between breeders or queers. I don’t believe in promises one can’t keep.”

“Why are you here, then?” Michael asked logically. The whole thing just didn’t make any sense for him.

“I offer no promises,” Brian said. “I’d like to offer something that would be only between you and me. Something that can’t be dissolved just because one of us gets bored with it. Something only death can end… I mean the Final Death kind of death, of course, as technically I’m already dead.”

He was uncharacteristically solemn, and that made Michael nervous, because he had the feeling that Brian was about to make the hardest decision of his life. Or unlife. Whatever. Something that was – at least for him – harder even than accepting the Embrace from Alain had been.

For some people, even death was easier than commitment. Although what kind of commitment Brian was speaking about, Michael had no clue.

“You’re losing me, Bri,” he admitted. “What the fuck are you talking about?”
“There’s one way for a vampire to be exclusive with his chosen one,” Brian began to explain, “but once it’s done, there’ll be no way to back off. Not for the vampire involved, in any case. The… partner can still change his mind.”

“Bri,” Michael interrupted, “you’re talking in circles again and not making any sense. Start again, and this time from the beginning.”

“Sorry,” Brian grinned ruefully. “This isn’t exactly easy for me, you know.”

“Oh, I know it,” Michael replied with an indulgent smile. “After all, we’re talking about something Brian Kinney doesn’t do as a rule. It’s all right, Bri, take your time. I’ll shut up and listen. I promise.”

“Thanks,” Brian raked his fingers through his already tousled hair. “All right, from the beginning. Since you’ve been socializing with the undead a great deal lately, let me ask you something; has Alain – or anyone else – ever told you about the One Vessel and his possible importance in a Kindred’s life?”

Michael, who didn’t remember much of his cryptic talk with Alain in A Taste of LA, shook his head. “Nah. Not that I could remember anyway. Is that some ceremonial dish? The Holy Grail of the undead?”

Brian laughed, and it was a lovely sound, one that Michael had missed for too long. “Well, in a manner, perhaps… but no,” he replied. “The One Vessel is a person chosen as a particular vampire’s exclusive food source.”

“You mean a personal slurpee?” Michael asked with a frown.

“More than just that,” Brian answered. “I’m fairly new to this myself; it’s been only days that Phillipe explained the ramifications to me. Apparently, if one of us keeps feeding on a single person exclusively, we’ll become dependent on that specific food source.”

“Which means?” Michael pressed; sometimes Brian’s circular thinking could be truly frustrating.

“It means that – given enough time – we won’t be able to feed from any other source,” Brian explained. “That’s why this person called the One Vessel… or One Blood. I hope I got the terminology right; this isn’t something that would be widely discussed, even among Kindred.”

“And you want me to be this person for you?” Michael finally began to see where things were heading.

Brian nodded. “Yes. Being who – and what – I am, this is the only thing I can offer that would be exclusively yours… that would be exclusively ours. Phillipe says it will lead to a bond even deeper and stronger than between Sire and Childe. I… I’d like to give you that, Mikey.”

Michael hmmmmed thoughtfully. “And I’ll be able to read your thoughts through the bond?” he asked. “Like I was able to read Alain’s when he gave me a taste of his blood?”

A pang of jealousy shot through Brian hearing that; he wasn’t even sure of whom he was actually jealous: of Alain for sharing with Michael something he hadn’t shared with Brian while Brian had still been Warm, or of Michael for becoming so… spiritually intimate with his Sire. It was a new and uncomfortable feeling for him, much more so than the simple jealousy he had felt for David or Ben or Michael’s more fleeting affairs. He didn’t like it; it made him wonder whether he’d waited for too long to make his offer.

“If you also taste my blood from time to time, yes, you will,” he finally replied. “You think you could
Michael shrugged. “I’ve tasted Alain’s; it was fairly disgusting, and it hurt like hell afterwards, but reading him was amazing. I’m willing to do it for you, if that’s what it takes.”

“It is – or so I’m told,” Brian said.

“Okay,” Michael nodded. “So where’s the catch?”

Brian raised a superior eyebrow. “Who says there is a catch?”

“There’s always a catch,” Michael replied, “especially if something sounds too good to be true. This is definitely one of those cases, so spill. I want to know the unpleasant part, too.”

“Well, there’s the bloodsucking involved,” Brian tried to evade, but Michael gave him a scolding look.

“Bri. The truth, please. I won’t accept anything less, and you know that,” he warned.

“Well, as I said, if you accept, after a couple of years I won’t be able to feed from anyone else,” Brian admitted. “I don’t know about bottled stuff, but since this is a spiritual bond, I don’t think it would sustain me, either. You must understand: this is a very rare thing among Kindred, so there are details nobody is really sure about.”

“Wait,” Michael interrupted. “What if something happens to me? What if I die?”

“Then I’ll die, too,” Brian admitted. Michael shook his head angrily.

“That’s completely unacceptable, Bri. I won’t endanger you that way.”

“You still don’t understand, do you?” Brian asked gently. “Mikey, I wouldn’t be able to live if something happened to you. Even while I was still a mortal, I wouldn’t have survived the loss of you. I always depended on you, since we were both fourteen. Committing to you in the Kindred way would only make official what has always been there.”

“I see,” Michael said slowly.

It didn’t surprise him, not really. He’d always known it, somewhere deep within, always avoiding to name it. What did surprise him was the fact that – after all those years – Brian was willing to bring it out into the open.

“So, back on your thirtieth birthday,” he began hesitantly, “it wasn’t really about getting older or suddenly discovering your kinky side, was it?”

“No,” Brian replied simply. “It was all about losing you.”

“You very nearly killed yourself, you idiot!” Michael exclaimed. “All you’d have to do was to say a fucking word, and I’d never have gone to fucking Portland with David!”

“I wanted you to go,” Brian thought about that, then he shook his head. “Nah, I didn’t. Not really. But I wanted you to be happy, and Debbie was so sure that you’d be happy with David, if only I wouldn’t stand in your way.”

“Since when do you listen to Ma?” Michael asked with a snort.

“She’s your fucking mother,” Brian reminded him, “and at least back then, she was genuinely
worried about your happiness, Mikey.”

“You mean genuinely worried about me standing it the way of her precious Sunshine,” Michael snorted again. “She sure as hell did her best to hammer that fact into my head that you lived Justin… and would never love me.”

“Yeah, she did the same with me,” Brian admitted. “There were moments when I almost believed myself. She’s a force of nature, your mother.”

“And a destructive one at that,” Michael agreed bitterly. “She and the lezzies, they’ve almost managed to drive us apart.”

“Well, don’t let them win now, then,” Brian said.

Michael shook his head. “It’s not that simple, Bri. If I accept your offer, that means I’ll also have to accept becoming a ghoul, too, and I’m still not entirely comfortable with that idea.”

“You don’t have to accept anything you’re not ready for,” Brian said.

“Oh, yes, I do,” Michael retorted. “I can’t do it knowing that if I die you’ll starve yourself to… to Final Death, as you guys call it. You’re a vampire now… a Kindred,” he corrected himself hurriedly. “You’ve got the chance to stay around for hundreds of years to come. I won’t take that from you.”

“Mikey, I don’t want to stay around for hundreds of years when you’re not with me to share all that,” Brian said patiently. “I only accepted the Embrace because it gave me the chance to make up for all those years I’ve wasted out of fear and sheer stupidity.”

Michael’s eyes grew wide and suspiciously shiny. “You really want to do this?” he asked in wonder. “To be with me as you wouldn’t be able to be with anyone else? Despite the risk it means for you?”

“There’s a certain risk involved for you as well,” Brian admitted. “Should word come out that you’re my One Vessel, it would make you a convenient target for my enemies.”

“Have you made so many already?” Michael joked.

“Nah,” Brian replied seriously, “and the only one I had among my own kind has been destroyed. But I will make enemies, Mikey; and it would make it easier for them to go after you than to fight me.”

“In that case becoming a ghoul would be even more useful,” Michael said. “It would make me stronger, faster, more resilient, wouldn’t it?”

“That seems to be the consensus about it, yeah,” Brian answered. “I haven’t met many of them, but they appear to be well able to take care of themselves.”

“And you’re really sure you want to make this?” Michael pressed. “To bound yourself to me, with no way out of it?”

Brian nodded. “Til Death do us part… well, Final Death, in any case,” he said, only half-joking.

Michael didn’t laugh. For quite a while, he just sat there, thinking. The ramifications, if he accepted, would be severe – for both of them. On the other hand, Brian was offering him the very thing he’d always wanted: to have something with Brian nobody else could have. And it would last for a very long time… as long as they lasted. Could he afford not to accept?

The answer to that was really an easy one.
He swallowed, gathering all his courage – of which, despite common opinion, he actually had a great deal – and looked up into Brian’s anxious face. “All right,” he said. “Since I also want to spend all those upcoming years with you… let’s go to Alain and allow him to turn me into a ghoul. I only hope it won’t be too unpleasant. You know I’m not much into pain.”

“Have you thought about it carefully, Mikey?” Brian asked, despite the inner urge to drag his friend into Alain’s den, now. “There won’t be any way back, once you’ve done that step. You won’t be able to become fully human again, no matter what. Are you absolutely sure you want to share all those centuries with me?”

Michael gave him an inscrutable look. “Well, we’ll see who’s gonna share what with whom,” he said. “Don’t expect me to be sexually monogamous, since you aren’t going to be, either… or to stay away from your Sire, after we’ve done the deed. I happen to enjoy his company.”

“So I’ve been told,” Brian said dryly.

Michael frowned. ‘You have? Whoever would bother to tell you?’

Brian shrugged. “It was Justin, apparently. Stalking the two of you for days, sending me anonymous e-mails with pictures about you and Alain kissing and groping in front of his personal haven… besides, I could smell you on him, you know. We undead guys have enhanced senses.”

Michael suddenly broke into a wide grin. “So, that was what made you finally stake your claim,” he laughed. “I’ll have to thank Justin for that little backfired action of his.”

“I’d avoid him if I were you,” Brian said. “He was stupid enough to get involved with the Sabbat and nearly got himself killed. The Prince ordered his mind to be wiped from all memories regarding Kindred – according to Phillipe, that is, and he’s always well informed.”

“I know,” Michael said. “That’s lawyers for you. I wasn’t really surprised when he told me that this Sunshine character really was Justin.”

Brian nodded. “Me neither. What other guy in his right mind would use that silly nickname beyond twenty? Not even a nellie bottom like Emmett would do that.”

“Leave Emmett alone,” Michael said sternly. “He’s a good friend. I owe him a great deal for keeping me sane in these days.”

“Which alone is a sure sign of the upcoming apocalypse,” Brian commented; then he pulled Michael to him for a deep tongued kiss. “Are you really sure, Mikey? Really, really sure?”

Michael nodded. His face was flushed and his breathing laboured; unlike his undead best friend, he still needed to breathe – a fact that Brian seemed to have temporarily forgotten.

“Yeah,” he said. “I’ve been toying with the idea for a while, to tell the truth. It’s just… I just waited to see what might become the two of us. I never wanted to be just another notch on your bedpost, you know. I knew I’d never have you for me alone, but I wanted to be at least something… well, something special.”

“You are,” Brian answered him. “You’ve always been. Even a stupid little twat like Justin realized that. The only one who never had a clue were you,” he kissed Michael again. “Now, what do you think about a little private celebration before we tell Alain the good news?”

Michael’s eyes melted like chocolate on a hot oven. “Oh, yes,” he said with deep satisfaction, “that would be a proper thing to do.”
Alain DeLaigle rarely felt the urge to go to church – not for any other reason than to play the organ, that is, and that not only because the Damned usually had a hard time to endure the sight of a cross or the scent of incense. It was a personal thing. Sure, he’d been raised as a Catholic in his mortal youth – most French people had, unless they belonged to the various heretic movements – but that had been more tradition than true faith. It had been expected from him to go to church, but he’d had no real wish to do so.

Strangely enough, it was after his Embrace – many, many years afterwards – that he’d begun a tentative approach towards personal faith. The brutality of the Clan wars during the Anarch revolt, the destruction of all his Childer by the Inquisition or by the Sabbat shook him badly and made him reconsider his choices.

He couldn’t undo the choice of becoming a vampire, of course, but the typical arrogance of the undead, the mistaken belief that they’ve cheated death for good, was broken for him. Yitzhak’s betrayal and the unjust accusation of being a Sabbat monster himself had been the last straw for him; the fact that he’d had to flee from the Enforcers to the other side of the ocean, that none of his own kind had been willing to believe him – at least not until he met Victor Girard – had led him to question his true identity.

Finding back to faith had not been an easy process, either. Despite the announcements of her ultimate founder that there would be greater joy in heaven over one repentant sinner than over ninety-nine righteous men who had no need for forgiveness, the Church had not been eager to accept one of the Damned with open arms. He’d had to struggle along the thorny path without help, without guidance for decades, as there was little chance that any of his own kind would understand why he wanted to struggle back to faith in the first place.

Sometimes he almost – almost – understood the Sabbat who’d built up their own hierarchy in a twisted mockery of a religious organization that summarily declared them all damned. There had to be some sick satisfaction in calling their most vicious monsters bishops and archbishops, as if showing the Church the cold shoulder, showing that they didn’t need her, that they didn’t want her, that they replaced her with something that matched their nature and allowed them to be the true power.

But Alain had never been, could never be a Sabbat monster, and so he’d struggled along as well as he could, until, finally, he met Father Callaghan a few years ago, during a visit in San Francisco on Victor’s behalf.

Back then, the young Irish priest had still been a member of the local Legacy House – a troubled and tortured soul like Alain himself. They’d met by accident and, despite all expectations, they became fast friends. They’d sat together in half-empty little bars, talking about the strange twists of their lives, about God in whose love and forgiveness Philip Callaghan still doggedly believed, and after a very long time, even in Kindred terms, Alain had begun to hope again.

It had been a pleasant surprise for him to be reunited with Father Callaghan in LA, to find him to be the newly assigned parish priest of the church named after “The Nine Choirs of the Saint Angels”, which was said to be the oldest church in Los Angeles. Rumours also said that the simple, elegant Gothic building was broken down and transported stone by stone from Ireland to L.A. by an eccentric millionaire who didn’t live to see “his” church being rebuilt in the whole. Alain didn’t know whether those rumours were true or not; neither was he particularly interested in finding out. The fact was, however, that she stood in a dangerous neighbourhood, infested with Anarch gangs and Sabbat packs, not to mention with malevolent, man-eating demons. Her previous priest, an old exorcist named Father Frederick, had been killed by a demon. But neither Father Callaghan, nor the
small convent of Coptic nuns who served in the church were willing to abandon the parish and the endangered people living there. For that, Alain couldn’t help but admire them.

Alain got out of his car, his eyes tearing up immediately in the unpleasantly strong sunlight, and he hurried into the dark, cool protection of the small, ethereal building with the slender tower. He didn’t come to practice on the organ today; he just needed a quiet hour to order his thoughts and re-establish the inner balance of his soul. He hadn’t been here often since Brian had entered his unlife, and the feeling that he was in some sort of fugue had grown steadily for months. He needed to come to a stop, to rearrange his priorities, to gain some perspective again.

The church seemed much bigger from the inside, with a vast, sweeping ceiling high above and ancient, pale tapestries hanging on the walls. Row upon row of pews filled most of the interior, a large altar dominating the end of the church opposite to where Alain now stood and looked up to the wonderfully-carved, huge cross hinging from the apse’s ceiling. He’d come to endure the sight of the cross during the recent years, knowing that all this fear from the sign of human salvation was largely a cultural condition among Kindred and that in itself the cross couldn’t harm him.

He walked slowly to the front pews and kneeled down, closing his eyes. By all rights, he shouldn’t have been here. He was a monster who killed people to turn them into monsters like himself, and he led a life (or unlife, in his case) that regularly violated just about every rule the Church had laid down for her followers. And yet he couldn’t resist the pull. From time to time, he simply needed to come here, to allow his weary soul to come to its peace on sacred ground, where the Creator to whom he’d found his way back, despite all hope, had taken up residence. Omnipresent God might be, the divine presence was still more palpable in a place devoted entirely to worship.

 Dans nos obscurités, allume le feu qui ne s’étendent jamais, the vampire prayed in his native French, trying to find the balance between his dark existence and the Light towards which all creatures of this Earth were heading on the end of their lives’ path; his path was just longer than that of the mortals, much longer. La ténèbre n’est point ténèbre devant toi; la nuit comme le jour est lumière.

Indeed, finding his way back to his particular version of faith had added a very different quality to his existence in the darkness. Father Callaghan seemed so certain that not even Kindred should be considered damned by default – after all, he liked to argue, God had not destroyed Caine after murdering his brother, merely marked him. And the Kindred, Caine’s Childer, even though they were still wearing the Mark – the bloodlust within, which they called the Beast – should be treated the same way.

Alain had not doubt that Father Callaghan would be excommunicated, should he voice his opinion within the earshot of his bishop. Still, for him as a Kindred, the attitude of the priest was a never-expected source of hope.

A mortal probably wouldn’t have heard the quiet rushing of clothes when old Sister Maura came forth to change the burned-down candles, but Alain’s keen senses alerted him as soon as she entered the nave. With her wise, ancient eyes and the habit of the eldest religious order of the world – her convent, or what was left of it after a vicious demon attack, had converted to the Coptic order only a couple of years earlier – she seemed older than Earth itself. She had served in this very church for decades, had witnessed the horrible murder of the previous priest by a demon, only to return to her convent and find all but one of her sisters massacred – Sister Maura had seen a lot and was not easily frightened.

She gave Alain a pointed look to signal him that while she was tolerating him for Father Callaghan’s sake, she was still not willing to trust him and probably never would. This time, however, she made no comment. She had an uncanny ability to recognize vampires, demons and any other creature in
human disguise, which was probably the reason why she was still alive, but she had grudgingly accepted that for some reason Father Callaghan would allow a few selected individuals to enter his church, and that she didn’t have the authority to prohibit him doing so.

