

ONE

SHADOWS NIGHTCLUB, CALDWELL, NEW YORK

There was no knock. The door to the office just flew open like someone had hit it with C4. Or a Chevy. Or a—
Trez “Latimer” looked from the paperwork on his desk.
“Big Rob?”

—cannonball.

As his security second in command stuttered and went into all kinds of hand flapping, Trez glanced over his shoulder at the twenty-by-ten-foot one-way mirror behind all his Captain Kirk, command central. Down below, his new club was poppin’, humans milling around the converted warehouse’s open floor space, each one of the poor sick bastards representing a couple hundred dollars of profit, depending on what their vice was and how much of it they needed to juice up.

It was opening night at shAdoWs, and he’d expected trouble.

Just not the kind that would make a veteran bouncer go twelve-year-old girl on him.

“What the fuck is going on?” he demanded as he got up and came around.

“I—you—I . . . the guy . . . he . . .”

Find your vocab fast, Trez thought. Or I'ma have to bitch-slap some words into you, my man.

Finally, the bouncer choked out, "Need to see this for yourself."

Trez followed Big Rob out and jogged down the stairs. His office was self-locking, not that he had any secrets shut in there. He did, however, have a couple of nice leather sofas, and some video-monitoring equip that could go the eBay route—plus he didn't like people in his spaces on principle.

"Silent Tom is containing the issue," Big Rob called out over the noise as they hit the ground floor.

"Like it's a chemical spill?"

"I don't know what it is."

T.I.'s "About the Money" was so pumped it formed a physical presence in the air, becoming something that Trez had to fight through as they made their way past the security guy guarding the entrance to the private lounges hallway.

As with his other club, The Iron Mask, there had to be little slices of Nobody Can See for his customers. It was tricky enough running a prostitution ring in Caldwell, New York, without having people flash their slappin' body parts out in the open.

"Back here," Big Rob said.

Silent Tom was a wall of human in front of the closed door of the third private room down. But Trez didn't need to have any reveal for him to put two and two together: His nose added that math up just fine.

The sickly sweet stench of a *lesser* permeated the hall, prevailing over the sweat and sex of the humans that were all around.

"Lemme have a look," he said grimly.

Silent Tom stepped aside. "Still moving. Whatever the hell it is."

Yeah, the slayer probably was. Those fuckers had to be killed in a specific way or they just kept on keepin' on—even if they were in pieces.

"We're going to have to call an ambulance," Big Rob said. "I did it. I didn't mean to—"

Trez held up his hand. "You're fine. And hold off on the nine-one-one."

Opening the door, he grimaced as the stench ramped up, and then stepped inside the ten-by-ten-foot room. The walls and floor were painted black, the ceiling mirrored, a single inset light glowing softly



overhead. The slayer was curled up in the far corner under the built-in fuck bench, moaning and bleeding an oil slick that smelled like dead roadkill mixed with fresh-baked oatmeal cookies and Johnson & Johnson baby powder.

Nauseating. And once again, it put him off Mrs. Fields, which he did not appreciate—and children, which he didn't care about.

He checked his watch. Midnight. Xhex, his head of security, was enjoying a rare evening off with her mate, John Matthew—and Trez had had to force the female to take the break, because it was the only time that week her *hellren* was off his rotation with the Black Dagger Brotherhood.

He was going to have to deal with this himself.

Trez stepped back out into the hall. “Okay, so what happened?”

Big Rob discreetly flashed a handful of small cellophane packets with powder in them as well as a wad of bills. “We found him pushing this. He got mouthy. I popped him and then he fought back—he was a fucking demon, and when he pulled the knife, I realized I was in trouble. I did what I had to do.”

Trez cursed as he recognized the symbol stamped on the heroin bags. It was nothing human—and the second time he'd seen it.

It was the vampiric Old Language—and the shit was on a *lesser* again? This time as a dealer?

He took the drugs and put them in his pocket. Let his bouncer keep the cash. “You were lucky you weren't killed.”

“I'll talk to the police. Everything's on tape.”

Trez shook his head. “We're not involving the CPD.”

“We can't just leave him in there.” Big Rob glanced at his mute partner. “He's going to die.”

It was the work of a moment to overpower the humans' minds. Both of them. As a Shadow, Trez was like any other vampire, capable of barging into a cerebellum and rearranging thoughts and memories like they were armchairs and sofas in a living room.

Or maybe removing them from the house altogether.

Big Rob's body instantly relaxed and he nodded. “Oh, sure. We can hang here. No problem, boss—and don't worry, you don't want no one in there? You got it.”

Trez clapped the man on the back. “I can always count on you.”

