

Cain had been watching them since they sloped into the club just before midnight, a pack of willow-thin boys and girls, dark with leather and ink, bristling with piercings. They draped themselves over the velvet sofas in the VIP section, seeming almost like a single organism. A sea anemone maybe. The way their limbs tangled and touched, the ubiquitous bored expression.

She stood out among them, like a neon tetra hiding in their waving mass of self-important tentacles. In second-skin leather leggings and a black t-shirt whose artfully torn holes displayed an intriguing puzzle of tattooed skin, she meant to blend in, but her eyes set her apart. Moss green, they darted around the room, taking everything in. She was new and trying hard not to let it show.

He wanted her like hurt.

“She's a peach, isn't she?” The voice purred in his ear, low and seductive, slipping under the bass thumping out of the speakers.

Cain glanced over his shoulder at a face he hadn't seen in years but knew as well as his own. Chiseled cheekbones and cruel black eyes were framed by a curtain of blue-black hair.

“This is my hunting ground, *Mace*.” He didn't hide his contempt for the name the shade had taken.

Mace ran his lurid pink tongue over the sharp points of his canines, grinning. “I thought we could share her. For old time's sake.”

Cain shook his head. “I don't do nostalgia. You should know that.”

Mace's smile faltered, just for a second. “Have it your way. But I'm taking her. I've been hunting her for days.”

“Not on my turf.” Cain held the other vampire in his stony glare.

Mace's smile widened as his eyes narrowed. "I wouldn't dream of it."

He hopped over the back of the sofa, landing beside Cain with the speed and grace of a cat. "She's got a *piéd a terre* in Chintown. Layers of peeling paint, rust in the enamel sink, white-washed windows. Shabby chic meets Goth. It's almost too perfect." He nodded his head toward the group. "Who knows. Maybe she'll bring a friend home. Two for the price of one." His eyebrows raised above his sly smirk.

Cain followed his gaze. One of the boys, a multitude of silver studs perforating his face, had insinuated his arm around the girl.

Cain glared at Mace, who smiled back, unfazed.

"Chinatown, if you remember," the wraith continued, "Is my territory. And she is my mark."

Cain watched the girl. If he closed his eyes, he could smell her, isolating her distinctive scent from all the others in the room. She was pure and untouched in all the ways that mattered. Drinking her blood would be like drinking from a mountain spring.

If she stayed with this pack of feral youths, they would drain the sweetness out of her, one sordid encounter at a time. And if he let Mace have her, he would drain more out of her than just her innocence. Mace was a manslayer, hunting just to kill, feeding off the pain he inflicted.

"What are you proposing?" Cain asked. The shade's eyes hadn't left Cain's face.

"I take the boy, my way," he tilted his head toward the group, a wicked glint lighting his eyes. "Then we take the girl, together." He reached a long-fingered white hand out to stroke Cain's face. "Your way."

Cain caught his wrist and forcibly removed the cold hand from his face. The two vampires

glared at each other. Mace was the first to look away. He nodded toward their prey. "Think fast. Looks like they're trying to make the last A train."

The boy had the girl by the hand and was leading her toward the exit. Cain's gaze lit on the twin globes of her buttocks, gleaming in their tight leather skin and swept up the curve of her spine to the nape of her neck, pale and vulnerable beneath her closely cropped hair. Perhaps sensing his eyes on her, she looked back over her shoulder. Their eyes connected.

Cain felt it like a punch to the solar plexus. In that instant, he made his decision.

"Fine," Cain said to Mace.

The vampire rubbed his hands together in undisguised relish. "Excellent."

Cain rose, his eyes still on the girl, who kept turning back to look at him as her conquest steered her into the dark stairwell that led to the street. "But After we take her, she's all mine. Clear?"

"Crystal, baby." Mace winked, heading for the door. "I lead," he whispered as they hit street level, a cold spring wind striking their faces like a slap.

Cain nodded in assent. This was Mace's game. He knew how to get results, fast.

"Brr. Colder than a witch's tit." Mace said, catching up to the couple, huddled together now against the cold. The youth glanced up, his eyes flat with suspicion that melted as he took in the pair's handsome faces and designer clothes.

"Yeah," he said, slowing down. The girl clutched his arm, looking uncertain. Then she saw Cain. She stopped. A slow, sweet smile blossomed on her perfect rosebud of a mouth.