She gave Alain another warning look and returned to the sacristy. Alain suppressed a grin, knowing that she would alert Father Callaghan at once, on the principle that if the priest was letting monsters into the church, it should be his responsibility to keep an eye on them. And indeed, a few moments later the door of the sacristy opened again, and the young priest came in, smiling. As always, he wore black jeans, and a black, dog-collared shirt. He had a pleasant, open face and longish hair, just long enough to reach his collar.

“So, here you are again,” he said with that soft, lilting Irish accent of his and sat down next to Alain. “I haven’t seen you for months. The convention has missed your organ-playing. It’s beautiful, you know.”

“I was busy,” Alain replied. “We had a brutal fight with the Sabbat; and then some family additions.”

“I know about the fight,” the priest said, long familiar with Kindred euphemisms. “You forget that I have the privilege to listen to the confession of your Prince on a semi-regular basis,” he gave Alain a shrewd look. “You should give it a try, too. Might prove helpful.”

Alain shook his head, laughing. Angelus’ custom to go to church had at first shocked the entire Kindred population in LA, but again, Angelus had been a vicious Sabbat monster once and had a great deal to atone for. Being a reformed monster was a strange thing indeed, whether seen from a human or a Kindred point of view.

“I still can’t see how it might work,” Alain admitted. “I mean, our very existence violates every possible rule your Church considers sacred. We kill people to procreate, we’re violent, promiscuous hedonists and sometimes do horrible things to each other… how can you forget that?”

“Those rules have been made for humans,” the priest pointed out. “You aren’t human anymore, my friend; haven’t been for a very long time. Applying human rules to your existence would be a mistake.”

“So what should I possibly confess them, if everything you consider a sin is part of my very nature?” Alain asked.

The priest shrugged. “How am I supposed to know? But we all have our regrets. Or do you want to tell me that you’ve never done anything that you’re ashamed of in hindsight? That you wouldn’t want to make up for? That’s hard to believe.”

“I haven’t said that,” Alain replied. “But I don’t think that a few prayers would make up for my past mistakes.”

“Of course not,” the priest agreed, “or we wouldn’t need divine grace to transcend our sins.”

“You say that so easily,” Alain said. “But in five hundred years, you’re the first priest I’ve met who didn’t look at me as if I were some kind of hellspawn… which, I guess, I am.”

“No,” the priest said very seriously, “you’re not. Sure, as a human being, a Catholic and a priest, I can’t give my blessing to the kind of life you lead… or, to be more accurate, I couldn’t if you were still human. But you aren’t, and that’s the key factor. You belong to a species older than mankind, and your kind has the right to continue, too – as long as you don’t leave dead bodies in your wake like those Sabbat types do,” he took a look at Alain’s face, sighed and shook his head. “We’ve been
there and discussed that already, Alain. Many times, in fact. What has brought it up again?"

“I’m about to add someone to my family again,” the vampire replied. “And I’m not sure it’s the right thing to do; even though the alternatives don’t look promising for the person in question.”

“I might understand it better if you told me everything from the beginning,” Father Callaghan said mildly. “Why don’t we go out into the church garden – it’s nice’n shadowy right now – grab a beer or two and talk about it?”

Alain gave the priest a long-suffering look. “We’ve known each other for years. When did you see me drink beer? Ever?”

Father Callaghan shrugged. “That’s the only thing I can offer. We don’t keep your… favourite vintage here. It would be a little awkward.”

“You do have a hang to understatements, don’t you?” Alain grinned, imagining the priest to take out a bag of 0-negative from the fridge for him. “But I’m fine for the moment, thanks. I don’t need anything… save a sympathetic ear.”

“I can certainly offer that,” the priest agreed and led him out into the church garden that was indeed sufficiently shadowed, even for a vampire’s comfort. They sat down in a private corner; Father Callaghan fetched himself a beer, and then looked at Alain expectantly. “Well, what are you waiting for? Tell me what’s going on.”

And in the next two hours Alain told him the most important facts, starting with Brian’s arrival in LA. While he spoke, he could feel things rearrange themselves in his mind – talking to Father Callaghan always had this effect on him. The priest listened to him, half-fascinated, half-disgusted by certain aspect of undead lifestyle, trying very hard not to judge the same way he’d have judged humans in a similar case.

Vampires were not humans, though – that was the key to even the most basic understanding, but that didn’t mean, in Philip Callaghan’s personal opinion, that salvation would be generally denied them. They had their own set of rules and would be judged according to those. At least that was the belief of Sister Grace (or Mother Verena, as she had been called since the conversion of her entire convent), the superior of the Coptic nuns, who also happened to be the lead demonologist of the Legacy, and Father Callaghan tended to agree. Sure, in the eyes of mortal men Alain DeLaigle was a monster… but an ethical one, as he stated of himself, and Philip Callaghan found that to be true.

“Well, I can’t pretend to really understand what motivates your kind,” he said when Alain had finished. “But as far as I can see, your choice would be the lesser evil for this Michael character. I can’t encourage you to turn someone into one of your kind, of course. But if he wants this, and if it will protect him from a far worse fate, well…” he shrugged. “I can’t apply the rules of the Church to someone who isn’t even nominally Catholic, but personally, I can’t believe that an act motivated by faithful love should be condemned.”

“One day, your superiors will find out about your heretic ideas,” Alain warned him. “And then you can be grateful if they only excommunicate you, instead of burning you on the stake.”

The priest laughed. “I could barely prevent the former once already. As for the latter – I think we’re safely beyond that phase.”

“Don’t be so sure,” Alain muttered. “I’ve seen the Inquisition… and what happened to the Kathar heresy. The methods might have changed. The human nature hasn’t.”
Father Callaghan shook his head in amusement. He knew, in theory, that Alain was five hundred years old – that was what made their conversation so interesting for him. But that mere knowledge still hadn’t prepared him for casual remarks like that.

Before he could say anything, though, Alain’s cell phone rang. The vampire answered it, staring at the text message on the tiny screen with an inscrutable expression.

“Well, that settles it,” he finally said. “Michael has made his decision – I couldn’t go back on my offer anymore, even if I wanted to.”

“But you don’t really want to anyway, do you?” the priest asked.

“No,” Alain said, shaking his head. “No, I want to do this; I have for quite some time. I just wasn’t sure that it was the right thing to do. But that’s not my decision to make, not any longer. Wish us luck, Father, even if you can’t condone our choices.”

“Your choices are your own,” the priest replied simply, “and I don’t intend either to condone or to condemn them. I do wish you the best… all of you.”

Chapter End Notes

As we know, Alain has already told Michael about the concept of the One Vessel. Understandably enough, however, Michael has forgotten about it. He had more than enough weird concepts to get used to at that time.
Entering the Darkness, Part 1

Chapter Summary

Michael takes the all-deciding step.

Chapter Notes

**Warning:** This chapter has very disturbing imaginery. You can read the sensitised version on FF.Net if you're grossed out easily.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

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ENTERING THE DARKNESS, Part 1

The news about Michael’s decision spread quickly within Clan Toreador and was greeted with general approval. Especially Victor Girard was relieved to have the young man’s status legalized according to Kindred law. He had always been a stout supporter of the Camarilla and wanted things to be done properly. Besides, Michael would have been a liability for him as the Toreador Primogen of LA in the long run. He had a strong enough opposition from the side of both Christopher Houghton and Rebecca Lowell as it was. Allowing a mortal to move freely among Kindred, without being bound to the Clan in any way, didn’t bode well with the more conservative members, and Victor needed the support of the Elders if he wanted to remain Primogen.

Before Alain could have made his move, however, he needed to get the Prince’s permission, as Angelus took the voluntary aspect of the Embrace very seriously. Granted, the creating of a ghoul was not exactly the same thing as the Embrace – in fact, the whole practice was somewhat frowned upon in orthodox circles, no matter how useful ghouls could be in certain positions – but it bound the individual to a certain Clan and bloodline just as infinitely. The ghoul might have a second chance forward – to the final Embrace – but none backward. He or she could no more go back to become a mere mortal than a vampire could. Therefore the creating of a ghoul underlay similar regulations and restrictions as the Embrace.

So Alain had to appear before the Prince again, voice his request and present his chosen one for approval. Unlike a fledgling vampire, a future ghoul didn’t have to be presented to the Clan Elders, only to the Prince. Nonetheless, Alain had asked Victor to accompany him at this meeting. Having the Clan Primogen’s obvious support was always useful in situations like this.

Michael was nervous like a virgin bride on her wedding night as he followed Alain up the broad marble stairs to the Prince’s spacious mansion. As much as he liked Victor, who was a funny and easy-going person as bloodsuckers go, he sorely missed some personal support. Something that would come from his own circles. But neither Brian nor Emmett had been invited along, being insignificant neonates, and so Michael had to stand up for himself all on his own.

*Well, it’s high time to grow up,* he thought a little sourly because reasonable insight was one thing
but pre-transformation jitters were another one entirely. I can’t expect Bri to fight my battles for me. I’ve done what I had to do before, without him. This won’t be any different.

But his stomach was still the size of a shrivelled lemon when they entered the Prince’s foyer - a grandiose room that had been turned into a library full of visibly old and most likely very precious books.

They were welcomed by a beautiful Creole woman who turned out to be Alex Moreau, the chief researcher of the *Luna Foundation*… and the Prince’s personal ghoul. She was friendly, absolutely charming and probably very well-learned and intelligent, but she didn’t seem to have the urge to show off said intelligence in any obtrusive way.

“Welcome to the home of the Prince, gentlemen,” she said in a low, pleasant voice. “Angel is expecting you, Mr. DeLaigle; and Mr. Girard, too. Mr. Novotny, you are to stay with me for the time being. You’ll be called when it’s time to be presented to the Prince.”

Michael wasn’t very comfortable with the thought of Alain and Victor discussing him with the undead ruler of LA in his absence. But the two vampires nodded in agreement, so it had to be another one of those arcane Kindred customs. Will he ever be able to learn how to navigate among them?

“With time and the proper attention… yes, you will,” Alex Moreau said, and Michael realized he must have voiced his doubts loudly. “It’s an ancient and intricate world that needs some getting used to, but it’s also a fascinating one. Well,” she clarified, laughing, “fascinating for me, at least. But I’ve had a strong interest for the supernatural from childhood on, so my opinion probably doesn’t count.”

“May I ask how you…” Michael trailed off, not sure he was allowed to ask such questions at all. But the Creole beauty took no offence.

“How I’ve become a ghoul?” she asked. Michael nodded. “Well, my story is a little bit different than yours,” she said thoughtfully, “as in my case it was perhaps the only possible way out of a fairly twisted situation. You see, during a university reunion a former college friend asked me out – only that in the years we hadn’t met he’d become a vampire. A *Sabbat* vampire. Has Mr. DeLaigle told you about the *Sabbat*?”

Michael nodded, shivering. “He has. It didn’t sound pleasant.”

“No, they’re everything but pleasant,” Alex agreed. “They wanted to turn me, using a very specific *Sabbat* ritual that would make me especially powerful as a vampire. Fortunately, my friends from the *Luna Foundation* rescued me before my transformation would have been completed. But there were already changes that couldn’t be undone: my senses have sharpened, I could feel the presence of vampires amidst a crowd… and I’ve developed a craving for blood. Preferably for human blood.”

Michael shuddered. “That’s just gross.”

Alex nodded in agreement. “Oh, yes, it is. I thought I’d go mad – it grossed me out to no end, and yet I craved it so much that it physically hurt. I’d probably have ended up as a crazed vampire, a *Sabbat* most likely, had I not been sent to LA to help founding the new *Luna Foundation House*. Here I met Angel, and with the help of his experts in the supernatural, we figured out that becoming his ghoul would be the best solution, for both of us. It helps with my cravings – *Kindred Vitae* is so much stronger than human blood – and being blood-bound to each other stabilizes him; helps keeping his Beast on a leash.”

She chose *not* to speak about Angel’s curse and how it had been lifted by magically binding the
Prince’s soul to hers. That was not meant to be common knowledge, for reasons of security; and besides, it wouldn’t help Michael with his own situation a bit.

“Have you… have you ever regretted it?” Michael asked hesitantly.

Alex shook her head. “No; not for a moment. Our partnership is closer than I could ever have had with a mortal lover; and besides, I enjoy being a ghoul. The special abilities come in handy sometimes, and the not aging part is a great appeal to every woman, you know.”

“What about children?” Michael asked.

Alex’ face clouded. “The changes the Sabbat forced upon me have already rendered me infertile. There was nothing left to give up in that area.”

“I’m… I’m sorry,” Michael said and he meant it. Being robbed of parenthood must have been a severe loss.

Alex gave him a sad, beautiful smile. “It’s not your doing, is it? And it’s not so that we could change it. What about you? Do you have children?”

Michael nodded. “A daughter. Actually, it was a favour I did for two lesbian friends, but I do love my little princess very much nonetheless.”

“That could become a problem one day,” Alex warned him. “After a while, people will notice that you’ve stopped aging, and that will raise suspicions.”

Michael shrugged. “Lindsay and Melanie are planning to move to Canada with the kids. Same-gender marriages are legal there, and they will be able to live without the constant homophobic attacks. I’ll miss Jenny Rebecca terribly, of course, but this move solves several problems at once.”

Their conversation was interrupted by a tall, blond, handsome young man who looked in through the half-open door.

“The Prince is ready to see Mr. Novotny now,” he said.

Alex smiled at him. “Thank you, Owen. Would you escort him there? I really need to finish the correction of this manuscript.”

“Sure,” the young man named Owen waved at Michael. “Come with me!”

He led Michael through several other rooms and then to an antechamber that opened directly to the Prince’s private study.

“By the way, do you happen to be Michael Novotny, the new screenwriter of the Vignes Studios?” he asked, as they were walking. Michael nodded.

“Are you a Rage fan?” he asked. It would have surprised him, as Owen looked like someone with more… conservative literary tastes.

He felt his judgement of character reassured when the young man shook his head.

“No. But Dawn Cavanaugh told me she’d handed in my book to Brett Keller as a possible plot for the next Rage movie.”

Now Michael was truly surprised. “You’re Owen Thurman?” he asked.
The young man nodded. “I am. And I assure you that the descriptions in my book were not exaggerated by half. In fact, I’ve toned it down quite a bit, or else my readers would have got sick.”

Michael gave him a thorough once-over. “You seem to have recovered well enough, though,” he commented.

Owen smiled grimly. “The Prince has Embraced me in the last possible moment… and advanced vampire healing does have its advantages,” he explained. “But the worst part wasn’t visible anyway… and I’m still struggling with the after-effects.” He stopped in front of the door. “You must go in there now. If you accept my book as a basis for your next screenplay we’ll have enough time to discuss later.”

Michael shifted his weight uncertainly from one leg to another, reluctant to reach for the doorknob. Owen gave him an encouraging pat on the back.

“Don’t fret,” he said, “Angel won’t bite… not without your consent anyway. And he’s not as bad as his reputation; not in peacetime. But he doesn’t like to be made wait, so – go in!”

Taking a deep breath, Michael opened the door with a trembling hand and entered the study of the Kindred Prince, nauseous with anxiety.

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The power radiating from the tall, dark, intimidating vampire hit him with the force of a thunderstorm before he’d have closed the door behind him. Those empathic abilities Alain had mentioned (and that he still doubted he’d truly possess) had sharpened due to the blood-sharing with Alain and the touch of the Wild that tasting Alain’s Vitae had gifted upon him.

He knew he had to thread very carefully here. He had been told stories from the Prince’s past and, despite Owen’s reassurances, his first impression was that of a dangerous predator, kept on leash by sheer willpower alone. He knew he shouldn’t show fear – weakness only made him a victim in the world of darkness – but it was hard to keep up a calm appearance when facing this… this creature. Of all the vampires he’d been associating with since his arrival to LA, Angelus was the first he’d have recognized as a monster, even without foreknowledge.

Determined to make a passable impression, he bowed – the same way he’d seen Diego bow to his Sire the few times Joaquin Murietta visited his Childe in the Studios – hoping that it was the right thing to do.

“My Prince,” he murmured as Alain had taught him, respectfully but without grovelling, “you wanted to see me?”

He could feel Alain’s approval through their rudimentary link (Alain had just fed off him shortly before) and knew he’d done right. It was a relief.

Angel, for his part, eyed the fragile-looking mortal with interest. At first sight one wouldn’t have seen much in Michael Novotny – save those beautiful eyes – but someone as experienced as the Prince could feel the steely strength under that harmless exterior… a strength perhaps Michael himself wasn’t at all aware of. Not yet, anyway. But one day he’d surprise everyone – before all else himself.

In some ways, Michael reminded him of Wesley. Just like the ex-Watcher and now Precept of the LA Legacy House, this young mortal had often been underestimated. Believed to be weak and meek and not particularly capable to best bigger, stronger, more aggressive adversaries. Unlike most people, Angel knew that this was far from the truth.
He could also feel that Michael Novotny – albeit perhaps not aware of it himself – was, in some way, stronger than Wesley could ever hope to become. No knowledge of the occult, of course, he hadn’t been raised and trained that way, but he possessed a natural strength one wouldn’t accept from his unremarkable appearance.

Perhaps he had grown up in a family marked by love and acceptance. Perhaps he was just born resilient. But he refreshingly lacked Wesley’s inferiority complex and self-recriminations. He might have not looked like, but this skinny little mortal knew what he wanted and wasn’t afraid of going for it. Which, if he wanted to survive in a Kindred family, was essential. One didn’t show weakness when socializing with the undead, or one ended up as dinner.