Heading back to his office, he kept up with the cursing. He'd gone to the Brothers months ago, when he'd first found a slayer with this

shit on him. And he'd meant to follow up even more with them. But life had gotten in the way, things like the s'Hisbe coming after him, and Selena and him. . . .

The mere thought of the Chosen female made him close his eyes and falter his feet on the stairs.

But then he threw off the sting. 'Cuz it was either that or go into a black-hole tailspin. The good news? He'd spent a lot of time over the last nine months trying to pull his mind, his emotions, his soul off the topic of Selena.

So he was used to this kind of power lifting.

Unfortunately, she remained a constant preoccupation, as if he had a low-level fever that dogged him no matter how much he slept and attempted to eat right.

And on some nights, it was a lot more than preoccupation—which was why he'd had to leave the Brotherhood mansion at times and crash back at his condo at the Commodore.

After all, bonded males could be dangerous, and the fact that he wasn't with her—and shouldn't be—meant absolutely nothing to that side of him. Especially when she was feeding fighters who could not, for whatever reason, take their mates' veins.

It was straight-up crazy.

She was a virtuous servant of the Scribe Virgin's, and he was a reformed sex addict with a life-in-prison-type sentence hanging over his head—and yet, according to his cock and balls, this was a recipe for true love.

Yup. There was some righteous math for you.

God, he was almost relieved he had a slayer leaking all over one of his sex rooms. At least it gave him a bomb to dismantle—which was better than staring out at that anonymous crowd of strangers who were feeding their own addictions thanks to the women and booze he supplied them with.

While he waited for the other shoe to drop back home.

At the s'Hisbe.

TWO

THE PIT, BROTHERHOOD MANSION

Rhage glared over the top of the *Caldwell Courier Journal*. From his vantage point on V and Butch's leather sofa, he had more view than he wanted of a shirtless Lassiter playing with himself.

Foosball, that was.

The fallen angel was working V's table like a pro, flashing back and forth between the two sides—and hurling insults at himself.

“Question,” Rhage muttered, as he rearranged his injured leg. “Are either of your personalities aware that you're schizo-freakin'-phrenic?”

“Your mama's so stupid”—Lassiter dematerialized and re-formed on the far side, spinning the rods—“she thinks a California dime is something you dial a phone with.”

V came over and took a load off. “That's multiple personality disorder, Hollywood. Not schizophrenia.”

The Brother put a leather pouch of tobacco and a sheaf of rolling papers on the stack of *Sports Illustrateds*—just as Lassiter fired off a shout of triumph.

“Oh, look,” V said under his breath. “The idiot is finally winning.”

Rhage grunted as he tried to find a better position for his leg. He

and V should both have been out fighting—except a *lesser* had gone Gordon Ramsay on him with a rusty knife and V had a gunshot wound through the left shoulder.

At least they'd both be back online in another twenty-four hours, largely thanks to Selena. Without her being so generous with her vein, they wouldn't be able to heal so fast—especially given that neither of their mates were capable of meeting their nutritional needs that way.

But, man, this sucked, sitting around like a couple of cripples.

And then there was the Lassiter factor.

The Pit was mostly as it always had been: full of gym bags, stereo and computer equipment, that Foosball table, and a TV the size of a city park. SportsCenter was on, talking about college football along with the NFL; there were dead-soldier Grey Goose bottles everywhere; and Butch's wardrobe was now spilling out into the hall. Oh, and yup, Schoolboy Q's "Hell of a Night" was bangin' on the speakers.

But it wasn't exclusively a bachelor pad anymore. Lingering in the air was Marissa's signature perfume—something Chanel?—and Doc Jane's medical bag was on the coffee table. Those vodka deadies? Only from this afternoon and tonight, and V was going to pull a tidy-up before he crashed. And then there were the *Journal of the American Medical Association* and the *People* magazines.

Oh, and the kitchen was clean, with fresh fruit in a bowl and a refrigerator full of things other than Arby's leftovers and soy sauce packets.

Rhage had dipped his toe into that Frigidaire pond as soon as he'd come in, snagging a half gallon of mint chocolate-chip ice cream. That was about a half hour ago, and he was feeling peckish again. Maybe it was time to head back to the main house—

As Jeezy's "Holy Ghost" broke in, Lassiter started rapping.

Rapping.

"Why did you invite him over?" Rhage asked—just as V extended his tongue to lick one of his hand-rolleds shut. "And Jesus, when the *hell* did you pierce *that*?"

"I didn't. He followed us across the courtyard. And a month ago."

"Why would you do that to yourself?"

V shot an evil smile across the sofa, his lids falling low over his diamond eyes. "Jane likes it."

Rhage went back to his newspaper. "TMI, my brother."

"Like you wouldn't do the same if Mary wanted it."



