

**ERIC:****THE ALLEY**

**S**omewhere in the middle of my rant it occurred to me that I'd killed whoever it was I'd been yelling at, so arguing was no longer important. I looked down at my victim's broken headless body and winced at the unnatural odor of rapidly rotting flesh. It never smells right to me when a vampire dies. I've always chalked it up to bowels. If you don't eat, you don't shit, and death just doesn't smell right without it.

Whoever this guy was, he'd obviously been a Master vampire, because Drones and Soldiers don't get the quick rot treatment. They turn to dust and blow away . . . which smells even less natural. And if he'd been a Vlad like me, he'd still be kicking.

## 2 ♦ STAKED

I glanced around the dingy back alley where we'd been arguing and couldn't remember exactly where I was, what we'd been fighting about, or what I'd done with the guy's head. From the way the neck muscles had been ripped, I was guessing I'd torn it off. If he'd been human, I would have been soaked in blood, but vampires don't bleed easily; my fingers were barely damp.

Out of curiosity, I went looking for What's His Name's head and found it lying next to the Dumpster at the back of the alley. I figured I ought to see if I recognized him. In spite of the unnaturally rapid decay, he looked vaguely familiar, like I might have seen him around town. Other than that his face didn't ring any bells.

A homeless man was curled up against the wall of the alley, shaking like a leaf and staring at me. I tucked Dead Guy's head under my arm and slipped the bum a twenty, mostly to screw with his mind, but also because I was sorry he'd seen whatever it was he'd seen. Besides, the homeless guy kind of looked like Alex Trebek and *Jeopardy!* is a damned good show.

"Do you want me to tell the police somethin' in particular?" asked the bum.

"Don't talk to me, you dirty little fucker," I snarled. I flashed my fangs at him and let my eyes do the whole glowing red bit. "I'm not paying you to do anything. The body will burn up when the sun hits it. Tell the cops whatever you want. If they believe you at all, they're well paid to do the right thing. This is Void City, sweetheart."

Norms don't notice the supernatural here unless they

aren't really normal. The spell that hangs over this city doesn't work on crazies, though. In this case I suspected the bum might remember what actually happened rather than thinking he'd seen a mugging or a gang fight or something.

I can't see magic, but I know that's how the spell is supposed to work. Your average Joe or Jane will forget the undead, the werewolves, even the demons that roam Void City and call it home . . . or sometimes they remember it wrong, their memories haphazardly replaced or jumbled by the spell. To see vampires and remember it later, you have to be crazy, be supernatural yourself, or be part of the scene, focused on being "in" with the undead crowd.

The cops all work for some high society fang I've never met and have no interest in meeting. I forget his name. If the police in his pocket have to cover up your crimes, you get a bill in the mail or a demand via phone from Captain Stacey with the VCPD. Everybody calls it the fang fee, because vampires get hit with the most of them. It's just one of the extra headaches of being a vampire, right alongside having to drink blood, staying away from holy objects, avoiding sunlight. . . .

Sunlight. I looked at my watch and cursed angrily. You'd think a vampire could remember to be in by sunrise, but my time sense has always sucked. Dropping the vamp's head and ignoring the bum, I dashed for my car only to see the driver's side door already glowing cheerily with the first lovely rays of dawn. I stopped for a moment in the shade of the alley to watch the sun's reflection in my Hummer's windshield. I used to love the sun. I still do, but now she doesn't like me

so much. Which makes her not that much different from any number of women I dated back during my living years.

I strolled back down the alley and glared disapprovingly at the bum. In the increasing illumination I could see him much better, and he didn't look a damn thing like Alex Trebek. "You could have told me how close to sunrise it was," I complained.

The bum smiled, and began to grow fur.

It rippled across his body, fingertips first, in a wave so fast the brown hair breaking the skin made little musical tinkling sounds like a giant rainstick. In the movies, the transformation always looks painful, but the bum's eyes rolled back in his head, eyelids fluttering in what looked more like pleasure than pain.

"If I'd have done that, it would've been a fair fight, dead boy." He growled, his skeleton distending with a sound like a hundred knuckles popping all in order, smallest to largest. The human teeth fell out of his muzzle as it lengthened, replaced by a mouthful of sharp pointy teeth. The better to blah blah blah me with.

"If you put those under your pillow, does the tooth fairy still pony up?" I asked.

"She pays more for vampire fangs," he retorted.

