

Lover Unleashed (Black Dagger Brotherhood, Book 9)

By J.R. Ward

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#1 *New York Times* bestselling author J.R. Ward's thrilling new novel in the Black Dagger Brotherhood series.

Payne, twin sister of Vishous, is cut from the same dark, seductive cloth as her brother. Imprisoned for eons by their mother, the Scribe Virgin, she finally frees herself-only to face a devastating injury. Manuel Manello, M.D., is drafted by the Brotherhood to save her as only he can-but when the human surgeon and the vampire warrior meet, their two worlds collide in the face of their undeniable passion. With so much working against them, can love prove stronger than the birthright and the biology that separates them?

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Editorial Review

Review
Vampire fantasy just doesn't get better than this lovevampire.com

About the Author
After graduating from law school J. R. Ward began working in health care in Boston and spent many years as chief of staff for one of the premier academic medical centres in the U.S. She lives in Kentucky with her husband.

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BY J. R. WARD

THE BLACK DAGGER BROTHERHOOD SERIES

Dark Lover

Lover Eternal

Lover Awakened

Lover Revealed

Lover Unbound

Lover Enshrined

The Black Dagger Brotherhood:
An Insider's Guide

Lover Avenged

Lover Mine

NOVELS OF THE FALLEN ANGELS

Covet

Crave

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IN LOVING MEMORY OF
MARGARET BIRD

DEDICATED TO YOU:

You,
a "brother" indeed.
I think you are right where
you are supposed to be—and
I'm not the only one who feels that way.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

With immense gratitude to the readers of the Black Dagger Brotherhood and a shout-out to the Cellies!

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Oh, and the better half of WriterDog, of course.

GLOSSARY OF TERMS AND PROPER NOUNS

ahstrux nohtrum (n.) Private guard with license to kill who is granted his or her position by the king.

ahvenge (v.) Act of mortal retribution, carried out typically by a male loved one.

Black Dagger Brotherhood (pr. n.) Highly trained vampire warriors who protect their species against the Lessening Society. As a result of selective breeding within the race, Brothers possess immense physical and mental strength, as well as rapid healing capabilities. They are not siblings for the most part, and are inducted into the Brotherhood upon nomination by the Brothers. Aggressive, self-reliant, and secretive by nature, they exist apart from civilians, having little contact with members of the other classes except when they need to feed. They are the subjects of legend and the objects of reverence within the vampire world. They may be killed by only the most serious of wounds, e.g., a gunshot or stab to the heart, etc.

blood slave (n.) Male or female vampire who has been subjugated to serve the blood needs of another. The practice of keeping blood slaves has recently been outlawed.

the Chosen (pr. n.) Female vampires who have been bred to serve the Scribe Virgin. They are considered members of the aristocracy, though they are spiritually rather than temporally focused. They have little or no interaction with males, but can be mated to Brothers at the Scribe Virgin's direction to propagate their class. Some have the ability to prognosticate. In the past, they were used to meet the blood needs of unmated members of the Brotherhood, and that practice has been recently reinstated by the Brothers.

chrih (n.) Symbol of honorable death in the Old Language.

cohntehst (n.) Conflict between two males competing for the right to be a female's mate.

Dhunhd (pr. n.) Hell.

doggen (n.) Member of the servant class within the vampire world. *Doggen* have old, conservative traditions about service to their superiors, following a formal code of dress and behavior. They are able to go out during the day, but they age relatively quickly. Life expectancy is approximately five hundred years.

ehros (n.) A Chosen trained in the matter of sexual arts.

exhile dhoble (n.) The evil or cursed twin, the one born second.

the Fade (pr. n.) Nontemporal realm where the dead reunite with their loved ones and pass eternity.

First Family (pr. n.) The king and queen of the vampires, and any children they may have.

ghardian (n.) Custodian of an individual. There are varying degrees of *ghardians,* with the most powerful being that of a *sehcluded* female.

glymera (n.) The social core of the aristocracy, roughly equivalent to Regency England's *ton*.

hellren (n.) Male vampire who has been mated to a female. Males may take more than one female as mate.

leahdyre (n.) A person of power and influence.

leelan (adj.) A term of endearment loosely translated as "dearest one."

Lessening Society (pr. n.) Order of slayers convened by the Omega for the purpose of eradicating the vampire species.

lesser (n.) De-souled human who targets vampires for extermination as a member of the Lessening Society. *Lessers* must be stabbed through the chest in order to be killed; otherwise they are ageless. They do not eat or drink and are impotent. Over time, their hair, skin, and irises lose pigmentation until they are blond, blushless, and pale eyed. They smell like baby powder. Inducted into the society by the Omega, they retain a ceramic jar thereafter into which their heart was placed after it was removed.

lewlhen (n.) Gift.

lheage (n.) A term of respect used by a sexual submissive to refer to her dominant.

Lhenihan (pr. n.) A mythic beast renowned for its sexual prowess. In modern slang, it refers to a male of preternatural size and sexual stamina.

lys (n.) Torture tool used to remove the eyes.

mahmen (n.) Mother. Used both as an identifier and a term of affection.

mhis (n.) The masking of a given physical environment, the creation of a field of illusion.

nalla (n., f.) or ***nallum*** (n., m.) Beloved.

needing period (n.) Female vampire's time of fertility, generally lasting for two days and accompanied by intense sexual cravings. Occurs approximately five years after a female's transition and then once a decade thereafter. All males respond to some degree if they are around a female in her need. It can be a dangerous time, with conflicts and fights breaking out between competing males, particularly if the female is not mated.

newling (n.) A virgin.

the Omega (pr. n.) Malevolent, mystical figure who has targeted the vampires for extinction out of resentment directed toward the Scribe Virgin. Exists in a nontemporal realm and has extensive powers,

though not the power of creation.

phearsom (adj.) Term referring to the potency of a male's sexual organs. Literal translation something close to "worthy of entering a female."

princeps (n.) Highest level of the vampire aristocracy, second only to members of the First Family or the Scribe Virgin's Chosen. Must be born to the title; it may not be conferred.

pyrocant (n.) Refers to a critical weakness in an individual. The weakness can be internal, such as an addiction, or external, such as a lover.

rahlman (n.) Savior.

rythe (n.) Ritual manner of assuaging honor granted by one who has offended another. If accepted, the offended chooses a weapon and strikes the offender, who presents him- or herself without defenses.