“Doc Jane *asked* for that? Like your goatee ain’t enough shit going on with your piehole? Come on.”

All he got was another of those smiles.

“Moving on . . .” He focused on the horoscopes. “Okay, so what sign are you, Lassiter?”

“I’m fabulous”—the fallen angel flashed to the other side—“with the sun rising in the Kiss My Ass quadrant. And before you keep asking, I was made, not born, so I don’t have a birthday.”

“I’ll give you a funeral date,” V cut in.

“How about a shirt.” Rhage turned to the next page. “Just a shirt. Would it kill you to cover up, angel? No one needs to see that.”

Lassiter gave things a pause . . . and then started pulling a Channing Tatum against the table, going all Magic Mike over the goal while he moaned like he was orgasming.

V covered his eyes. “Never thought I’d pray for blindness.”

Rhage wadded up the paper and threw it at Lassiter. “Oh, come on, asshat! I wanna use that thing sometime—”

Rhage’s phone threw off a seizure, vibrating against his ass until he leaned to the side and dug it out of the back pocket of his leathers. “Yeah,” he said without looking at the number.

Trez’s voice was low. “I got an issue.”

“What’s doing?”

“Incapacitated *lesser* in my club. I’ve done a scrub job on my bouncers—especially the one who fought him—but this ain’t going to keep.”

Rhage got to his feet. “Be there in five.”

“Thanks, man.”

Ending the call, Rhage nodded at V. “Come on, I know we’re red-shirted, but this is not a fight situation.”

“Don’t need to ask me twice. Where are we going?”

Lassiter straightened from his grind. “Field trip!”

“No—”

“No—”

“I can be useful as well as decorative, you know.”

V started to arm himself, grimacing as he strapped on his dagger holster and slipped in a pair of sharp-and-shinies, handles down. “Doubt we’ll need a battering ram.”

“Maybe we’d get lucky.” Rhage headed for the door. “But I wouldn’t bet on it.”

“I don’t want to stay here by myself—”

“And you ain’t that decorative, angel.”

Outside, the night was all about the fall, cold, crisp September air, making Rhage’s sinuses hum and his beast surge under his skin as he walked across the courtyard to the great stone mansion’s entrance.

Man, he couldn’t wait for his Mary to get home from her work at Safe Place.

All that talk about tongues and females liking them in certain places—okay, it had only been about three sentences, but that had been more than enough—had gotten him tight.

Ten minutes, two forties, a pair of daggers, and a three-foot length of chain later, he dematerialized down to Caldwell’s meatpacking district with V, both of them re-forming across the street from Trez’s new joint. shAd-oWs was located in a rehabbed warehouse, and as usual with any of the Shadow’s places, there was a line snaking down the block, humans standing like cows about to go into a feeding shed. As music bumped, flashing lights and laser beams pierced the thousands of glass panes, making the place look like a three-story-tall psychedelic trip trapped under a tin roof.

As the pair of them walked around back, there were all kinds of turned heads, but whatever. Human women had a way of noticing vampires—maybe it was a hormonal thing; maybe it was the black leather.

Certainly wasn’t that goatee. C’mon, now.

And yeah, there might have been a time in the past when he would have had to take advantage of the dubious wares, but no more. He had his Mary and that was more than enough for him. V was the same with his Jane.

Well, Jane plus a “healthy” dose of whips and chains.

Sicko.

The rear entrance of the club was a double-doored, triple-locked stretch of Staff Only, and it obvi had a security camera somewhere, because the instant they approached, a bouncer opened things up.

“Are you . . . ?”

“Yeah.” V barged in. “Where’s Trez at?”

“This way.”

Dark halls. Dumb, drunk humans. DD working girls. And then there was Trez, standing outside a black door under a black light.

The Shadow made an impression, even from thirty dim feet away. He was tall and had an inverted triangle for a torso, big heavy shoulders dumping into a tight waist, with thick thighs and long legs hold-



ing the production off the floor. His skin was the color of the mansion's mahogany dining room table, his eyes black as midnight, his hair trimmed down to nothing but a pattern on his skull. All of that was just pretty window dressing, though.

The truth was that he was more dangerous a commodity than anything you could buy at a gun show.

Shadows were deadly, capable of tricks even members of the Brotherhood were impressed by—and their kind usually kept to themselves, sticking to the s'Hisbe's territory way outside of the city. Trez and his brother, iAm, were exceptions to that rule.

Something to do with Rehvenge. Not that Rhage had ever asked. "Where is it?" V asked as he clapped hands with the Shadow.

"In here."

Rhage did the same, greeting the Shadow with a hard embrace. "How you doin'?"

"We got ourselves a complication." Trez stepped back and opened the door. "And not like you're thinking."

