

LUKE IRONTREE & THE LAST VAMPIRE WAR

Book 0 - The Centurion Immortal

Book 1 - Dark Fangs Rising* - March 22, 2022

Book 2 - Dark Fangs Raging* - April 19, 2022

Book 3 - Dark Fangs Descending* - May 17, 2022

Book 4 - Blood Empire Reborn* - June 14, 2022

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DARK FANGS RISING

LUKE IRONTREE & THE LAST VAMPIRE WAR

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DARK FANGS RISING

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Dark Fangs Rising

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To Amy

*Your tireless support and all your work and advice are the reason this book
exists*

AUTHOR'S NOTES

Pronunciation: Latin names and words are mentioned throughout the book and are intended to be read with the classical Latin pronunciation. For instance, “c” is always pronounced hard, like a “k.” “U” is always a short “oo” sound. “V” typically sounds like a “w.” If you wish to go deeper, here's a link from [Loyola University of Chicago](#).

Lucius – Loo-kih-oos

Silvanius – Sihl-wahn-ih-oos

Ferrata – Fehr-rah-tah

Cassius – Cahs-sih-oos

Anachronisms: It's nearly impossible to write historical settings without some anachronisms, especially when you're writing scenes set nearly 2,000 years in the past. Those used are done so intentionally for the purpose of story telling and to convey sentiments that would be recognizable to people then and now. Also, there are vampires.



ONE



LUKE'S PREY stumbled in front of him; the weight of the intoxicated woman slung over the vampire's shoulder made him clumsy. With all the vamp's attention on the drunk woman, he had no idea what other dangers lurked in the night. The vampire maneuvered his impaired victim into the shadow of a massive statue of a woman kneeling, one of her metal hands reaching down while the other grasped a trident. Rain drizzled over the statue's body and down her arm, streaming off her outstretched fingers onto the street below. Luke reached over his shoulder into the folds of his hood, ensuring his sword's handle remained unobstructed by the damp cloth, then returned his hand to his side.

"Excuse me, sir. Could you spare a moment? I seem to be lost. Can you point me in the right direction?" Luke asked.

The overly polite and formal tone should mark him as an easy target. A bit of buzzed slur added just the right spice to Luke's charade. He distractedly scratched at his overgrown, scruffy beard. He hadn't cared enough to trim it since he'd returned from his trip to Belgium last spring. The vamp, clad in a stylish jacket, hefted the woman against the wall.

Luke waited for the man to turn around. What Luke didn't expect

was to see a woman disentangling herself from her victim to deal with Luke. Most vampires tended to be male. Without the support of the woman, the drunk slumped forward, momentum stopped by the wall. The vamp strode toward him. Luke wasn't sure how he'd misidentified his target, but he adjusted his plan as the short, dark-haired, white woman looked him over. Her expression went from annoyed to predatory to pleasantly helpful in the blink of an eye. If Luke was as drunk as he was feigning, he'd have missed it.

"Certainly!" She casually approached Luke, walking slowly with a small smile on her face. "What are you looking for?"

When she was close enough to see Luke's unsteady stance, the predatory gleam returned to her eyes. As oblivious as she was to her surroundings—letting Luke follow her and missing that his drunkenness wasn't genuine—she must be a young vamp.

Luke, dressed in dark colors—a black hoodie, baggy faded jeans, and black combat-style boots, ran his right hand through his long, dark, slightly damp hair and left it casually resting on the back of his neck as if scratching an itch. "Um, I'm not sure... I'm staying at a hotel near here, but I seem to be lost."

"Fortunately, you ran into me," the vampire said, her lips parting into a carnivorous grin.

"What's—what's wrong with your teeth?"

Needle-sharp fangs descended from her top teeth, her grin growing even more feral. She tilted her head slightly to the side. "Oh, these? In a moment, you'll forget you ever saw them."

Luke feigned a nervous chuckle and let his hand slide down into his hood to grip the well-worn handle of his gladius. Sheathed on his back, the gladius was twenty-five inches of viciously sharp Toledo steel alloyed with a bit of silver. The scabbard was angled toward his right shoulder and was open except for the last eight inches that covered the tip of the blade and the snap band at the top that held it in place, allowing for easy, quick draws.

His new friend walked closer, turned toward Luke's left side, and raised her arm as if to put it around Luke's shoulders so she could more easily guide Luke to his destination—her dinner plate.

Luke grabbed the vampire's arm and spun the creature around so

her back was in front of him, keeping her fangs away from his more vulnerable spots. He pulled his gladius from its sheath and brought it down through the woman's leather clad right elbow.

