

CONTINUING THE BESTSELLING SAGA OF DARREN SHAN

CIRQUE DU FREAK

Allies of the Night

"FAST-PACED AND
COMPELLING . . .
FULL OF SATISFYING
MACABRE TOUCHES."
—J. K. ROWLING,
AUTHOR OF THE
HARRY POTTER SERIES

DARREN SHAN

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KILLERS OF THE DAWN

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Tunnels of Blood (Book 3)
Vampire Mountain (Book 4)
Trials of Death (Book 5)
The Vampire Prince (Book 6)
Hunters of the Dusk (Book 7)
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The Lake of Souls (Book 10)
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Sons of Destiny (Book 12)

For:

Bas—my Debbie Hemlock

OBE

(Order of the Bloody Entrails) to:

Davina “bonnie” McKay

Quality Control:

Gillie Russell & Zoë Clarke

Party Animals:

The Christopher Little Clan

PROLOGUE

IT WAS AN AGE OF WAR. After six hundred years of peace, the vampires and vampaneze had taken up arms against each other in a brutal, bloody battle to the death. The War of the Scars began with the coming of the Lord of the Vampaneze. He was destined to lead his people to total, all-conquering victory — unless killed before he was fully blooded.

According to the mysterious and powerful Mr. Tiny, only three vampires stood a chance of stopping the Vampaneze Lord. They were the Prince, Vancha March; the one-time General, Larten Crepsley; and a half-vampire, me — Darren Shan.

It was predicted by Mr. Tiny that our path would cross four times with that of the Vampaneze Lord, and each time the destiny of the vampires would be ours for the making. If we killed him, we'd win the War of the Scars. If not, the vampaneze would cruise to savage victory and wipe our entire clan from the face of the earth.

Mr. Tiny said we couldn't call upon other vampires for help during the quest, but we could accept the aid of non-vampires. Thus, when Mr. Crepsley and me left Vampire Mountain (Vancha joined us later), the only one to come with us was Harkat Mulds, a stunted, grey-skinned Little Person.

Leaving the Mountain — our home for six years — we headed for the cave of Lady Evanna, a witch of great power. She could see into the future but would only reveal this much to us — if we failed to kill the Lord of the Vampaneze, by the end of our quest, two of us would be dead.

Later on, we linked up with the Cirque Du Freak, where I'd lived with Mr. Crepsley when I originally became his assistant. Evanna traveled with us. At the Cirque, we ran into a group of vampaneze. A short fight followed, during which most of the vampaneze were killed. Two escaped — a full-vampaneze by the name of Gannen Harst, and his servant, who we later learned was the Lord of the Vampaneze, in disguise.

We were sickened when Evanna revealed the true identity of Gannen Harst's servant, but Vancha was especially miserable, because he had let them escape — Gannen Harst was Vancha's brother, and Vancha had let him go without challenging him, unaware that his brother was prime protector of the Vampaneze Lord.

But there was no time to sit around feeling sorry for ourselves. We still had three chances to find and kill our deadly foe, so our quest continued. Putting the lost chance behind us, we sharpened our blades, parted company with Evanna and our friends in the Cirque Du Freak, and took to the road again, more determined than ever to succeed....

CHAPTER ONE

Your Daily Post, September 15

BLOODY NIGHTS OF DEATH!!!

This once-sleepy city is under siege. In the space of six short months eleven people have been brutally murdered, their bodies drained of blood and dumped in various public places. Many more have vanished into the shadows of the night and might be lying beneath the streets, their lifeless bodies decomposing in the lonely dark.

Officials cannot account for the gruesome killing spree. They do not believe the murders to be the work of one man, but nor have they been able to link the crimes to any known criminals. In the largest single police operation in the city's history, most local gangs have been broken up, religious cult leaders arrested, and the doors of secret orders and brotherhoods smashed down ... to no effect at all!

CUSTOMARY BLUNTNESS

Chief Inspector of Police Alice Burgess, when queried about the lack of results, responded with her own brand of customary bluntness. "We've been working like dogs," she snapped. "Everyone's on unpaid overtime. Nobody's avoiding responsibility. We're patrolling the streets in force, arresting anyone who even *looks* suspicious. We've initiated a 7 p.m. curfew for children, and have advised adults to remain indoors too. If you find someone who can do a better job, give me a call and I'll gladly step aside."

Comforting words — but nobody here is taking comfort from them. The people of this city are tired of promises and pledges. Nobody doubts the honest, hardworking efforts of the local police — or the army who have been called in to assist in the operation — but faith in their ability to bring an end to the crisis has hit an all-time low. Many are moving out of the city, staying with relatives or in hotels, until the killings cease.