What a pistol, that guy! I was laughing even as I picked up the Dumpster and emptied its contents over his head. Two more dead vamps rolled out to join No-Name. Their bodies weren't like Headless Guy's. They were little more than skeletons, the quick rotting flesh having bubbled away, leaving only a thin layer of gray scum. The bones had been

gnawed on; the rib cages were splintered, gaping open where their hearts had been ripped out. They stunk even worse than Headless Guy did.

Normal animals won't touch vampire remains, which left Werewolf Bum the obvious culprit. I'd have guessed even a low-level Master to be equal to one werewolf, so either this guy'd had help or he was really something special.

The werewolf launched himself from beneath the garbage, sending gouts of filth into the air and scattering refuse everywhere. The dead vamps' peculiar odor problem ceased to be an issue. Now the whole alley smelled like human waste of all types, foreign and domestic. I smiled, though. After all, Wolfy had to have a much more acute sense of smell than me. Heh.

"Damn it!" he roared, then sneezed pathetically and swatted at his nose.

I've always had trouble taking werewolves seriously. They all look like one of Ray Harryhausen's stop-motion creature effects to me; you know, fake looking. I keep expecting Sinbad to show up and pretend to duel with them, like he did with the skeletons in *Sinbad and the Eye of the Tiger*. Normally I could probably take on four or five of them. This guy had no chance. I was still thinking that when Wolfy sank his fangs into my shoulder. The Dumpster fell backward out of my hands. He should have bitten my head or my neck; he wouldn't get another shot.

Time seemed to slow as I reached up and grabbed the werewolf's jaws, forcing them apart until I felt the joint give. Then I let go and rolled backward, coming up beneath the

falling Dumpster, and catching it before it landed. It always makes me feel like a superhero when my vampire speed kicks in. Some vamps are able to use that speed all the time, but mine has always been sporadic for some reason.

I knew that I should kill Wolfy, but I really wasn't interested. Werewolves tend to stick together. Kill one and you might wind up fighting the whole pack, or worse. Besides, I didn't care about the other two vamps he'd killed. Wolf Bum was just doing what came naturally to him, so if I could, I'd let him go with a warning. I swung the Dumpster in an arc and knocked him into the air with it.

Time sped up again. I watched the blood spurt from his jaws, splattering when he hit the wall of the alley with a wet cracking noise. Bones had broken when he landed. Some of them sounded important. My twenty-dollar bill hit the ground and I dropped the Dumpster to pick it up, the crash of metal on concrete reverberating in my ears.

Wolfy was still breathing, but he was down for the count. With a grimace, I walked over and tucked the cash into his hand, then added another twenty to it. His jaw was really going to hurt if it healed that way and had to be re-broken. Adding a third twenty, I shook my head.

"Walk away," I told him. "You gave it a good try."

At least the buildings on either side of me were tall enough to keep most of the alley safe from the sun, but not for long. I had to get out of here somehow. I ripped off the lid of the Dumpster and dropped the bin down over myself. "God, this stinks," I complained.

The front page of the *Void City Echo* was stuck to one

wall of the Dumpster. I could make out a headline about the decrease in crime, the record drop in the murder rate on East Side. It was bullshit, of course. There's a reason the paper is called the *Echo*. It's a fang rag, heavily influenced by vampires who want to keep Void City's human populace fat and happy. On the plus side, the captions jogged my Swiss cheese memory and I suddenly remembered where I was, and for that matter, which alley I was in. My club wasn't far from here.

I put my hands on the brownish sludge caking the walls of the Dumpster and felt it squish between my fingers as I began to push my makeshift sunblock toward the end of the alley.

Tabitha was going to find me so appealing when I got back to the club. The thought of her pretty little nose turned up in disgust brought a smile to my lips. A wet clump of refuse fell from the Dumpster's upturned bottom, slapping me messily across my hairline. "Shit!" If it wasn't, it certainly smelled like it. I wiped whatever it was from my face, leaving a trail of brown sludge in its place.

I put my hands back on the Dumpster wall and began to push, leaving long scratches in the road as I went. The sound of metal on asphalt was earsplitting, but I picked up speed anyway. The strip club was only three blocks away and all I could think about was washing this shit off and making Tabitha help. Tabitha was one of a long line of human girlfriends I'd had. There were always girls willing to do anything a vampire might want as long as they thought there was a chance they might get immortality out of it.

My Dumpster-pushing progress came to a sudden halt as I slammed into my Hummer. It was new; only a couple of weeks old. My car alarm started going off. It was the last straw. The next thing I knew, I was punching holes through the Dumpster with my bare hands. It came apart like tissue paper. It was all very satisfying until I caught fire. Note to self: The big burning ball of gas in the sky is the sun.