The "dead" slayer was moving on the floor, writhing its arms and legs slowly. Things were broken in various places, one foot pointing in the wrong direction, an elbow cocked at a wonked-up angle, and there was a good deal of leaking going on, the floor puddling with the Omega's oil-black blood.

"Nice work," Rhage said, taking a grape Tootsie Pop out of his jacket and popping the wrapper. "Bouncer did this?"

"Big Rob." Trez put his hand out. "And here is the complication."

In the center of his palm were a bunch of nothing-special packets of drugs—

Wait a minute.

V picked up the things with his gloved hand. "Just like the ones you gave to Butch, true?"

"Exactly."

"Yeah, this is dealing."

"Did anything come of this shit earlier?"

"Butch talked to Assail, and Assail denied, denied, denied he was doing business with them. And that was it. With nothing else to go on, we had other priorities, feel me?"

Rhage bit down to the chocolate center as he leaned in and did some WTF-ing of his own. The drugs were marked with a red stamp . . . of the Old Language symbol for death.

The *chrih*.

Assail was going to be in some serious ass-shit if he was using the enemy to get his product onto the streets.

V dragged his free hand through his black hair. “Now I know why you didn’t just stab this thing back to the Omega.”

“My bouncer said the slayer came in with the crowd and worked his way around, doing bit deals. He was asked to leave, argued, attacked, and then it was time for some lights-out when Big Rob took care of business. First time this particular *lesser*’s been around, but that’s not saying much, because it’s opening night. Bottom line, though, is I don’t let people deal in my joints, human or otherwise. Don’t want to be on the CPD’s list of things to do any more than we already are . . .”

As the pair of them kept talking, Rhage sucked the white stick clean and found himself sizing up the Shadow.

Cutting into the convo, he demanded, “Why don’t you come to Last Meal anymore.”

V’s diamond-hard glare swung around. “My brother, focus.”

“No, I’m serious.” He propped his hip on the black wall. “What’s up, Trez. I mean, our food not good enough for you?”

Cue the throat clearing on the Shadow’s side. “Oh, no, yeah, I’m just . . . busy, you know. Opening this . . .”

“And when was the last time you fed? You look like shit.”

Vishous threw up his hands. “Hollywood, will you get in the game—”

“You know, I used Selena tonight and her blood is amazing—”

It all happened so fast. One minute V was jawing at him while he was bringing up the very salient point that the Shadow needed to take a vein.

The next, Trez’s racket-size palm was locked on his neck, cutting off all his air supply.

While the guy bared his teeth and snarled like Rhage was the enemy.

In the blink of an eye, and in spite of that nasty shoulder wound, Vishous counter-attacked the Shadow, tackling him in a total body slam as Rhage grabbed at that thick wrist to pull the grip free. Incredibly, it got them nowhere. Even with V’s close to three hundred pounds trying to pry Trez off and all of Rhage’s tensile strength getting thrown into the mix, the Shadow was brick-wall-going-nowhere, barely moving.



And then the three of them had something to really worry about. Rhage blinked, and when he opened his eyes, brilliant light flooded the cramped, black space.

“Fuck,” V gritted. “Let him fucking go, Trez! We got problems!”

Beneath Rhage’s skin, his beast surged to life, awoken by the mortal threat.

“Trez! Let go!”

Something got through to the Shadow—whether it was all that light, or the fact that Rhage’s features were already starting to morph—and he loosened his hold just a little.

V took it from there, throwing the Shadow to the slick floor and jumping on him, a black dagger flashing out and being put directly to the jugular.

On a sagging curse, Rhage coughed and breathed deep a couple of times. Shit. His beast had a hair trigger on a good night, when he was well-fed, well-fucked, and properly exercised. But when someone tried to kill him?

Even if there might have been a good goddamn reason for it?

Clearly, the Shadow had bonded with the Chosen. ‘Cuz that reaction had male hormones all over it.

“I’m sorry,” Trez mumbled. “I don’t know what came over me. Swear on my brother’s life.”

“Why didn’t you”—Rhage tripped over his own words—“tell us you bonded with her?”

There was a pause. Then Trez said, “I . . . shit.”

V added a string of curse words. “You gonna stay put, Shadow, or am I slicing the front of your throat open?”

“I’m good. Swear.”

A moment later, V came over. “Rhage . . . ? My brother?”

Rhage put his palms to his face and let himself slide off the vertical until he was ass-on-the-floor. Breathe in. Breathe out. Breathe in. Breathe out.

They already had a *lesser* in the club.

His beast was the last kind of patron they needed.

Breathe in.

Breathe out—

“What’s going on with him?” Trez asked.

“Don’t ever aggress on that motherfucker,” was the last thing Rhage heard before the world receded like smoke in a draft.