"I have kids," Michael Corbett, the forty-six-year-old owner of a secondhand bookshop told us. "Running away doesn't make me feel proud, and it'll ruin my business, but the lives of my wife and children come first. The police can do no more now than they did thirteen years ago. We just have to wait for this to blow over, like it did before. When it does, I'll return. In the meantime, I think anyone who stays is crazy."

HISTORY OF DEATH

When Mr. Corbett spoke of the past, he was referring to a time, nearly thirteen years ago, when horror similarly visited this city. On that occasion, nine bodies were

discovered by a pair of teenagers, butchered and drained as the recent eleven victims have been.

But those bodies were carefully hidden, and only unearthed long after death had occurred. Today's murderers — rather, *tonight's*, since each victim has been taken after sunset — are not bothering to hide the evidence of their foul deeds. It's as though they are proud of their cruelty, leaving the bodies where they know they will be found.

Many locals believe the city is cursed and has a history of death. "I've been expecting these killings for fifty years," said Dr. Kevin Beisty, a local historian and expert on the occult. "Vampires visited here more than one hundred and fifty years ago, and the thing about vampires is, once they find a place they like — they always come back!"

DEMONS OF THE NIGHT

Vampires. If Dr. Beisty's was the only voice crying out against demons of the night, he could be dismissed as a crank. But many other people believe that we are suffering at the hands of vampires. They point to the fact that the attacks always occur at night, that the bodies have been drained of blood — seemingly without the aid of medical equipment — and, most tellingly, that although three of the victims were photographed by hidden security cameras when they were abducted, their attackers' faces *did not show up on film*

Chief Inspector Alice Burgess is dismissive of the vampire theory. "You think Count Dracula's on the rampage?" she laughed contemptuously. "Don't be ridiculous! This is the twenty-first century. Warped, sick humans are behind all this. Don't waste my time blaming bogeymen!"

When pushed, the Chief Inspector has this to add: "I don't believe in vampires, and I don't want idiots like you filling people's heads with such nonsense. But I'll tell you this: I'll do whatever it takes to stop these savages. If that means driving a stake through some madman's chest because he believes he's a vampire, I'll do it, even if it costs me my job and freedom. Nobody's walking away from this on an insanity plea. There's only one way to pay back the deaths of eleven good men and women *extermination!*

"And I'll do it," Chief Inspector Burgess vowed, a fiery gleam in her pale eyes which would have done Professor Van Helsing proud. "Even if I have to track them to Transylvania and back. There'll be no escaping the sword of justice, be they humans or vampires.

"Tell your readers that I'll get their tormentors. They can bet on that. They can bet their *lives...*".

MR. CREPSLEY PUSHED the manhole cover up and out of the way, while Harkat and me waited in the darkness below. After checking the street for signs of life, he whispered, "All clear," and we followed him up the ladder and out into fresh air.

"I hate those bloody tunnels," I groaned, slipping off my shoes, which were soaked through with water, mud, and other things I didn't want to think about. I'd have to wash them out in the sink when we got back to the hotel and leave them on top of a radiator to dry, as I'd been doing at the end of every night for the past three months.

“I despise them too,” Mr. Crepsley agreed, gently prying the remains of a dead rat from the folds of his long red cloak.

“They’re not so bad,” Harkat chuckled. It was OK for him — he had no nose or sense of smell!

“At least the rain has held off,” Mr. Crepsley said. “Give it another month,” I replied sourly. “We’ll be wading up to our hips down there by mid-October.”

“We will have located and dealt with the vampaneze by then,” Mr. Crepsley said, without conviction.

“That’s what you said two months ago,” I reminded him.

“And last month,” Harkat added.

“You wish to call off the search and leave these people to the vampaneze?” Mr. Crepsley asked quietly.

Harkat and me looked at each other then shook our heads. “Of course not,” I sighed. “We’re just tired and cranky. Let’s go back to the hotel, dry ourselves off, and get something warm to eat. We’ll be fine after a good day’s sleep.”

Finding a nearby fire escape, we climbed to the roof of the building and set off across the skylight of the city, where there were no police or soldiers.

Six months had passed since the Lord of the Vampaneze escaped. Vancha had gone to Vampire Mountain to tell the Princes and Generals the news, and had not yet returned. For the first three months Mr. Crepsley, Harkat, and me had roamed without purpose, letting our feet take us where they wished. Then word reached us of the terror in Mr. Crepsley’s home city — people were being killed, their bodies drained of blood. Reports claimed vampires were to blame, but we already knew better. Rumors had already reached us of vampaneze in the city, and this was all the confirmation we needed.

