



THE SAGA OF LARTEN CREPSLEY

BROTHERS
TO THE
DEATH

DARREN SHAN

THE PREQUEL SERIES TO THE *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING **CIRQUE DU FREAK**

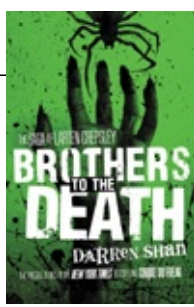
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For:

those I have lost on this journey – Granny, Grandad, Martha

OBE (Order of the Bloody Entrails) to:

Eliza Segal – Australia's #1 vampire!

Tiffany McCall – parting is such sweet sorrow!

fraternally edited by Nick Lake

agent to the death – Christopher Little

Part One

“This is what happens to lovers of vampires.”

Chapter

One

On a grassy bank in a park on the outskirts of Paris, a young man lay beside a middle-aged woman, holding her hand. They were talking softly, shielded from the setting evening sun by a large umbrella. Those passing by thought they were perhaps a mother and son. None suspected that the orange-haired gentleman in the blood-red suit was more than twice the age of the woman.

“What do you think people would say if I kissed you?” Larten murmured.

Alicia giggled. “There would be a scandal.” Much about her had changed over the years, but her giggle was the same as ever.

“I relish a juicy scandal,” Larten said, leaning closer towards her.

“Don’t!” Alicia laughed, pushing him away. “You know I don’t like it when you tease me.”

“What if I was not teasing?” Larten asked with a smile. But the smile was for Alicia’s benefit. He was serious—he *did* want to kiss her.

“That’s sweet of you,” Alicia said. “But I’m an old woman. You can’t have any real interest in me after all these decades. I’m a wrinkly hag!”

“Hardly,” Larten snorted. Alicia looked much older than him now, but in his eyes she was as beautiful as when they’d first met almost thirty years earlier.

Alicia rolled away from him, into the sunlight, where she stretched and lazily studied the clouds. Larten’s smile never faltered, but inside he felt sad. It had been a decade and a half since his reunion with Alicia. They had met often over the course of those years. Each time he hoped she’d kiss him, declare her love for him, accept him as her husband. He wanted things to be like they were in 1906, when they were engaged and madly in love.

But Alicia felt that she was too old to marry again, and if she ever did give her hand to another man, she wanted to give it to a man her own age. It didn’t matter that Larten had been born almost eighty years before her. He looked like he was in his twenties and that was how she thought of him. To Alicia he could never be more than a friend. Larten had accepted that—he had no choice—but he couldn’t help wishing he was more.

“The children are having fun,” Alicia noted, nodding at a boy and girl playing by the edge of a small pond.

The girl was almost eighteen, a young woman who would probably marry soon and have children of her own. But Larten still thought of her as little Sylva. She was a tall, slim, pretty maid, but to him she would always be a cute, chubby baby.

The boy was in his thirties but didn’t look much older than Sylva. He was a vampire like Larten, aging only one year for every ten that passed. He was of medium height, but broad, built like a wrestler. He could have thrown Sylva to the far side of the pond, but he always handled her gently, as Larten had taught him, careful never to squeeze too hard when he was holding her hand, knowing he could shatter every bone in her fingers if he did.

Gavner hadn’t wanted to return to Paris. He had left under a cloud, swearing loyalty to Tanish Eul, a weak, selfish vampire who had killed an innocent woman to save his own thickly layered neck. When Larten caught up with them and herded the killer to his execution, Gavner thought his world had ended. He hated the man whom he’d known since childhood as Vur Horston, and yearned to strike him dead.

Larten had granted him that opportunity. Handing Gavner a knife, the General told him that he had killed Gavner's parents. He said that Gavner had every right to exact revenge, and he offered himself to the bewildered teenager.

Gavner would never forget how close he'd come to stabbing Larten. His mind was in a whirl. Tanish Eul's sudden death had shocked him. When he learned that Larten had killed his parents too, it seemed like the only way to end the madness was to murder the orange-haired vampire. His fingers tightened and he tried to drive the knife forward into Larten's heart, stopping it forever.

But something held him back. He still wasn't sure why he hadn't struck. Maybe it had been the calm acceptance in Larten's eyes, the fact that he wasn't afraid of death, that he felt like he deserved to die. Perhaps it was because the vampire had been true to him for the first time in his life, and Gavner couldn't kill a man for telling the truth. Or maybe he just didn't have a killer's instinct.

Whatever the reason, Gavner had let the knife drop, collapsed in a weeping huddle, and given himself over to confusion and grief.

"I wish you could spend more time with us," Alicia sighed as Gavner chased Sylva around the pond, threatening to throw her in. "Sylva misses you when you're not here."

"I suspect she misses Gavner more," Larten remarked wryly. He had never been much of a father figure. He'd always been distant with Sylva, and especially with Gavner. It was a mystery to him why the pair liked him so much.

"Gavner's like a brother to her," Alicia admitted, "but she's fond of you too. She thinks of you as an uncle."

"*Uncle Larten*," the vampire chuckled, blushing slightly. "How ridiculous."

"Don't be so stuffy," Alicia growled, pinching his left cheek until his scar burned whitely. Then she smiled and kissed one of her fingers and pressed it to the scar. "You still haven't told me how you got that," she said, changing the subject.

"I will one night," Larten promised. "When you are old enough."

The pair laughed. Gavner heard the laughter—his senses were much sharper than a human's—and he paused to smile in the direction of the couple who had been the only real parents he'd ever known. (He tried not to think about the nights when he had served as Tanish Eul's surrogate son. While he would never speak ill of Tanish, who had been nothing but loving to Gavner, he was ashamed that he had not seen through the killer's mask.)

Larten and Vancha March had helped Gavner recover. They'd told him much about the clan, explained Tanish's bitter history, helped prepare him for life as a creature of the night. When they left Petrograd, Larten urged Gavner to travel with Vancha. He said that the Prince could teach Gavner more than he ever could. But Gavner asked to learn from Larten instead. He had always wanted to get closer to the aloof, tall man with the scar. He saw this as a chance to gain a father. There were no more lies between them. He hoped to build a strong relationship with Larten Crepsley, to earn his respect and love.