the Scribe Virgin (pr. n.) Mystical force who is counselor to the king as well as the keeper of vampire archives and the dispenser of privileges. Exists in a nontemporal realm and has extensive powers. Capable of a single act of creation, which she expended to bring the vampires into existence.

sehclusion (n.) Status conferred by the king upon a female of the aristocracy as a result of a petition by the female's family. Places the female under the sole direction of her *ghardian*, typically the eldest male in her household. Her *ghardian* then has the legal right to determine all manner of her life, restricting at will any and all interactions she has with the world.

shellan (n.) Female vampire who has been mated to a male. Females generally do not take more than one mate due to the highly territorial nature of bonded males.

symphath (n.) Subspecies within the vampire race characterized by the ability and desire to manipulate emotions in others (for the purposes of an energy exchange), among other traits. Historically, they have been discriminated against and, during certain eras, hunted by vampires. They are near extinction.

the Tomb (pr. n.) Sacred vault of the Black Dagger Brotherhood. Used as a ceremonial site as well as a storage facility for the jars of *lessers*. Ceremonies performed there include inductions, funerals, and disciplinary actions against Brothers. No one may enter except for members of the Brotherhood, the Scribe Virgin, or candidates for induction.

trahyner (n.) Word used between males of mutual respect and affection. Translated loosely as "beloved friend."

transition (n.) Critical moment in a vampire's life when he or she transforms into an adult. Thereafter, he or she must drink the blood of the opposite sex to survive and is unable to withstand sunlight. Occurs generally in the midtwenties. Some vampires do not survive their transitions, males in particular. Prior to their transitions, vampires are physically weak, sexually unaware and unresponsive, and unable to dematerialize.

vampire (n.) Member of a species separate from that of Homo sapiens. Vampires must drink the blood of the opposite sex to survive. Human blood will keep them alive, though the strength does not last long. Following their transitions, which occur in their midtwenties, they are unable to go out into sunlight and must feed from the vein regularly. Vampires cannot "convert" humans through a bite or transfer of blood, though they are in rare cases able to breed with the other species. Vampires can dematerialize at will, though they must be able to calm themselves and concentrate to do so and may not carry anything heavy with them. They are able to

strip the memories of humans, provided such memories are short-term. Some vampires are able to read minds. Life expectancy is upward of a thousand years, or in some cases even longer.

wahlker (n.) An individual who has died and returned to the living from the Fade. They are accorded great respect and are revered for their travails.

whard (n.) Equivalent of a godfather or godmother to an individual.

PROLOGUE

1761, OLD COUNTRY

X*cor saw his father killed when he was but five years past his transition.*

It happened afore his very eyes, and yet even with the proximity, he could not fathom what transpired.

The night began as any other, darkness falling over a landscape of forest and cave, clouds above providing coverage from the moonlight for him and those who traveled upon horseback with him. His group of soldiers was six strong: Throe, Zypher, the three cousins, and himself. And then there was his father.

The Bloodletter.

Formerly of the Black Dagger Brotherhood.

What brought them out into this evening was that which called them to service after every sun fall: They were looking for lessers*, those soulless weapons of the Omega that saw fit to slaughter the vampire race. And they found them. Often.*

But the seven of them were no Brotherhood.

In opposition to that lauded, secretive group of warriors, this band of bastards led by the Bloodletter were naught more than soldiers: No ceremonies. No worship from the civilian populace. No lore or laudations. Their bloodlines might have been aristocratic, but they had each been forsaken by their families, born with defects or begotten outside of sanctified matings.

They would ne'er be but expendable flesh within the larger war for survival.

That all being true, however, they were the elite of the soldiers, the most vicious, the strongest of shoulder, those who had proven themselves over time to the hardest taskmaster in the race: Xcor's father. Handpicked and chosen wisely, these males were deadly against the enemy and codeless when it came to vampire society. Codeless when it came to killing as well: It mattered not whether the prey was slayer or human or animal or wolfen. Blood would flow.

They had taken one vow and one vow only: His sire was their lord and no other. Where he went, they did, and that was that. So much simpler than the Brotherhood's elaborate shite—even if Xcor had been a candidate by bloodline, he'd have had no interest in being a Brother. He cared naught for glory, as it held not a patch on the sweet release of murder. Better to leave such useless tradition and wasted ritual to those who refused to wield naught but a black dagger.

He would use whatever weapon there was.

And his father was the same.

The clamoring of hooves slowed and then faded into silence as the fighters came out of the forest and upon an enclave of oaks and brush. The smoke from home hearths drifted over on the breeze, but there was other confirmation that the small town they had searched for had finally presented itself: High above, on a piercing cliff, a fortified castle sat perched like an eagle, its foundation as talons locked into the rock.

Humans. Warring with each other.

How boring.

And yet one had to respect the construction. Mayhap, if Xcor e'er settled down, he would massacre the dynasty therein and assume that stronghold. Far more efficient to poach than erect.

"To the village," his father commanded. "Onward to the amusements."

Word had it that there were lessers *therein, the pale beasts mixing and mingling with the villagers who had carved out plots of land and planted stone houses under the shadows of the castle. This was typical of the Society's recruiting strategy: Infiltrate a town, take over the males one by one, slaughter or sell off the women and children, abscond with weapons and horses, move along to the next in greater number.*

Xcor was of like mind with the enemy in this respect: When he was finished fighting, he always took whatever he could in the manner of assets before heading off for the next battle. Night by night the Bloodletter and his soldiers worked their way through what the humans called England, and when they reached the tip of the Scots territory, they would turn and hasten themselves back downward, moving south, south, south till the heel of Italy forced them to turn about. And then it was a case of going through those many miles yet anew. And again. And again.

"We leave our provisions herein," Xcor pronounced, pointing to a thick-trunked tree that had fallen over a creek.

Whilst the transfer of their modest supplies was made, there was naught but the sound of creaking leather and the occasional snort from the stallions. When all was stowed under the flank of the downed oak, they remounted and gathered their high-bred horses—which were the only things of value other than the weapons that they possessed. Xcor did not see the usefulness in objects of beauty or comfort—those were naught but weight that bore you down. A strong horse and a well-balanced dagger? Those were priceless.

As the seven of them rode unto the village, they made no effort to mute the pounding of their steeds' hooves. There were no war cries, however. Such was wasted energy, as their enemy needed little invitation to come forth and greet them.

In manner of welcome, a human or two peeked out of doors and then quickly locked themselves back in their abodes. Xcor ignored them. Instead, he scanned the squat stone houses and the center square and the fortified trading shops, searching for a bipedal form that was as pale as a ghost and stank like a corpse coated in treacle.