Also, this natural inner resilience would enable him to accept the Embrace, should he ever choose to do so. The same resilience the lack of which had convinced Angel that Wesley would never make a passable Childe. The Beast of the Line of Aurelius would have broken him within weeks and made him a vicious monster that still wouldn’t have been able to handle the clan’s difficult heritage.

Michael Novotny, on the other hand, would be more than capable of handling the Beast of Alain’s unknown yet powerful bloodline. Whether he’d ask for the full Embrace or not, he had the strength to live in Alain’s family without taking serious harm. Without endangering the Masquerade. Angel was content with what he’d seen.

“Well, Michael,” he finally said, and Michael was surprised by the light baritone coming from such a large body, “Alain here tells me that you have consented to become his personal ghoul. Can you confirm that statement?”

“Yes, my Prince,” Michael replied simply, relieved that the lead vampire apparently didn’t stand on ceremony.

“Have you been instructed thoroughly what it means and what the transformation would do to you, with all the consequences?” asked Angel in a manner that was more concerned than demanding.

Michael nodded. “Yes, my Prince. I know that once started, it can’t be undone, or I’d die in a rather… unpleasant manner. And I also know that I’ll be dependent on the Blood of Alain’s line for the rest of my life.”

“Do you accept those terms, and do you declare that you’ll undergo the process of your own free will, without any pressure from your future Domitor?” the Prince asked, now more formally than before.

Michael, having been made familiar with that particular term, nodded again.

“I do,” he said, and he almost began to giggle, because the question grotesquely reminded him of the marriage wows. Only that this bond would be a true one, not such a mockery as his so-called marriage with Ben had been.

The Prince looked at him for a moment, frowning. Perhaps he’d caught his suppressed amusement and couldn’t explain it. Then he turned to the ghostly pale, dark-haired woman on his side; an almost painfully thin woman, one clad entirely in white – in an ankle-length, old-fashioned white gown generously adorned with lace.

“Drusilla, please confirm,” he said.

The woman rose and came up to Michael, her unnaturally large, dark eyes unblinking. She didn’t say a word, just stared at Michael the way a snake would stare at a bird it wanted to eat. Michael had
heard of Drusilla, too, of course: the mad, psychic vampire, who had started out her life blessed – or
coursed – with the Second Sight; then, to her eternal misfortune, caught the eye of the Scourge of
Europe… and that was that. He’d broken her mind, made her a crazed, vicious creature of the night –
then abandoned her without guidance, without protection.

It was whispered in Kindred circles that Drusilla had been healed to a certain extent – as much as
anyone in her condition - which she’d borne for a century or more - could be healed to begin with.
Currently, she served as the Prince’s Archon, as due to her abilities she could frighten the most
hardened vampires out of their minds.

Considering this, Michael shouldn’t have been a true challenge for her. She reached out to the young
mortal easily, forcing herself into his mind, not brutally but mercilessly, determined to find out
whether or not he’d been telling the truth. He could feel his pathetic resistance, then his rising panic
at the inevitable intrusion, and then…

…then some automatic self-defence the mortal hadn’t even been aware of possessing kicked into
high gear; his mental shields slammed down with the force of a train crash. The backlash made
Drusilla stagger and sway for a moment with the unexpected strength of it. She could almost
physically feel the impact, and would probably have fallen, had Angel not caught her in the last
moment.

“Are you all right, Dru?” he asked in concern.

Drusilla nodded, still shaking a little.

“He’s strong for a mortal… surprisingly so, and stronger still he will grow,” she said in a strange,
singsong voice that made Michael’s hair stand on the edge. There could be little doubt that the
woman – the vampire – still wasn’t entirely sane, no matter what the rumours said. “The touch of the
Wild…experienced through Alain’s Vitae… had torn down some of his natural barriers, unleashing
his Gift fully. This little duckling has great potential, Angelus. He must be guarded carefully. In the
wrong hands his Gift could become a terrible weapon.”

“What do you mean?” asked the Prince with a frown. “And for Caine’s sake, Dru, try to speak
clearly, just this one time. I really don’t have the nerve to play twenty questions right now.”

To Michael’s surprise, the eerie-looking woman blinked and became… almost normal.

“He’d make a very powerful and vicious Lasombra, if turned by the wrong people,” she explained.
“They’d corrupt his Gift and make of him a monster even we’d have a hard time to deal with. He
mustn’t be Embraced, not yet, not for a while, and most definitely not by anyone even remotely
associated with the Sabbat. But,” she added more brightly, “he’ll make an excellent Toreador one
day.”

“No, thanks,” Michael said hurriedly. “No offence, but I prefer to stay on the sunny side of the road,
thank you very much.”

“Why are you doing this then to begin with?” the Prince asked in understandable confusion. He
couldn’t have known what was behind the whole arrangement between Alain and Michael.

“Because Brian needs me,” Michael replied simply. “And this is the only way I can hope to remain
on his side.”

Angel exchanged a look with Drusilla – then he shrugged.

“As good a reason to become a ghoul as any I’ve ever heard,” he said. “In fact, better than most
people have. All right then. Alain, you have my permission to do this. But guard him very carefully. You’ve heard Drusilla.”

“I’ve known about it already, my Prince,” Alain replied respectfully. “As you probably know, I can see auras; his is a spectacular one, unlike any I’ve seen so far.”

“Good, then,” said the Prince. “Should there be more… undue interest in him and his Gift than you feel you can deal with, call on me. I’ve got the means to protect him, even where you can’t; and I will do so, because I want this potential of his on our side.”

Alain bowed deeply, formally. The Prince’s personal protection was the best thing – the highest level of safety – any Kindred could hope for his household. And the Prince of LA was a powerful and ruthless one. Few would risk raising his ire about a mere ghoul, no matter what special gift said ghoul might possess. The Order of Aurelius still had a fearsome reputation among the undead citizens – and a well-earned one.

“As my Prince orders,” he said formally.

Angel smiled, giving them a glimpse of the carefree young mortal he once had been.

“It was just an offer, nothing else,” he said. Now, off with you; see the deed done. And Michael?”

“Yes, my Prince?” Michael was surprised to be addressed again. In Kindred terms, he was considered property from the moment on the Prince gave his permission to make him a ghoul, and Princes didn’t talk to property as a rule.

The dark, unfathomable eyes of the undead ruler of LA twinkled with for him unusual amusement.

“When you are settled in and have grown stronger, I’ll have a taste of you,” he said, and Michael shivered from the dark promise in his voice.

He knew that – in theory anyway – everyone within a Prince’s Domain was considered his, but he also knew that Angelus only applied this rule in cases of emergency. That he would make an exception with a ghoul was a rare thing and a great honour in Kindred terms as ghouls were not particularly well-respected, no matter how useful they were. For a ghoul, being associated with the Prince of the city, in whatever way, meant a considerable rise in social status.

“As my Prince orders,” Michael echoed Alain’s previous answer, bowing deeply.

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After that, they were unceremoniously dismissed and returned to Alain’s house that had already been prepared for the event. Sarina was present, of course – she counted as Alain’s Childe in all but blood, after all – as well as Brian, and even Alain’s older Childer, Oliver and Pierre had come to witness the soon-to-be extension of family boundaries. Peppone, as always, had seen to that everything was ready and the guests comfortably seated while waiting.

Michael had already met Oliver Simon, who was the agent of several of the actors and models he regularly worked with in the Vignes Studios, and found him rather… unremarkable, which was the unspoken reason why he’d never taken Oliver up on the offer to become his agent, too. As a rule, even the most promising and asked-for screenwriter ought to have an agent in Hollywood, and Oliver was a solid, reliable one as agents go, not to mention part of the same family, but Michael was still hesitating to accept him.

Like many young gay men – including Brian – he was a little too obsessed with youth and good looks, and couldn’t imagine why anyone would choose an older man, whether as a partner or as a
business associate. Even if that older man was witty, funny and generous like the late George Schickel had been. The ones like David were usually the limit of what he, personally, would have accepted, and the bespectacled, balding, meek-mannered Oliver, now stuck permanently in his early forties, was not on his list of desirable candidates. He knew he was being shallow, but thirty-plus years of Liberty Avenue training weren’t easy to overcome.

But as he was introduced to Oliver’s partner, he understood at once the potential attraction of an experienced and sophisticated lover… one as David should have been, only that he hadn’t. The elegantly greying Pierre Chatelet was at least a decade older than Oliver – in mortal terms, that is – but borne his age in that… well… ageless manner only French men of a certain social class would do. He was also handsome, in an almost patrician way, very obviously well-educated and, if the twinkling of his eyes was any indication, most likely had a wicked sense of humour, too.

What he saw in Oliver was a mystery for Michael, but perhaps he was just being shallow again.

Michael knew that Alain had Embraced Oliver on the Prince’s behalf, to secure his loyalty for Victor against Rebecca Lowell, whose agent Oliver had been back then. But there could be no doubt that Alain would enjoy the company of the cultured and refined Pierre, who was not only a very successful landscape architect but also co-owned a series of art studios with Madame D’Excavalier.

And while Pierre was still barely more than a fledgling, having only been in the Dark for a few years, Michael was fairly sure that one day he’d become Alain’s right hand and the second most important person in their undead family. What Oliver lacked in class and power, Pierre had in spades. Alain must have been glad to have him on his side.

The necessary introductions having been made, they could finally turn their attentions to the actual event of the day. As ghouling – as the making of a ghoul was usually called – was a semi-public ceremony, witnessed by the Clan Primogen and every family member within easy reach, the private salon on the ground floor had been selected as the location for it… not that a great deal of preparation would have been needed, unlike in the case of a proper Embrace.

It was an airy room, with stained glass windows that broke down the sunlight and thus rendered it harmless for vampires, and was furnished with dark red leather sofas around a long, onyx-plated coffee table that had bronze legs, shaped like animal paws. There was no other furniture, save for a narrow sideboard left from the door and the bronze candelabra in the corners. The entire room was a curious mix of modern and old-fashioned things, remembering Michael of Alain’s private haven. Usually, it was used for impromptu meetings with Clan members.

As Alain had already told Michael, ghouling was a process quite similar to the Embrace. With the marked difference that the candidate didn’t get drained completely, just weakened enough for his master’s Vitae to take over the regulating of the body functions and kick off the Change. That would be a somewhat… unpleasant process which, just like with fledgling vampires, could take anywhere from a few days to several weeks. It all depended on the bloodline and the master himself. Considering that Alain was an old and powerful vampire with very potent Vitae, Michael could count on a short but violent transformation process, of which he had only had a taste so far when first being fed a small amount of Alain’s blood. As a test, for the lack of a more proper expression.

He knew that it would be painful, and he was glad for the supporting presence of his future family – especially that of Brian. Together, they had always managed to deal with just about everything.

“The Dynamic Duo,” he murmured, more to himself, but Brian’s acute vampire hearing caught it anyway.

“Always, Mikey,” he said. “Don’t be afraid. I’m here with you. I’ll always be here with you. I
He’d have said more, but he was interrupted by people more important for the entire event than himself.

“Let us begin!” Victor Girard intoned.

As ghouling concerned the entire family. Other members were allowed – indeed, encouraged – to actively participate in the process, if they wanted… and if the head of the family didn’t object. Alain did not, and thus it was Brian and Sarina who stripped Michael to the waist, offering his wrist to the Clan Primogen first, then to their older Brood Brothers, and finally to each other. Even Sarina was allowed to participate.

The younger vampires drank from him, sending him to ever new waves of euphoria through the execution of the Kindred Kiss. This was, basically, done so that Alain wouldn’t have to absorb too much of his blood, for such a thing always made it hard to keep a strong grip on the Beast, unless a vampire had to feed a newly-Embraced Childe afterwards. The last thing they wanted was Alain to Frenzy in the middle of the process.

But finally they surrendered Michael to his soon-to-be Domitor. Unlike the others, Alain gathered him in his arms and fed from his neck, signalling his ownership with that intimate gesture. Michael felt already light-headed from the blood loss, and now relaxed in Alain’s arms, floating on the very edge of consciousness. His heartbeat had slowed down considerably, and he heard the voice of Victor Girard as through thick fog.

“Now, Alain! Hurry up, or it will be too late!”

The voice was full of urgency, even with fear, which surprised him. He felt wonderful; why would Victor sound so worried?

But then Alain was kissing him with a long, deep-tongued kiss that took away his breath and stripped away all conscious thought. Suddenly, his mouth was filled with some cool, viscous liquid that vaguely disgusted him. He could not recognize what it was, though.

“Swallow, Michael!” he heard Victor’s strangely urgent voice again. “You must take it on your own will! We can’t force you!”

“Come on, Mikey, you were doing so well, don’t let us down now!” another voice, fairly scared, encouraged him. It was Brian’s. Brian needed him to do this... for whatever reason. So he would do it... for Brian. He could do it. It wasn’t that difficult, was it? He swallowed a million times every day, didn’t he?

With more effort he’d have thought to be capable off, Michael forced himself to swallow the liquid filling his mouth. It had a coppery taste, and now he realized that it was blood. Alain’s blood. But he’d barely begun to feel sick about the whole situation when the excruciating pain hit with the brutal force of a falling rock.

Chapter End Notes

The creation of a ghoul is mostly the product of my imagination. I know it contradicts White Wolfe canon in several points, but since this is a crossover and an AU anyway, I
didn’t really care. The whole thing seemed more logical to me this way, and I stick to it. :o))
Entering the Darkness, Part 2

Chapter Summary

A newly created ghoul needs to be claimed by his maker to solidify his status in the family.

Warning: This is the part that truly justifies the E-rating. You can read the sanitised version on FF.Net.

Chapter Notes

Dedication: for who wanted some steamy hot stuff between Alain and Michael. This one is for you, my friend!

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ENTERING THE DARKNESS, Part 2

If the first, tiny taste of Alain’s Vitae had been painful, swallowing an entire mouthful of it was pure agony. Every nerve ending in Michael’s body was on fire, and the gut-wrenching pain was tearing him apart. From far, far away he could hear Brian’s voice, murmuring encouragements, promising that he wouldn’t leave, not until Michael has gone through the transformation, nor afterwards. Never. The only thing grounding him was Brian’s voice and Brian’s strong, almost desperate grip on his hand – until everything went mercifully black and he passed out.

When he came to, the pain was still bad but reduced to a bearable level. On the other hand, the house seemed to have become… noisier somehow, the colours brighter, and the familiar scent of Brian’s otherwise so decent cologne almost painfully intense.

He blinked, looking up into the face of his best friend/lover/blood brother… whatever they were supposed to be for each other now.

“Has… has it worked?” he asked, wincing from the volume of his own voice, although he’d thought he’d spoken quietly. Brian nodded, relief clearly written into his face.

“Careful,” he said in a low voice. “Your senses have been sharpened due to the transformation; you’ll need time to adjust.”

“Was it bad for you, too?” Michael asked, realizing at the same moment what a stupid question it was. Of course it had been bad for Brian! He was a real, honest, down-to-earth vampire now. The Change must have been even more painful.

“Oh, yes!” Brian answered with feeling. “I had the mother of all raging headaches for a week or so. It’s even worse for vampires, as we change a great deal more, you know. On the other hand, of course, the transition will be a lot easier for you, should you ever decide to accept the Embrace.”

“Don’t accept any bets on that,” Michael warned him. Slowly, step by step, he became more aware
of his surroundings, and realized that he was lying in the familiar bed of Brian’s guest room. “How long have I been asleep?”

“Four days,” Brian replied. At Michael’s baffled look, he shrugged. “They had to put you under. The first days of the transformation were almost as brutal as during a regular Embrace. Alain didn’t want you to suffer unnecessarily.”

Michael could appreciate that. Still…

“They drugged me?” he asked. That would explain the strange feeling in his head – as if it had been stuffed with cotton wool. But Brian shook his head.

“Nah,” he said. “Sarina put some vampire mojo on you. She can make people fall asleep within seconds… a talent that has surfaced by her shortly after she was done with Becoming.”

“It must have been some fucking strong shit, whatever she did,” Michael rubbed his temples. “Do all vamps develop superhero abilities?”

“I haven’t discovered any by myself, so far,” Brian replied with a shrug. “But apparently, in most cases it comes with age and exercise.”

“Well, that sucks,” Michael groused. “I thought now that you’ve become Dracula junior, you finally can take me flying. Like Superman.”

“I thought you didn’t want to be Lois Lane anymore,” Brian teased, then gently kissed Michael’s forehead. “Are you still hurting, Mikey?”

Michael shrugged – and regretted it immediately, as the sudden gesture caused blinding pain to shoot through his skull. He groaned pitifully.

“Right,” Brian said. “Forget it. It was a stupid question. What I actually wanted to ask: could you go on without me for an hour or two? I won’t go far, just down to the atelier to go through the new campaign with Diego. Deadline is tomorrow, and…”

“Bri,” Michael interrupted, “go! It’s okay!”

“Sarina offered to stay with you until Alain is done with today’s class,” Brian assured him. “She’ll call me, should you need my help with anything.”

“If you can help me to go to the bathroom now, I won’t,” Michael said, refusing to even consider how that particular problem had been solved in the four days while he’d been asleep.

“Sure,” the familiar, lewd grin appeared on Brian’s face. “Shall I hold it for you, or do you manage to take a leak alone?”

Michael rolled his eyes good-naturedly. It was like old times all over again – like when they’d been both fourteen. He actually enjoyed the immature bickering.

“Just take me to the head,” he said in almost-convincing annoyance. “Unlike some people, I can keep my own dick under control.”

Brian laughed and scooped him up from the bed as if he’d been a child. Or a rag doll. That simple fact made him understand how much Brian had changed indeed. He could lift him, with some effort, before – but never like this.
Michael really felt like Lois Lane.

“Am I gonna turn into superhero material when I’ve gotten through the transformation?” he asked.

Brian carried him to the bathroom and put him down in front of the toilet.