Larten did respect Gavner, and loved him in his own strange way. But he never made any open display of affection. He was shy with most people, slow to reveal anything personal. But it went beyond shyness with Gavner. He had orphaned the boy and would never allow himself to forget that. He had told Gavner the whole sad story, how he'd been suffering with a fever, how his young assistant had been killed, the way he'd lost his mind and slaughtered a shipful of humans.

Gavner had forgiven him—he had come close to killing when he lost Tanish Eul, so he could empathize with the older vampire—but Larten still blamed himself, and every time he looked at Gavner he was reminded of that dark day, of the stain on his soul. Though he had spent most of the

last fifteen years with the youth, teaching him the ways of the clan, he'd always kept his assistant at arm's length, insisting Gavner treat him as nothing more than a tutor.

"I will never be a father to you," he'd declared several years ago, after Gavner had absentmindedly referred to Larten as his father. "I do not deserve such love and I will cast you aside if you ever speak of me in that way again. I will accept your friendship if you feel I am entitled to it, but no more than that."

Gavner knew that Larten thought of him as more than a mere assistant, just as he thought of Larten as more than a mentor. But he accepted the older vampire's rules and never again spoke of his true feelings. If this was what Larten needed in order to feel comfortable around his student and would-be son, so be it. He would do anything to please the man who had reluctantly reared him.

While Gavner studied Larten and Alicia, smiling sadly as he thought of the past, Sylva snuck up on him and pushed him hard. Gavner yelped, arms flailing, then fell into the water. He came up spluttering and roaring. He looked for Sylva, to drag her in, but she'd already fled—she knew how swiftly a vampire could react.

"Hide me!" Sylva squealed, seeking shelter behind her mother and Larten.

"If you were my daughter I would spank you," Larten growled as Gavner hauled himself out of the pond. "You know that sunlight is bad for him. I will have to help him fish his hat out of the pond before his hair catches fire."

Sylva's smile faded as she stared at the glowering vampire. But then Larten winked and she knew that everything was fine. She looked on with delight as he hurried to the shivering Gavner, expressing concern for him—then howled with glee as he shoved his unsuspecting assistant back into the pond.

"Men never grow up," Alicia tutted, but she was smiling too. She offered Gavner the rug she was sitting on when they returned, and helped him dry his hair. She corrected him when he cursed Larten and Sylva—"Gentlemen do not use such crude words."—then packed up and led them home.

Gavner and Sylva strayed ahead of their elders, walking arm in arm. Sylva chatted about friends, fashion, and movies, and Gavner pretended to be interested in such things. He had already forgiven her for pushing him into the pond—he'd never been one to hold a grudge. Larten and Alicia followed leisurely, strolling like any ordinary couple.

"How long can you stay this time?" Alicia asked, already knowing the answer. Larten and Gavner had arrived a week earlier, and though nothing had been said, she'd gathered within a few hours that it would be a short visit. Larten always tried to cram in a lot if he wasn't staying long. When she heard him making plans for all the things that he wanted to do, she knew the pair would be moving on in a matter of days, not weeks or months. From his expression this afternoon, she realized the time had come for them to leave, so she asked the question at last, the same way she always did. It was a long-established routine of theirs.

"We go tonight," Larten said. "We have a meeting that we must attend. It is not far from here as vampires measure things, but it will take us most of the night to get there."

"Will you return soon?" she asked, again already knowing the answer.

Larten sighed. "I do not think so. We have been forced to deal with unpleasant but determined people, and I suspect the negotiations will take some time."

"How mysterious your lives are," Alicia said enviously. "I bet you're off to meet a magician or witch."

"Nothing so fanciful," Larten smiled. "I would prefer it if we were. These men pose more of a threat to the world, I fear, than any being of magic."

"What do you mean?" Alicia asked, frowning at him as they reached the small house where she and

Sylva lived.

~~“We do not have much to do with human politicians or soldiers,”~~ Larten said, pausing at the door to cast one last glance at the setting sun. “But occasionally a group tries to forge links with us and we find ourselves having to deal with them. This is one such time, and I am worried about the outcome. Tell me, Alicia, what do you know about *Nazis*?”

Chapter

Two

“We are so alike,” Franz said with a smile. “Vampires and National Socialists are creatures of similar beliefs and habits. We have common goals and hopes. If we unite, it will benefit both our *clans*.” The officer’s smile widened. Larten had never met people who smiled as freely as the Nazis. But he found no warmth or humor in their grins, merely menace, deceit, and threats.

The Nazis had been courting the night walkers for several years. Their leader was a man who believed in the supernatural. He had set his followers the task of finding out whether or not vampires were real. The members of the clan were usually adept at keeping their secrets, but somebody had let their guard down at some point and discussed their ways with one of the investigators. It didn’t happen often, but it wasn’t without precedent—Larten himself had accidentally given some of their secrets away to Bram Stoker when the author was researching his book *Dracula*.

The Nazis had been politely hounding the Generals of the clan ever since they found out about them. The Princes had avoided the entreaties of the political party, as they always did whenever a group tried to forge links with them. It had happened a few times over the centuries. Vampires were faster and stronger than humans. They would make powerful allies... powerful *weapons*. The Nazis weren’t the first to seek the support of the creatures of the night.

But no other group had pressed as hard as the smiling soldiers in the sharp suits. No army or party had claimed to share so many common ideals. Nobody had promised as much as the representatives of the short man with the silly-looking mustache.

Many Generals were in favor of a union with the Nazis. They saw shades of themselves in the Germans. Like vampires, National Socialists believed in honor, order, unity. They had stabilized a country in chaos. They lived by strict laws and preached obedience and decency. They had little time or sympathy for the weak or old—they focused on the strong, the pure, those who could handle themselves in a fight. They were more interested in control and power than vampires were, but apart from that they were as close to the clan in spirit as any humans had ever appeared to be.