His father rode up to him and smiled with a vicious edge. "Mayhap afterward we shall enjoy the fruits of the gardens herein."

"Mayhap, " Xcor murmured as his stallion tossed its head. Verily, he wasn't much interested in bedding females or forcing males to submit, but his sire was not one to be denied even in whims of leisure.

Using hand signals, Xcor directed three of their band to the left, where there was a small structure with a

cross atop its peaked roof. He and the others would take the right. His father would do what he pleased. As always.

Forcing the stallions to remain at a walk was a chore that challenged even the stoutest of arms, but he was used to the tug-of-war and sat solidly in his saddle. With grim purpose, his eyes penetrated the shadows thrown by the moonlight, seeking, probing—

The group of slayers that stepped free from the lee of the smithy had weapons aplenty.

"Five," Zypher growled. "Blessed be this night."

"Three," Xcor cut in. "Two are but humans as yet—although killing that pair . . . 'twill be a pleasure as well."

"Which shall you take, m'lord?" his brother-in-arms said, with a deference that had been earned, not granted as part of some birthright.

"The humans," Xcor said, shifting forward and bracing for the moment he gave his stallion its head. "If there are other lessers *about, that shall draw them out further."*

Spurring on his great beast and melding into his saddle, he smiled as the lessers *stood their ground in their chain mail and weaponries. The two humans beside them were not going to remain as steadfast, however. Although the pair were likewise kitted for fighting, they would turn and run at the first flash of fangs, spooking like plow horses from a cannon blast.*

Which was why he abruptly bore off to the right no more than three strides into the gallop. Behind the farrier's cottage, he hauled up on the reins and threw himself free of his steed. His stallion was a wild cur, but was obedient when it came to a dismount and would await—

A human female burst forth from the back door, her white nightgown a brilliant streak in the darkness as she scrambled to find footing in the mud. The instant she saw him, she froze in terror.

Logical response: He was twice her size, if not three times as large, and dressed not for sleep, as she was, but for war. As her hand rose to her throat, he sniffed the air and caught her scent. Mmm, mayhap his father had a point about enjoying the garden . . .

As the thought occurred, he let out a low growl that galvanized her feet into a panicked run, and at the sight of her fleeing, the predator in him came to the fore. With bloodthirst curling in his gut, he was reminded that it had been a matter of weeks since he'd fed from a member of his species, and though this lass was but human, she could well suffice for tonight.

Unfortunately, there was no time for the diversion the now—although his father would surely catch her afterward. If Xcor needed some blood to tide him over, he would get it from this woman, or another.

Turning his back on her escape, he planted his feet and unsheathed his weapon of choice: Although daggers had their doing, he preferred the scythe, long handled and modified for a holster that strapped upon his back. He was an expert at wielding the heavy weight, and he smiled whilst he worked the vicious, curved blade in the wind, waiting to play net to the pair of fish who were sure to swim—

Ah, yes, how good it was to be right.

Just after a bright light and a popping sound broke out from the main thoroughfare, the two humans came

screaming around behind the smithy as if they were being pursued by marauders.

But they got it wrong, did they not. Their marauder was waiting here.

Xcor didn't yell or curse them or even growl. He lunged into a run with the scythe, the weapon balancing evenly between his two hands as his powerful thighs ate up the distance. One look at him and those humans skidded in their boots, arms bowing out for balance like the flapping wings of ducks landing on water.

Time slowed down as he fell upon them, his favored weapon striking in a great circle, catching them both at neck level.

Their heads were severed upon a single, clean sweep, those surprised faces flashing and disappearing as what had been liberated went nose over forehead, blood spooling out to speckle upon Xcor's chest. In the absence of their cranial crowns, the bottom body halves fell to the ground with curious, liquid grace, landing inanimate in a twist of limbs.

Now he yelled.

Wheeling about, Xcor planted his leather boots in the mud, drew in a great breath and released it on a bellow as he worked his scythe in front of him, the crimsoned steel hungry for more. Though his prey had been mere humans, the rush of the kill was better than an orgasm, the sense that he had taken life and left corpses behind streaming through him like mead.

Whistling through his teeth, he called forth his stallion, which bolted to him at the command. One leap and he was up into the saddle, his scythe aloft in his right hand as he handled the reins with his left. Spurring hard, he threw his steed into a gallop, shot down a narrow, dirt vantage way, and emerged into the thick of the battle.

His fellow bastards were in full fight mode, swords clashing and shouts peppering the night as fiend met foe. And just as Xcor had predicted, half a dozen more lessers *came barreling forth upon well-bred stallions, lions flushed to defend their territory.*

Xcor fell upon the advancing cadre of the enemy, securing his reins on his pommel, and brandishing his scythe as his stallion rushed for the other horses with teeth bared. Black blood and body parts flew as he carved up his adversaries, he and his horse working as a single unit in their attack.

As he caught yet another slayer with his steel and sliced it in half at chest level, he knew that this was what he was born to do, the highest and best use of his time on the earth. He was a killer, not a defender.

He fought not for his race . . . but for himself.

It was over all too soon, the night mist swirling around the fallen lessers *that writhed in puddles of their oil-black blood. The injuries were few among his band. Throe had a gash on his shoulder, rendered in his flesh by a blade of some sort. And Zypher was limping, a red stain running down the outside of his leg to coat his boot. Neither was slowed or concerned in the slightest.*

Xcor pulled up on his horse, dismounted, and returned his scythe to its holster. As he drew his steel dagger and began his stabbing rounds of the slayers, he mourned the process of sending the enemy back to their maker. He wanted more to fight, not fewer—

A pealing scream drew his head around. The human woman in the nightgown was tearing down the village's packed dirt road, her pale body in a full bolt, as if she had been flushed out of a hiding place. Tight on her

heels, Xcor's father was astride his stallion and riding hard, the Bloodletter's massive body hanging sideways off his saddle as he came upon her. Verily, it was no race a'tall, and as he flanked her, he caught her with his arm and threw her over his lap.

There was no stop, nor even a slowing after the capture, but there was a marking: With his stallion at a full gallop and the human flopping about, Xcor's father still managed to strike her slender throat with his fangs, locking on to the woman's neck as if to hold her in place by the canines.

And she would have died. Surely she would have died.

If the Bloodletter hadn't first.

From out of the swirling fog, a ghostly figure appeared as if it had been formed of the filaments of moisture that rode upon the air. And the moment Xcor saw the specter, he narrowed his eyes, and relied upon his keen nose.