I walked back into the alley, rolled on the ground, and beat my head against the wall to put out the remaining flames. Then I checked on Wolfy. He was still unconscious, so I pulled out my cell phone and called my club.

Roger answered the phone. "How refreshing! Did you actually remember the phone number or did you have to look it up?" He sounded tired and angry, as if he'd answered the phone only because he'd recognized the name on the caller ID. I decided to let it slide. After all, Roger needed more sleep than I do and he was my best friend. I also needed a ride.

"Remembered," I said.

"Thank heavens!" Roger's voice dripped with sarcasm. "It's Eric," he called to someone else on the other end. "Safe and sound, our lost little lamb. We were all so worried about you." In the background I heard a woman let out one scornful "Ha!" I ignored it.

"I'm three blocks away, in the alley at Thirteenth Street and Fifth Avenue. Bring the party van around to pick me up."

"Sun's up, pal. I can't come get you," he said more seriously. "I'll send Candice over."

Candice is the kind of golden-hearted stripper other strippers pretend to be. She's working on her nursing de-

gree, and if I were still human I'd be all over her. As it is, I just pay for her college and watch her dance naked in the club. And, okay, sometimes I pretend I'm with her when I'm with Tabitha. It's just better for all involved.

"I smell pretty bad. Is Lillian still around?" I asked. Lillian had come in late three days in a row, just in time for the evening rush. If she thought early afternoons were shit duty, I'd show her shit duty.

"Yes," Roger answered, laughing. "Don't want to smell bad in front of your little groupie?"

"Lillian's more deserving," I said. "Send her over, then tell Talbot he's going to need to get the van cleaned up after we're done with it."

Roger hung up and I waited for the van, admiring my handiwork on the Hummer. From the damage, I must have really picked up some speed before impact. I took a perverse joy in having demolished the shiny new SUV. Roger had talked me into buying it, but to be honest, I hated the thing. I'm only comfortable in my Mustang. It's old, but so am I, and we both have plenty of miles left in us.

A few minutes later, the party van rounded the corner, screeching to a halt just inches into the shade. Lillian glared at me through the windshield, bleary-eyed through her half-removed makeup. She looked really pissed. As I walked toward the van, I found out the hard way that the werewolf had been playing possum for the last few minutes. I'd never known what it was like to be picked up by the ankles and slammed face-first into a brick wall. The experience isn't much to write home about.

He swung me back around to repeat the process and I felt time begin to slow down once more. I was giving Wolfy too many chances to kill me. I'm pretty damn hard to wipe out, but I supposed he could get lucky. After all, he'd killed those other two vamps somehow.

I bent backward at an angle usually reserved for circus acrobats and grabbed his jaw. He would have whimpered if he'd had the time. The jaw had healed broken, each portion pointed in opposite directions at odd angles. I re-broke it for him and slammed it shut on his lolling tongue.

As time shifted back to normal, he screamed. It was part pain, part fear; a real little-girl scream. He dropped me, and I rolled to the ground and came up facing him. Wolfy smelled scared. I guess he finally realized the first round hadn't been a fluke and the little five-foot-ten bastard he was up against actually could kick his ass up and down the alley. He held up both paws and backed away from me. My twenties had scattered across the alley, mixing like dried leaves with the trash. For some reason, it pissed me off.

The edges of my vision began to blur. It happens sometimes when I get really angry. The werewolf tried to say something despite his mangled tongue, but I couldn't quite make it out. It was too late for talk; I was too far gone to rein the anger in.

The next thing I knew, I was knee-deep in werewolf, shoving bloody twenty-dollar bills into my jeans. His chest had been cracked open like an oyster and gutted. I was standing where his organs ought to have been, but they were scattered about the alley like mismatched socks. I never remember what happens when I'm really mad. I black out.

I couldn't decide whether the scene would be more or less disturbing when the sun rose high enough to fill that portion of the alley and his corpse turned human. A dead werewolf reverts to human form in the light of day. Too bad it doesn't do the same to live lycanthropes. Part of his stomach was under my left shoe, the bile already staining it beyond recognition. At least the blood had washed some of the garbage off. Lillian, her face contorted in disgust, climbed out of the van, opened the back, and threw me a towel.

Sometimes being a vampire is truly fucked up. If you don't believe me, ask the poor vamp I'd killed in the alley earlier. I couldn't remember why the hell I'd killed him, much less why we'd been arguing. For all I knew, it was about football. Definitely fucked up.