Some highly ranked Generals had met with members of the party in recent years, and now a Prince had been sent to parlay. Mika Ver Leth was chosen to head the debate, mostly because he was young and open to new ideas. (Though Larten thought the fact that he dressed in black and looked like a Nazi also played a part in the decision.)

This was the first time a Prince had negotiated with a human delegation and it was a momentous event in the history of the clan. Mika had to choose a General to be his second, someone he could discuss the complex issues with. Most thought he would opt for an elderly vampire with a proven record, but to everyone’s surprise—not least of all Larten’s—he had asked for Seba Nile’s ex-student.

The pair had been engaged in talks with the Nazis for several weeks. Franz was only the latest in a line of party members that they had dealt with. They’d been treated to a tour of Germany to meet a variety of the National Socialists in the flesh. Mika had read many documents about the party, their beliefs and aims. They had dined well, slept in fine hotels, and been treated like honored dignitaries.

Yet Larten hadn’t felt at ease since linking up with Mika. He couldn’t put his finger on the exact reason for his discomfort. He just didn’t trust these people. They reminded him in some ways of Tanish Eul, only far more dangerous than the cynical, self-serving Tanish had ever been.

Larten listened with a polite expression but a heavy heart as Franz outlined a list of reasons why

vampires should support the growing Nazi movement. He promised to provide the clan with an army of new, German recruits. They would be equals, sharing all that came their way. He said the Nazis wished to learn from the wise vampires and emulate their great deeds, to turn the world away from the petty vices of the day, towards the noble pursuits of the night.

Gavner Purl and Arra Sails sat several feet behind Mika and Larten. Arra was a respected General now, but she still considered Mika to be her mentor. When he had need of her, she acted as his assistant, the way Gavner assisted Larten. She hadn't hesitated when he'd asked her to come with him. There was no dishonor in serving the wishes of a Prince, no matter how experienced a General you might be.

Larten hadn't spoken much with Arra. Their nights were packed with meetings and fact-finding outings, and by day they slept. Besides, he wasn't sure what to say. He had made his admiration of her clear in the past, but that was before he'd renewed his relationship with Alicia. His French amour might only be a close friend now, but he still hoped that she would one night ask to be more. Any romantic entanglement with Arra would have felt like a betrayal. It was easier to keep out of her way and avoid a potentially complicated situation.

"The world is changing," Franz said. He was still smiling, but not as widely as before. Larten had sensed a change in the atmosphere over the last few nights. The Nazis had grown impatient and Franz was having a hard time hiding his mounting frustration.

"The world is forever changing," Mika said.

"True," Franz nodded. "But now more than ever. Faster than ever. A storm is coming. We will all need friends if we are to survive. You will find us friends of the highest caliber. Strong. Loyal. Dependable."

"What are you like as enemies?" Mika asked casually, and although he said it with a chuckle, Larten saw Franz's face darken.

"Why speak of us that way?" Franz growled. "We have no wish to be anything but your allies."

"You misunderstand me," Mika said. "If we become your friends, your enemies will be our enemies. If you go to war, it will be *our* war. I want to know how you plan to deal with those who don't share your vision for the future."

"I see." Franz was beaming again. "First, it is important to recognize that we do not seek war. We hope to expand and redraw the boundaries of our once-great nation, to again be a force of true power in the world. Ideally we will exert our influence peacefully. If others resist and threaten us, we will of course fight—and win—but war isn't something we wish to actively pursue."

"Yet there are some you long to destroy," Mika pressed. "People of certain nations and religions..."

"*Destroy* is the wrong word," Franz purred. "We believe this world would be better without certain types of people. We have always been up front about that. But vampires share those beliefs. You cut loose the old and infirm, those of low character, base creatures who would drag you down. We seek to do the same. Surely that cannot be an issue for proud, pure warriors such as yourselves?"

Mika nodded slowly, considering Franz's words. This was the heart of their debate, even though they had largely skirted the issue so far. Vampires came from all corners of the earth, regardless of color, race, or creed. If you were strong, determined, and honest, you could join the clan and be entitled to respect. The Nazis weren't so eager to include people of specific backgrounds.

"What do you think?" Mika asked suddenly, turning to Larten.

The orange-haired vampire blinked and stared at the Prince. Larten still wasn't sure why Mika had invited him to be his second. The ravenlike Prince had said little to the General. He hadn't asked for

Larten's views or discussed matters with him in detail. Until now.

As Larten struggled to form a polite, diplomatic response, Mika shook his head. "Don't tell me what you think I want to hear. And don't worry about our hosts. I want your true opinion. Share your thoughts with me, openly and honestly. That is the vampire way," he murmured to Franz and the officers who flanked him. "I hope you won't be offended."

"Of course not," Franz said, but he was squinting at Larten suspiciously.

"On which particular points do you wish me to comment, Sire?" Larten asked.

"All of them," Mika said. "I want your general reaction. Tell me what you think of the National Socialists and their desire to merge with us."

"I dislike and distrust them," Larten said bluntly. Some of the officers gasped, but Franz silenced them with a sharp gesture. He was glaring at Larten, but he said nothing, waiting to hear the rest.

"They are cruel," Larten went on. He didn't enjoy airing his feelings this way, but Mika had asked him to be open, and Larten would never disobey the demands of a Prince. "Vampires are hard, yes. We ask much of ourselves and those who would be part of the clan. We execute the mad, the weak, the injured, the old, or urge them to make an end of their own. In that respect we are like these humans.

"But those we treat harshly have chosen the path of the night. They left their human ways behind when they joined the clan. They understand why we treat them so pitilessly. They acknowledge our rule, live by our laws, accept death when they are no longer fit to fight.

"The enemies... no, the *victims* of the Nazis have no such choice. These people hate without reason. They pass judgment on innocents. In that way we differ. Vampires are harsh, Nazis are vicious. We are merciless, they are monstrous."