Mr. Crepsley cared for these people. Those he’d known when he lived here as a human were long since dead and buried, but he looked upon their grandchildren and great-grandchildren as his spiritual family. Thirteen years earlier, when a mad vampaneze by the name of Murlough was savaging the city, Mr. Crepsley returned — with me and Evra Von, a snake-boy from the Cirque Du Freak — to stop him. Now that history was repeating itself, he felt compelled to intervene again.

“But maybe I should ignore my feelings,” he’d mused three months earlier, as we discussed the situation. “We must focus on the hunt for the Vampaneze Lord. It would be wrong of me to drag us away from our quest.”

“Not so,” I’d disagreed. “Mr. Tiny told us we’d have to follow our hearts if we were to find the Vampaneze Lord. Your heart’s drawing you home, and my heart says I should stick by you. I think we should go.”

Harkat Mulds, a grey-skinned Little Person who’d learned to talk, agreed, so we set off for the city where Mr. Crepsley had been born, to check out the situation and help if we could. When we arrived, we soon found ourselves in the middle of a mystery. Vampaneze were definitely living here — at least three or four, if our estimate was correct — but were they part of the war force or lone madmen? If they were warriors, they should be more careful about how they killed — sane vampaneze don’t leave the bodies of their victims where humans can find them. But if they were mad, they shouldn’t be capable of hiding so skillfully — after three months of searching, we hadn’t found a trace of a single vampaneze in the tunnels beneath the city.

Back at the hotel, we entered through the window. We'd rented two rooms on the upper floor, and used the windows to get in and out at night, since we were too dirty and damp to use the lobby. Besides, the less we moved around on the ground, the better — the city was in an uproar, with police and soldiers patrolling the streets, arresting anyone who looked out of place.

While Mr. Crepsley and Harkat used the bathrooms, I undressed and waited for a free bath. We could have rented three rooms, so we'd each have a bath, but it was safer for Harkat not to show himself — Mr. Crepsley and me could pass for human, but the monstrous-looking, stitched-together Harkat couldn't.

I nearly fell asleep sitting on the end of the bed. The last three months had been long and difficult. Every night we roamed the roofs and tunnels of the city, searching for vampaneze, avoiding the police, soldiers, and frightened humans, many of whom had taken to carrying guns and other weapons. It was taking its toll on all of us, but eleven people had died — that we knew of — and more would follow if we didn't stick to our task.

Standing, I walked around the room, trying to stay awake long enough to get into the bath. Sometimes I didn't, and would awaken the following night stinking, sweaty, and filthy, feeling like something a cat had coughed up.

I thought about my previous visit to this city. I'd been much younger, still learning what it meant to be a half-vampire. I'd met my first and only girlfriend here — Debbie Hemlock. She'd been dark-skinned, full-lipped, and bright-eyed. I would have loved to get to know her better. But duty called, the mad vampaneze was killed, and the currents of life swept us apart.

Several times since returning, I'd walked by the house where she'd lived with her parents, half-hoping she still lived there. But new tenants had moved in, and there was no sign of the Hemlocks. Just as well, really — as a half-vampire I aged at a fifth the human rate, so although nearly thirteen years had passed since I last kissed Debbie, I only looked a few years older. Debbie would be a grown woman now. It would have been confusing if we'd run into one another.

The door connecting the bedrooms opened and Harkat entered, drying himself with a huge hotel towel. "The bath's free," he said, wiping around the top of his bald, grey, scarred head with the towel, careful not to irritate his round green eyes, which had no eyelids to protect them.

"Cheers, ears," I grinned, slipping by him. That was an in-joke — Harkat, like all the Little People, had ears, but they were stitched under the skin at the sides of his head, so it looked as if he didn't have any.

Harkat had drained the bath, put the plug back in, and turned on the hot water faucet, so it was almost full with fresh water when I arrived. I tested the temperature, added a dash of cold, turned off the faucets, and slid in — heavenly! I raised a hand to brush a lock of hair out of my eyes, but my arm wouldn't lift all the way — I was too tired. Relaxing, I decided to just lie there a few minutes. I could wash my hair later. To simply lie in the bath and relax ... for a few minutes ... would be ...

Without finishing the thought, I fell soundly asleep, and when I awoke it was night again, and I was blue all over from having spent the day in a bath of cold, grimy water.

CHAPTER TWO

WE RETURNED TO THE HOTEL at the end of another long, disappointing night. We'd stayed at the same hotel since coming to the city. We hadn't meant to — the plan had been to switch every couple of weeks — but the search for the vampaneze had left us so exhausted, we hadn't been able to muster the energy to go looking for fresh lodgings. Even the sturdy Harkat Mulds, who didn't need to sleep very much, was dozing off for four or five hours each day.

