

CHAPTER 4

Standing above the red puddle and a ring of exploded broken glass was a man who looked far too buff to be dead.

“Filthy dogs.” He was snarling at Nicholas. “We must sustain ourselves by feasting of the scum floating on Lake Erie... and now we are allowing the retched mongrel dogs into our inner sanctums?”

“‘Friend’ isn’t the word for it.” Eddie muttered behind my back.

“Henry.” The tiny girl hissed. “That is enough.”

“I will not be silenced by a girl-child.” He bellowed. “You know I come on behalf of Marcus. He whose marks our Madre clearly carries.” He briefly gestured to a lovely woman with dark, intense eyes whose neck was a strange mass of multiple bite wounds. She was not a vampire, but her smell was no different than the rest of the undead around her. If she wasn’t already dying from her wounds she would be soon. Yet her face held a placid expression.

Solomon glanced briefly at Eddie.

Eddie grabbed me by the shoulder and started pulling me back toward the exit. I struggled for a second, but as the sounds of the outside crowd reappeared at my back, and the conversation began to drown out, I felt like I was already gone.

“Aren’t we going to help him?” I asked Eddie as a live band started playing.

“We only help Solomon when there’s a real fight... and that’s not a real fight.” Eddie said, clearly disappointed that the threat of violence wasn’t bigger. “That’s a pissing contest. Besides, Helena’s with Solomon. And she loves putting Henry in his place. Without Marcus to back him up, I doubt if Henry ranks as high as a Delta.”

“And what’s wrong with being a Delta?” asked a voice behind us. We turned to see Allen, a little worse for the wear, but still smiling like a salesman.

“They can’t keep their mouths shut for one.” Eddie said, not missing a beat.

“The car’s OK?” I asked. Allen smiled.

“The car’s fine. The police took our statements and I called for a tow truck.”

“What about the guy?” I asked, “Chuck?”

“Carl was let off with a warning. I convinced the officers that he was only a real danger to himself.”

“How did you pull that off?” I asked.

“It’s me.” Allen said proudly.

“You’ve got to teach me that.” I said, envious.

“Excuse me, sir?” a waiter, young and shaved fashionably bald, said as he came up to us, “There’s no smoking in here.”

“I’m with the private party.” Eddie said, gesturing to the door where Henry’s voice was starting to get particularly loud.

“There’s still no smoking,” the waiter said, still polite, but increasingly firm.

“Allen, what’s a Delta?” I asked. “And why is Henry one?”

“Henry’s here? I heard that Marcus was ill.”

“What do you mean ‘still no smoking?’” Eddie was asking besides us.

“That’s what I heard too.”

“That’s unfortunate. We’ve all been hoping that Henry wouldn’t get any more power in his Family. Things could get tricky if this is an indication of the future.”

“All of our patrons accept our policies sir,” the waiter was saying.

“Dammit man, do you know who’s in there?” Eddie yelled.

Allen managed to smack him even in a teeming crowd.

“Dammit Allen, I’m negotiating here!” Eddie yelled.

“Are you still calling it that?” Nicolas’ voice came.

Nicolas and Allen recognized each other, and got close enough to shake hands. As they pulled themselves close enough to hear each other talk there was a loud snarl and a sound like someone or something being thrown across the room with great force.

“Should we be worried?” Allen asked, yelling in my ear.

“Not at all. Helena’s in there.” Nicolas said.

Allen made an understanding noise. ‘Does this place have a smoking section?’

“For Solomon’s Beta and Delta? Of course.” Nicolas said. He made a welcoming gesture and started pushing his way to the back of the room. We followed close behind.

“Allen, what’s a Beta?” I asked.

No one heard me over the roar of the crowd. I followed them as they made their way to the back.

We found ourselves standing on the loading dock that overlooked the dark parking lot. It wasn’t anything more than a block of concrete that had some filthy poles for railings.

There was a girl there already, wearing a black tank top and jeans underneath a beat-up maroon double-breasted jacket. She was standing just out of the range of the one lone bulb over our heads. Her eyes were yellow, and she smelled the little funny, but she seemed normal. Not undead, in any case. If felt safer already.

I found myself wondering where she got her contacts. It was the brightest yellow I’d seen outside of a neon sign. And the tattoos covering her arms were impressive in the low light. I couldn’t see a hint of untouched skin.

I turned to see Eddie open up a new pack of cigarettes and, after taking one and lighting it, start to pass it around.

Allen, to my surprise, took one. I never knew Allen smoked. He used his breaks at work to have animated discussions with his broker on his cell phone. But even when sucking down smoke and tar he looked cooler than hell. He held his cig like a knife at a formal dinner nicer than anything I’d ever be invited to.

I looked over at Eddie who was smiling and muttering something to Nicholas. His cigarette was in a grip that made me think of a prison inmate at lunch who was expecting to get stabbed with a sharpened toothbrush.

Eddie hefted the open pack when it came back to him. He eyed the girl who was eyeing us. He extended the pack. She stepped forward into the light. Reached out a hand and took it.

They weren't tattoos. They were scales. The tank top showed off the milky-green iridescent scales that covered her arms and shoulders. They hadn't quite climbed up onto her face yet, but it wouldn't be long. Scales were scattered across the line of her jaw and her uncovered skin had turned green.