One of the officers cursed and leapt to his feet. He drew a pistol and leveled it at Larten. Before he could fire, Franz barked a command and the officer angrily holstered his weapon and sat. When he had control of the room again, Franz faced Larten and sneered. "You understand nothing of us or the problems we face."

"Perhaps," Larten said calmly. "But I was asked for my opinion and I gave it."

"Do you share his view?" Franz snapped at Mika.

The Prince smiled thinly. "In any group you will find people of differing beliefs and standards. I'm sorry if my assistant's criticism upset you. I simply wanted to know where he stood on this issue."

"And now you know," Franz said. "But where do *you* stand?"

"I will have to think about that before I give my answer." Mika rose and offered his hand. Franz hesitated, then shook the Prince's hand.

"We have been patient," the officer said softly, "but we cannot wait forever. I must know if you are with us or against us, and I need to know soon."

"You shall," Mika promised. "I'm close to making a decision. There are just a few minor matters need to think over. You will have your answer shortly."

Franz didn't look happy, but he nodded curtly and took his seat, watching with narrowed, hostile eyes as the Prince and his followers slipped out of the room and returned to the fabulous hotel suite where they had been quartered.

Chapter

Three

Mika said nothing to Larten on their way back to the hotel, and retired to his room as soon as they got there, giving no indication whether or not he approved of what Larten had said. Gavner shared a worried glance with his master, then went to his own room. A distracted Larten nodded goodnight to Arra in the lobby, but as he climbed the stairs he realized she was following him. He glanced over his shoulder questioningly.

“It’s time we had a chat,” Arra said, then brushed ahead and waited for him at the door to his suite.

Arra cast a scornful eye around the room when she entered, unimpressed by the florid furniture and antiques. “Do you sleep in the bed?” she asked.

“Where else?” Larten replied.

“I laid hands on a coffin when I came here,” she said. “I’ve had it shipped from one hotel to another. Beds are for humans.”

Larten smiled. “You sound like Vancha March.”

“A most noble vampire,” Arra nodded, then sat on the least comfortable looking chair and studied Larten seriously. She hadn’t changed much since he had first met her. By no means beautiful, but pretty in her own way. She’d picked up scars in battle since she’d become a vampire and was leaner than when she’d served as Evanna’s apprentice. But she wore the same brown clothes, and in the dim light she could have passed for a teenager.

“You spoke passionately tonight,” Arra noted.

“I said what was in my heart.”

“The Nazis didn’t like being called monsters.”

Larten shrugged. “Perhaps that was uncalled for. But their smug smiles sicken me. I wished to wipe the grins from their faces.”

“You certainly did that.” Like Mika, Arra gave no sign whether she felt Larten had been right to speak the way he had. Before he could ask, she said, “Why don’t you like me anymore?”

Larten blinked. “What do you mean?”

“You craved me before. You tried to sweet-talk me into taking you as a mate on many occasions. Even when you weren’t openly flattering me, your gaze trailed me everywhere I went. But now you look away when I’m around. Why?”

Larten laughed. “Evanna herself could not have put the question in more direct a fashion!”

“Never mind that barmy old witch,” Arra huffed. “Tell me why I repulse you.”

“You do not *repulse* me,” Larten said softly. “On the contrary, I think you are as striking as ever. But circumstances have changed. There is another woman....”

“You’ve mated?” Arra snapped.

“No. She is human.”

“Then you’ve married?”

“No.”

“You’re engaged?” Arra pressed.

“Not exactly.”

Arra’s dark brown eyes hardened. “Are you even partners?”

Larten cleared his throat. “We were in the past, but now we are just friends.”

“You wish to be more,” Arra guessed, “but she won’t have you.”

“~~She thinks she is too old for me.~~” Larten thought that Arra would laugh, but she didn’t. Instead she stunned him with her next sentence.

“I have a mate. I mated five years ago with Darvin Allegra. You don’t know him. He’s a fine General, a fierce fighter, though not as passionate in the coffin as I had hoped he’d be.”

“Arra!” Larten gasped. “You cannot say things like that!”

“I can if it’s true,” she retorted.

“What about Mika? I always thought…”

She shook her head. “I rejected his advances in the past, and I doubt if he will ever choose a mate now. He has no time for love these nights. He takes his duties as a Prince very seriously.”

“Why did Darvin not come here with you?” Larten asked.

“He wasn’t invited,” Arra said. “Business is business. Besides, he knows I plan to take you as a mate in the future and he’s jealous. I don’t think he—”

“Stop!” Larten roared, blushing furiously. “How can you say such things when you already have a partner?”

“I’ll be free in two years,” Arra said. “It was a seven-year agreement and I have no intention of signing up for another spell. I’ll be faithful to Darvin for the next twenty-four months, but after that…”

Larten gaped at the dark-haired vampiress. “You were never this frank in the past,” he mumbled. “You teased me and kept me at arm’s length.”

“That’s what young women do to their admirers,” Arra sniffed. “But I’m older. I’m not interested in games now. We would be good together, so it’s time we stopped fooling around.”

“Do I have any say in the matter?” Larten growled.

“Not much,” Arra said.

Larten could do nothing but laugh. When he’d finished chuckling, he sat close to Arra and took her hand. Her nails were sharp and jagged, and he was reminded of Evanna’s nails when she’d scarred his face. He thought he might get scarred again tonight, but he didn’t shy away from Arra as he spoke.

“I am fond of you, and once I was much more than fond. But I will not divide my loyalties. I love Alicia—the woman of whom I spoke—and I can think of no other while she has my heart.”

“Have you been reading poetry?” Arra frowned.

“I never learned to read,” Larten said.

“But others have read poems to you?”

“On occasion,” he admitted.

“Damn poets,” Arra snarled. “They complicate everything.” She squinted at the orange-haired vampire. “How old is your woman?”

“It would not be polite to state her age,” Larten murmured.

“Is she in good health?” Arra asked. “Does she have twenty years left? Thirty? I don’t mind waiting a few decades until she dies, but if it’s more than that I might get restless.”