“You won’t be as strong as a vampire, most likely,” he replied, “but yeah, you’re gonna grow
stronger than the average mortal. Stronger, faster, more resilient – and with advanced healing
abilities, too.”

“Which means bye-bye, asthma spray,” Michael said. “That’s a relief anyway.”

“Oh, come on, Mikey, you haven’t used that shit in what? A decade?”

“I know. But there was always the chance that it would come back.” Michael made vague shooing
gestures. “Now, get out and let me piss in peace. I’ll call you when I’m done.”

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The short trip to the bathroom proved to be more strain on his weakened body than he’d have
thought, bringing back the pain full force. So in the next hour or so he lay in the bed, moving as little
as possible, suffering quietly, and tried to believe it when they told him, that the worse part was
already behind him.

Sarina came in right after Brian had left, as promised, bringing with her the provisional script of *Rage II – The Black Widow*. Now that she’d nailed the starring role, she was most anxious to do a decent
job with it.

“I thought we could discuss the character a little, if you don’t mind,” she said, almost apologetically.
“This is my first real chance to make the big breakthrough, you know, I don’t want to screw it up.”

Michael didn’t mind it at all. On the contrary, it served as a welcome distraction from the pain. So
they discussed the actions and the possible background of the character, and why she would be
hostile towards *Rage* to begin with, and before Michael would notice, almost an hour had gone by,
and the pain had receded a little.

“May I ask you something personal?” he asked.

Sarina gave him a wary look. “Define *personal*,” she said.

“Oh, not that kind of personal,” Michael clarified. “I just wanted to know how you ended up as
Alain’s foster Childe did.”

She shrugged elegantly, her jade earrings clinking from the gesture. “Oh, that? It’s not exactly a
secret, and besides, you’re family now. But it’s not a story for the faint of heart.”

“Tell me anyway,” Michael said. “It helps to think of other things, even if they are unpleasant.
Please.”

“Okay,” Sarina said with another shrug. “Well, I always wanted to be an actress, but it’s not easy if
you don’t have connections. Connections are the most important thing in the movie business when
you’re new. So Cordelia, Emily and I – two girls I knew from the scene – used to go to each and
every party we could get an invitation to, if we knew that some movie people could be there. On one
of those parties, we met this Wilson Christopher character and his two friends. They seemed nice
enough, and Wilson was a photographer, which meant we could have a presentation file made for
very little money. So we went with the guys from bar to bar, and ended up in bed with them.”
“And they turned out to be vampires?” Michael asked, believing to know the rest of the story already. But Sarina shook her head.

“Nah, actually, it was worse than that,” she said. “In the next morning, when we woke up, they were gone, and we discovered that we were pregnant.”

“All three of you?” Michael asked, a little shocked.

Sarina nodded. “All three of us. And we weren’t simply pregnant – it seemed as if we were in the night month already, and – according to the ultrasound – there were seven babies in every single one of us.”

“Speak about fast-forwarding the process,” Michael murmured. “I suppose those babies weren’t exactly human, were they?”

“No,” Sarina replied grimly. “They were the Spawn of a Haxil Beast: a demon promising money, fame and success to young guys, so that they would impregnate as many women with its spawn as they could.”

“A… demon,” Michael repeated slowly.

Sarina nodded. “A huge one, actually. According to our Nosferatu scholars, it could reach anywhere from thirty to fifty-plus feet tall, and neither fire nor decapitation will kill it… or its spawn. I know. I’ve tried. I’ve tried to poison the little buggers with alcohol, drinking like a fish all the time; or with nicotine, picking up smoking. Nothing helped. They can’t be harmed so easily. In the last phase, they took us over, controlling us through some sort of telepathic umbilical, so that we would protect them at any costs.”

“Would you have been able to give birth to the things at all?” Michael asked in morbid fascination. Sarina shook her head.

“Of course not,” she said dryly. “We’d have all died. When the time came, the demon called us all to an old rafinery, fronting the cave in which it resided. We had to climb into a waist-deep pool of some stinking, opaque liquid and stand in a circle, waiting for it to deliver its spawn. I never had the courage to ask our scholars how that would have happened, but I doubt that much of us would have been left.”

“How did you escape, in the end?” Michael asked.

“We’ve been very fortunate that Cordelia was a friend of Angel’s,” Sarina replied. “Without him, we’d be history.”

“You mean the Prince?” Michael tried to clarify. Somehow he could well imagine the undead ruler of LA fighting thirty-foot-large demons.

“He wasn’t the Prince yet, not back then,” Sarina said, “just a vampire PI, trying to protect the innocent. And Cordelia was his secretary and his seer. He came with Wesley – you know, the cute English guy who’s now the Precept of the Luna Foundation House – and between the two of them and Cordelia, they killed the demon.”

“But how if it couldn’t be killed by traditional methods?” Michael asked.

Sarina grinned. “They froze it with liquid nitrogen, and Cordelia tackled it with a huge concrete block hanging from a chain, rendering it to smithereens. Once it was dead, its spawn turned to water and left our bodies.”
“That must have been… traumatic,” Michael said uncertainly, not wanting to sound like an idiot but not really knowing what else to say.

“You’re a master of understatement,” Sarina answered with a grimace. “I couldn’t even look at a guy afterwards, not to mention sleep with one, in the whole time until my Embrace.”

“Speaking of which,” Michael said, “all this that you’ve told me so far still doesn’t explain how you ended up with Alain as your Daddy. Did you stay with the Prince… with Angel after the demon event?”

Sarina shook her head. “Oh, no, we didn’t really have anything to do with each other, and even Cordelia, Emily and I kinda drifted apart afterwards. I guess neither of us wanted to be reminded of… of what’d happened. I kept hanging out around the studios, trying to nail small roles… and so it was that I met Rebecca Lowell. You know her?”

“The star of Raven? Of course!” Michael exclaimed. “I was a huge fan of hers.”

“Well, she was a sinking star already, and she let herself be Embraced, so that she could remain at least young and pretty forever,” Sarina said. “Although still a fledgling herself, she filled my head with the stupid idea of not getting older and having the best chances to make a shining future and all that – and I, stupid thing, having no clue what it truly meant, let her talk me into accepting the Embrace from her. Only that she got bored right after that and left me in the middle of Becoming.”

Knowing what that must have meant, Michael shuddered in sympathy.

“You must have extraordinary strength to survive that,” she said.

“Oh, I didn’t survive on my own,” Sarina replied. “Some studio people found me, recognized the Clan – there are always lots of Toreadors around the studios, you know – and brought me to Victor. He helped me to go through Becoming, but the Conclave wasn’t happy with the whole situation. It reflected badly on them all when mere fledglings started to make progeny left and right, without permission. Some demanded that I’d be destroyed as a failure.”

“But it wasn’t your fault!” Michael protested in shock.

“At least not entirely,” Sarina agreed, “although I had been stupid enough to consent. But Kindred law is harsh. They’d have the right to order my destruction. Luckily for me, Angel had just been elected as the Prince of the City, and he saw things a little differently. Plus, he recognized me. So Rebecca was stripped of any rights regarding me, and Alain was selected to foster me. He’s old, strong, experienced, and he didn’t have any Childer back then.”

That piece of information surprised Michael. “He didn’t? I thought…”

“No, Pierre and Oliver came after me; that is, Oliver came first, since he was the actual target,” Sarina explained. “Alain only Embraced Pierre for his sake; and only after Oliver had gone through Becoming safely.”

“Why?” Michael asked. “Wouldn’t it be simpler and faster if…”

“Embracing and guiding a fledgling through Becoming puts considerable strain on the Sire,” Sarina interrupted him. “In the first time – and it’s individual how long it takes – the fledgling is very dependent on his or her Sire. Only Sire blood can help you through the worst patches of Becoming, although you can’t feed on your Sire exclusively, or you’ll get enthralled – and not in a good way. Weak, dependent vampires don’t survive very long in the Dark. Ash Rivers is the only one I know of, and even with him, it’s uncertain how long he will last. Our kind doesn’t tolerate weakness.”
“Are we talking about the ‘we’re the predators and you’re prey part of undead existence?’ Michael asked, with notable sarcasm in his voice.

Sarina nodded. “Don’t feel slighted,” she replied. “That’s the truth about it, and whether we like it or not won’t change the facts.”

“Do you like being a predator?” Michael asked quietly.

Sarina shrugged. “I prefer it to being the prey; been there, done that, still have the nightmares. And being part of Alain’s family is not bad, as you’ll see for yourself. He gives us much leeway – more than most family heads would, in fact – as long as we obey him in certain things.”

“Like doing the horizontal mambo with him?” Michael commented wryly.

“For my part, I do that voluntarily,” Sarina answered with a shrug. “After the… the experience with demon spawn I thought I’d swear off guys entirely, but after the Embrace… Kindred have stronger, more urgent needs than mortals do. You won’t find any celibate vampires, no matter how hard you’re looking – well, except Drusilla, of course, but she’s a special case in many ways. But the rest of us crave sex almost as much as we crave blood. And Alain is a skilled and considerate lover. I’ve been very fortunate that I was given into his care. Other foster Sires would have been a lot less… understanding.”

“What about Oliver and Pierre?” Michael asked. “Do they have to put up their asses for him, too?”

“Oh, no!” Sarina laughed. “They take care of each other well enough – they’d been an exclusive couple in their mortal days for six years or so already – and besides, theirs was an Embrace out of convenience. Alain hasn’t even Claimed them.”

“He hasn’t… what?” Michael repeated with a frown. “You’re losing me here.”

“Claiming a Childe means sexually dominating them right after the Embrace,” Sarina explained. “It isn’t a necessary part of the process and is usually done to express the Sire’s personal interest in the Childe.” Seeing Michael’s confused expression, she laughed again. “There are more Childer Embraced out of convenience – or necessity – than you’d think. It doesn’t always mean their Sire would be interested in them as bed partners.”

“Did…” Michael hesitated for a moment, then decided to ask it anyway. “Did Alain Claim you?”

Sarina nodded, without the slightest sign of embarrassment. Michael had already realized that vampires weren’t exactly shy when discussing their affairs.

“In my case it was actually necessary,” she said, “as he hadn’t been the one to Embrace me. Claiming is the way to adopt someone into a Kindred family; that and extensive blood-sharing, that is. But you’ll see it for yourself.”

“What?” Michael bolted upright in shock… and groaned as the pain shot through his entire body again.

“Carefully!” Sarina warned him. “You’re still not done changing. But yes, once you’re done, Alain will Claim you; and the rest of the family is gonna witness.”

“Michael gave her a bewildered look. “You’re kidding, right?”

“Not at all,” Sarina replied calmly. “It will be done in your best interest.”
“Yeah, right…”

“No, I mean it! You see, most ghouls don’t have a very high status within a Kindred family. As a rule, they’re business employees, like the Goldfarbs for Salvador Garcia, cannon fodder like the ones of Louis Fortier, or simply doormats or food sources. Only a Prince’s personal ghouls are highly respected by anyone – and within a family those who’ve been Claimed by the family head, in the presence of the rest of the family. Being Claimed gives them nearly the same status as Childer; it’s up to them to rise in the hierarchy later, then.”

“Oh, great! Just great!” Michael groaned. “So you guys will sit there and watch Alain fucking my brains out?”

“Basically… yes,” Sarina answered bluntly. “It’s a ritual to establish your status within the family, for your own protection. You don’t have anything to fear from us, of course, we like you well enough as you are. But Alain may make other Childer later who could be more… problematic. You need to have sufficient status for them to treat you with respect.”

“You guys sure as hell have an interesting concept about respect,” Michael groused.

Sarina have him an exasperated look.

“And that from a man who’s been going in and out of the back rooms in gay clubs all his life,” she said. “With your history, you shouldn’t be so queasy about the whole thing. You might even enjoy it.”

Personally, Michael doubted that very much. Unlike Brian, he didn’t have exhibitionistic tendencies, and his goings in and out of back rooms had usually served the purpose to drag a stoned or drunk Brian out of there and take him home.

One aspect of the whole embarrassing concept did attract him, however. Such a semi-public act would also serve to stake his own claim on Alain… and the rest of the family would have to accept. As Sarina had said, it was a ritual, and vampires were great on rituals, after all.

Yes, that was the only part of the whole thing that did have its appeal. Still, who knew… Sarina might even be right. He might enjoy the… erm… unusual attention. As he was looking forward to a very long life now, who said that he needed to remain shy for the whole ride?

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As expected, it took Michael another week to go through the transformation. After the first pain-filled days, the rest actually wasn’t so bad. Brian barely left his side, which was nice… just like in old times, when they had been kids. They were clowning around, watching movies – mostly old favourites where they could quote the dialogue by heart – and talking about nonsense. Just like in old times, Michael repeated in thought. It was… nice. Yeah, it was nice.

Alain, too, visited him twice a day to check on his progress, and on each day, he fed Michael a very small amount of his Vitae to help the transformation along. That was every bit as disgusting and unpleasant as at the first time, but Michael had to admit that it did help. As an additional bonus, their mental connection of which he’d got a glimpse at that first time, had now established itself firmly, although Alain warned him that it would gradually lessen between feedings.

Finally, almost two weeks after Michael had been made, as ghouting was officially termed, Dr. Gloria Martinez, the pretty Kindred doctor from the Barofsky Institute of Haematology, gave him a thorough examination and declared him fully healed and the transformation complete.
“You’ll require taking a small amount of your Domitor’s Vitae once a month,” she reminded him, “but as long as you do that, you’ll be all right. Congratulations. You can start your new life as a creature of the twilight any time you want now.”

Michael thanked her, albeit a little nervously, because he had no illusions about the exact nature of that start. And indeed, Alain didn’t waste any time. He called a family gathering to witness Michael’s Claiming for the next night. The sooner it’s done the better, he declared, not really asking what Michael thought about the whole issue. He didn’t need to. It was within his rights.

Michael still wasn’t entirely thrilled by the semi-public nature of the ritual, although Brian’s ill-veiled jealousy amused him a little. Still, he was near to panic when Sarina came to escort him to the red salon, which, once again, had been selected as the location of the event.

“Don’t fret,” Sarina said, leading him to the small, adjoining wardrobe first. “It’s not something you wouldn’t have done before.”

“Right; but never with audience,” Michael muttered darkly.

Sarina grinned. “There’s a first time for everything,” she said. “Now get naked. You’re supposed to leave your clothes here.”

“What?” Michael startled.

“It’s required by custom,” she replied. Then, with a slow, sensuous grin, she added. “Do you need help with undressing? I’m willing to assist you.”

“Thanks, but I’ll manage,” Michael answered hastily and began to take off his clothes, folding each piece carefully and placing it onto the sideboard, just to put off the inevitable for a little longer.

When he was bare-assed naked like on the day he was born, Sarina brought forth a little velvet box and opened it. On a small silk cushion, there was a silver cock ring in the box, with a simple yet elegant design decorating it.

“Put this on,” she said. “This is a ritual of dominance; you’re not supposed to get off on it. In fact, it would be considered as a serious break of etiquette.”

Michael stared first at her, then at the rather… unusual piece of jewellery… and then he began laughing hysterically.

“I’m… I’m sorry…” he said, gasping for air, “but the whole… the whole thing just reminds me too much of a frigging wedding!”

“In a sense, it is,” she replied calmly. “This is a ceremony that will change your life forever – in ways you’ve never expected. Now go on; it’s not wise to make your Domitor wait.”

Gulping nervously, Michael entered the red salon through the hidden side door. The room didn’t look any different than ever, save for the slight rearrangement of the red sofas: one was now standing alone, opposite the stained glass windows, fully illuminated by the colourful evening light, while the others were arranged in a wide semi-circle in front of the same windows, so that the ones sitting there would have undisturbed view.

For a family as small as theirs, it was an impressive gathering. Pierre and Oliver were there, of course, the former one impeccably elegant and worldly as always, while Oliver seemed at least as nervous as Michael felt. Apparently, this was the first time he witnessed something like this. Peppone
sat a little further away; while he wasn’t exactly blood, he’d been a friend and associate of Alain’s for almost two hundred years, so he counted as family, too – more so than any of the fledglings, actually.

Serina slipped into the salon behind Michael, closed the door noiselessly and joined Peppone on the sofa. She, too, had the right to witness, but moved away from the actual Childer and closer to Peppone; the status of these two was a high but unusual one within Alain’s family.

Finally, Brian sat on the third sofa on the right, alone, with a grim, closed expression on his face. Michael could almost physically feel the look of those hazel eyes on his naked body, and to his slight mortification, he felt himself harden. The whole situation was embarrassing enough without admitting that yes, the thought of being fucked before the eyes of all – and most above all before the eyes of Brian – did, indeed, turn him on, big time. That was something he hadn’t really expected, despite Sarina’s jokes. Suddenly he was very grateful for the provided cock ring, or else he’d embarrass himself beyond endurance within moments.

Now another side door opened silently, and Alain walked in, wearing nothing but a deep red silk dressing gown. His lean, slender body was pale like alabaster, his eyes burned silver. The gown was open in the front, leaving no doubt about the fact that he was very much aroused and ready to go on with the ritual.

“Ghoul of my Blood,” he said in a low, silky voice, laying a proprietary hand upon Michael’s shoulder, “are you ready to accept my dominance over you?”

Michael was so nervous that he could barely swallow. Speaking was even harder (ha! ha!) but he knew what he was supposed to answer. Peppone had instructed him on the details of the ritual thoroughly.

“I am ready, my Regnant,” he said in as steady a voice as he could manage.

To his surprise, however, Alain broke the ritual by shaking his head. “No, little one. You’re not my thrall and I’m not your regnant. I’m your maker, and – hopefully – I’ll be your Sire one day, should you choose so. But in this house, in this family you’ll never be just a slave. You’re Blood, and you’ll be treated the same way as my Childer are.”