It seemed to be a female. Of his kind. Dressed in a white robe.

And her scent reminded him of something that he couldn't quite place.

She was directly in the path of his father, but she seemed utterly unconcerned about the horse or the sadistic warrior that was soon to come upon her. His sire was entranced with her, however. The instant he took notice of her, he dropped the human woman as if she were naught but a lamb bone he'd already chewed the meat off of.

This was wrong, Xcor thought. Verily, he was a male of action and power, and hardly one to shy away from a member of the weaker sex . . . but everything in his body warned him that this ethereal entity was dangerous. Deadly.

"Oy! Father!" he called out. "Turn about!"

Xcor whistled for his stallion, who came on command. Bolting into his saddle, he spurred his stallion 's flanks, pitching himself headlong so that he could intersect his father's path, a strange panic driving him.

He was too late. His father was upon the female, who had slowly crouched down.

Fates, she was going to leap up onto the—

In a coordinated rush, she went airborne and caught his father's leg, using it as a way to vault onto the horse. Then, latching onto the Bloodletter's solid chest, she sprang off to the far side and took that male with her as one unto the ground, the mighty lunge defying both her sex and her wraithlike nature.

So she was no ghost, but flesh and blood.

Which meant she could be killed.

Whilst Xcor prepared himself to plow his stallion right into them, the female let out a yell that was not feminine at all: More along the lines of his own war cry, the bellow cut through the thundering hooves beneath him and the sounds of his band of bastards gathering themselves to counter this unexpected attack.

There was no immediate need to intercede, however.

His father, over his shock at being taken down from his saddle, rolled onto his back and unsheathed his dagger, the snarl upon his face like an animal's. On a curse, Xcor reined up and halted his rescue, for surely his sire would take control: The Bloodletter was not the kind of male you aided—he had beaten Xcor for it in the past, lessons that had been hard learned and well remembered.

Still, he dismounted and readied himself on the periphery in the event there were others of this Valkyrie's type in and amidst the forest.

Which was why he heard her say clearly a name.

"Vishous."

His father's rage segued into a brief confusion. And before he could resume his self-defense, she began to glow with what surely was an unholy light.

"Father!" Xcor yelled as he raced forth.

But he was too late. And contact was made.

Flames burst out around his sire's harsh, bearded face and they o'ertook his corporeal form as if on dry hay. And with the same grace with which she had taken him down, the female leaped back and watched as he frantically sought to beat out the fire, to no avail. Into the night, he screamed as he burned alive, his leather clothing no protection at all for his skin and muscle.

There was no way to get close enough to the blaze, and Xcor skidded to a halt, raising his arm afore himself and bowing away from the heat that was exponentially hotter than it should have been.

All the while, the female stood over the contorting, twitching body . . . the flickering orange glow illuminating her cruel, beautiful face.

The bitch was smiling.

And that was when she lifted her face to him. As Xcor got a proper view of her visage, at first he refused to believe what he saw. And yet the flames' glow told no lies.

He was staring at a female version of the Bloodletter. Same black hair and pale skin and pale eyes. Same bone structure. Moreover, the same vengeful light in her near-violent eyes, that rapture and satisfaction at causing death a combination Xcor himself knew all too well.

She was gone a moment later, fading into the fog in a manner that was not as his kind dematerialized, but rather that of a waft of smoke, departing by inches and then feet.

As soon as he was able, Xcor rushed to his father, but there was nothing left to save . . . barely anything to bury. Sinking to his knees afore the smoldering bones and the stench, he had a moment of deplorable weakness: Tears sprang to his eyes. The Bloodletter had been a brute, but as his only claimed male offspring, Xcor and he had been close. . . . Indeed, they were one of another.

"By all that is holy," Zypher said hoarsely. "Whate'er was that?"

Xcor blinked hard before he glared over his shoulder. "She killed him."

"Aye. And then some."

As the band of bastards came to stand about him, one by one, Xcor had to think of what to say, what to do.

Stiffly rising to a stand, he wanted to call for his stallion, but his mouth was too dry to whistle. His father . . . long his nemesis and yet his grounding, too, was dead. Dead. And it had happened so fast, too fast.

By a female.

His father, gone.

When he could, he looked at each of the males afore him, the two on horseback, the two on foot, the one to his right. With weighty realization, he knew that whatever destiny lay ahead, it would be shaped by what he did in this moment, right here, right now.

He had not prepared for this, but he would not turn away from what he must do:

"Hear this now, for I shall utter it but once. No one is to say a thing. My father died in battle with the enemy. I burned him to pay homage and keep him with me. Swear this to me now."

The bastards he had long lived and fought with so vowed, and after their deep voices drifted away on the night, Xcor leaned down and raked his fingers through the ashes. Raising his hands to his face, he streaked the sooty marking from his cheeks to the thick veins that ran up either side of his neck—and then he palmed the hard, bony skull that was all that was left of his father. Holding the steaming, charred remains aloft, he claimed the soldiers before him as his own.

"I am your sole liege now. Bind yourselves unto me at this moment or thou art mine enemy. What say you all."

There was nary a hesitation. The males set upon bended knee, taking out their daggers, and bursting forth with a war cry before burying the blades into the earth at his feet.

Xcor stared at their bowed heads and felt a mantle fall upon his shoulders.

The Bloodletter was dead. No longer living, he was a legend starting this night.

And as is right and proper, the son now stepped into the soles of his sire, commanding these soldiers who would serve not Wrath, the king who would not rule, nor the Brotherhood, who would not deign to lower themselves to this level... but Xcor and Xcor alone.

"We go in the direction from whence the female came," he announced. "We shall find her even if it takes centuries, and she shall pay for what she hath wrought this night." Now Xcor whistled loud and clear to his stallion. "I shall take this death out of her hide myself."

Springing up onto his horse, he gathered the reins and spurred the great beast into the night, his band of bastards falling into formation upon his heels, prepared to go to the death for him.

As they thundered out of the village, he put the skull of his father in his leather battle shirt, right over his heart.

Vengeance would be his own. Even if it killed him.

ONE

PRESENT DAY AQUEDUCT RACETRACK, QUEENS , NEW YORK

"I want to blow you."

Dr. Manny Manello swiveled his head to the right and looked at the woman who'd spoken to him. It was hardly the first time he'd heard that combination of words, and the mouth they'd come out of certainly had enough silicone in it to offer a good cushion. But it was still a surprise.