“Be careful,” Larten growled. “I will not have you speak so lightly of such grave matters.”

“Nonsense,” Arra huffed. “Humans lead short lives. That’s the way it is. Don’t tell me you plan to mourn for the next few centuries after she dies and remain true to her memory?”

Larten reared back and prepared a stinging insult. But before he could deliver it, somebody knocked on his door. As he stood, glaring at Arra, the door opened and Mika Ver Leth entered.

“Am I interrupting?” the Prince asked, sensing tension in the air.

Larten almost told Mika that he was, but then he smiled tightly. “No, Sire. Arra was just leaving.”

“No, stay,” Mika said as Arra rose. “You should hear this too.” He closed the door and stepped closer to Larten. His expression was as guarded as ever. “You said a lot with few words tonight.”

“I spoke honestly, Sire, as you bid,” Larten responded.

Mika nodded. “I was aware of your dislike of our German suitors—you haven’t learned to hide your emotions as artfully as I have—but I didn’t know you felt so strongly about them. Do you stand by everything that you said?”

“Aye,” Larten said evenly.

“Good,” Mika grunted. “The Nazis disgust me. I’m pleased you feel the same way. They’re creatures of destruction and hatred. I had to be diplomatic and give them every opportunity to present their case. But I’ve been drawing closer to my decision all the time, and tonight settled matters for me.

“I’m sorry I asked you to speak your mind in front of such vile animals,” Mika went on, “but I needed to bait them, to give them one last chance to deny such foul accusations. If they weren’t monsters, they would have argued when you criticized them. But since they are, they could only threaten violence. I couldn’t be the one to enrage them, so I used you. Again, my apologies.”

Larten smiled. “You have nothing to apologize for, Sire. It was a pleasure to tell them what I thought. If I had known of your intentions, I would have treated them to even more of my mind.”

“No, that was enough,” Mika said. Then he sighed. “Franz was truthful about one thing—a storm coming. But it’s a storm of their making. Humanity is in for a rough ride, I fear. They are heading towards another *Great War*, and this one could be even worse than the last.

“We must play no part in the atrocities. We cannot even afford to observe, in case the Nazis capture and manipulate us into doing their bidding.”

“No human can catch a vampire,” Arra snorted.

“These might,” Mika disagreed. “They’re cunning. It will be best if we don’t give them the chance. I’m leaving tonight to spread the word—I want every vampire out of Europe. If some are determined to stay, I’ll urge them to keep deeper to the shadows than ever. We probably have a few years before war erupts, but the sooner we slip free of this spreading net of fascism, the better.

“I need you and Gavner to distract them,” he said to Larten. “When you meet with Franz tomorrow tell him I’ve left to discuss the matter with the other Princes. Make it seem as if you think I’m angry with you, that I plan to pledge our forces to the Nazi cause. String him along. When he realizes he’s been played for a fool, flee. Take to the hills, but don’t flit. Let them track you. I think the Nazis will trail you in the hope that you’ll lead them to Vampire Mountain. Keep that hope alive for as long as you can. Stretch it out for months... years if possible. The longer they focus their attention on you and Gavner, the more time the rest of us will have to evacuate.”

“We will lead them on the mother of all wild-goose chases,” Larten promised, eyes alight. He would drag them through the harshest, most uncomfortable corners of the world. He doubted that Franz would smile so much then!

Mika clasped Larten’s shoulder and squeezed. “Stay alert,” he warned. “These men are dangerous. They might try to trap you if they suspect that they’re being led astray. If that happens and they block all avenues of escape, you’ll better serve the clan dead than alive. Understand?”

“We will do whatever we have to,” Larten said steadily.

“I trust you completely,” Mika said, “but Gavner is young. Maybe I should send Arra with you instead.”

“No!” Larten yelled. When Mika looked at him strangely, Larten forced a weak chuckle. “I have faith in Gavner Purl. This will be a good test for him. If I think that he is struggling, I will send him

back to Vampire Mountain. But I believe he will prove himself.”

“Very well,” Mika said, covering his face with his right hand, placing the tip of his middle finger to his forehead and spreading the adjoining fingers. “Even in death may you be triumphant.”

Mika departed. Arra followed but paused at the door and glanced back with a veiled smile. “This isn’t over,” she purred. “We’ll discuss our relationship in more depth later.”

Before Larten could protest, she slipped out, leaving him alone in the large, ornate suite to marvel at the fact that he was more worried by Arra than he was by the army of Nazis that would soon be hot on his and Gavner’s trail.

Chapter

Four

Larten was ready to strangle Gavner. He had endured more than three months of his assistant's snoring and it was driving him mad. He'd tried herbal medicines, pegs on Gavner's nose, even a gag, but nothing worked. He rarely got more than a couple of hours' sleep most days. He was tired and irritated, and he blamed it all on Gavner Purl.

"What's wrong with you?" Gavner yawned, sitting up and stretching. They had spent another day in a coffin in a crypt. Gavner had enjoyed a perfect day's sleep, but Larten had been up for the past hour and looked as sour as a pinched baby.

"Three guesses," Larten snapped, shooting Gavner a dark look.

Gavner laughed. "Don't tell me I was snoring again."

"I think you do it just to annoy me," Larten growled.

"You should move to another coffin if it's that bad."

Larten's expression darkened and he muttered foul curses beneath his breath. It had been his idea to share a coffin. They holed up in graveyards most days, although sometimes they slept in barns or old ruins. They could easily have slept apart, but Larten thought it would be safer if they stayed together. He worried that the Nazis might divide and capture one of them otherwise.

The Germans had been pursuing them for the past three months, ever since Franz realized Mika wasn't returning. Negotiations had broken down and the officer was replaced by one who never smiled and who demanded Larten agree to his terms immediately—or else. Sensing that he had pushed them as far as he could, Larten stole away that night, and he and Gavner had been on the run since.