The others exchanged surprised looks, only Sarina smiled quietly. She’d realized Alain’s fondness for the young man long ago and had expected something… unusual. As for Michael, he was touched beyond expectations. He couldn’t say anything, just dipped his head in gratitude.

“Well then,” Alain added, smiling, “shall we begin?”

Michael nodded again and allowed Alain to arrange him on the sofa that stood alone, opposite the window. Alain made him kneel with his right knee on the seat and to lean on his right elbow, while he stood firmly with his left foot on the floor, leg stretched for support. He was wide open for the taking in that position – and the fact that Brian was watching them made him shiver with anticipation. Resting his temple in his right hand, Michael run his left hand up and down his bare buttocks and thigh invitingly, opening himself wide for Alain… and for Brian’s hungry eyes. He looked back at Alain over his shoulder and saw that his master was lubing up his cock. Strictly seen that was against the rules; to unmistakably establish his dominance, Alain should have taken him without any preparation. Pain was part of this particular process, for very specific reasons: to make the ghoul always remember whom he owed immortal life and obedience. But Alain was worried about causing undue damage. While Michael was certainly far from being a virgin, he was still a mortal (in a sense), and mortals were fragile… especially such small, slimly built mortals. So
Alain was making allowances, and Michael was grateful for so much consideration. Even so, there would be pain, he knew it. Alain wasn’t brutally large but well endowed for such a slender guy; taking him in without being stretched first would be… difficult at least, despite the lube.

Alain now stepped up between Michael’s thighs, so that his cockhead was nudging Michael’s unstretched opening. Michael pulled his ass even more apart, and Alain rubbed his cockhead against his opening to spread the not-strictly-allowed lube a little before pushing in. Then, supporting Michael’s back with one hand, he lined up and began the slow intrusion.

Michael hissed in pain as his body was breached; Alain felt huge, pressing into his unprepared hole. It burned badly, and he felt as if he were split in two by Alain’s dick. He dropped his upper body onto the pillows, spreading himself as wide as he could; then he felt Alain adjust the angle of the intrusion, and in the next moment the vampire’s hard flesh was rubbing against his pleasure spot, and with a heartfelt groan, Michael relaxed around him. Encouraged by the way Michael’s too-tight channel gave in, Alain made a few experimental thrusts, then he began to pound into Michael’s ass with vigour. It was a hard, almost violent fuck, serving the demonstration of power rather than the means of pleasure, but now that he was relaxed, Michael could take it.

When it was over, Michael collapsed on the sofa, sore and aching hard but strangely sated. Lifting his leaden eyelids he could see that the others were gone. He was alone with Alain, whom he now belonged completely and irreversibly, body, heart and soul. Alain sat down next to him, closing a cool hand around his hot and straining dick.

“We ought to do something about this,” he said, “but I’d rather not soil the room any more. Can you bear it as long as we get to the bathroom? There is one on the ground floor, too.”

Michael nodded drowsily. Alain’s hand felt so pleasantly cool on his hot flesh, and the promise of a hot shower to ease his aches sounded even better.

“Whatever you want,” he murmured, the devotion he felt for his master echoing through their link and was met with a similar emotion from Alain’s side. He barely registered Alain lifting him from the sofa and carrying him through the little wardrobe into an equally small bathroom. The soreness of his ass, the strain their violent coupling had put on his thighs, the throbbing of his still unreleased dick… all seemed to be somewhere far away.

What mattered was that he’d found his place in this world of twilight. After a long time, after much searching and wandering around, he was finally home.
Walking in Shadows

Chapter Summary

Michael is getting used to his life as a ghoul. It’s not always without problems.

Chapter Notes

This chapter is a tie-in to my other (so far unwritten) story, “The Sacrifice”, featuring predominantly Owen Thurman. Alice Babylon and Mariel St. John are canon RPG-characters – with my own twist on them, as always.

**WARNING:** Serious kink and high squick factor in this one!

**Dedication:** Again, for , who wanted some steamy hot stuff between Alain and Michael. This one, too, is for you!

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WALKING IN SHADOWS

Michael had just a very short time to adjust to his new life as a ghoul, as only a week after his status had been established in Alain’s undead household, the first *Rage* movie finally hit the theatres. It started off simultaneously all over LA and in most of the largest cities of the States. The Toreadors had contacts, after all, and as several other Clans were involved, too, the ad campaign had been forcefully supplied from several sides.

The resulting success surprised even such old Hollywood veterans as Isaac Abrams or Edward and Vera Vignes. While it was true that Brett Keller hadn’t produced anything but blockbusters in the recent years, this time the topic was a bit… *sensitive*, and the heroes… *unusual*, to say the least. Brett had skilfully played down the fact that all main characters were gay, focusing on the mystery and action part of the movie; nonetheless, the message was unmistakable, and that could have caused quite the uproar in fundamentalist circles.

Fortunately for them, fundamentalists usually don’t watch action movies, and so the scandals were rare and mostly locally dealt with. As everyone knows in the movie industry, small, well-controlled scandals, in fact, provide good publicity, and in the end none of Brett’s previous movies could be compared with *Rage’s* success. The interest was simply overwhelming.

Not only – not even predominantly – from the gay community, which was vocally disappointed with the understated way the sexual orientation of the heroes was presented. The majority of the movie-goers came from the steadily widening base of *Rage* fans, but – surprisingly enough – the fans of “On Your Own”, the big fantasy/horror series of Rebecca Lowell that had run nine and a half years, also came in great numbers to watch the latest work of Dawn Cavanaugh who had been responsible for the *Raven* show’s haunting visuals. Nine and a half years can produce a large and devoted fanbase, and with no more *Raven* to watch, a great percentage of the *Raven* fans turned to *Rage*, hungry for something new.
It was whispered that Rebecca Lowell literally Frenzied when she heard that. But the triumph of Rage was unstoppable. After weeks, the theatres were still crowded, merchandise sold like crazy, the older comic issues that had been out of print for a year or so had to be reprinted… and, of course, the creative minds behind the franchise became quite flush.

Michael could still barely believe it - which didn’t hinder him to enjoy his well-earned success, though. He sent a suitable amount of money – not to mention matching Rage T-shirts – his mother and to the bank account of his daughter; mostly to make Debbie and the munchers eat their words, as he admitted to Brian, for all the belittling he’d had to suffer from them over his “childish” hobby, but he still had more than he could spend, even if he lived a hundred years.

“You know, Mikey, you actually have the chance to live long enough even to get rid of your indecent wealth,” Brian commented. “A hundred years, two hundred years… does it truly matter? You won’t be getting any older now.”

Which was true, of course. Michael just still had a hard time to realize it. Not that he wanted to waste his money, though; like most people who’d grown up knowing financial problems, he’d learned to deal with his money, now that he had it, wisely. Fortunately for him, Phillipe Navital could help him with the right – not to mention safe – investments, so, for the first time in his life, he enjoyed the fact that he could afford to work for the pure joy of it, not because he had to.

And work there was aplenty. When it became obvious that the movie would be a big success, Vera Vignes finally gave green light for the sequel. Many of the scenes had already been shot, back-to-back with the first movie to spare money and utilize the already existing sets and costumes, but those scenes were merely footage, meant to be inserted into the second movie in post-production. The real work was just about to get started… simultaneously with the Dragonfly movie that had been developed for the Japanese market.

As if that hadn’t been enough, Vera Vignes had accepted the book of Owen Thurman as the basis for a third Rage movie, employing Michael to turn it into a screenplay. So Michael was now spending a lot of time with Owen (and Brian, who seemed to have a vested interest in the guy, although Owen turned a deliberately blind eye on his advances) to figure out between them what from the book would work on the big screen and what wouldn’t. It wasn’t an easy thing, as the book was written from an interesting third person perspective that still made the impression that the reader would see everything through the hero’s – or victim’s – eyes. It made a great effect in written form but was practically impossible to translate for a visual medium.

Fortunately for Michael, Owen - who was an English major and made extensive studies into the topic of occult sects, cults and human sacrifices - turned out to be a great help with that. He also turned out to be a very nice guy; it was hard to imagine that he belonged to the Prince’s notoriously vicious bloodline (no matter how much reformed they were now), although those were the facts. Due to his studies, he also knew a great deal about occult symbols and teachings and gave valuable advice which to use and which not to use, so that they wouldn’t make an enemy of any of the really existing cults and sects. That wouldn’t have been wise.

With Owen’s help, it only took Michael six weeks to finish the first, provisional script and to present it to Vera Vignes. She suggested a few changes, mostly in small details, then handed over the script to Brett Keller and Edward Blount who, just like with the first two movies, was foreseen as the executive producer of Rage III – The Return of Shadow… right when several TV-studios signalled their interest in an eventual Rage TV-series.

“It’s a good thing that most of the creative staff are Kindred,” Michael commented to the director and the executive producer when they met to watch the dailies of Rage II and to discuss possible casting
choices for *Rage III*. “For this workload one really needs vampire stamina.”

“True; but you have to hammer the iron as long as it’s glowing,” Brett replied, quoting the favourite saying of his late Hungarian grandfather. “Fannish interests are capricious; we need to get out as much of the franchise as possible while the interest is still there.”

“It’s not about money for me, Brett,” Michael said, a little indignantly.

The Brujah nodded. “I know, Michael, and that wasn’t what I meant. But if you want to do anything else with *Rage* in this human lifetime, it has to be done now. After this wave ebbed down, you’ll have to wait for the remake in fifty years or so.”

“Luckily for me, I now can do *that*, too,” Michael grinned, starting to see the advantages of his new status. Then he looked at Edward Blount. “So, have you guys given the casting any thought yet? We’ll need someone for the part of the cult priestess who’s sexy and creepy at the same time.”

“What about Alice Babylon?” Edward Blount suggested. “Granted, she isn’t a big name actress, but a good one. *And* she’s a Toreador. She’d do a good job.”

Brett shook his head. “She’s also a member of Rebecca’s family. No, that’s a bad idea. I’d suggest Rebecca herself, but with her behaviour in the recent years… besides, her face has been identified with *Raven* too strongly to be accepted as a different character. That will need decades. But what about Mariel St. John?”

Edward Blount pulled a face. “She’s Sabbat, Brett.”

“She’s Antitribu,” Brett corrected. “But first and foremost, she’s a moderately successful model who’d die – pardon the pun – for a good role. For the chance of a big breakthrough, she’d kiss the Prince’s ring publicly, if she had to.”

“I wonder how Phillipe Navital will react to an unexpected reunion with his errant Childe,” Edward said dryly. “Their break-up was rather… spectacular. Small wonder, if you imagine that Phillipe has always been a stout supporter of the Camarilla. For his only Childe to run off on him and join the Sabbat…”

“I’m not sure she actually has,” Brett said.

Edward Blount rolled his eyes. “Brett, she’s Antitribu!”

“Sure she is,” Brett shrugged, “but that doesn’t necessarily make her a Sabbat monster. Many of the younger ones rebelled against the strict rules of the Camarilla, without going on a killing spree or turning to the black arts. She’s not a lost case yet, I think. She just felt too confined and wanted her freedom. The Nosferatu have no reports of her actually running with any of the Sabbat packs… or taking part in any known Sabbat activities.”

“Just because we have no knowledge...” Edward Blount began, but Brett interrupted him.

“I know, I know…” still why not give her a chance? I’m not trying to lure her back to the Camarilla – that’s her decision and Phillipe’s concern – but keeping her close might help her to find back on her own. Then Phillipe would owe us a debt, and that’s always worth collecting. Besides, she’d be excellent for the part.”

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It took Brett some more persuasion, but finally Edward Blount agreed to invite Mariel St. John to the casting, and she accepted without a moment of hesitation. Michael, who’d been a little wary
knowing her background, was truly impressed by her.

She was an Afro-American woman of very light colouring, seemingly in her late twenties – it was hard to imagine that she’d been born in 1903 and Embraced in 1930, although that was the truth – petite, deceivingly fragile-looking but harder than steel, with an oval face of somewhat tragic beauty, large, jewelled dark eyes and a thick mane of long, dark curls that gave her a vaguely leonine appearance. She moved with the grace of a ballet-dancer and the controlled strength of a trained athlete. She also had an aura of dark radiance about her, which Michael couldn’t see, of course, but which registered with his empathic gift on a semi-conscious level.

“If she’s half as talented as she’s beautiful, she’ll be perfect for the part,” he said to Brett. “Ye gods, but she has a presence!”

The Brujah director grinned at him. ”Good, good! We’ll make a ladies’ men out of you yet!"

“Ewww!” Michael grimaced. “Do you want me to lose my breakfast? I don’t look at women that way, thank you very much.”

“Not yet anyway,” Brett laughed. “But you haven’t spent much time in the twilight yet. There are few of us who don’t walk both sides of the street.”

“Brian doesn’t.” Michael pointed out, “and neither do I.”

“That’s where you’re wrong,” Brett replied. “I don’t know your Brian well, but I’ve seen him looking at women with interest. He definitely does have a bi streak in him… probably deeply hidden, but I think the Embrace has made it resurface, like by the most of us.”

“Terrific!” Michael commented sourly. “Now I’ll have to share him with women as well.”

“Are you sure this is a completely new development?” Brett asked, suddenly very serious again. “It has been my experience that more people have that bi streak in their system than would admit. Especially those who make a great issue about being exclusively straight… or gay. Think about it.”

Michael shook his head. “Nah, Brian never would…” but he trailed off, remembering Lindsay and her ambivalent relationship with Brian; one he’d never been entirely comfortable with.

The two had a child together, for fuck’s sake… and despite the lack of mechanics involved, it was a very different case than Michael fathering Melanie’s baby. Brian and Lindz had always had a deeper connection; a bond that went beyond friendship. Plus, to Michael’s knowledge – and he knew more about Brian’s sex life than he’d be comfortable with – Lindsay was the only woman Brian had ever actually slept with. Granted, it had been at their college time, in a phase of experimenting. But that didn’t change the fact that Lindsay had had Brian twenty-some years before Michael would get his chance.

Interpreting his silence the only logical way, Brett Keller nodded knowingly… even with a little compassion, which was rather unusual for him.

“Things are never that simple,” he said. “Never just black or white, straight or queer. You’ll learn that about yourself, too, eventually. Now, what do you think about giving Mariel that chance we were speaking of?”

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They did so, and Mariel St. John proved surprisingly good; convincing in a way the standard Hollywood beauties usually weren’t. *Of course, being a vampire probably does give a certain depth to an evil character*, Michael thought. In any case, she nailed the role within half an hour, and the
casting could go on.

The greatest challenge remained to find someone who’d play the victim, as the character would be based on Owen, who’d been a complex personality already back in his mortal days. At one point Brian suggested to bring back JT, instead of killing him at the end of Rage II, and after a great deal of consideration, Brett, Edward Blount and Michael decided that it was a good idea indeed. Fans liked their characters returning in the sequels, even the stupid, immature, whiny ones. Bringing JT back would shift focus back to Rage and Zephyr, instead of centering it around a new original character, which was probably better so. The fans came for their objects of obsession, not for the guest stars, no matter how excellent those might be.

Decision made, the rest of the casting went quickly. The followers of the cult were easily found; for one of them Alexis Goldfarb got cast, the permanently-sixteen-year-old-looking, beautiful ghoul boy of Salvador Garcia. With his youthful appearance and the experiences of a pogrom survived, he brought an unexpected depth to the supporting cast.

Ash Rivers, of course, was all too eager to pick up his role from the first movie again. The success of Rage had pushed him back right into the spotlight, and he seemed to awake from his customary apathy a little. He showed some interest in the new script already, and even discussed possibilities with Michael at some point. He was happier than for a long time, and that made Isaac Abrams, his Sire and Regnant, supremely content… which meant that the upcoming movie would have his full support. And Isaac Abrams’ support counted as one of the most important factors in Tinsel Town.

After the casting was done, the search for the right location started. Owen showed them the abandoned nunnery in which the original Setite Temple would have been founded, but Dawn Cavanaugh who had, once again, been chosen as director of photography, adamantly opposed to shooting the movie – or even parts of it – there.

“This place is still in need of a long and thorough cleansing,” she stated. “I don’t mind haunted places, but if we spent too much time here, many of the younger and weaker ones would turn mad. The very stones here are impregnated with evil, starting with the day where Angelus, back at his still-evil times, massacred the nuns who used to live here. There was a reason why the Clan chose it for the site of the new Temple in the first place. Besides, they wouldn’t tolerate us to work here.”

“I thought there’s no significant Setite presence in LA,” Brett said.

Dawn shrugged. “There are few who dwell here now, but those few are very powerful. And they are drawn here. The consecration of the Temple had nearly been finished… those Coptic nuns will have to perform several cleansing rituals before the place would be safe again.”

“Too bad,” commented Brett. ”The place is suitably creepy. It would look great on film. Well, it can’t be helped. Do you have an alternate suggestion?”

“The crematorium,” Dawn replied promptly. “It has great, empty halls with very tall pylons… an eerie look.”

“But would we be allowed to shoot there?” Edward Blount asked worriedly.

Dawn shrugged again. “It’s owned by the Nosferatu. There will be a way. Also, there are great arched chambers in the waterworks under the city – controlled by the Nosferatu, too. We should be able to use them at some point. The rest we can build up in the Studios… which will be better for the light effects anyway. I’m sure Isaac would rather infuse more cash into the movie than let Ash ever come here. That boy is unstable enough as he is.”
With that, the question of locations was decided, and Michael could return to finishing the script. Things slowed down a little, despite the shooting of *Rage II*, and after all the hectic activity of the recent weeks, Michael welcomed the change. Especially as it meant he could finally spend more time with Brian – something they both wanted very much, now that the obstacles had been removed from their shared way. Although Michael kept his apartment, even returned there from time to time to see Emmett, or when he needed to be alone for a while, mostly he stayed in Alain’s house, in the guest room of Brian’s apartment.