Candace Hanson smiled at him and adjusted her Jackie O. hat with a manicured hand. Apparently, she'd decided that the combination of ladylike and raunchy was enticing—and maybe it was to some guys.

Hell, at another time in his life, he probably would have taken her up on it, under the why-the-hell-not theory. Now? File that under not-so-much.

Undeterred by his lack of enthusiasm, she leaned forward, flashing him a set of breasts that didn't so much defy gravity as flip it off, insult its mother, and piss on its shoes. "I know where we could go."

He bet she did. "Race is about to start."

She pouted. Or maybe that was just the way her post-injection lips poofed out. God, a decade ago she'd probably been fresh faced; now the years were adding a patina of desperation to her—along with the normal wrinkle-linked aging process that she clearly fought like a boxer.

"Afterward, then."

Manny turned away without replying, unsure exactly how she got into the owners' section. Must have been in the rush to come back here from the saddling up at the paddock—and no doubt she was used to getting into places she technically wasn't allowed: Candace was one of those Manhattan social types who was nothing but a pimp away from being a prostitute, and in a lot of ways, she was like any other wasp—ignore the nuisance and it'll go land on something else.

Or someone else, as it were.

Putting his arm up to keep her from getting any closer, Manny leaned on the rail of his owner's box and waited for his girl to be brought out onto the track. She was posted on the outside, and that was fine: she preferred not to be in the pack, and going a little extra distance had never bothered her.

The Aqueduct in Queens, New York, was not quite on the prestige level of Belmont or Pimlico, or that venerable mother of all racetracks, Churchill Downs. It wasn't dog shit, either, however. The facility had a good mile and an eighth of dirt, and also both a turf and a short course. Total capacity was ninety thousand-ish. Food was meh, but no one really went there to eat, and there were some big races, like today: The Wood Memorial Stakes had a $750,000 purse, and as it was held in April, it was a good benchmark for Triple Crown contenders—

Oh, yeah, there she was. There was his girl.

As Manny's eyes locked on GloryGloryHallelujah, the noise of the crowd and the bright light of the day and the bobbing line of the other horses disappeared. All he saw was his magnificent black filly, her coat catching the sun and flashing, her superlean legs flexing, her delicate hooves curling up out of the track's dirt and planting down again. With her at nearly seventeen hands high, the jockey was a tiny pretzeled gnat on her back, and that size differential was representative of the division of power. She'd made it clear from day one of her training: She might have to tolerate the annoying little humans, but they were just along for the

ride. She was in charge.

Her domineering temperament had already cost him two trainers. The third they were on now? The guy was looking a little frustrated, but that was just his sense of control getting hoofed to death: Glory's times were outstanding—they just had nothing to do with him. And Manny was summarily unconcerned with the inflated egos of men who bossed horses around for a living. His girl was a fighter, and she knew what she was doing, and he had no problems letting her go and watching the fun as she buried the competition.

As his eyes stayed with her, he remembered the sucker he'd bought her off of a little more than a year ago. That twenty grand had been a steal, given her bloodlines, but was also a fortune going by her temperament and the fact that it hadn't been clear that she'd be able to get her gate card to race. She'd been a unruly yearling on the verge of getting benched—or worse, turned into dog food.

But he'd been right. Provided you gave her her head and let her run the show, she was spectacular.

When the lineup approached the gate, some of the horses started to twinkle-toe it, but his girl was rock steady, as if she knew it was pointless to waste her energy on this pregame bullshit. And he really liked their odds in spite of their pole position, because this jockey on her back was a star: He knew precisely how to handle her, and in that regard, he was more responsible for her success than the trainers. His philosophy with her was just to make sure she saw all the best routes out of the pack and then let her choose and go.

Manny rose to his feet and gripped the painted iron rail in front of him, joining the crowd as it crested out of the seats and popped countless binocs. As his heart started to pound, he was glad, because outside of the gym he'd been all but flatlining it lately. Life had carried a terrible numbness with it over the past year or so, and maybe that was part of the reason this filly was so important to him.

Maybe she was all he had, too.

Not that he was going there.

At the gate, it was a case of move it, move it, move it: When you were trying to stuff fifteen high-strung horses with legs like sticks and adrenal glands that were firing like howitzers into itty-bitty metal boxes, you didn't waste time. Within a minute or so, the field was locked down and the track hands were hightailing it for the rails.

Heartbeat.

Bell.

Bang!

The gates released and the crowd roared and those horses surged forward like they'd been blown out of cannons. The conditions were perfect. Dry. Cool. Track was fast.

Not that his girl cared. She'd run in quicksand if she had to.

The Thoroughbreds thundered by, the sound of their collective hooves and the driving beat of the announcer's voice whipping the energy in the stands to an ecstatic pitch. Manny stayed calm, however, keeping his hands locked on the rail in front of him and his eyes on the field as the pack rounded the first corner in a tight knot of backs and tails.

The wide-screen showed him everything he needed to see. His filly was the second to the last, all but loping

while the rest of them went at a dead run—hell, her neck wasn't even fully extended. Her jockey, however, was doing his job, easing her out from the rail, giving her the choice of running around the far side of the pack or cutting through it when she was ready.

Manny knew exactly what she was going to do. She was going to plow right through the other horses like a wrecking ball.

That was her way.

And sure enough, as they came off the distant straightaway, she started to get her fire on. Her head lowered, her neck elongated, and her stride began to stretch.

"Fuckin' A," Manny whispered. "You do it, girl."

As Glory penetrated the choked field, she became a streak of lightning cutting past the other runners, her burst of speed so powerful you had to know she did it on purpose: It wasn't enough to just beat them all, but she had to do it in the last half mile, blowing the saddles off the bastards at the last possible moment.

Manny laughed deep in his throat. She was so his kind of lady.

"Christ, Manello, look at her go."

Manny nodded without glancing at the guy who'd spoken in his ear because a game changer at the head of the pack was unfolding: The colt that was in the lead lost his momentum, falling back as his legs ran out of gas. In response, his jockey cropped him on, whipping his hindquarters—which had all the success of someone cursing at a car whose tank was on E. The colt in second place, a big chestnut with a bad attitude and a stride as long as a football field, took immediate advantage of the slowdown, his jockey letting that horse have all its head.

The pair went neck and neck for only a second before the chestnut took control of the race. But it wasn't going to be for long. Manny's girl had picked her moment to weave in between a knot of three horses and come up on his ass tighter than a bumper sticker.