Larten was enjoying the game of cat and mouse. He and Gavner kept one step ahead of the Nazis, moving swiftly every night, but never so fast that they couldn't be tracked. The Nazis had almost trapped them a few times, surrounded graveyards where they were sleeping and moved in for the kill. If Larten had been human, he and Gavner would have been caught, but his sharp sense of hearing had alerted him to the threat each time and they'd managed to break free.

On one occasion the Nazis outsmarted them and sent their forces ahead of the vampires to stake out a number of graveyards in advance. That had almost been the end—they'd faced a desperate dash at dawn to find somewhere safe to rest, ending up beneath the roots of an ancient tree. Ants and other insects had made it a long, uncomfortable day. Since then Larten had varied their route, following no set pattern, deciding each day at dusk which direction to take.

Larten wasn't sure how long the Nazis would dog their trail. Mika thought they would hound him for years. Larten doubted they were patient enough to follow him for that long, but so far they'd shown no sign of quitting. They had doubled their numbers, then doubled them again, even following the pair when they crossed the border into lands where Germans were far from welcome. Larten could have revealed the Nazis' presence to the local authorities, but his task was to lead them on, not have them locked up.

The only real downside was Gavner's snoring. It truly was as bad as Larten claimed. Some days he made more noise than one of the polar bears that Larten had wrestled with years earlier during their trek across the plains of Greenland.

"Perhaps if I cut off your nose..." Larten muttered, only half-joking.

"You go anywhere near my nose and I'll slice off your ears," Gavner retorted.

“You were not this bad when you were a child.”

“How do you know? You never checked on me when I was asleep.”

“Yes, I did,” Larten protested.

“Don’t lie,” Gavner tutted. “Alicia always tucked me in and looked after me if I stirred in the night.”

She told me I was a terrible snorer from the start.”

“Then you admit it!” Larten pounced.

“Maybe I snore a *little*,” Gavner grinned.

The younger vampire moved to the mouth of the crypt and stared at the rows of headstones and crosses. It was almost dusk, but the light still hurt his eyes and he had to shield them with a hand.

“How come you don’t mind the sun so much?” he asked Larten.

“Your eyes adjust after fifty or sixty years,” Larten told him.

Gavner grimaced. “I hate the way you make the decades sound so casual. Fifty years is a long time.”

“I thought so too, once,” Larten said, although honestly he couldn’t remember when fifty years had seemed like an age. Like most vampires who had been around for more than a century, he had the impression that he’d always been offhand about the passage of time. He had forgotten the impatience of his youth, the way years had dragged. He no longer regarded the future with unease, wondering how he’d fill so many long nights. As a General of good standing, he had more things to worry about than killing time.

“You must get bored,” Gavner said. “There must be nights when you feel like you’ve been alive forever, and the thought of enduring more drives you insane.”

Larten cocked an eyebrow at Gavner. “You sound like a Cub. Perhaps you need to spend some time with vampires your own age.”

“That lot of losers?” Gavner snorted. “No chance!”

They had run into a pack of Cubs several years earlier. There weren’t as many as there had been in Larten’s youth. Vampires only rarely blooded children now, and new recruits were given more time to adjust to the ways of the clan before being asked to commit themselves. As a result, few felt as restless as Larten once had. Most were not inclined to break away from the clan for a decade or two.

But some young vampires still gathered in different parts of the globe every so often, to mix with humans and lead a free and easy life before giving themselves over completely to the vampire cause. When Gavner had been introduced to a pack, he reacted with scorn. The high-living, dandyish members reminded him of Tanish Eul and he felt nothing but contempt for them. His response delighted Larten, although he did feel a pang of shame when he considered how low an opinion Gavner would have had of *him* if they had met back when he went by the name of Quicksilver.

“Are there any exercises I can do to make my eyes stronger?” Gavner asked.

“Try focusing on far-off objects,” Larten said. “Fix on something in the distance and hold on it with your eyes almost shut. Slowly widen them. When the pain goes away, take a break, then focus on something else and repeat.”

“That will help?” Gavner asked dubiously.

“You will start to notice a difference fairly soon,” Larten said.

“How soon exactly?”

“Ten or fifteen years,” Larten said with a straight face.

Gavner glared, not sure if the older vampire was joking or not. Muttering to himself—much as Larten had moments earlier—he settled against the wall of the crypt near the door and commenced the exercise. Hiding a smile, Larten set about preparing their first meal of the night. He cooked a couple

of rabbits that Gavner had caught earlier, using collapsible pans that Evanna had given him.

“Any rumblings from the Nazis during the day?” Gavner asked after a while.

“How could I hear anything over the sound of your snoring?” Larten replied.

“Stuffy old bat,” Gavner grunted. “You should loosen up and pull your head out of your...” He stopped. Larten thought it was because he didn’t want to complete the insult, but seconds later Gavner said, “Someone’s there.”

“Where?” Larten darted to Gavner’s side.

Gavner pointed. “On the outskirts of the graveyard. Under that tree. I can’t see anyone now, but there was a man a moment ago.”

“A Nazi?” Larten asked.

“I don’t think so. He was small, white hair, dressed in yellow.”

“With green boots?” Larten said quickly.

“Yes. You know him?”

“Aye.” Larten’s face was dark.

“Is he a vampire?”

Larten shook his head. “If your eyes were sharper, you would have seen a heart-shaped watch sticking out of his breast pocket.”

Gavner drew a sharp breath. “Mr. Tiny?”

“I suspect so.”

Larten had told Gavner much about the mysterious meddler, the man of ancient years who claimed to be an agent of destiny. For a long time he had said nothing of their meeting in Greenland, when Desmond Tiny pulled him back from the brink of a deadly fall, sparing both their lives for dark, unknowable reasons of his own. But finally, since Gavner kept asking, he told the full story even though it troubled the young vampire.

“Why is he here?” Gavner asked, searching with his gaze for the strange, short man. “Doesn’t he only turn up when terrible things are about to happen?”