That had the advantage that he saw Alain on the regular basis, too, which they both enjoyed a great deal. While Alain had retreated from him a little after the Claiming, leaving him and Brian time and opportunity to reconnect, they were still working on their new relationship as Master and ghoul. Michael was relieved to learn that Alain had no preference for kinky games - not with him anyway, or at least not yet. Perhaps it would come later; in any case, Michael didn't feel like trying out bondage games for the time being. He enjoyed his new life in the twilight; he enjoyed his work, and more than anything he enjoyed the interest of the two gorgeous, undead men in this new life.

At Alain's demand, he began to explore his empathic abilities that had come to full force due to the Change. For this purpose, he regularly met Dr. Takuya Shiraiva, the leader of the *Barofsky Institute of Haematology* - a quiet, competent, surprisingly well-educated Japanese Brujah who, although majorly interested in blood research, also had a degree in psychology. With the doctor's guidance, Michael worked mostly on his shielding, which now, with his abilities fully awakened, was of desperate urgency.

"You need to learn how to repell mental attacks," Shiraiva explained. "Some of the Sabbat priests - and even more so their bishops - are very strong at Dominance. They could tear the mind of an unshielded empath to bloody rags. You could end up vegetable."

"I wish this... thing had never surfaced," Michael grumbled. "I was perfectly happy without it. It's nothing but bother, really."

"Perhaps," the Brujah doctor allowed. "But without it, you'd not be the person you are... the person you've been all your life. This gift - or curse, if you want to see it that way - has always been an integral part of you. It's also the very thing that attracts people to you."

"And here I thought it was my boyish good looks," Michael replied sarcastically.

Shiraiva laughed. "Well, that might have played a role, too; you are pretty. But mostly, people can instinctively feel that you understand them. Of course, you do it on a level they can't even begin to comprehend, but they can still feel it. And being understood, being accepted is one of the most basic human needs."

"Is it the same for vamp... for Kindred?" Michael corrected himself hurriedly.

The Brujah thought about it for a moment, then shrugged.

"Most of the time - yes," he finally answered. We're different, sure, but we bring over a lot of human urges with us. They say the psychological changes don't really begin before one's first millennium; and very few of us do actually live that long. The only Methuselah in LA I know of is Lady Abigail, the Regent of the Tremere Chantry; but again, Tremere are weird people, even as Kindred go," he glanced at his watch. "Well, Michael; I've got another appointment in fifteen minutes. Is there anything else you'd like to talk about?"

Michael shook his head. "Nah; I've got to go, too. We have our rebound session today, and Alain
doesn't like me being late."

"Then you shouldn't be," the doctor said. "Reliability is something highly valued among Kindred. Give Alain my regards. I'll see you next week, same time, bare any emergencies."

"Right; I'll be here," Michael said. As much as he'd originally hated the idea, he'd come to value these talks with Dr. Shiraiwa. They helped him to readjust his expectations and to understand his new life better. "Take care, Doc."

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Staying in Alain’s house most of the time proved useful when it came to the strengthening of his bond with his Master. They had their bonding sessions once a month, which was the absolute minimum for a ghoul to still go on. Keeping them so far apart was not entirely without risk, but Alain wanted to keep Michael in his Warm state as long as possible. Feeding him his Vitae more often might have awakened a dangerous hunger in Michael, craving it worse the more of it he had received and ending up in an inevitable Embrace – or madness and a painful death on Michael’s side. This particular danger was the graver for a ghoul the more powerful his Master was, and Alain’s Vitae, despite him being of unknown generation, was very powerful. Age, too, was a deciding factor in that matter.

Usually they had these sessions in Alain’s private haven, because this was a very… intimate act between Master and ghoul, even without the sex part of it. Sexually dominating a ghoul wasn’t necessarily part of the package, of course; in Michael’s case, however, his natural born submission was one of the aspects that had piqued Alain’s interest for him in the first place.

As Alain had to wait for several important messages faxed to his office on this particular day, they had their session in his house… in the evening, when the students had long left, and Brian had gone clubbing. Brian had actually wanted to stay – he was always jealous of their private sessions – but Alain had told him in no uncertain terms that in this case he would only be a distraction and was therefore unwanted. So Brian had left, silently fuming but not daring to protest because he knew that would earn him severe punishment. Alain was fairly lenient towards him compared with other Sires, but he didn’t tolerate his authority being questioned, and whenever it happened it always had dire consequences for the one crossing the border.

So they had the house for themselves, save for Sarina who was eminently discreet. Alain led Michael to his office, as he needed to keep half an eye on the fax machine and looked around, working out the logistics in his head before they would start anything. His glance fell on the round table of dark, polished wood that stood in the mostly unused half of the room, half-forgotten. It was a sturdy one and reasonably low, too.

“Yes, that would do,” he decided. “Clean the table, Michael, and get naked!”

Michael stared at him with wide, shocked eyes. “I should do what?”

Alain shrugged. “You’ve heard me. I’m feeling like executing my ownership in advance tonight.”

Michael felt the heat of excitement pooling in his belly, seeing that Alain’s eyes had already turned silver. When Alain was in this mood, it always meant great, hard sex; a session that left him sore for days afterwards, despite the enhanced healing abilities he now possessed as a ghoul. He’d come to value those occasions, even more than the other times when they had more casual sex, because they clearly showed Alain’s need for him, and being desired so much by his Master was a heady feeling – well worth the little pain it went with.

He shed his clothes with trembling hands, deliberately letting the odd piece fall to the floor, which –
as expected and intended – earned him a few hard slaps on his already bare bottom. He yelped, more for fun than anything else, as it stung rather than hurt; Alain knew as much as he did that it was just a game and was more than willing to play. The quickly fading red prints of his hand on Michael’s lily white buttocks always turned him on, big time.

“Get onto the table, on your back,” he ordered in that authoritative tone that always made Michael harden instantly. “Hands under your head – I don’t want to give you a concussion. Legs wide open, kneecaps over the edge of the table. Now!” he added, slapping Michael’s ass really hard, as a warning that he should not tarry.

Michael hurriedly obeyed. The urgency in Alain’s tone indicated that he’d probably not be able to sit down properly for a week after this, and if he made his Master wait, Alain could get carried away more than he might have wanted. This was a somewhat… risky relationship between the two of them, and the thrill of danger it included kept Michael on razor’s edge during their bonding sessions.

He positioned himself on the table as ordered, laid out for his undead Master like a feast, his cock, already half-hard with excitement, lying on his flat belly. As Alain had ordered him in the morning per phone to shave his chest and armpits for the session, his torso was as smooth as that of a prepubescent boy’s, save from the thatch of dark hair surrounding his cock. He knew Alain loved him like this and was more than happy to do such small things for his Master.

Alain now stepped between his widely spread thighs, lifting his right knee over his shoulder, opening him wider still. Michael trembled uncontrollably. This position left him extremely exposed and vulnerable, which was an incredible turn-on; his sphincter began to spasm without any physical simulation. Alain stared down at him with gleaming silver eyes, the tips of his fangs visible between his slightly parted lips. He stroked Michael’s chest and belly with one hand, pinching and rubbing his nipples, not too gently, while with the other one he guided his hard dick into Michael’s tight body.

Michael hissed at the intrusion. Being fucked in the ass always hurt a little, at least at first, no matter how carefully one’s ass was breached – and in this mood Alain was not particularly careful. The initial intrusion felt as if he’d been poled like convicts in the Middle Ages, and it – again – reminded him that Alain came from a much rougher, harsher time, when there was little consideration for the sensitivities of a subject. But when the first pain faded away and the burning gave way to the feeling of exquisite fullness and the knowledge of being utterly possessed, Michael relaxed, his body yielding to Alain’s dominance obediently, his back arching in pleasure as Alain drove into him, hard and deep, practically flattening his pleasure spot with each upward thrust. There was some profound, basic fulfilment in giving himself totally into the keeping of a worthy Master who could play his body like a well-strung instrument.

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Again, he hissed in the mixed plain/pleasure as Alain fucked him hard, harder than any other lover he’d ever had. But while he’d have found such treatment from any of his former partners abusive and unacceptable, there was a marked difference between those and Alain. Alain owned him, body and soul; he was entitled to use his body as he pleased… and Michael realized that he found a never-before-known satisfaction in that fact. Perhaps because as a ghoul he’d developed a much higher tolerance for pain and so his tastes, too, had changed for a slight preference for harder sex. But perhaps all this was so enjoyable for him because Alain very much respected him as a person – and the mental intimacy during a bonding session was nothing he’d ever known before. As much as he still loved Brian and happily enjoyed being with him, there were things only Alain could give him.

For his part, Alain enjoyed greatly to conquer Michael’s body and soul during these sessions. Sure, they did have casual sex frequently, but executing his dominance was such a heady feeling that even he, after half a millennium in the Dark, got drunk from it. He stroked the soft inside of Michael’s thigh as it hung limply from the table, then reached for his hard, leaking cock and brought him to
climax with a few expert strokes; Michael had been very close already but knew he was not allowed to come without his Master’s permission. Now he came with a vengeance. Alain watched the smooth, slim body convulse in ecstasy, then he let go of his own control, allowing Michael’s clenching ass to bring him over the brink.

He rode out his climax, murmuring sweet, dirty things in French (only Michael made him revert to his mother tongue during sex), but didn’t pull out just yet. Instead, he opened the vein in his wrist and held it out for Michael.

“Here, little one. Take your reward.”

Michael hesitated a little. Taking Alain’s *Vitae* while they were kissing was one thing – this way it seemed a little too... vampire-like for his comfort.

“I… I don’t think I can do it,” he said apologetically.

“Nonsense,” Alain replied. “If you can suck my cock – and we both know you can do *that* very well – you can suck my *Vitae* as well.”

“I’m... I’m really not sure,” Michael hesitated.

Alain gave him an icy, silver look that went directly to his groin, make his cock stir again, even though it had perhaps more to do with sudden fear than with desire at the moment.

“Do I need to make it an order, *mon petit*?” the vampire asked in a silky-dangerous voice, and Michael gulped nervously, because his Master seemed genuinely angered by his reluctance.

“N-no, Master,” he replied meekly, taking the proffered arm and pressing his mouth to the small wound. Despite everything – even the morbid craving he seemed to have developed for Alain’s *Vitae* – the actual process of drinking blood still grossed him out, big time, and it seemed to be a stubborn obstacle to overcome.

“You’re *not* drinking,” Alain said, now with a clear warning in his voice, and Michael understood that this time his Master would not allow him to chicken out. He gulped again, hoping by Caine (and not even realizing he was already thinking in Kindred terms) that he wouldn’t throw up into his Master’s face, and made a half-hearted try to suck.

The oily substance of Alain’s *Vitae* filled his mouth, almost made him gag. Kindred *Vitae* was thicker than human blood and had a much stronger coppery aftertaste – or, at least, that was what Brian and Emmett said. It really wasn’t all that pleasant... unless you were a vampire, of course. But it had to be done. He’d agreed to do this and couldn’t back off now.

Seeing Alain throw back his head in ecstasy from the pleasure of being fed from did help a little. And, fortunately, he only needed to get down a small amount of the stuff – which was already bad enough. He seriously doubted he’d manage any more.

Due to all that practice during the last couple of months, he was prepared now for the scorching heat and the pain that went with it. Unlike the first times, he now endured the first agonizing moments calmly, waiting for his mental bond with Alain to re-establish itself. After three weeks of abstinence, it had been considerably weakened, and in the last couple of days he couldn’t even reach his Master anymore. He’d missed that special closeness in those days, despite the unpleasantness of the bonding itself.

But when the secret inner world of Alain opened for him again, he realized with a sinking feeling that Alain was disappointed with him... even displeased.
“Master…” he said in concern. “What have I done?”

“You’ve disobeyed me, mon petit,” Alain replied quietly. “I hate to do this to you, but I can’t tolerate such behaviour, not from you. You know that. I’ll have to punish you.”

Michael found that thought more than merely disturbing – he found it downright frightening. Alain had never raised a hand against him so far – well, save from the one or other nice erotic spanking, but that had been a different matter and Michael knew that. He’d seen Brian’s ass having turned black and blue after a serious disciplinary session with his Sire, despite advanced vampire healing.

“Are you gonna beat me as you sometimes do with Bri?” he asked, unable to conceal the fear in his own voice and hating it. At least Brian was man enough to take it, whenever Alain got fed up with his trespassing.

To his shameful relief, though, Alain shook his head thoughtfully.

“Non, mon amant,” he said. “You’d get nothing out of that, only pain and resentment. You don’t need a lesson in pain; although, apparently, you need a lesson in obedience. That’s why I’m giving you an enema.”

Michael was shocked. He hated enemas – hadn’t had one since the age of twelve or so and hadn’t planned to have one today… or any other day, to be honest.

“I’d rather have that beating,” he murmured, tears of shame threatening to break free.

“I can understand that,” Alain replied. “Unfortunately for you, it’s not your decision to make. I’ve chosen to give you an enema, and you’re not allowed to let go of the water until I tell you so. Am I understood?”

“Y-yes,” Michael whispered. That earned him a really hard slap on his exposed buttocks.

“Yes what?” Alain asked icily.

“Yes, Master,” Michael replied glumly. He knew some gay men loved enemas, in fact couldn’t get enough of them – however, he was not one of those people.

“I hope so,” he could feel Alain’s genuine regret as his Master pulled out of him. “Go and clean up in Brian’s bathroom. I’ll do the same in mine. Be here again in ten minutes, showered and naked as you are… and don’t make me wait for you,” he added, slapping Michael’s ass again, hard. “Move it!”

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If the thought of being given an enema grossed Michael out, he was downright frightened when he saw the apparatus Alain intended to use on him. Alain was known for his weird preference for outdated things sometimes – a tendency born from his age, most likely – but this… equipment had to trail back to the times of Debbie’s grandmother. It consisted of an enamelled water tank that, by the sight of it, could take in a gallon of water (or more), a long rubber tube connected to it, and a shiny black plastic tap on the tube’s end, of the size of a man’s middle finger – assuming that said man had really big fingers.

Alain hung up the water tank on the clothes peg, so that the water would flow freely, and ordered Michael to bend over the table, with his legs spread. Then he pulled apart Michael’s asscheeks and inserted the plastic syringe into his instinctively clamped hole, slowly but steadily.

“Don’t tighten up,” he said, “or you’ll hurt yourself. This isn’t supposed to be painful, unless you’re
trying to resist.”

Michael hissed in pain. The… thing was very hard, and he was more than a little sore already from the hard session they’d just had. While not too thick, the syringe was also very rigid, and it really hurt as Alain pushed it into him, no matter how much he tried to relax. When the tap was finally opened and warm water flooded his insides, it was a blessing… at first.

But the water kept coming and coming, until he felt as if he’d burst, and he was sure he was bloated like a frog. It was most unpleasant, not to mention humiliating as hell, and he doubted that he’d be able to control his bowels till the end of the procedure, not to mention afterwards.

After what seemed an eternity of agony, the water flow finally stopped, and Alan removed the tool of torture from his battered ass. But he was still not allowed to leave, and he was sure he’d soil himself – and Alain’s office – within moments.

“That would be unfortunate,” Alain said icily, reading his thoughts with ease, now that their bond had been re-established. “You’re not allowed to let go until I say that you can let go.”

“You’re a sadistic bastard,” Michael said through gritted teeth. Fuck this was humiliating beyond belief! In his misery, he almost missed the flash of anger in Alain’s silver eyes. Almost but not quite.

“No,” Alain said in a quiet, forcibly collected voice. “I’m teaching you a lesson… for your own good. You think this is bad? This is just a physical reaction of your bowels. But if you don’t listen to me, if you don’t drink from me when I tell you to do so, how bad do you think, will it get when you succumb to the blood lust and lose control over your mind? If you go on a rampant killing spree, just because you’re too queasy to take a little of my Vitae?”

Michael couldn’t deny that his Master did have a point. He still couldn’t believe, though, that Alain would deliberately make him soil himself, just to bring said point over with proper emphasis.

Yet that was, exactly, what Alain was doing. And if nothing else, that humiliating incident was good for one thing: he never questioned Alain’s authority again when it came to the intricacies of unlife. Which, as every vampire could have told him, was the best – or, to be more accurate, the only – way to survive in the twilight.

He was settling into his new existence, realizing the opportunities now lying open for him. All he needed were time and patience. And, thank Alain, time was something he now had enough.

“Yes, you do,” Alain said, snapping up his unshielded thoughts easily. “And I hope there will be no need to repeat today’s lesson.”

“No, Master,” Michael replied, still in deeply submissive mode; now that he’d let go of his anger and resentment, he actually felt very much at peace.

“Good,” Alain said. “Now, get into the shower, then put on something presentable. As soon as the fax I’m waiting for has arrived, we’ll go out.”

“We do?” Michael was surprised; this had never happened before. “Is Bri coming, too?”

“No,” Alain replied, “today, it will be only you and me. This is our night, and I don’t want anyone else to be part of it. Not even Brian.”

“Where are we going?” Michael inquired, hesitating between regret that he wouldn’t be seeing Brian and almost childish pride over his cherished status.
Alain looked at him with a weird, almost paternal fondness, which, considering what they’d been doing just an hour before was a bit… well, freaky.

“I thought you’d want to see this new superhero movie,” he said. “Granted, it’s Japanese, but you might like it.”

“Yippee!” Michael squealed in delight and dashed off to the bathroom.
Once Too Often, Part 1

Chapter Summary

Michael repeats his performance from the Pride, and the guys have a not-so-happy reunion.

Chapter Notes

Dancer has been modelled after the famous German drag queen, Olivia Jones. Dawn Cavanaugh is “played” by Lexa Doig.

Warning: Cross-dressing and a few squicky scenes - nothing serious, though.