I felt better after a hot bath and switched on the TV to see if there was any news about the killings. I learned it was early Thursday morning — days melted into one another when you lived among vampires, and I rarely took any notice of them — and no new deaths had been reported. It had been almost two weeks since the last body was discovered. There was the slightest hint of hope in the air — many people thought the reign of terror had come to an end. I doubted we'd be that lucky, but I kept my fingers crossed as I turned the set off and headed for the welcome hotel bed.

Sometime later I was roughly shaken awake. A strong light was shining through the thin material of the curtains, and I knew instantly that it was midday or early afternoon, which was way too soon to be even thinking about getting out of bed. Grunting, I sat up and found an anxious-looking Harkat leaning over me.

"Wassup?" I muttered, rubbing the grains of sleep from my eyes.

"Someone's knocking at ... your door," Harkat croaked.

"Tell them to please go away," I said — or words to that effect!

"I was going to, but ..." He paused.

"Who is it?" I asked, sensing trouble.

"I don't know. I opened the door of *my* room a crack ... and checked. It's nobody connected with the hotel, although ... there's a staff member with him. He's a small man, carrying a big ... briefcase, and he's ..." Again Harkat paused. "Come see for yourself."

I got up as there was a round of fresh knuckle raps. I hurried through to Harkat's room. Mr. Crepsley was sleeping soundly in one of the twin beds. We tiptoed past him and opened the door very slightly. One of the figures in the corridor was familiar — the day manager of the hotel — but I'd never seen the other. He was small, as Harkat had said, and thin, with a huge black briefcase. He was wearing a dark grey suit, black shoes, and an old-fashioned bowler hat. He was scowling and raising his knuckles to knock again as we closed the door.

"Think we should answer?" I asked Harkat.

"Yes," he said. "He doesn't look like the sort who'll... go away if we ignore him."

"Who do you think he is?"

"I'm not sure but there's something...official about him. He might be a police officer or in ... the army."

“You don’t think they know about ...?” I nodded at the sleeping vampire.

“They’d send more than one man ... if they did,” Harkat replied.

I thought about it for a moment, then made up my mind. “I’ll got see what he wants. But I won’t let him in unless I have to — I don’t want people snooping around in here while Mr. Crepsley’s resting.”

“Should I stay here?” Harkat asked.

“Yes, but keep close to the door and don’t lock it — I’ll call if I run into trouble.”

Leaving Harkat to fetch his axe, I quickly pulled on a pair of trousers and a shirt and went to see what the man in the hall wanted. Pausing by the door, not opening it, I cleared my throat and called out innocently, “Who is it?”

In immediate response, in a voice like a small dog’s bark, the man with the briefcase said, “Mr. Horston?”

“No,” I replied, breathing a small sigh of relief. “You have the wrong room.”

“Oh?” The man in the corridor sounded surprised. “This isn’t Mr. Vur Horston’s room?”

“No, it’s —” I winced. I’d forgotten the false names we’d given when registering! Mr. Crepsley had signed in as Vur Horston and I’d said I was his son. (Harkat had crept in when no one was watching.) “I mean,” I began again, “this is *my* room, not my dad’s. I’m Darren Horston, his son.”

“Ah.” I could sense his smile through the door. “Excellent. You’re the reason I’m here. Is your father with you?”

“He’s ...” I hesitated. “Why do you want to know? Who are you?”

“If you open the door and let me in, I’ll explain.”

“I’d like to know who you are first,” I said. “These are dangerous times. I’ve been told not to open the door to strangers.”

“Ah. Excellent,” the little man said again. “I should of course not expect you to open the door to an unannounced visitor. Forgive me. My name is Mr. Blaws.”

“Blores?”

“*Blaws*,” he said, and patiently spelled it out.

“What do you want, Mr. Blaws?” I asked.

“I’m a school inspector,” he replied. “I’ve come to find out why you aren’t in school.”

My jaw dropped about a thousand miles.

“May I come in, Darren?” Mr. Blaws asked. When I didn’t answer, he rapped on the door again and sung out, “Darrrennn?”

“Um. Just a minute, please,” I muttered, then turned my back to the door and leaned weakly against it, wildly wondering what I should do.

If I turned the inspector away, he’d return with help, so in the end I opened the door and let him in. The hotel manager departed once he saw that everything was OK, leaving me alone with the serious-looking Mr. Blaws. The little man set his briefcase down on the floor, then removed his bowler hat and held it in his left hand, behind his back, as he shook my hand with his right. He was studying me carefully. There was a light layer of bristle on my chin, my hair was long and scruffy, and my face still carried small scars and burn marks from my Trials of Initiation seven years before.