Yup, Glory was in her element, ears flat against her head, teeth bared.

She was going to eat his fucking lunch. And it was impossible not to extrapolate to the first Saturday in May and the Kentucky Derby—

It all happened so fast.

Everything came to an end . . . in the blink of an eye.

On a deliberate sideswipe, the colt slammed into Glory, the brutal impact sending her into the rail. His girl was big and strong, but she was no match for a body check like that, not when she was going forty miles an hour.

For a heartbeat, Manny was convinced she'd rally. In spite of the way she careened and scrambled, he expected her to find her footing and teach that unruly bastard a lesson in manners.

Except she went down. Right in front of the three horses she'd passed.

The carnage was immediate, horses veering widely to avoid the obstacle in their way, jockeys breaking their

tight racing curls in hopes of staying on their mounts.

Everyone made it. Except Glory.

As the crowd gasped, Manny shot forward, popping over the box's confines and then vaulting over people and chairs and barricades until he came down to the track itself.

Over the rail. Onto the dirt.

He ran to her, his years of athletics carrying him at breakneck speed to the heartbreaking sight.

She was trying to get up. Bless her big, fierce heart, she was fighting to get up from the earth, her eyes trained on the pack as if she didn't give a shit that she was injured; she just wanted to catch up with the ones who had left her in the dust.

Tragically, her foreleg had other plans for her: As she struggled, that front right flopped around below the knee, and Manny didn't need his years as an orthopedic surgeon to know that she was in trouble.

Big trouble.

As he came up to her, her jockey was in tears. "Dr. Manello, I tried—oh, God . . ."

Manny skidded in the dirt and lunged for the reins as the vets drove up and a screen was erected around the drama.

As the three men in uniforms approached her, her eyes began to go wild from pain and confusion. Manny did what he could to calm her down, allowing her to toss her head as much as she wanted while he stroked her neck. And she did ease up when they shot her with a tranquilizer.

At least the desperate limping stopped.

The head vet took one look at the leg and shook his head. Which in the racing world was the universal language for: *She needs to be put down.*

Manny rode up in the guy's face. "Don't even think about it. Stabilize the break and get her over to Tricounty right now. Clear?"

"She's never going to race again—this looks like a multi—"

"Get my fucking horse off this track and over to Tricounty—"

"She isn't worth it—"

Manny snap-grabbed the front of the vet's jacket, and hauled Mr. Easy Out over until they were nose-to-nose. *"Do it. Now."*

There was a moment of total incomprehension, like being manhandled was a new one to the little snot.

And just so the two of them were really clear, Manny growled, "I'm not going to lose her—but I'm more than willing to drop you. Right here. Right now."

The vet cringed away, as if he knew he was in danger of getting corked a good one. "Okay . . . okay."

Manny was not about to lose his horse. Over the last twelve months, he'd mourned the only woman he'd ever cared about, questioned his sanity, and taken up drinking Scotch even though he'd always hated the shit.

If Glory bit it now . . . he didn't really have much left in his life, did he.

TWO

CALDWELL, NEW YORK TRAINING CENTER, THE BROTHERHOOD'S COMPOUND

F*ucking . . . Bic . . . piece of shit . . .*

Vishous stood in the hall outside the Brotherhood's medical clinic with a hand-rolled between his lips and a thumb that was getting a terrific frickin' workout. No flame to speak of, though, no matter how many times he masturbated the lighter's little wheel.

Chic. Chic. Chic—

With utter disgust, he fired the POS into a trash bin and went for the lead-lined glove that covered his hand. Ripping the leather free, he stared at his glowing palm, flexing the fingers, arching it at the wrist.

The thing was part flamethrower, part nuclear bomb, capable of melting any metal, turning stone into glass, and making a kebab out of any plane, train, or automobile he pleased. It was also the reason he could make love to his *shellan*, and one of the two legacies his deity of a mother had given him.

And gee whiz, the second-sight bullshit was about as much fun as this hand-o'-death routine.

Bringing the deadly weapon up to his face, he put the end of the hand-rolled in the vicinity, but not too close or he'd immolate his nicotine-delivery system and have to futz around making another one. Which was not something he had patience for on a good day, and certainly not at a time like this—

Ah, lovely inhale.

Leaning against the wall, he planted his shitkickers on the linoleum and smoked. The coffin nail didn't do much for his case of the grims, but it gave him something to do that was better than the other option that had been running through his head for the last two hours. As he tugged his glove back in place, he wanted to take his "gift" and go arson on something, anything. . . .

Was his twin sister honestly on the other side of this wall? Lying in a hospital bed . . . paralyzed?

Jesus Christ . . . to be three hundred years old and find out you had a sibling.

Nice move, moms. Real fucking nice.

To think he'd assumed he'd worked through all of his issues with his parents. Then again, only one of them was dead. If the Scribe Virgin would just go the way of the Bloodletter and kick it, maybe he'd manage to get on an even keel.

As things stood now, however, this latest Page Six exclusive, coupled with his Jane's wild-goose chase out into the human world alone, was making him . . .

Yeah, no words on that one.

He took out his cell phone. Checked it. Put it back into the pocket of his leathers.

Goddamn it, this was so typical. Jane got her focus on something and that was that. Nothing else mattered.

Not that he wasn't exactly the same way, but at times like this, he'd appreciate some updates.

Fricking sun. Trapping him indoors. At least if he were with his *shellan*, there'd be no possibility of "the great" Manuel Manello oh-I-don't-think-so-ing things. V would simply knock the bastard out, throw the body in the Escalade, and drive those talented hands back here to operate on Payne.

In his mind, free will was a privilege, not a right.

When he got down to the tail end of the hand-rolled, he stabbed it out on the sole of his shitkicker and flicked the butt into the bin. He wanted a drink, badly—except not soda or water. Half a case of Grey Goose would just barely take the edge off, but with any luck he'd be assisting in the OR in short order and he needed to be sober.

Pushing his way into the exam room, his shoulders went tight, his molars locked, and for a split second, he didn't know how much more he could take. If there was one thing guaranteed to peel him raw, it was his mother pulling another fast one, and it was hard to get worse than this lie of all lies.

Trouble was, life didn't come with a "tilt" default to stop the fun and games when your pinball machine got too tippy.

"Vishous?"