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ONCE TOO OFTEN, Part 1

The shooting of Rage II – The Black Widow was going well. So well, in fact, that Brett Keller found the time to work on the trailer of the third movie with Michael and Dawn Cavanaugh, planning to include it in the extras of the DVD release. Michael found that the increased strength of his new status came in handy during those days – they worked on vampire schedule, which often meant several days in one go, without longer breaks than a couple of hours.

They shot a few haunting scenes in the local crematorium, which had been chosen as the set for the Shadow Temple, with Imalia, a former supermodel featuring as the Shadow Oracle, a character that was to be closely defined yet. Imalia, who’d been depressed and suicidal ever since Embraced by the Nosferatu, made a stunning figure on the silver screen, although it had cost a lot of cajoling and reassurance to talk her into playing the part. She’d never truly gotten over losing her ethereal beauty, but seeing the results the make-up artists achieved on her finally persuaded her that she would, in fact, look great. Which she did.

Brett wanted Michael to make a cameo appearance in the trailer, too, saying that it would sell the DVDs twice as well. At first, Michael flat out refused, even though Brian – who was working on the ad campaign for the movies – agreed with Brett. But Michael didn’t want to become so well-known that people would recognize – and stampede – him on the streets. He valued his privacy highly.

Brett, however, was very much taken with the idea, and kept pestering him about it.

“You know, Mikey, if you don’t wanna be recognized, you could always play the scene in drag,” Brian suggested.

Alain, who was making sketches of a stark naked Michael for his planned Hermes-statue, raised an intrigued eyebrow. “You’re into cross-dressing, Michael? Kinky…”

“I only did it once!” Michael protested.

“And you looked absolutely gorgeous in that blonde wig,” Brian prompted. “Not even your co-
workers from the fucking Q-Mart recognized you at first sight. You could name yourself Michelle Grassi in the end credits – and offer a prize for anyone who’d spot you. People would go crazy about the DVDs.”

“Yeah, sure,” Michael snorted, but Brian could see that he was tempted.

“I tell you what,” he said. “Let’s make a test run: you dress up like you did for the Pride. We take you out to some fancy place, and if people buy the act, you’ll do the scene as Michelle.”

“Bri, I don’t think it’s such a good idea...” Michael was still not fully persuaded

“Actually, it’s an excellent one,” Alain interrupted. “I’d certainly love to see you in drag; I’m sure you’d look gorgeous. And it would be fun.”

That about decided the question. Nominally, Michael was expected to do what Alain asked him to do; and the thought of entering some fancy restaurant flanked by both Alain and Brian was a tempting one.

“Ask Emmett to make you up,” Brian advised. “He did an excellent job on you last time – and it would look more natural than the work of a professional visagist. The wig you wore on the Pride was perfect; I’m sure Emmett can find something similar.”

Needless to say that – although nobody actually asked his opinion – Emmett was absolutely thrilled by the idea. He also did his best to reconstruct Michael’s outfit from that fateful Pride, more than three years before. Considering that he currently worked for the Costume and Props department of the Vignes Studios, finding the right dress, wig and accessories wasn’t really a challenge. But, as he often explained, the devil stuck in the details; therefore it was very important that said details matched each other flawlessly.

“It’s a good thing that your legs aren’t too hairy,” he declared with a critical look at Michael’s aforementioned body parts, while Michael stood in the middle of Alain’s garderobe, clad only in a G-string, mortified beyond imagination. “Leg shaving is a bitch, and it itches like hell when it’s growing back. You’ll have to shave your chest again, though. And your belly.”

“What for?” Michael protested. “I’m not gonna wear a navel-free dress, am I?”

“No, sweetie,” Emmett explained patiently, “But you’re gonna wear silk. Very fine, expensive silk that, as they say so nicely, leaves nothing to the imagination. The trail of hair on your belly would be clearly visible through the thin fabric.”

“And my dick wouldn’t?” Michael countered, hating the idea more with each passing minute.

“Nah, the skirt bells out from the hip,” Emmett replied airily. “You believe I wouldn’t think of that? Besides, the cut will make your hips look more rounded – more feminine. Now, let’s give these a try.”

These were a pair of genuine silicone breast implants – small and perky ones, matching Michael’s general stature. He got the shock of his life nonetheless.

“Alain, I’m not having plastic surgery just to make your joke work!” he squealed in an embarrassingly high, girlish voice. Alain and Brian were beside themselves with laughter. They were literally howling, unable to get out a coherent word.

Emmett rolled his eyes. “They’re not going under your skin,” he said with somewhat forced patience. “They’re going into a plastic wonderbra, and I wanna see if the size is the right one. Now,
Stop fidgeting and let me work.”

After about an hour of cajoling, encouraging and occasional cursing (from Emmett’s side) and endless amounts of giggling and outright laughter (form the other two), Michael finally stood in the garderobe as Michelle, in a golden lamé dress that barely covered his knees – as Emmett explained, knobbly male knees were always a dead give-away – and was held by two thin straps on the shoulders. The implants sat solidly in the plastic bra (necessary for the straps to stay invisible), making the impression of perky little breasts, like those of a teenage girl.

The high heels changed Michael’s carriage, making him stand straighter than usually, and pushing his butt into a more accentuated position, with the effect that Brian’s mouth was watering at the sight. The pale blond wig and the bleached eyebrows changed Michael’s colouring, building a dramatic contrast with his long, black eyelashes and big, dark eyes. Emmett had used the make-up sparsely, just to smooth out the small irregularities of the male skin and to conceal the shadow of the beard. A pale gold silk shawl, several nuances paler than the dress, wrapped loosely around Michael’s neck, hid his Adam’s apple. With brown eyelid shades and an apricot lipstick, as well as fake golden fingernails, the illusion was perfect.

“He looks good enough to eat,” Alain, who could appreciate feminine prettiness more than the others, judged in satisfaction. Emmett nodded.

“Yes, he’s very pretty as a girl. Now we need to practice the proper walking in high heels; and how does a lady sit down and cross her legs without being mistaken for a man… or for a hooker on the prowl.”

That part turned out more complicated than either of them would have thought (Michael had a rather graceless way to move), but finally, hours later, Emmett declared himself content.

“Let’s give him a break,” he said. “I’ll come back tomorrow and help with the shaving and the other stuff.”

But Alain shook his head. “Not with the shaving,” he said. “We want to have some fun, too. Where did you make reservations, by the way?”

“There’s a new club named Femboi,” Emmett answered, “specialized in transgender dancers, or so they say. I thought it would be the best place for a test run.”

“Perhaps,” Alan frowned. “I’ve never heard of it, though. Where is it?”

“Neutral territory,” Emmett gave him the address. “Should I check out the owners, just to be on the safe side?”

“No,” Alain said. “I’ll have the Nosferatu do it; they’re the best at this sort of stuff. The neighbourhood is… questionable at best, though. Isn’t Lothar’s Lair somewhere in that area, too?”

Emmett shrugged, not having a clue.

“What is that place?” Brian asked with interest.

“Exactly what the name says,” Alain replied. “An S/M club, owned by a Brujah Anarch named Lothar; also known as the Leather Daddy of the undead.”

“Hmm…” Brian seemed mildly interested. “Sounds kinky…”

“Believe me, it’s not something you’d want to try, unless you’re into serious pain,” Alain said, the
warning very clear in his voice. “It’s not something I’d want to try, and I am into pain… well, sometimes. Lothar’s Lair is a place where doms send their errant slaves to be punished… to be seriously punished. Lothar’s sessions are said to be extremely painful, even for one of us.”

“You never risked as much as a glimpse?” Brian asked in surprise. “Weren’t you even curious?”

“No,” Alain said simply. “Taking unnecessary risks is the prerogative of the young and the foolish. I’m none of those things.”

After Emmett had left, Alain contacted Four-Eyes and asked the Nosferatu scholar to check out the background of the new transgender club. What he learned made him decidedly not happy.

“I’m not sure that we should go there,” he told Brian; Michael had gone out on a shooting with Brett Keller. “Apparently, the club is owned by a fake corporation, the trail of which leads nowhere. It’s always suspicious if not even the Nosferatu can find something like that right away.”

“They found nothing?” Brian asked in surprise. That was unusual. As a rule, the Nosferatu could find out anything a paying customer wanted to know.

“Oh, I’m sure they’ll find it eventually,” Alain replied dismissively, “just not before tomorrow. That’s strange in itself; Four-Eyes is one of the best. But what concerns me more is that the description of the floor manager of the club reminds me strongly of Dancer.”

“Ah,” Brian said blankly. “It would be informative if you could tell me who the fuck this Dancer is.”

“He’s a transgender dancer, as his name indicates,” Alain explained. “A very good one, actually. But he’s also a Ventrue Antitribu, and a member of the Crypt-Ticks Sabbat pack. He’s of Weak Blood – twelfth generation – but vicious and shrewd. Or else he wouldn’t have survived the big showdown between the Camarilla and the Sabbat last year. Many of his fellow pack members didn’t.”

“And you guys tolerate him in the city?” Brian asked with a frown.

Alain shrugged. “As long as he stays in neutral territory, there’s precious little we can do; one of the few disadvantages of living in a free Anarch city. Besides, alone he isn’t particularly dangerous. The real danger comes from the company he keeps.”

“And?” Brian urged.

“The Crypt-Ticks is a nomadic pack that wanders from one city to another, wreaking havoc wherever they take up temporary resistance,” Alain explained. “They consist of Brujah, Ravnos and other such unsavoury characters. Dancer himself, however, is personally associated with Henry Taylor-Slash, who happens to be the progeny of Mohammed al-Muthlim, the Sabbat Bishop of L.A.”

“Which means that he might be the actual owner of the Femboi, right?” Brian said.

“It’s a distinct possibility,” Alain replied. “We have no proof, of course – not yet – but I have actually little doubt.”

“So does it mean we aren’t going there tomorrow?” Brian asked.

Alain thought about that for a moment. “I think we should go nevertheless,” he finally decided. “We can’t mollycoddle Michael forever; the pathways in the Dark are dangerous, and he needs to face this fact sooner or later. It’s better if he does so while we’re with him to protect him, if necessary.”
“Define we,” Brian said. Alain grinned and counted on his fingers.

“You and me, of course. Emmett, definitely; it’s as much his show as ours, and besides, he’ll fit in better than anyone else. Brett won’t miss this for the world, and I think Dawn Cavanaugh will be interested to see the results before the shooting.”

“And her presence alone would help to scare everyone to Final Death and into behaving themselves,” Brian grinned back at him.

“Exactly,” Alain prompted. “Aside from that, we might learn something about the Sabbat and Anarch clientele that will prove useful later.”

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And so it was decided that they’d go to the Femboi on the next evening, to test Michael’s abilities to play a woman. Alain and Brian had great fun with shaving Michael’s chest, and once again, Emmett outdid himself to make a convincing woman out of him. Then they all got into Alain’s corvette and drove over to the Femboi.

The Femboi turned out to be a seedy little club, with a stage for the dancing boys, separated from the club area by a cordon, and small loges in the background of the club area, where the more… classy customers could sit and watch the performance. In the middle of the room there were small tables for the common crowd. Half of them were already occupied by what seemed to be the usual clientele in such clubs: sweating, unattractive men beyond their first youth, getting their rocks off by watching the dancing boys – or feeling them up for a tip.

The floor manager came to greet them at the entrance. He was – or at least seemed to be – an exceptionally tall woman: at least six feet barefooted, but the high heels he was wearing added at least another ten inches to his already impressive height. He had a platinum blonde wig, his pale eyes adorned with dramatic eye-makeup and long, false black eyelashes, and he used a lipstick several shades too red for his pale face.

“Alain,” he said in a low, exaggeratedly feminine voice. “What a rare honour for our humble establishment. I always thought you’d require more… class from a club.”

“Usually, I do,” Alain replied bluntly. “This was a bet.”

“One that you’ve lost?” the floor manager grinned.

“That’s not decided yet,” Alain grinned back at him mirthlessly. “Can you show us to our loge, Dancer? We’ve booked in advance… the one for Mr. Honeycutt.”

“Sure, business first,” the infamous Sabbat drag queen led them to their loge, took their orders and promised them that the drinks – containing various percentages of blood – would be served promptly. Before he’d leave them, however, he gave Michael an appreciating look.

“Not bad, my pretty one,” he said, “not bad at all. Most people would buy the act from you. But take a piece of advice from a professional: real girls don’t glare at guys so straightforward. A bit more coquetterie would improve your performance a great deal.”

Michael bit his lower lip and gave the drag queen a coy look through his long lashes. Dancer laughed, and it actually seemed genuine.

“Much better. With a bit more practice you could make a great career on stage.”

“Hardly,” Michael replied with a snort. “I’ve got a voice like a crow; and my abilities as a dance
performer are not even worth mentioning.”

“With looks like yours, nobody would complain here,” Dancer replied, wrinkling his nose in mild disgust; he appeared less than happy with his current job, but apparently even Sabbat vampires had to take low-scale jobs sometimes. “Talent is the last thing that’s expected from our regular patrons.”

Less than half an hour later they could see that the Sabbat hadn’t been exaggerating. The dancing boys performing on stage were moderately pretty and relatively young, but rhythm was definitely not their forte. Neither did the drunken customers expect them to have any. The only thing expected from them was to show off their youthful bodies… and to let the customers feel them up for a tip. Which the drunken crowd did with enthusiasm, sticking dollar notes into the boys’ G-strings generously.

The boys had stupid stage names like Catgirl, Butterfly and so on, and each and every one of them represented a certain type: a furry, a geisha, a nurse a chambermaid… The last one of them was a schoolgirl, and the moderator announced him as 'Sunshine'.

To say that Alain and the others were thunderstruck would have been the understatement of the century.

“That little asshole is like a bad penny; he keeps turning up, no matter what,” Brian commented in annoyance. “Do we really want to watch him shake his blond boy ass at everyone who’s willing to give a buck for it? I certainly don’t. We should leave.”

“No,” Alain said in an authoritative tone. “We’ll stay here, lie low and try not to catch his attention.”

“Why not?” Michael asked, puzzled.

“His mind has been wiped by Drusilla; he’s not supposed to remember anything concerning Kindred,” Alain explained. “But such extensive mind-wipes are always tricky. Memories can be triggered again, by strong enough motivation; and you can’t deny that he was always strongly motivated when it came to Brian… or to you, Michael… pardon, Michelle.”

“So, it’s true then that the little shit used to be the thrall of Jean-Vincent?” Brett Keller asked in surprise. “And the Prince left him alive? Why in seven hells would he do that?”

“The Prince has guilt issues due to his past as the Scourge of Europe,” Dawn Cavanaugh commented dryly. “That makes him unnecessarily queasy when it comes to cleaning out human trash. One day, it will be his downfall.”

“I hope not,” Alain replied seriously. His existence – and that of his undead family – depended on the Prince’s favour to a certain extent.

Michael gave Dawn an uneasy look. The most creative Director of Photography of the Vigness Studios was an eerily beautiful woman, in the way a corpse would be beautiful. She had vaguely Asian looks, somewhat marred by her hollow cheeks; her skin was just a hint more yellow-ish than it would have been healthy, and made a sharp contrast with her bluish-black hair, jewelled dark eyes and small, blood-red mouth. There was something cruel and skull-like in her fine-boned features: the true nature of her Clan that she couldn’t completely conceal, no matter what. Although they’d worked together since the very first shot of the first Rage movie, Michael couldn’t quite suppress his dread whenever he was in her company. He was glad that she was, at least, on their side; at least he hoped so.

The howling of the drunken customers signalled the beginning of the next number. A skinny young
man in a blond wig and a schoolgirl’s uniform, high-heeled red slippers and white stockings swayed onto the stage and began to wriggle around in what he apparently thought was a seductive way. It was Justin indeed, although the first cracks in his erstwhile prettiness could already be seen.

“Well… his dancing skills haven’t improved much since the time when he was hopping around in the Babylon, in that stupid angel’s costume,” Brian commented nastily.

Michael gave him a jaundiced look. “Look who’s speaking… besides, when did dancing skills ever count in the Babylon? What the guys wanted to see was exactly what our little Sunshine is showing his fans right now.”

The thing he meant was Justin’s surprisingly scrawny ass that he was now shaking at the half-drunk crowd, flipping up his skimpy little schoolgirl’s skirt.

“He used to have a lot more flesh on his bones when Ma was feeding him,” Michael said in mild shock.

“No...”

"Debauchery doesn’t feed one as well as people would think,” Dawn Cavanaugh said dryly. “I should know. I have tried.”

Alain and Brett exchanged wry grins. Older Kindred were well aware of the fact that – before discovering her artistic talents – Dawn had done her best (or worst) to give Hollywood the reputation of “Sin Capital of the World”.

“Of course,” Dawn added with such extreme dryness that it would have put the High Gobi Desert to shame, “I was never this cheap… or this low-class.”

Following her disgusted look they saw Justin turn around and flip the front of his schoolgirl’s shirt to show his fans his dick that seemed almost obscenely large compared with his outfit. Some of the patrons got up from their chairs, stormed forward to the railing and waved at him with dollar notes. He stood for a while to let them look their full, sucking on his index finger in a falsely sweet manner; then he came closer with a toothy smile and allowed them to grab his private parts while collecting the money they were offering him for that questionable privilege.

“Quite the downfall for the King of Babylon,” Brian said cynically.

Alain shook his head in bewilderment. “And this from someone who used to study at the Belle Artis in Italy,” he said, disappointed. “I mean, I know he’s an irresponsible little shit, but he used to have some talent. Not enough to become a truly great artist, but with a little luck and a great deal of work he could have made a name for himself as a reasonably good painter.”

“Yeah, but that’s always been the problem with Justin,” Michael said, more sadly than truly aggravated. “He always wanted everything right now, if possible without effort. He always expected people to do everything for him… and most of the time he even got his way,” he looked at Alain pleadingly. “Sire, can we go now? The last thing I need to watch is Justin’s dick going around from hand to hand.”