"If you want to warm up, my friend's place is just over there." Mace tilted his head in the

direction of Cain's building.

“The Dakota?” the boy said, interest sparking in his dull eyes.

Cain nodded.

The boy was attractive enough, underneath all the hardware, but his eyes said he had seen it all and done it all too young. His smell was sickly sweet, like raw meat starting to spoil.

Turning back to Mace, the boy asked, “You looking to party?”

The vampire's face split into a wide, wicked grin. “Oh, yeah.” He took out his wallet, letting the boy's eyes linger on his platinum card and the thick wad of hundreds inside. Handing the boy his business card, he added, “Partying is my life.”

The girl read over his shoulder. “Mace Extreme: Event Wizard.” She giggled, and the sound was like the rippling of a virgin stream. Cain's core pulsed with desire.

Mace flicked a glance at him, and Cain knew he was feeling the same thing. Hunger and lust were hot in his eyes.

“Interested?” Mace asked the boy, his eyes dancing over the girl briefly, as if he didn't trust himself to look at her for long.

The boy pulled the girl in tighter, but kept his eyes glued to Mace. “You know it. Right, Claire?”

Claire. Cain turned the name over in his mind, reading the slide-show of emotions on the girl's face. Desire. Excitement. Uncertainty. Fear. “Beautiful name,” he said, capturing her gaze. “It means light in French.”

Claire nodded, mesmerized.

Cain felt Mace's hand clap him on the back. "You have to forgive Cain. Read a few too many Harlequin romances."

The boy laughed and Claire bit back a smile, lowering her gaze demurely. Cain ached to take her then and there, but he was a master of restraint.

In the elevator, Mace flirted shamelessly with the boy, touching his face, wrapping a sinuous arm around his shoulder. The boy took the attention as his due, only the growing bulge in his jeans showing he was in any way effected. Cain caught Claire averting her gaze.

"The view from the living room is something else," Cain said to distract her from the realization that she was in the wrong place with the wrong people. "It's why I got the place. I think you'll love it."

"Oh, yeah?" she said, looking into his eyes, tamping down her discomfort.

Silly girl, he thought. That's your instinct, telling you you're in danger. Listen to it. But he said, "You can see all the way to the Statue of Liberty. It's a slice of Manhattan. And at night, it's like a galaxy." He lowered his voice, so only she could hear him. "That's why you came to the City, isn't it? The macrocosm in the microcosm?"

Her eyes registered shock, but she quickly covered it. She was learning fast how to survive in this environment, he thought. "How do you know I'm not from here?" she asked.

He thought: Your innocence. Your naiveté. The scent of the loam-rich wheat-field that still lingers in your blood. But he said, "Everyone's from somewhere else in New York."

"Even you?" she asked, teasing.

The stark mountains of his homeland flashed through his consciousness, briefly. He moved closer to her, raising a hand to cup her cheek. "Even me."

Just then the elevator doors opened. Mace and the boy were the first out, their arms around each other, moving erratically, drunk with lust. Cain and Claire followed, their hands joined in a tentative knot.

“Shit,” Mace said, to Cain. “I’m out of darts.” His eyes were like two empty holes. His hunger had reached the point of no return. He needed to feed. Now. “Christian and I will go to the bodega down the street and get some.” Mace turned his gaze on his prey, a seductive leer on his lips. “You don’t mind keeping me company, do you?”

The boy glanced briefly at Claire and Cain, as if weighing his odds. He shook his head.

“Excellent,” Mace said, all but licking his lips. “I’ll make it worth your while.” He cast a surreptitious wink at Cain, too fast for the humans to register. “Don’t start the party without us,” he said, as the elevator doors closed. Given the state of Mace’s need, the boy would be dead in minutes, Cain knew, which was for the best, given the alternative. Mace liked to play with his food.

All morbid thoughts were pushed out of Cain’s head by Claire. Alone with her now, her scent, her body-heat, the rhythm of her pulse were dominant in his consciousness.

“Shall we?” he asked, tilting his head toward the door to his apartment.

Claire looked him boldly in the eye. “Sure.” Her gaze and posture radiated nonchalance, in contrast to the rapid tattoo of the pulse at her throat and her smile, flickering like a neon sign.