He closed his eyes briefly at the sound of that soft, low voice. "Yeah, Payne." Switching to the Old Language, he finished, *" 'Tis I."*

Crossing to the center of the room, he resumed his perch on the rolling stool next to the gurney. Stretched out under a number of blankets, Payne was immobilized with her head in blocks and a neck brace running from her chin to her collarbone. An IV linked her arm to a bag that hung on a stainless-steel pole and there was tubing down below that plugged into the catheter Ehlena had given her.

Even though the tiled room was bright and clean and shiny, and the medical equipment and supplies were about as threatening as cups and saucers in a kitchen, he felt like the pair of them were in a grungy cave surrounded by grizzlies.

Much better if he could go out and kill the motherfucker who'd put his sister in this condition. Trouble was . . . that would mean he'd have to pop Wrath, and what a buzz kill there. That big bastard was not only the king, he was a brother . . . and there was the little detail that what had landed her here had been consensual. The sparring sessions that the two had been rocking for the last couple months had kept them both in shape—and, of course, Wrath had had no idea who he'd been fighting because the male was blind. That she was a female? Well, duh. It had been on the Other Side and there were no males over there. But the king's lack of vision had meant he'd missed what V and everyone else had been staring at anytime they'd walked into this room:

Payne's long black braid was the precise color of V's hair, and her skin was the same tone as his, and she was built just as he was, long, lean, and strong. But the eyes . . . shit, the eyes.

V rubbed his face. Their father, the Bloodletter, had had countless bastards before he'd been killed in a *lesser* skirmish back in the Old Country. But V didn't consider any of those random females relations.

Payne was different. The two had the same mother, and it wasn't just any *mahmen* dearest. It was the Scribe Virgin. The ultimate mother of the race.

Bitch that she was.

Payne's stare shifted over and V's breath got tight. The irises that met his were ice white, just like his own, and the navy blue rim around them was something he saw every night in the mirror. And the intelligence . . . the smarts in those arctic depths were exactly what was cooking under his bone dome, too.

"I cannot feel anything," Payne said.

"I know." Shaking his head, he repeated, *"I know."*

Her mouth twitched like she might have smiled under other circumstances. "You may speak any language you wish," she said in accented English. "I am fluent in . . . many."

So was he. Which meant he was unable to form a response in sixteen different tongues. Go, him.

"Have you heard . . . from your *shellan*?" she said haltingly.

"No. Would you like more pain meds?" She sounded weaker than when he'd left.

"No, thank you. They make me . . . feel strange."

This was followed by a long silence.

That only got longer.

And longer still.

Christ, maybe he should hold her hand—after all, she had sensation above the waist. Yeah, but what could he offer her in the palm department? His left one was trembling and his right one was deadly.

"Vishous, time is not . . ."

As his twin let the sentence drift, he finished in his mind, *on our side.*

Man, he wished she wasn't right. When it came to spinal injuries, however, as with strokes and heart attacks, opportunities were lost with each passing minute the patient went untreated.

That human had better be as brilliant as Jane said.

"Vishous?"

"Yeah?"

"Do you wish that I had not come herein?"

He frowned hard. "What the hell are you talking about? Of course I want you with me."

As his foot got tapping, he wondered how long he had to stay before he could go out for another cigarette. He just couldn't breathe as he sat here, unable to do anything while his sister suffered, and his brain got choked with questions. He had ten thousand whats and whys sitting on the top of his head, except he couldn't

ask them. Payne was looking like she could slip into a coma at any moment from the pain, so it was hardly time to kaffeeklatsch it.

Shit, vampires might heal lightning-fast, but they were not immortals by any stretch.

He could well lose his twin from this before he even got to know her.

On that note, he gave a look-see at her vitals on the monitor. The race had low blood pressure to begin with, but hers was hovering close to ground level. Pulse was slow and uneven, like a drum section made up of white boys. And the oxygen sensor had had to be silenced because its warning alarm had been going off continuously.

As her eyes closed, he worried that it would be for the last time, and what had he done for her? All but yell at her when she'd asked him a question.

He leaned in closer, feeling like a schmuck. "You have to hold on here, Payne. I'm getting you what you need, but you've got to hang on."

His twin's lids rose and she looked at him from out of her stationary head. "I have brought too much upon your doorstep."

"You don't worry about me."

"That is all I have ever done."

V frowned again. Clearly this whole brother/sister thing was a news flash only on his end, and he had to wonder how in the hell she'd known about him.

And what she knew.

Shit, here was another chance to wish he'd been vanilla.

"You are so certain of this healer you seek," she mumbled.

Ah, not really. The only thing he was sure of was that if the bastard killed her there was going to be a double funeral tonight—assuming there was anything left of the human to bury or burn.

"Vishous?"

"My *shellan* trusts him."

Payne's eyes drifted upward and stayed there. Was she looking at the ceiling? he wondered. The examination lamp that hung over her? Something he couldn't see?

Eventually, she said, "Ask me how long I have spent at our mother's beckoning."

"You sure you have the strength for this?" When she all but glared at him, he wanted to smile. "How long."

"What is this year for the Earth?" When he told her, her eyes widened. "Indeed. Well, it has been hundreds of years. I was imprisoned by our *mahmen* for . . . hundreds of years of life."

Vishous felt the tips of his fangs tingle in rage. That mother of theirs . . . he should have known what peace

he'd found with the female wouldn't last. "You're free now."

"Am I." She glanced down toward her legs. "I cannot live in another prison."

"You won't."

Now that icy stare grew shrewd. "I cannot live like this. Do you understand what I'm saying."

The inside of him went absolutely frigid. "Listen, I'm going to get that doctor here and—"

"Vishous," she said hoarsely. "Verily, I would do it if I could, but I cannot, and there is no one else I have to turn to. Do you understand me."

As he met her eyes, he wanted to scream, his gut roping up, sweat flushing across his brow. He was a killer by nature and training, but that wasn't a skill set he'd ever intended to wield on his own blood. Well, their mother excepted, of course. Maybe their dad, except the guy had died on his own.

Okay, amendment: not something he would ever do to his *sister*.

"Vishous. Do you—"

"Yeah." He looked down at his cursed hand and flexed the goddamn piece of shit. "I get it."

Deep inside his skin, at his very core, his inner string started to vibrate. It was the kind of thing he'd been intimately familiar with for most of his life—and also an utter shock. He hadn't had this sensation since Jane and Butch had come along, and its return was . . . another slice of Fuck Me.

In the past, it had taken him seriously off the rails into the land of hard-core sex and dangerous, on-the-edge shit.

At the speed of sound.

Payne's voice was thready. "And what say you."

Damn it, he'd just met her.