“You look quite old,” Mr. Blaws commented, sitting down without being asked. “Very mature for fifteen. Maybe it’s the hair. You could do with a trim and a shave.”

“I guess ...” I didn’t know why he thought I was fifteen, and I was too bewildered to correct him.

“So!” he boomed, laying his bowler hat aside and his huge briefcase across his lap. “Your father — Mr. Horston — is he in?”

“Um ... yeah. He’s... sleeping.” I was finding it hard to string words together.

“Oh, of course. I forgot he was on the night shifts. Perhaps I should call back at a more convenient...” He trailed off, thumbed open his briefcase, dug out a sheet of paper and studied it as though it was a historical document. “Ah,” he said. “Not possible to rearrange — I’m on a tight schedule. You’ll have to wake him.”

“Um. Right. I’ll go ... see if he’s ...” I hurried through to where the vampire lay sleeping and anxiously shook him awake. Harkat stood back, saying nothing — he’d heard everything and was just as confused as I was.

Mr. Crepsley opened one eye, saw that it was daytime, and shut it again. “Is the hotel on fire?” he groaned.

“No.”

“Then go away and —”

“There’s a man in my room. A school inspector. He knows our names — at least the names we checked in under — and he thinks I’m fifteen. He wants to know why I’m not in school.”

Mr. Crepsley shot out of bed as though he’d been bitten. “How can this be?” he snapped. He rushed to the door, stopped, then retreated slowly. “How did he identify himself?”

“Just told me his name — Mr. Blaws.”

“It could be a cover story.”

“I don’t think so. The manager of the hotel was with him. He wouldn’t have let him up if he wasn’t on the level. Besides, he *looks* like a school inspector.”

“Looks can be deceptive,” Mr. Crepsley noted.

“Not this time,” I said. “You’d better get dressed and come meet him.”

The vampire hesitated, then nodded sharply. I left him to prepare, and went to close the curtains in my room. Mr. Blaws looked at me strangely. “My father’s eyes are very sensitive,” I said. “That’s why he prefers to work at night.”

“Ah,” Mr. Blaws said. “Excellent.”

We said nothing more for the next few minutes, while we waited for my “father” to make his entrance. I felt very uncomfortable, sitting in silence with this stranger, but he acted as though he felt perfectly at home. When Mr. Crepsley finally entered, Mr. Blaws stood and shook his hand, not letting go of the briefcase. “Mr. Horston,” the inspector beamed. “A pleasure, sir.”

“Likewise.” Mr. Crepsley smiled briefly, then sat as far away from the curtains as he could and drew his red robe tightly around himself.

“So!” Mr. Blaws boomed after a short silence. “What’s wrong with our young trooper?”

“Wrong?” Mr. Crepsley blinked. “Nothing is wrong.”

“Then why isn’t he at school with all the other boys and girls?”

“Darren does not go to school,” Mr. Crepsley said, as though speaking to an idiot. “Why should he?”

Mr. Blaws was taken aback. “Why, to learn, Mr. Horston, the same as any other

fifteen-year-old.”

“Darren is not ...” Mr. Crepsley stopped. “How do you know his age?” he asked cagily.

“From his birth certificate, of course,” Mr. Blaws laughed.

Mr. Crepsley glanced at me for an answer, but I was as lost as he was, and could only shrug helplessly. “And how did you acquire that?” the vampire asked.

Mr. Blaws looked at us strangely. “You included it with the rest of the relevant forms when you enrolled him at Mahler’s” he said.

“*Mahler’s?*” Mr. Crepsley repeated.

“The school you chose to send Darren to.”

Mr. Crepsley sank back in his chair and thought about that. Then he asked to see the birth certificate, along with the other “relevant forms.” Mr. Blaws reached into his briefcase again and fished out a folder. “There you go,” he said. “Birth certificate, records from his previous school, medical certificates, the enrollment form you filled in. Everything present and correct.”

Mr. Crepsley opened the file, flipped through a few sheets, studied the signatures at the bottom of one form, then passed the file across to me. “Look through those papers,” he said. “Check that the information is ... *correct.*”

It wasn’t correct, of course — I wasn’t fifteen and hadn’t been to school recently; nor had I visited a doctor since joining the ranks of the undead — but it was fully detailed. The files built up a complete picture of a fifteen-year-old boy called Darren Horston, who’d moved to this city during the summer with his father, a man who worked the night shift in a local slaughterhouse and ...