Cain turned the key in the lock and let the door swing inwards.

“Wow,” Claire said, stepping into the marble-floored hallway that opened onto the living room. The walls were painted a subdued mushroom so as not to compete with the canvases that covered them.

“Is that a real Pollock? And a de Kooning? Oh, Rothko!” She moving from one canvas to the

next, drinking them in with her eyes.

Cain nodded, moving closer to her. “1960..” he started

“Number 14,” Claire finished for him. “Can I touch it?”

Something in the tone of her voice ignited a fire in his loins. Innocent, yet...inquisitive. “You can touch anything you like,” he answered.

Biting her lower lip, Claire reached out a tentative hand. “Wow,” she said again. “I can die happy now.”

She gave Cain a sidelong glance and a sweet smile.

Cain felt a thrumming in his conscience at the unwitting irony of her statement. He hesitated for a moment, thoughts tumbling through his mind like monkeys on speed. I should tell her to go. Mace. I could keep her here until...No. It's too late. This is happening. He flashed his most disarming smile. “I've got another one in the bedroom.”

A laugh rippled up her throat. “Is that your line?”

Cain smiled. “Unfortunately, it only works with the arty types.”

She looked down at the toe of her motorcycle boot. “Oh, I doubt that.” She glanced at him from under her lashes. She started walking down the hall that led off the living room. Cain followed, watching the firm muscles of her thighs and ass, the luminous texture of the skin on her bare arms and neck, his need sharpening.

As Claire stepped into the dimly lit bedroom, he dared to put a guiding hand on her lower back. The heat of her skin beneath her thin t-shirt seared his palm. He breathed her in, luxuriating in the

exquisite torture of her proximity.

She shivered away from his touch. “Cold hands, warm heart?” she asked, forgetting for a moment that she was trying to be cool.

“You tell me,” he said, gazing down at her. Their eyes connected, and again, he felt that jolt to his core. *She's the one.*

“Okay,” she said, her eyes riveted to his. Slowly, she reached her hand out to touch his chest where his heart would be if he had one. At the last second, Cain grabbed it. Maintaining her gaze, he turned it over and brought her wrist to his lips.

The vital force pulsing beneath her skin made him dizzy. She inhaled sharply as he kissed her, his mouth soft and open against her throbbing vein.

“Well, well, well.” A voice behind him said. Mace’s voice.

Cain whipped his head around to see the shade leaning against the doorway. He peeled himself upright and moved toward them. Every fiber of his being radiated contentment. He was fed and ready to play.

“Where's Christian?” Claire asked, a twinge of uncertainty dancing in her eyes. She reached into her pocket for her phone and started dialing.

“He wasn't feeling well, all of a sudden,” Mace answered, walking steadily toward her. She backed away from him, holding the ringing phone to her ear, her eyes darting from Mace to Cain and back again.

Cain heard Christian's voice. Relief smoothed over Claire's face. It was her voice-mail.

“I, uh, I'm not feeling so hot.” He was breathing heavily, panting almost. He groaned. “I, mmm, I'm splitting. I'll call you.”

Cain narrowed his eyes. He could hear another sound, too low for human ears. A wet, rhythmic sound. He cut his eyes to Mace. A leer oozed its way across Mace's features.

“So,” Mace said, gently peeling Claire's fingers off the phone, “Satisfied?”

“Um,” Claire began, clearly unsure of this new twist in the evening. As if sensing her uncertainty, Mace backed off. Flopping down on the snowy duvet-covered bed, he leaned back on his elbows.

“Cain showing you his enormous piece?” He tilted his chin at the huge canvas that hung over the bed.

Momentarily disarmed, Claire laughed and nodded.

Mace shook his head, laughing with her, every gesture deliberate. “You've got to get some new moves, man.” He winked at Cain, who gave him a cold glare in return.

Ignoring Mace, Cain turned to Claire who stood with her arms crossed, casting furtive glances at the door.

“Claire.” He said her name like a caress. She met his gaze. Instantly, her defensive posture dropped. The flickering smile returned.

“What's your death row meal?”

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Mace cringe and shake his head in disbelief.

But Claire laughed. “You mean, like my last supper?”

“I think it says a lot about a person.” Cain shifted his head in Mace's direction without breaking eye contact with Claire. “Mace?”