“He is never far from disaster,” Larten said, “but he sometimes pays visits for other reasons.” He hesitated, then decided this was as good an occasion as any to tell Gavner another of his secrets. “This is not the first time he has trailed us.”

Gavner looked around, his eyes narrowing, but not from the sunlight.

“I have caught glimpses of him several times over the decades,” Larten said. “He circles us occasionally, keeping his distance, watching.”

“Why?” Gavner snapped.

Larten shrugged.

“Maybe we should go after him,” Gavner suggested. “Face up to him. Make him explain why he follows us.”

“There is no point,” Larten sighed. “He never comes close enough to catch. The nearest he came to me was when I visited my old home last year.”

Larten had been back to the city of his birth a few times with Gavner. He liked to keep an eye on the place. Relatives of his still lived there, and although he had not tracked down any of them, he felt connected. Whenever he was within easy traveling distance, he made time to swing by and make sure that all was well with the people who had been his before he was accepted into the clan.

“I was on the roof of the house where my parents used to live,” Larten went on. “You were asleep—snoring, it goes without saying. Mr. Tiny appeared on the roof next to mine. I thought he was going to say something—he stood there for ages, looking at me directly—but then he turned and left.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Gavner asked.

“I saw no reason to trouble you.”

Gavner scowled. “I’m not a child. I don’t need to be protected.”

“It had nothing to do with protection,” Larten said. “I simply did not wish to burden you with information that would have been of no use to you.”

“How do you know it wouldn’t have been useful?” Gavner grumbled. “I could have watched out for him. I might have been able to trap him.”

“No one can trap Desmond Tiny,” Larten said. “When he does not want to be approached, it is impossible to get close to him. While he obviously finds the pair of us fascinating for some reason, it is equally clear that he has no interest in speaking with us. We would only waste our time if we—”

“That’s where you’re wrong,” somebody said brightly, and both vampires reeled away from the entrance to the crypt.

As they recovered, they saw someone squatting outside the mouth of their den. He was blocking most of the light, but as he ducked forward, their eyes focused on a chubby, rosy, beaming face.

“Well,” Mr. Tiny chuckled, rocking back and forth on his heels, shattering a small bone underfoot as he did so, “isn’t anyone going to invite me in?”

Chapter

Five

Larten offered Mr. Tiny one of the rabbits, but he turned it down. “I prefer my meat raw,” he said scoldingly. “Where’s the pleasure in eating if you can’t feel the juices streaming down your chin as you bite in?”

The short man was perched on one of the coffins. He had kicked off his left boot and was scratching the flesh of his foot with a bone he’d picked up from the ground. Larten was intrigued to see that Mr. Tiny’s toes were webbed.

“You’ve grown a lot since our paths first crossed,” Mr. Tiny said to Gavner.

“That was a long time ago,” Gavner said softly.

“Hardly,” Mr. Tiny snorted, then eyed Gavner critically. “You were an ugly baby. At least that much hasn’t changed.”

Gavner bristled, but Mr. Tiny only laughed and turned his attention to Larten. “I assume you’re aware of the dozens of stout-hearted Germans dogging your every move?”

“Yes,” Larten said.

Mr. Tiny flicked the bone he’d been scratching his foot with up into the air. He let it spin a couple of times, then caught it and proceeded to pick his teeth with it. Larten raised an eyebrow but said nothing. There was a long silence. Gavner felt uneasy, but Larten and Mr. Tiny both looked at ease.

Mr. Tiny broke the silence. “You’ve matured since I saved you in that palace of ice. You remind me of Seba Nile now, serious and boring.”

“I am not a jester,” Larten said calmly. “It is not my job to amuse you.”

Mr. Tiny scowled. “I preferred you when you were suicidal.” He cast a catlike glance at Gavner. “Has he told you about the time he nearly leapt to his death?”

“Yes,” Gavner said.

Mr. Tiny rolled his eyes. “You two are about as much fun as...” He grumbled his way into silence again.

Larten cleared his throat. “Have you traveled far?”

“I’m always traveling,” Mr. Tiny replied. “I never stop in one place for long. There’s always some new tragedy to enjoy, a fresh disaster that merits an audience. I don’t get home often.”

“You have a home?” Gavner asked.

“Of course,” Mr. Tiny said. “Every man needs a place to put his feet up and call his castle. I might take you there one day, Master Purl. You could tell me tall tales and admire my collection.”

“What do you collect?” Gavner asked, but Mr. Tiny waved the question away and cocked his head. “Ah. Here they come. Better late than never.”

Larten and Gavner shared an uncertain look. They couldn’t hear anything. Then, out of nowhere, Larten heard the footsteps of several heavy people, close to the entrance to the crypt. He couldn’t understand how they had gotten so near without alerting him before this. It was as if they had dropped to the earth or appeared out of thin air.

As Larten tensed and Gavner rose to his feet, eight strange figures entered the crypt and fanned out around Mr. Tiny’s coffin. They were even shorter than the meddler in yellow, and all were dressed in blue robes with hoods drawn over their heads to hide their faces.

“The Little People,” Larten sighed, having heard the legends.

“I must come up with a better name for them one day,” Mr. Tiny purred, leaning across to adjust the hood of the Little Person closest to him. Larten caught a glimpse of gray skin that had been stitched together, and a flash of green that might have been the creature’s eyes. Its mouth was covered with some sort of mask. Before he could probe further, the hood fell back into place and he saw nothing more of the Little Person’s face.

“I’m taking them to the Cirque Du Freak,” Mr. Tiny said, and Larten’s eyes lit up.

“The Cirque is nearby?” he gasped, surprising Gavner with his enthusiasm.

Mr. Tiny nodded. “Just a few hours from here. That’s why I’m in the area. You didn’t think I dropped by just to pass the time with you and your pup, did you?”

“Don’t call me a—” Gavner growled, taking a menacing step forward. Before he got any farther, four of the Little People stepped in front of him and shielded Mr. Tiny. They made no sounds and he couldn’t see their faces, but Gavner got the impression that they were snarling hungrily beneath their hoods.