My breath caught in my throat — the slaughterhouse was the one where we’d first encountered the mad vampaneze, Murlough, thirteen years ago! “Look at this!” I gasped, holding the form out to Mr. Crepsley, but he waved it away.

“Is it *accurate?*” he asked.

“Of course it’s accurate,” Mr. Blaws answered. “You filled in the forms yourself.” His eyes narrowed. “Didn’t you?”

“Of course he did,” I said quickly, before Mr. Crepsley could reply. “Sorry to act so confused. It’s been a hard week. Um. Family problems.”

“Ah. That’s why you haven’t shown up at Mahler’s?”

“Yes.” I forced a shaky smile. “We should have called and informed you. Sorry. Didn’t think.”

“No problem,” Mr. Blaws said, taking the papers back. “I’m glad that’s all it was. We were afraid something bad had happened to you.”

“No,” I said, shooting Mr. Crepsley a look that said, “play ball.” “Nothing happened.”

“Excellent. Then you’ll be in on Monday?”

“Monday?”

“Hardly seems worthwhile coming in tomorrow, what with it being the end of the week. Come early Monday morning and we’ll sort you out with a schedule and show you around. Ask for —”

“Excuse me,” Mr. Crepsley interrupted, “but Darren will not be going to school on Monday or any other day.”

“Oh?” Mr. Blaws frowned and gently closed the lid of his briefcase. “Has he

enrolled at another school?”

“No. Darren does not need to go to school. *I* educate him.”

“Really? There was no mention in the forms of your being a qualified teacher.”

“I am not a —”

“And of course,” Blaws went on, “we both know that only a qualified teacher can educate a child at home.” He smiled like a shark. “Don’t we.”

Mr. Crepsley didn’t know what to say. He had no experience of the modern educational system. When he was a boy, parents could do what they liked with their children. I decided to take matters into my own hands.

“Mr. Blaws?”

“Yes, Darren?”

“What would happen if I didn’t turn up at Mahler’s?”

He sniffed snootily. “If you enroll at a different school and pass on the paperwork to me, everything will be fine.”

“And if — for the sake of argument — I didn’t enroll at another school?”

Mr. Blaws laughed. “Everyone has to go to school. Once you turn sixteen, your time is your own, but for the next...” He opened the briefcase again and checked his files. “... seven months, you must go to school.”

“So if I chose not to go ... ?”

“We’d send a social worker to see what the problem was.”

“And if we asked you to tear up my enrollment form and forget about me — if we said we’d sent it to you by mistake — what then?”

Mr. Blaws drummed his fingers on the top of his bowler hat. He wasn’t used to such bizarre questions and didn’t know what to make of us. “We can’t go around tearing up official forms, Darren,” he chuckled uneasily.

“But if we’d sent them by accident and wanted to withdraw them?”

He shook his head firmly. “We weren’t aware of your existence before you contacted us, but now that we are, we’re responsible for you. We’d have to chase you down if we thought you weren’t getting a proper education.”

“Meaning you’d send social workers after us?”

“Social workers first,” he agreed, then looked at us with a glint in his eye. “Of course, if you gave them a hard time, we’d have to call in the police next, and who knows where it would end.”

I took that information in, nodded grimly, then faced Mr. Crepsley. “You know what this means, don’t you?” He stared back uncertainly. “You’ll have to start packing lunches for me!”

CHAPTER THREE

“**M**EDDLING, SMUG, STUPID LITTLE ...” Mr. Crepsley snarled. He was pacing the hotel room, cursing the name of Mr. Blaws. The school inspector had left and Harkat had rejoined us. He’d heard everything through the thin connecting door, but could make no more sense of it than us. “I will track him down tonight and bleed him dry,” Mr. Crepsley vowed. “That will teach him not to come poking his nose in!”

“Talk like that won’t fix this,” I sighed. “We have to use our heads.”

“Who says it is talk?” Mr. Crepsley retorted. “He gave us his telephone number in case we need to contact him. I will find his address and —”

“It’s a mobile phone,” I sighed. “You can’t trace addresses through them. Besides, what good would killing him do? Somebody else would replace him. Our records are on file. He’s only the messenger.”

“We could move,” Harkat suggested. “Find a new hotel.”

“No,” Mr. Crepsley said. “He has seen our faces and would broadcast our descriptions. It would make matters more complicated than they already are.”

“What I want to know is *how* our records were submitted,” I said. “The signatures on the files weren’t ours, but they were pretty damn close.”

“I know,” he grunted. “Not a great forgery, but adequate.”