"Yes." He flexed his deadly hand. "I'll take care of you. If it comes to that."

As Payne stared up out of the cage of her dead-lead body, her twin's bleak profile was all she could see, and she despised herself for the position she'd put him in. She had spent the time since she'd arrived on this side trying to tease out another path, another option, another . . . anything.

But what she needed was hardly something one could ask of a stranger.

Then again, he was a stranger.

"Thank you," she said. "Brother mine."

Vishous just nodded once and resumed staring straight ahead. In person, he was so much more than the sum

of his facial features and the massive size of his body. Back before she had been imprisoned by their *mahmen*, she had long watched him in the seeing bowls of the sacred Chosen and had known the instant he had appeared in the shallow water who he was to her—all she'd had to do was look at him and she saw herself.

Such a life he had led. Starting with the war camp and their father's brutality . . . and now this.

And beneath his cold composure, he raged. She could feel it in her very bones, some link between them giving her insight beyond that which her eyes informed her of: On the surface, he was collected as a brick wall, his composite components all in order and mortared in place. Inside his skin, however, he seethed . . . and the external clue was his gloved right hand. From underneath its base, a bright light shone . . . and got e'er brighter. Especially after she'd asked him what she had.

This could be their only time together, she realized, her eyes slicking over anew.

"You are mated to the healer female?" she murmured.

"Yeah."

When there was only silence, she wished she could engage him, but it was clear he answered her only out of courtesy. And yet she believed him when he said he was glad she'd arrived herein. He didn't strike her as the type to lie—not because he cared about morality or politeness as such, but rather because he viewed such effort as a waste of time and inclination.

Payne eased her eyes back to the ring of bright fire that hung o'erhead. She wished he would hold her hand or touch her in some way, but she had asked more than plenty of him already.

Lying upon the rolling slab, her body felt all wrong, both heavy and weightless in the same moment, and her only hope was the spasms that tore down her legs and tickled into her feet, causing them to jerk. Surely all was not lost if that was occurring, she told herself.

Except even as she took shelter under that thought, a very small, quiet part of her mind told her that the cognitive roof she was trying to construct would not withstand the rain that hung o'er what was left of her life: When she moved her hands, though she could not see them, she could feel the cool, soft sheeting and the slick chill of the table she was upon. But when she told her feet to do the same . . . it was as though she were in the serene, tepid waters of the bathing pools on the Other Side, cocooned in an invisible embrace, sensing nothing against her.

Where was this healer?

Time . . . was passing.

As the wait went from intolerable to downright agonizing, it was difficult to know whether the choking sensation in her throat was from her condition or the quiet of the room. Verily, she and her twin were alike steeped in stillness—just for very different reasons: She was going nowhere with alacrity. He was on the verge of an explosion.

Desperate for some stimulation, something . . . anything, she murmured, "Tell me about the healer who is coming."

The cool draft that hit her face and the scent of dark spices that tunneled into her nose told her it was a male. Had to be.

“He’s the best,” Vishous muttered. “Jane’s always talked about him like he’s a god.”

The tone was rather less than complimentary, but, indeed, vampire males did not appreciate others of their persuasion around their females.

Who could it be within the race? she wondered. The only healer that Payne had seen in the bowls was Havers. And surely there would have been no reason to search for him?

Perhaps there was another she had not been witness to. After all, she had not spent a vast amount of time catching up with the world, and according to her twin, there had been many, many, many years transpiring between her imprisonment and her freedom, such as it was . . .

In an abrupt wave, exhaustion cut off her thought process, seeping into her very marrow, dragging her down even harder atop the metal table.

Yet when she closed her eyes, she could withstand the dimness only a moment before panic popped her lids open. Whilst their mother had held her in suspended animation, she had been all too aware of her blank, limitless surroundings and the grindingly slow passage of moments and minutes. This paralysis now was too much alike what she had suffered for hundreds of years.

And that was the why of her terrible request to Vishous. She could not come here to this side only to replicate what she had been so desperate to escape from.

Tears trickled over her vision, causing the bright light source to waver.

How she wished her brother would hold her hand.

“Please don’t cry,” Vishous said. “Don’t . . . cry.”

In truth, she was surprised he noticed. “Verily, you are correct. Crying cures naught.”

Stiffening her resolve, she forced herself to be strong, but it was a battle. Although her knowledge of the arts of medicine was limited, simple logic spelled out what she was up against: As she was of an extraordinarily strong bloodline, her body had begun repairing itself the moment she had been injured whilst sparring with the Blind King. The problem was, however, the very regenerative process that would ordinarily save her life was making her condition ever more dire—and likely to be permanent.

Spines that were broken and fixing themselves were not likely to achieve a well-ordered result, and the paralysis of her lower legs was testament to that fact.

“Why do you keep regarding your hand?” she asked, still staring at the light.

There was a silent moment. Atop all the others. “Why do you think I am?”

Payne sighed. “Because I know you, brother mine. I know all about you.”

When he said not another thing, the quiet was about as companionable as the Old Country inquests had been.

Oh, what things had she set in motion?

And where would they all be when this came to an end?

THREE

Sometimes the only way to know how far you'd come was to return to where you once had been.

As Jane Whitcomb, M.D., walked into the St. Francis Hospital complex, she was sucked back into her former life. In one sense, it was a short trip—merely a year ago, she'd been the chief of trauma service here, living in a condo full of her parents' things, spending twenty hours a day running between the ER and the ORs.

Not anymore.

A sure clue that change had come a-knock-knock-knockin' was the way she entered the surgical building. No reason to bother with the rotating doors. Or the ones that pushed into the lobby.

She walked right through the glass walls and passed the security guards at the check-in without their seeing her.

Ghosts were good like that.

Ever since she'd been transformed, she could go places and get into things without anyone having a clue she was around. But she could also become as corporeal as the next person, summoning herself into a solid at her will. In one form, she was utter ether; in the other, she was as human as she'd once been, capable of eating and loving and living.

It was a powerful advantage in her job as the Brotherhood's private surgeon.

Like right now, for example. How the hell else would she be able to infiltrate the human world again with a minimum of fuss?

Hurrying along the buffed stone floor of the lobby, she went past the marble wall that was inscribed with the names of benefactors, and wended her way through the crowds of people. In and among the congestion, so many faces were familiar, from admin staff to doctors to nurses she'd worked with for years. Even the stressed-out patients and their families were anonymous and yet intimates of hers—on some level, the masks of grief and worry were the same no matter whose facial features they were on.

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