The shade answered without hesitation. “Chateau Neuf de Pape 1973 and a porterhouse. Bloody.” A sinister grin split his face. “What's that say about me, Mr. Psychology Today?”

“That you're more than a touch pretentious.”

Claire laughed and Cain allowed himself to look away from her long enough to flash Mace a sardonic grin.

The gleam in Mace's eyes dulled, though his smile didn't diminish. “Touché. Yours?”

“Venison stew,” he said, thinking back to his actual last supper, though he hadn't known it at the time, “with fresh bread, still warm from the oven, and aching cold water, scooped straight from the spring with my hand.”

Claire nodded her approval, green eyes twinkling.

Mace yawned, extravagantly. “Solid. Down to earth. Humble,” he sneered. “In your Prada suit, with your million dollar art, at your exclusive address.”

Cain ignored him. “Claire?” he asked, softly.

She ran a hand through her fine, short hair.

“Well, I'm a vegetarian, so...”

Mace issued a derisive bark of a laugh.

“A salad of peppery field greens with warm goat cheese and ripe raspberries,” she said. “And

some of your bread.” The tremulous smile grew bolder.

He wanted to kiss that smile, to taste those lips, to tilt back her chin and then...

“To drink?” he asked.

She considered for a moment. “Prosecco.”

Cain smiled. “Earthy, wild and...” he searched for the right adjective, “effervescent.”

He was rewarded with her giggle and a tentative hand on his arm.

Mace snorted. Cain glanced over at him. He was leaning on his elbows, his legs suggestively wide. “Are we finished with the pop psychology portion of the evening's entertainment? Ready to get on with the games?” He ran the tip of his tongue along his upper lip, as his eyes traveled the length of Claire's body.

She looked at Cain. He could see the pulse in her throat speeding up. He leaned in close.

“Trust me?” he asked.

She searched his eyes for a moment. Then she nodded.

“Wait here,” he said.

“Yes, wait right here,” Mace added patting the bed beside him.

Cain cast the other vampire a warning glare before striding out of the bedroom to the kitchen.

His fridge was next to bare, so he wouldn't be able to deliver on the goat cheese or greens, but the Prosecco was another matter. He wrapped his hand around the cold neck of the bottle and grabbed a couple of Baccarat flutes.

When he returned to the bedroom, Claire hadn't moved, but Mace was beside her. He had taken off his shirt and seemed to be trying to persuade Claire to do the same. "What happened to I'll show you mine if you show me yours?" he purred, his index finger tracing the skin beneath one of the tears in her shirt.

"Mace," Cain hissed a warning.

Claire and Mace looked at him simultaneously. Her eyes flooded with relief, his, amusement.

"I'm just so curious," Mace continued, moving on to another circle of brightly inked flesh. "What *is* this?" He looked at Claire now, the smile on his lips widening. "And what kind of girl voluntarily submits to that kind of pain?"

A flush rose to Claire's cheeks. She stepped away from Mace and, looking Cain boldly in the eye, pulled her t-shirt over her head.

She wasn't wearing a bra and her small breasts were high and round, their nipples the same pink as her lips. "I'll have some of that," she said, nodding toward the Prosecco. "Please," she added, before saying over her shoulder to Mace, "Satisfied?"

"Oh. Not yet," he answered under his breath, stepping closer to run his fingers over her back. "Cain, check it. She's got more serious art on her back that you have on your walls. Turn around, Claire." He said her name like a dirty word, his eyes glinting.

Claire gulped down her glass of wine and turned her back to Cain.

The tattoo started below the waist of her pants and extended up to her shoulders, spanning the entire width of her narrow back. Cain couldn't resist. He had to see it all. Wrapping his arms around her, he slid his hands under the waistband of her leggings. She shivered at his touch, but didn't try to

stop him. Though her pulse was racing, he knew she was committed now. She wouldn't back down.

“Yes, let's see it all,” Mace said, moving next to Cain as he slid her leggings down.

She stepped out of her legging, standing before the two vampires, naked, as they stared at what represented hours spent under the punishing burn of the needle.

Cain ran his hands from her shoulders down to her waist and over the juicy peach of her buttocks. “Diego Rivera's *Creation*,” he said, remembering the musty smell of the university hall that was home to the original. “Incredible.”