“Is it possible there’s been ... a mix-up?” Harkat asked. “Perhaps a real Vur Horston and his son ... sent in the forms, and you’ve been confused with them.”

“No,” I said. “The address of this hotel was included and so were our room numbers. And ...” I told them about the slaughterhouse.

Mr. Crepsley stopped pacing. “*Murlough!*” he hissed. “That was a period of history I thought I would never have to revisit.”

“I don’t understand,” Harkat said. “How could this be connected to Murlough? Are you saying he’s alive and has ... set you up?”

“No,” Mr. Crepsley said. “Murlough is definitely dead. But someone must know we killed him. And that someone is almost certainly responsible for the humans who have been killed recently.” He sat down and rubbed the long scar that marked the left side of his face. “This is a trap.”

There was a long, tense silence.

“It can’t be,” I said in the end. “How could the vampaneze have found out about Murlough?”

“Desmond Tiny,” Mr. Crepsley said bleakly. “*He* knew about our run-in with Murlough, and must have told the vampaneze. But I cannot understand why they faked the birth certificate and school records. If they knew so much about us, and where we are, they should have killed us cleanly and honorably, as is the vampaneze way.”

“That’s true,” I noted. “You don’t punish a murderer by sending him to school. Although,” I added, remembering my long-ago schooldays, “death *can* sometimes seem preferable to double science on a Thursday afternoon ...”

Again a lengthy silence descended. Harkat broke it by clearing his throat. “This sounds crazy,” the Little Person said, “but what if Mr. Crepsley *did* ...submit the forms?”

“Come again?” I said.

“He might have done it in...his sleep.”

“You think he *sleep-wrote* a birth certificate and school records, then submitted them to a local school?” I didn’t even bother to laugh.

“Things like this have happened before,” Harkat mumbled. “Remember Pasta O’Malley at the ... Cirque Du Freak? He read books at night when he was asleep. He could never recall reading them, but if you asked ... him about them, he could answer all your questions.”

“I’d forgotten about Pasta,” I muttered, giving Harkat’s proposal some thought.

“I could not have filled in those forms,” Mr. Crepsley said stiffly.

“It’s unlikely,” Harkat agreed, “but we do strange things ... when we sleep. Perhaps you —”

“No,” Mr. Crepsley interrupted. “You do not understand. I could not have done it because ...” He looked away sheepishly. “I cannot read or write.”

The vampire might have had two heads, the way Harkat and me gaped at him.

“Of course you can read and write!” I bellowed.

“You signed your name when we checked in.”

“Signing one’s name is an easy feat,” he replied quietly, with wounded dignity. “I can read numbers and recognize certain words — I am able to read maps quite accurately — but as for genuine reading and writing ...” He shook his head.

“How can you not be able to read or write?” I asked ignorantly.

“Things were different when I was young. The world was simpler. It was not necessary to be a master of the written word. I was the fifth child in a poor family and went to work at the age of eight.”

“But... but...” I pointed a finger at him. “You told me you love Shakespeare’s plays and poems!”

“I do,” he said. “Evanna read all his works to me over the decades. Wordsworth, Keats, Joyce — many others. I often meant to learn to read for myself, but I never got around to it.”

“This is ... I don’t... Why didn’t you tell me?” I snapped. “We’ve been together fifteen years, and this is the first time you’ve mentioned it!”

He shrugged. “I assumed you knew. Many vampires are illiterate. That is why so little of our history or laws is written down — most of us are incapable of reading.”

Shaking my head, exasperated, I put aside the vampire’s revelation and concentrated on the more immediate problem. “You didn’t fill out the forms — that’s settled. So who did and what are we going to do about it?”

Mr. Crepsley had no answer to that, but Harkat had a suggestion. “It could have been Mr. Tiny,” he said. “He loves to stir things up. Perhaps this is his idea ... of a joke.”

We thought that one over.

“It’s his style,” I agreed. “I can’t see why he’d want to send me back to school, but it’s the sort of trick I can imagine him pulling.”

“Mr. Tiny would appear to be the most logical culprit,” Mr. Crepsley said.

“Vampaneze are not known for their sense of humor. Nor do they go in for intricate plots — like vampires, they are simple and direct.”

“Let’s say he *is* behind it,” I mused. “That still leaves us with the problem of what to do. Should I report for class Monday morning? Or do we ignore Mr. Blaws’s warning and carry on as before?”

“I would rather not send you,” Mr. Crepsley said.

“There is strength in unity. At present, we are well prepared to defend ourselves if we should come under attack. With you at school, we would not be there to help you if you ran into trouble, and you would not be able to help us if our enemies struck here.”