Her hands had long since stopped being human. But the long talons of her nails were painted with a bright blue nail polish. Black jelly bangles shimmered against her black leather wrist protectors as her hand dipped down into her pocket, feeling for her lighter.

Allen extended his lighter.

She bent over and leaned in.

From where I was standing it was a nice sight. If you ignored the scales, her tits weren't half bad.

"Tom, you were saying something about Deltas?" Allen asked.

When I tore my eyes away I realized the eyebrow Allen had raised was a bit too knowledgeable for my comfort. He knew exactly where I'd been looking.

"I don't understand what all the talk about Betas and Deltas are." I told him.

"Ah." He intoned. "It's very simple. It's the order of power each of us holds in the pack. Solomon's the leader, Eddie's his second in command, and I'm next in line and so on. So we're an Alpha, Beta and Delta respectively. Have you heard of the term 'Alpha Male' before?"

I had, but mostly when it referred to guys who were assholes. "But Solomon's... cool. He's a decent guy."

"You're confusing it with a Type -A personality. Alphas are the guys who take the pressure off, who handles things; they're the guys who run the show."

"So... Solomon's not the type to get angry, then?" I asked.

"I didn't say *that*, did I?"

"No... I guess—"

"Solomon's got a nasty side just like everyone else, and the last thing you want to be is on the bad side of it. Just do what he says. Don't push stupid shit."

"Is your pack really that hard to run with?" The girl asked before she took a long drag.

“Not at all my dear.” Allen grinned, instantly charming as hell. “Now, I have seen some Type-A Alphas, but Solomon’s not one of those. I have to say, if you get an Alpha who keeps things cool, you’ve got it made.”

“Even if you are a Delta?” I asked.

“Far as I can see a Delta’s the perfect place to be. You get all the fun of the show without any of the mess. Solomon’s got to fend off every two-bit power play, Eddie’s got to do the dirty work... I just sit back and wait for a chance to be useful. At least I’m not the Omega.”

“Sounds like you’ve got this all figured out,” the girl said, stepping in so that the three of us formed a triangle.

Allen grinned. “Well we are a rather nice group. Eddie excluded of course.”

“If you don’t mind me saying so,” the girl said, coyly, “I’ve heard some things you wouldn’t believe about your Beta.”

“I bet I would believe them my dear.” Allen said, “Knowing Eddie at least some of them have to be true.”

The door opened up and Solomon appeared.

“What’s the good word boss?” Eddie asked.

“Helena and I have talked. We’re going to escort her back home.”

“Without a car?” I asked.

Eddie snickered. “Yeah, I don’t think we can run that fast boss.”

“Our hostess says she will provide.” Solomon said, “And she does want to make amends for the state of Allen’s car. Here.”

Solomon produced a set of keys from his pocket and tossed them to Allen. As Allen turned them over in his hand I saw the logo of a car brand I couldn’t have begun to afford.

“How come Allen gets to drive?” Eddie asked.

“Because the goal is to return the car to Helena in one piece,” Solomon said. “Go. It’s parked in the parking structure near the John Knight center.”

Allen and Eddie did, with Eddie already trying to snatch the keys away from Allen.

Solomon put a calm hand on my shoulder. "How are you holding up?"

"Better. I think. I don't know where I would have been if Nicholas hadn't stepped in."

"That's right, you met Nicholas..." Solomon said, "What do you think of him?"

"Seems nice."

"He is." Solomon said, with a calm, warm smile.

"So, why did he become partners with Eddie?"

"Nicolas is Eddie's partner, now?" Solomon asked.

"That's what Eddie said." I told Solomon, "Well actually he said that he had no clue if they were working together or not... but they were talking a lot about business and clan disputes."

"Well, well." Solomon said thoughtfully. "That is good news."

"Why would someone like Nicholas hang out with someone like Eddie?" I asked.

"I can't tell you. It works whatever it is. And it's helped us several times in the past."

Nicholas opened up the door, as Helena's people began filing out onto the loading dock. Solomon took my arm and led me down the stairs.

"The girl?" I found myself saying, as I saw Helena appear wrapped in layers of black fur.

"Hmm?" Solomon said.

"The girl. Helena. Is she...well, is she dangerous?"

"Very." Solomon said.

I swallowed hard. "Maybe I should get out of here."

"Considering all that's happened tonight, it would be bad form not to see our hostess home." Solomon said.

"Solomon, I have to be at work in a few hours." I told him, "Couldn't you just drop me off?"

"You are one of us now." Solomon said, "You can't just leave. Relax. You will be at work on time. I told you that you would, and I'm a man of my word. I made no promises about how much sleep you would get before you left, though."

I surprised myself by growling, but Solomon seemed more amused than surprised.

I looked over at Nicholas and Helena. She smiled at me, showing off all of her teeth, including the particularly sharp ones. She left Nicholas' side, and made her way towards us, pulling the rest of her entourage with her.

“Solomon...” I said, starting to back up.

“Don't worry.” Solomon said, his calm hand steady on my shoulder, “I think all she wants is a formal introduction.”