“If you don’t withdraw, they’ll tear you limb from limb and eat your flesh while it’s warm and bloody,” Mr. Tiny said cheerfully. He studied Gavner speculatively. “I believe I’ll ask them to keep your tongue for me.”

Gavner retreated swiftly, only stopping when he backed into the wall. The Little People returned to their original positions. Mr. Tiny looked disappointed.

Larten had taken no notice of the exchange. He was searching mentally for Mr. Tall, the owner of the Cirque Du Freak. The pair had bonded years before and Larten could track him the same way he could track Seba and Wester.

After a few seconds the orange-haired vampire smiled. Mr. Tiny had told the truth—his old friend was no more than a couple of hours away. Larten brightened at the thought of meeting with Mr. Tall again. He adored the world of the Cirque Du Freak, its fantastical performers, the magical shows it produced without fail night after night.

“You can come with me,” Mr. Tiny said. “I won’t be stopping—I just want to drop off my Little People—but you can stay once I’m gone.”

Larten would have loved to accept the tiny man’s offer, but as he thought about it, his excitement dwindled. He didn’t want to lead the Nazis to the Cirque Du Freak—it might mean complications for Mr. Tall and his crew. Better to steer clear and return at a later date, when he was free of his vampiric duties.

“No, thank you,” Larten said. “We must move on. We do not have time for social visits.”

“As you like,” Mr. Tiny sniffed. He got to his feet, put his boot back on, and started for the exit.

“One moment,” Larten stopped him.

“Yes?” Mr. Tiny paused.

“If you do not mind my asking, could you tell me why you are taking the Little People to the Cirque Du Freak?”

Mr. Tiny shrugged. “I have a vested interest in the Cirque. Hibernius Tall might be my polar opposite when it comes to height, but we share many similar concerns. I help out in times of distress. Hibernius can usually take care of himself, but he doesn’t always act in his own best interest. Sometimes he is powerless to shield his performers from the cruelties of the world. In times of danger and terrible wars, I send a troop of Little People to travel with the Cirque and guard the cast and crew from catastrophe.”

“But this is not a time of war,” Larten noted.

“It will be soon,” Mr. Tiny chuckled, his eyes flashing with wicked delight. “The most delicious

war ever will be hot upon us within a matter of years. I can't wait. It's going to be majestic. I plan to follow it in all its gory glory, so I need to see to Hibernius in advance, to avoid getting distracted later."

"You cannot know that for certain," Larten said. "Like you, I think there will be another savage war, but it is a guess. Neither of us can be sure."

"I can," Mr. Tiny purred. "Time is not the mystery for me that it is for you. I can see into the future. I know what lies ahead."

"If that is true, you could stop it," Larten said. "You could intervene and halt it at its source."

"I could," Mr. Tiny said thoughtfully, then grinned viciously. "But that wouldn't be any fun!"

Mr. Tiny threw a mock salute at Larten and Gavner, then ducked out of the crypt. His Little People followed like a line of giant, gloomy ducks. Larten and Gavner stared at each other. Before they could say anything, Mr. Tiny stuck his head back inside. "I almost forgot—you'll be seeing your old friend Wester Flack soon. Give him my regards, won't you?"

"Wester?" Larten snapped. "What is he doing here, and how do you...?"

Before he could complete the question, Mr. Tiny was gone, leaving a troubled Larten and a bewildered Gavner alone in the crypt with the remains of the dead.

Chapter

Six

A week later, with the Nazis hot on their trail, Wester caught up with Larten and Gavner on a windswept mountain. It was raining heavily. The pair had been searching for a cave where they could rest during the day. Larten spotted Wester from a long way off, but they kept searching while the guard closed in on them.

Larten hugged Wester when he arrived. The pair were like brothers and had been for most of their lives.

“It is a joy to see you,” Larten greeted him.

“You too,” Wester smiled, but he looked drawn and tired. He started to speak, but Larten shook his head and wiped rain from his face.

“Help us find a cave. We can talk when we are sheltered and dry.”

Wester scoured the mountain with the others. In the end they found a tiny cave—little more than a hole—and squeezed into it. At least the rain wouldn’t drench them here. There was no room to light a fire, but they generated enough body heat to warm the cramped space.

As they wrung the worst of the rain out of their clothes, Larten asked casually, “Why have you been consulting with Desmond Tiny?”

Wester stared at Larten, astonished. “How do you know that?”

“He paid us a visit recently.”

Wester looked worried. “What did he say about me?”

“Only that you would be joining us soon. He asked me to give you his regards.”

Wester scowled. “Damn his *regards*! He shocked the life out of me a couple of years ago. I was scouting around the base of Vampire Mountain—Seba had asked me to bring him some berries—and Mr. Tiny hailed me from a tree.”

“Desmond Tiny has returned to Vampire Mountain?” Larten snapped.

“No. He didn’t enter. He said that he just happened to be passing, but I think he specifically came to see me.”

Larten frowned. “Did he say why?”

Wester sighed. There were dark rims around his eyes and the flesh of his cheeks was tight. He looked like he hadn’t slept much or eaten properly in a long time. “I’m losing support,” he said softly. “Those who stood by me in my campaign to alert the clan to the threat of the vampaneze are trickling away. The tide of opinion is turning. Many vampires see shades of our hatred for the vampaneze mirrored in the hatred of the Nazis for their enemies. They have begun to question our motives and goals.”

Wester despised the purple-skinned vampaneze. One of them had killed his family. His thirst for revenge had never ebbed. He’d linked up with others of his mind-set and they had been trying to gather enough support to drive the vampires to war with their blood cousins. Larten was pleased to hear that they were losing momentum.

“Mr. Tiny told me this would happen,” Wester went on. “He said he can see into the future, and that within a handful of years the anti-vampaneze movement will be a wreck. All but the most passionate will desert us and war with the vampaneze will never come to pass.”

“That’s a good thing, isn’t it?” Gavner asked innocently.

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