“But if I don’t go,” I noted, “we’ll have school inspectors — and worse — dogging our heels.”

“The other option is to leave,” Harkat said. “Just pack our bags and go.”

“That is worth considering,” Mr. Crepsley agreed. “I do not like the idea of leaving these people to suffer, but if this *is* a trap designed to divide us, perhaps the killings will stop if we leave.”

“Or they might increase,” I said, “to tempt us back.”

We thought about it some more, weighing the various options.

“I want to stay,” Harkat said eventually. “Life is getting more dangerous, but perhaps ... that means we’re meant to be here. Maybe this city is where we’re destined ... to lock horns with the Vampaneze Lord again.”

“I agree with Harkat,” Mr. Crepsley said, “but this is a matter for Darren to decide. As a Prince, he must make the decision.”

“Thanks a lot,” I said sarcastically.

Mr. Crepsley smiled. “It is your decision, not only because you are a Prince, but because this concerns you the most — *you* will have to mix with human children and teachers, and *you* will be the most vulnerable to attack. Whether this is a vampaneze trap or a whim of Mr. Tiny’s, life will be hard for you if we stay.”

He was right. Going back to school would be a nightmare. I had no idea what fifteen-year-olds studied. Classes would be hard. Homework would drive me loopy. And having to answer to teachers, after six years of lording it over the vampires as a Prince ... It could get very uncomfortable.

Yet part of me was drawn to the notion. To sit in a classroom again, to learn, make friends, show off my advanced physical skills in gym, maybe go out with a few girls ...

“The hell with it,” I grinned. “If it’s a trap, let’s call their bluff. If it’s a joke, we’ll show we know how to take it.”

“That’s the spirit,” Mr. Crepsley boomed.

“Besides,” I chuckled weakly, “I’ve endured the Trials of Initiation twice, a terrifying journey through an underground stream, encounters with killers, a bear, and wild boars. How bad can *school* be?”

CHAPTER FOUR

I ARRIVED AT MAHLER'S an hour before classes began. I'd had a busy weekend. First there was my uniform to buy — a green sweater, light green shirt, green tie, grey trousers, black shoes — then books, notepaper and writing pads, a ruler, pens and pencils, an eraser, set squares and a compass, as well as a scientific calculator, whose strange buttons — “INV,” “SIN,” “COS,” “EE” — meant nothing to me. I also had to buy a homework report book, which I'd have to write all my homework assignments in — Mr. Crepsley would have to sign the book each night, saying I'd done the work I was meant to.

I shopped by myself — Mr. Crepsley couldn't move about during the day, and Harkat's strange appearance meant it was better for him to stay inside. I got back to the hotel with my bags late Saturday evening, after two days of nonstop shopping. Then I remembered that I'd need a schoolbag as well, so I rushed out on one last-gasp, lightning-fast expedition to the nearest store. I bought a simple black bag with plenty of space for my books, and picked up a plastic lunch box as well.

Mr. Crepsley and Harkat got a great kick out of my uniform. The first time they saw me stuffed inside it, walking stiffly, they laughed for ten minutes. “Stop it!” I growled, tearing a shoe off and lobbing it at them.

I spent Sunday wearing in the uniform, walking around the hotel rooms fully dressed. I did a lot of scratching and twitching — it had been a long time since I'd had to wear anything so confining. That night I shaved carefully and let Mr. Crepsley cut my hair. Afterward he and Harkat left to hunt for the vampaneze. For the first night since coming to the city, I stayed behind — I had school in the morning, and needed to be fresh for it. As time progressed, I'd work out a schedule where I'd assist in the hunt for the killers, but the first few nights were bound to be difficult and we all agreed it would be for the best if I dropped out of the hunt for a while.

I got hardly any sleep. I was almost as nervous as I'd been seven years earlier, when awaiting the verdict of the Vampire Princes after I'd failed my Trials of Initiation. At least then I knew what the worst could be — death — but I had no idea what to expect from this strange adventure.

Mr. Crepsley and Harkat were awake in the morning to send me off. They ate breakfast with me and tried to act as though I had nothing to worry about. “This is a wonderful opportunity,” Mr. Crepsley said. “You have often complained of the life you lost when you became a half-vampire. This is a chance to revisit your past. You can be human again, for a while. It will be fascinating.”

“Why don't you go instead of me then?” I snapped.

“I would if I could,” he deadpanned.

“It'll be fun,” Harkat assured me. “Strange at first, but give it time and you'll fit in. And don't feel inferior: these kids will know ... a lot more about the school curriculum than you, but you are ... a man of the world and know things that they will... never learn, no matter how old they live to be.”