“It is something,” Mace agreed, slipping an arm around Cain's shoulder. He trailed one long finger from the nape of Claire's neck slowly down her spine. “But I have to say that this side,” he spun her around to face them, “is equally arresting.”

Keeping his arm around Cain, he gripped the hair at the back of her head and pulled her roughly toward them. Her closeness, the supple heat of her skin and her cool sweet scent were intoxicating. Cain wrapped his arm around her and pressed his open mouth to her jugular, feeling her pulse beating against his lips.

Mace released his grip on Cain's shoulder, stepping aside so that Cain and Claire were chest to chest. Cain slid his tongue up her neck to her lips and found them open and receptive. He gripped her silky hair and kissed her deeply, feeling her tongue soft and mobile in his mouth. Mace was behind him, tugging his shirt out of his pants. He heard the sound of buttons pinging off the floor as Mace ripped the shirt open, but he was lost in the delirium of kissing Claire, using all his self-control not to let his canines slice into the soft flesh of her tongue.

Claire's hands seared the skin of his waist, her fingers sliding down under his waistband. Mace's voice was a mocking whisper in his ear. “Slow down, Romeo. Let me have some.” He had one hand on

Cain's bare back and one hand on Claire's. His mouth moved from Cain's ear to Claire's neck as he insinuated himself between them.

Cain reluctantly backed off, watching Mace slide his tongue down the center of Claire's body to kneel at her feet. Claire's eyes were closed, her head tilted back. Her entire body seemed to throb with life, with blood.

The muscles in Mace's back rippled as he gripped her naked cheeks and licked between her legs. Her thighs were pale, covered with a light dusting of blonde fuzz. She shivered and moaned, her hands caressing the smooth warm flesh of her own torso. Cain felt his need to take her, to taste her, reaching the breaking point.

“Now,” he said to Mace, moving beside the couple.

Mace looked up at him, the tip of his pink tongue still flicking at Claire's slit. She cried out, bucking her hips and clutching her breasts, and a sly smile spread over Mace's lips.

“No,” he said.

Rage flooded Cain's body. Fueled by his hunger, he gripped Mace by his thick black hair, pulled him up and flung him against the wall. Claire fell back onto the bed, stunned.

Mace peeled himself off the wall and slowly walked toward Cain as if nothing had happened. He smiled, but there was menace in his eyes.

“You want to play rough, Cain?”

The two vampires locked eyes. Out of his peripheral vision, Cain noticed Claire inching back toward the headboard. Sensing her fear, he felt the rage that had overtaken him ebbing. This hesitation was all Mace needed. He lunged, suddenly, like a panther springing on a gazelle.

Only, it wasn't Cain that he pounced on. It was Claire.

He scooped her up as easily as if she were a child, pressing her back to his chest and wrapping his arms around hers. She struggled in vain. Cain knew Mace's arms might as well have been iron bands.

Holding her like this, he dropped to the bed, leaning lazily against the headboard. His gaze held Cain's as he smiled, running the razor sharp point of his canine up Claire's neck.

She cried out in pain and surprise. Miniscule drops of blood beaded along the thread-fine cut. The hot sweet smell of her blood sent a wave of almost over-powering hunger washing over Cain. He snarled. His instincts demanded that he tear her from Mace's grasp and rip into her like a pit-bull.

"Cain!" she said, and the pleading in her voice was like a reproach. She looked small and fragile in Mace's arms. With enormous effort, he reigned himself in.

"We had a deal," he said to Mace, through clenched teeth. "My way, remember?"

"You had a deal?" Claire's voice was quiet but surprisingly firm. Her eyes gripped Cain's.

Mace laughed, mirthlessly. "Oh, yes. Naïve little girl. We stalked you. Hunted you." He ran his tongue over the thin cut he had made. "Mmm." He shuddered with pleasure. His eyes glowed with awakening blood-lust. "Your little friend was a nice appetizer. But sweetheart, you're the main course."

"You're vampires." It wasn't a question. Her eyes still held Cain's and he was surprised to find no fear in this revelation.

"You knew?" Cain asked. He was slowly closing the distance between them. The scent of her blood became stronger the closer he got. He dug his fingernails into his palms to keep himself focused.

“I hoped,” she said.

Cain froze. Even Mace let his mask of cocky indifference slip.