“Believe me, I understand that,” Alain replied. “But we can’t go, mon amant, not yet. We must wait until he leaves the stage,” he squeezed Michael’s thigh under the table. “I’m sorry, Michelle. I’ll make up for the inconvenience, I promise.”

“I’m sorry, too,” Emmett offered. “Next time, I’ll find us something with a little more class.”

They all grinned and turned their attention back to their drinks. None of them caught the hate-filled glare of the half-naked dancer directed at them from the stage.
Once Too Often - Interlude

Chapter Summary

Alain has promised to make up to Michael for having "enjoyed" Justin's performance in the Femboi. Alain is a vampire who keeps his promises.

Chapter Notes

Michael's partner of the night is "played" by Kyle Chandler.

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INTERLUDE

Michael was genuinely distraught when they left the Femboi after Justin's performance. He knew it was ridiculous that the little shit could still throw him so completely off-balance but he couldn't help it. He'd lost too much because of Justin – the affection of his own mother, the friendship of Lindz and Melanie, and very nearly Brian, too – he simply could not think straight (pardon the pun) when it came to the blond parasite of Liberty Avenue. Not even Justin's currently obvious bad luck could change that.

Alain saw that all too clearly, but was momentarily at a loss as how to iron out the problem again. Michael's current behaviour had something of a wronged wife, and never in his five hundred and some years had he been forced to deal with that. He also felt bad for having Michael taken to the Femboi to give his alter ego the test run. For all that Michael had grown up on the Liberty Avenue, subjected to the questionable taste of Debbie, the Femboi was deep beneath his style.

Emmett had long since realized the wrongness of his choice, but the truth was, seedy bars were more his world than they were Michael's. So he apologized another two or three times; then he shut up and kept giving Alain helpless looks – which Alain returned in kind. Brian, not being the most sensitive person in town, either, no matter how much he loved Michael, wasn't much help.

So it came down to Brett Keller, the worldliest vampire of the lot, to do something. Although a great deal younger than Alain, both in relative age and in generation – or perhaps even because he was so much younger – he had more extensive experiences in dealing with modern sensitivities. Plus, he really liked Michael, not only as a co-worker but also as a person, and wanted to save the evening for him, if he could.

"You guys go home or go Hunting or do whatever you do on your evenings," he said. "I'll take Michelle out to the Seraglio."


Michael didn't seem so sure about that. "What's the Seraglio?" he asked warily.

"An exclusive night club, preferred by guys who like to dress up as women and to be fucked by
men," Brett explained. "A very discreet, very refined… and quite expensive place. You can only get in when one of the long-time members vouches for you… or if you're having a date with one of them."

"And you just happen to have a membership, eh?" Michael sounded a bit more amused now.

Brett nodded. "Something like that, yeah. Actually, I own it… well, not alone, of course, but I can claim partial ownership, and I'm quite proud of it. I think you'll like it, Michelle."

"Why do you keep calling me that?" Michael laughed, still a bit shaken but more honestly.

"Because I believe what you need right now is to be seduced and taken like a woman," Brett answered bluntly.

Brian choked on the smoke of his cigarette and Dawn stifled a laughter, while Emmett was grinning like a loon. Alain showed no reaction for the moment; he wanted Michael to have the completely free choice in this matter. When Brett could help to re-build Michael's battered self-confidence, Alain would be happy to let him do it.


"Nonsense," the Brujah said. "I'd do you any time, and you know that; you're hot and sweet like few other guys in this industry. I will do you tonight, if that's what you want. But I'd be surprised if you weren't able to seduce a more… exciting customer in the Seraglio. With this fine piece of ass," he added, kneading Michael's silk-clad backside briefly, "I'll have to beat off unwanted suitors with a walking stick."

"Well, I don't know," Michael shot Alain a hesitating look. "What do you think, Sire?"

Alain shrugged. "Sure, why not, if you think you'd like it."

"You don't mind…?" Michael trailed off uncertainly.

Alain withstood the urge to roll his eyes. Apparently, Michael still needed a great deal of reassurance, and taking his uncertainties seriously was part of the therapy.

"Michael, when did I mind if you had a little fun elsewhere? The Seraglio is a classy place, and with Brett, you'll be safe enough. Go, enjoy yourself – I did promise you to make up for the Femboi, did I not? Go and make the guys crazy," he smiled. "I know you will."

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And so, after a moment of hesitation, Michael gave in and left on Brett's arm to make his first visit to the Seraglio. To do things in style, Brett ordered a limousine to get them there, and Michael had to admit that it did have its moments to get out of such a decadent vehicle on his high heels, while the customers smoking in front of the club were staring at his silk-covered legs with their mouths hanging open. It was a heady feeling, being so openly admired.

Despite its name, the Seraglio wasn't one of those fake oriental places with lots of fake gold and overdone plush and other stupid clichés. It was a supremely elegant night club, with playrooms in different styles and a somewhat old-fashioned bar that – according to Brett, at least – had been designed in the likeness of the lounge of expensive London hotels. The clientele was exclusively male… only that some of them were dressed up as women. As very elegant women. The ones wearing male clothing were dressed up, too, either in fitted suits or even worse, in tuxedos.

Michael became extremely nervous again. "I don't know, Brett," he said, hesitating. "It's way above
my usual league. What do I do? How will I fit in?"

"Don't panic," Brett grinned. "The only thing that needs to fit is the dick of your choice up your ass. This is all just theatre. All the guys dressed up as women come here to be fucked. And the ones dressed up as men come here to fuck them. You just wait for the offers and either accept them or refuse them. It's that simple."

Michael still seemed a little uncertain, but before he could have replied anything, they were interrupted by a supremely elegant man in his late thirties or early forties, clad in an impeccable tuxedo. The man had dark hair and exotic dark eyes with a vaguely oriental touch, and he seemed to know Brett because he greeted the Brujah director in the manner of old acquaintances… not in the manner of close friends, though.

Brett returned the greeting in the same manner. "Nice to see you again, Martin," he said; then, turning to Michael, he added by way of an explanation. "Martin and I've known each other for some ten years or so. He owns a small bank and several real estate agencies."

"But I'm still a friendly guy," Martin added with a charming smile. "Don't you introduce your company, Brett?"

"Oh, sorry," Brett laughed. "This is Michelle; and she isn't actually my company… I mean, not exclusively. I'm just escorting her; this is her first visit in the Seraglio."

"Oh, is it?" Martin seemed energized at once. "In that case, may I buy you a drink, Michelle?"

Michael looked at Brett helplessly. The Brujah gave a small, barely visible nod, signalling that the guy was safe to go to one of the playrooms with, and so Michael accepted the offer.

"I'll be in the manager's office, should you need me," Brett said, before they would relocate to the bar. "The personnel will alert me when you decide to go."

That was a clear warning to Martin that Brett intended to keep an eye on "Michelle's" well-being, which reassured Michael to no end. So he followed his new suitor to the bar, where Martin ordered a vodka/orange for himself and looked at Michael expectantly.

"I don't assume they'd serve beer here," Michael smiled ruefully, "so I guess a Cosmo will have to do."

"Actually, they serve any kind of drink you order," Martin replied. "But if this is your trial run in cross-dressing, let me give you a hint: ladies of the upper class don't drink beer. Not when other people can see them anyway."

"I stand corrected," Michael actually relaxed enough to laugh; Martin was pleasant company. "Do you come here often?"

"Once or twice a week, if I'm in my phase for male company," Martin revealed. "I'm bi, actually, and like real women as much as I like men in drag," he gave Michael a thorough once-over. "You make a beautiful girl; do you want me to woo you as if you were a real one?"

"I'm afraid I don't have the right equipment for that," Michael laughed.

"Oh, I won't say so," Martin discreetly slid a hand under Michael's skirt and grabbed his package under the silk thighs. "I'd say your equipment is more than adequate… besides, many women like it the Greek way. Shall we relocate to one of the playrooms? Or am I going too fast for you?"
"A little," Michael admitted helplessly. "I'm, not usually this shy, you know – no son growing up with a mother like mine would have the chance for that – but I'm really new to this thing… and this place is way too elegant for me. I don't know how to behave. It's a little intimidating."

"I believe you'll find out soon enough that the clientele is not so fine by far as they'd like the others to think," Martin grinned. "But I'm in no hurry. We can socialize a bit first if that would ease your mind."

"That would probably be helpful," Michael said, relieved.

Martin nodded. "Very well. Let's dance first, then."

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The dance floor of the Seraglio was nothing like Michael had seen before in any gay bar; not even in the very exclusive (and expensive) ones Alain preferred. It seemed that here dancing really meant dancing, not merely a sort of foreplay, and Michael had to confess that he didn't know any of the classic dances. His previous experience was limited: visits to the Babylon and other gay discos, where people used the excuse of "dancing" to become all touchy-feely and to rub against each other shamelessly before vanishing in the back rooms.

He said so with disarming honesty.

"It doesn't matter," Martin reassured him. "You can learn it in no time. It's not that difficult; besides, most of the ladies here started off like you. Actually, teaching a newbie is a lot easier than breaking a good dancer out of the habit of leading."

And, sweeping Michael onto the dance floor, he began to explain the figures of the dance. It was a bit complicated, despite his promise, but after a while Michael slowly developed a feeling for it; and he had to admit that it was fun. The dance required a great deal of body contact, although in a much more subdued way than he was used to it – and the mortal warmth of Martin's solid body felt good, so incredibly good. In a sudden moment of clarity, he realized how much he needed this: warm mortal hands on his skin, a warm cock up his ass, without having to ask himself whether he would end up as dinner.

It wasn't so that he didn't trust Alain; he did, implicitly so. But boinking the undead was a complicated thing, even for a ghoul. There was always a very real possibility that his bed partner might Frenzy and kill him, without even meaning it. Sure, someone of Alain's age ought to be able to keep the Beast on a tight leash; but accidents could happen, and Brian's stories about Alain's temper tantrums weren't really suited to disperse Michael's fears.

He realized that he'd been living in constant tension, ever since coming to LA; and that tension now finally, gradually fell away from him as Martin leaned in to him while they were dancing slowly, in full body contact. He accepted the kiss, allowing the older man's tongue to invade his mouth. It was almost shockingly warm after all those months in which he'd mostly been intimate with vampires.

Perhaps it was this mortal warmth the undead craved, why so many of them took mortal lovers, despite the risks.

Suddenly he couldn't wait to feel that warmth even more intimately.

"I think we've socialized enough," he whispered when they had to break the kiss for the lack of air; another thing he hadn't experienced for a while.

Martin laughed, feeling him harden through the thin silk of the dress.
"Yes, it feels so, doesn't it?" he replied. "Do you have any preferences concerning the scenario? The playrooms offer a wide spread of choices."

"I thought playrooms have something to do with BDSM," Michael said in surprise.

Martin shook his head. "Not here. This isn't a fetish club but a role-playing one. Is there a particular reason why you started cross-dressing?"

"Actually, it's for a possible cameo role in a movie," Michael admitted.

"Oh, that's easy then," Martin turned to the floor manager. "Is the casting couch free at the moment?"

The young man consulted his palmtop.

"It's just been cleaned," he then said. "Should I book it for you, sir?"

"Please," Martin handed him his membership card. "It seems that the young lady here would like to apply for a film role."

The floor manager swiped the card through the slot of his palmtop and handed it back. "The room is yours, sir. You know the way, I presume."

"Yes, I do," Martin put the card away and pocketed his wallet. "Have champagne sent to the room, please."

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The room turned out to be a nondescript yet flashy office, the sort that many influential people in the movie industry of Tinsel Town preferred, including the Vignes' and Edward Blount. It had the usual large desk, heavy curtains and multiple phones (likely fake ones in this case), as well as a leather sofa and the matching stuffed armchairs and glass-plated table in the opposite corner.

A bottle of champagne in a silver ice bucket and a small bowl of strawberries were already waiting on said coffee table when they arrived. The whole thing was so much like a scene from "Pretty Woman" that Michael seriously had to fight the urge to giggle hysterically. He was just grateful that he had Martin in it instead of Richard Gere whom he wouldn't have touched with a ten-foot pole, movie star or no movie star.

So they had some champagne and Michael allowed Martin to feed him strawberries while groping him under his flimsy dress. He'd never thought that wearing silk thighs could increase the sensation so much, especially if one only wore a G-string beneath, meaning that he was basically bare-assed naked under the silk.

Martin seemed to enjoy the experience, too.

"How much do you want that role, Michelle?" he asked, sliding a hand between Michael's thighs to fondle his cock and balls. "What would you do for it?"

"Anything," Michael was so far gone by now he was nearly weeping in desperate need. "Anything you want."

"Well, in that case I hope your delicate little pussy can take a good, hard banging," Martin turned him and bent him over the back of the overstuffed leather sofa, still talking to him as if he were a girl, eager to spread her legs for a film role. "Because that's what you'll get, and rest assured that I won't stop until I'm done with you."
He pushed the flimsy dress way up above Michael's waist and pulled the silk thighs down, just under the curve of Michael's ass, together with the G-string, so that the male package remained covered, leaving the illusion of fucking a girl in fact. It was a deliciously dirty thing, Michael found, so much hotter than complete nudity.

Looking back over his bare shoulder, he saw Martin tear open a small package and roll the condom over his straining dick. He was nicely endowed but not overly so, to Michael's relief. He wanted a nice, long fuck, not being split in two by a log.

"Such a naughty little girl," Martin murmured, slapping Michael's exposed, vulnerable ass repeatedly; hard enough to sting, but not so hard that it would actually hurt. "Selling your sweet little pussy for a film role... I think I need to teach you a lesson."

In the next moment Michael felt something bunt and slick nudge at his hole and Martin pushed into him slowly, carefully, yet without any preparation. He was fine with that; it was part of the scenario and besides, he was being thoroughly and frequently stretched by both Alain and Bri, so he could take it with a minimum of discomfort. In fact, he was glad Martin didn't treat him like some delicate flower. He might be dressed up like a girl, but he was still a guy and an experienced bottom who had developed an appreciation for a bit harder play since mingling with the undead.

"Are you all right?" Martin asked, now fully sheathed inside him.

Michael nodded, a bit frantically. "Give me a moment," he wriggled a little, so that Martin's dick would touch his sweet spot, and then relaxed around him at once. "Okay, you can move now."

Martin didn't need more encouragement. Lifting one of Michael's legs, he placed Michael's knee on the armrest of the sofa, opening him wide, and then started to pound into him with abandon, hitting his sweet spot unerringly by every inward slam.

Michael held on for dear life, enjoying the treatment too much to be embarrassed by the mewling sounds coming from his own throat, while his dick rubbed against the silk of the thighs delicately. Oh, this was so hot, so good! The only thing he regretted was that he couldn't see Martin's face.

As if reading his thoughts, Martin pulled out of him and turned him around, lifting his leg again, pushing it from right to left and hooking his knee over his arm.

"Hold it there," he ordered and pushed back into him.

The angle was different in this position, the fit tighter but even better. Michael felt so full he feared he would burst any moment now. The clouding of Martin's exotic eyes revealed that he was close, too, and in a moment he came, shuddering with the force of his orgasm. Michael followed only seconds later, thankful for Emmett's warning to wear double protection under his G-string, or else he'd have soiled the expensive dress beyond help.

"Oh," he groaned, coming down from his high when Martin pulled out of him and teased the entrance of his sensitized hole with that still semi-hard dick. "That was great. Thanks."

"My pleasure… quite literally," Martin fingered his ass, stroking him in the inside which, strangely enough, helped him to calm down. "You're absolutely delicious. I'll leave my number with the management for you, should you be interested in a repeat performance. No strings attached."

"I'll think about it," Michael got back to his feet… a bit gracelessly. He expected to walk funny for the next day or so. "Is there a place where we can clean up?"

"Of course; all playrooms are equipped with an en-suite shower," Martin steered him to the door, a
hand still on his bare ass. "Do you want to go first or shall we share?"

"I'll go first if you don't mind," Michael replied.

Martin shrugged. "Not at all; we're still strangers, if you think about it. Take your time; I'm in no hurry."

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And so Michael showered and got dressed again, and then gave Brett the call via one of the waiters. Brett came while Martin was still in the shower and grinned like a shark.

"Did you have a good time, Michelle?"


"I thought so. You'll always be welcome here," he handed Michael a brand new Gold membership card. "Starting today, for as long as you need it. Celebrities are always good for business."

"I am not a celebrity," protested Michael, laughing.

"Not yet," Brett said. "But you will be."

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Those words proved prophetic, soon enough. Emboldened by his experience in the Seraglio Michael consented to appear in Rage II, credited as Michelle Grossi, and the news that he would be seen in the movie and those who spotted him would be able to win free DVDs, if they were lucky, turned the fandom absolutely crazy. The movie wasn't even finished yet when the premiere tickets were pre-sold in several cities, and for a while he actually had to grow a beard and wear sunglasses, so that people wouldn't recognize him on the streets. Not even the lead Rage actors were as popular as he had become.

"I told you so," Brett grinned and assigned to him two Brujah ghouls as bodyguards. "You are a celebrity."

Michael shook his head soberly. "I never wanted that, Brett. I just wanted to tell my stories."

"Which is exactly why they are so hugely sought after," Brett pointed out, grinning. "Don't worry. You've got the time to get used to the hype."

Actually, Michael doubted that very much. It simply wasn't in his nature. But he guessed he could enjoy it as long as it lasted. In the meantime, he had film scripts to write.
Chapter Summary

Next part of the story coming up, soon.

My dear readers,

I have decided to remove the chapter that used to be in this place because this story is mainly about Michael and Brian, not about Justin. I'll post it later separately, most likely with another part or two added, as a story of its own. I was unhappy with the way it clashed with the general tone of "The Toreador Chronicles", so there will be more, but as its own - rather disturbing - tale.

Thanks for your patience and understanding.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!