Though her smile trembled on her lips, her voice got stronger as she spoke. “See, when our eyes met across the club, I knew. You were my deliverance.” She twisted her head to look back at Mace. “Let me go,” she said, with quiet authority.

Dumfounded, Mace released her.

She stood up, wrapping her arms around Cain. Her blood-scent pounded at his senses like a jackhammer. “I’m ready,” she sighed, nestling into him, “I’m ready to die.”

He held her, luxuriating in the sweet torment of her skin hot against his, her heart pounding against his chest, so close that it could have been his own. In all his years as a blood-drinker, he had never had anyone offer themselves up to him like this before. Despite his efforts to be gentle and merciful, even to the bitter dregs of humanity he tended to feed on, there had always been the sour tang of fear tainting their blood.

“Shit,” Mace said, rising from the bed. His eyes were dull, like a child whose toy has just broken. “Talk about a buzz-kill,” he continued, grabbing his t-shirt off the floor and pulling it over his head. He started for the door but stopped beside Claire and Cain to run the back of his hand over her cheek and down her naked back. “Shame. I had big plans for you.” His eyes met Cain's. “The tat threw me. I was going with sadomasochistic art-lover, not self-sacrificing holy roller.” He winked at Claire and turned his back on the couple, sauntering toward the door.

“I guess I’ll try to find your little friend. He can’t have gotten too far in the condition I left him.” he said, pausing in the doorway and looking over his shoulder. “I think he’ll prove more...amusing.” The cruel glint was back in his eyes.

Claire shivered, but didn't break eye contact.

And then, he was gone.

Claire looked up at Cain, her eyes wide and trusting. "I'm ready," she said, again.

Tears sprang to her eyes, but she didn't resist as he laid her down on the duvet and stretched himself out beside her. Cain ran a gentle hand over her down her neck to her small, firm breasts. He kissed the tears that were leaking onto her cheeks and felt his need sharpening.

"Tell me," he said, nuzzling into her neck.

"It was my little sister, Sarah," she began, as Cain licked at the wound Mace had inflicted. Oxidized though it was, her blood was as sweet as he had imagined. He shuddered in ecstasy, widening the cut as he pressed his tongue into it.

"There are, were eight of us, but she's," Claire gulped, "She *was* my favorite. Not the sharpest knife in the drawer, but so sweet. She'd give you her last gummy bear."

Her tears were in full flow now, her chest heaving. Cain kissed his way down the center of her body, resting his head against her heart for a moment to listen to the luscious liquid sound of her blood pumping.

"I was supposed to be watching her, but then my boyfriend came over and..." she took a deep shuddering breath.

"We wanted to be alone. So I said, 'Sarah, go outside and play for bit.' and of course, she just went. She was so good. No arguments. But she had a thing for water. I should have known she'd head straight for the creek out back. She always did. But then, I was always with her..." Claire trailed off, letting the sobs wrack her body.

Cain licked the underside of her breast, feeling the blood pulsing just below the surface of her skin. He slid his hands down the sides of her body to her firm, ripe buttocks, then back up to her breasts.

“I tried to atone for what I did. The tattoo. Fasting and prayer. Service. But nothing stops the voice in my head screaming 'Guilty!'. Nothing will. Only death.”

As abruptly as the tears began, they finished. Claire wiped her eyes and shook her head as if to clear it of any lingering doubts. She looked down at Cain, who was kneeling between her legs with his hands on her naked thighs.

“Do it,” she said.

Holding her gaze, Cain unzipped his fly and slid her up onto his erect member. She closed her eyes, sinking onto him. With his hands on her waist, Cain rocked her up and down, sliding in and out of her, savoring her scent, her heat, her closeness. Then, as her heart quickened and she tightened around him convulsively, he sliced into her jugular.

She cried out. A short, sharp gasp. And then as her blood flowed into him, sweet and rich as fresh cream, she was silent.

Cain drank deeply, feeding on her with all his senses: The warmth of her skin, the smell of her sex and her sweat and her blood, the clean, earthy taste of her. And then, at the height of his pleasure, he stopped.

He slid out of her and tenderly lay her now limp body on the bed. Zipping up his pants, he leaned over her, pressing his ear to her chest. Her heartbeat was faint, but regular.

He let her rest. When she awoke, perhaps she would be angry that she was not dead. But he had

all eternity to convince her he had made the right choice.