"WHAT THE FUCK, MAN!" The creature whirled around as black blood splattered in an arc from her stump. Her eyes glowed red, all traces of humor disappearing from her face. "We could have done this the easy way, but now you're going to feel every moment."

A wound that would have downed a howling barbarian had merely pissed her off. The vampire crouched and flexed her remaining hand, nails extending into nasty looking claws. She launched a series of clumsy swipes at Luke's neck and torso he easily side stepped. With each subsequent miss, her rage grew, fueling her speed, but not her skill.

Luke snorted in amusement, eliciting a growl of fury from the one-armed vampire. She finally landed a swipe that cut into the cloth covering Luke's chest. Her claws screeched against hard steel. Her momentary look of triumph quickly morphed into confusion.

Luke'd had enough. He waited for the next awkward swipe, letting the vamp's rage and momentum carry her past Luke as he spun and brought the blade down on the vamp's left shoulder, relieving her of her other arm. Luke kicked her in the back of her legs, sending her crashing to the ground. The creature's rage turned to whimpering as she tried to push herself off the ground with her bloody, oozing stump. She only managed to slip and slide, landing on her face. Luke put a foot on the vampire's butt to keep her on the ground as he reached under the waistband at the back of his hoodie. He flipped the catch holding the rudis in place and withdrew it from its scabbard.

The rudis, a gladius made of wood, was a piece of art. Gleaming, razor-sharp steel lined the cutting edges and point while intricate designs made of silver filigree covered the wooden blade. The wood itself was a warm, deep honey gold intermixed with rich brown and dark brown hardwood with a pattern that highlighted the wood's grain. Luke flicked his right wrist, and the steel sword sliced into the vamp's leather jacket between the shoulder blade and the spine.

"My coat!" she whimpered. The blood was slowing to a trickle, her stumps already sealing.

"I already cut both sleeves off. What's one more rip?" With that, Luke plunged the rudis through the cut he'd just made and felt the blade scrape along the vampire's scapula, backbone, and ribs until it found the heart. As he knelt over her body, Luke rested his forehead on the pommel of the rudis, whispering an incantation he'd said more times than he could remember. The silver filigree began to glow with a pure, white light, slithering down the silver into the vampire's body and then back up again to disappear into Luke's forehead. The corpse went rigid, and steam rose where the silver touched it. Once he removed the rudis from the vampire's body, the corpse gradually deflated and dissolved into a viscous reddish-black goo.

"Damn it," Luke muttered, shaking his head. "A new vampire. All goo and no go. I thought her moves seemed weak."

The sound of retching reminded him he wasn't alone. He turned to see the vamp's intended victim on all fours, heaving up everything he'd consumed that night. Luke scanned around for something to clean his blades on. The vamp's clothes were out as the erstwhile young lady of the fang was currently drenching her trendy ensemble in the rapidly spreading goo that had been her body. He looked down, pursing his lips.

"Fucking vamp ruined my favorite hoodie." He set down the rudis and slid the blade of the gladius into the belly pocket. Gripping the blade through the rain damp fabric, he slid it clean, then resheathed it. He treated the rudis in the same manner and put it away. With the weaponry stowed, Luke slowly walked toward the man.

"W-what's wrong with me?"

"It appears you drank too much."

"Did she drug me? Was she going to rob me?"

"Something like that," Luke replied as he slowly approached, trying not to spook him. Luke followed the man's gaze to what remained of his would-be date slowly liquefying on the sidewalk and running into the gutter. He retched again.

"Pl-pl-please don't hurt me," he whimpered between dry heaves.

"I'm not going to hurt you." He pointed at the slick of vampire goo. "She was going to."

The glamour drunk man nodded.

Luke pointed west. "Let's walk up to Broadway. It's well lit. Do you have a phone? You can call a Lyft or a taxi."

"O-OK."

They stepped as quickly as the man's frightened but still slightly inebriated body would carry him. As they walked past the nearly vanished remnants of the unlucky vampire, the man was careful to look anywhere else. When they got to Broadway, Luke waited with him under a streetlight while his car arrived to take him home. Just as he stepped into the back seat, he paused, looked at Luke and said, "Thank you."

Luke nodded at him, then turned and walked back into the dreary night.



LUKE PARKED his old Volvo wagon in his garage and grabbed the equipment-filled tote from the rear hatch. Propping the tote against the door frame, he hit the garage door button, then unlocked the door and walked in. A hulking, orange tabby cat greeted him.

"Mrrrraaooooo!"

"Hey, Alfred. Stay out of trouble tonight?" He usually did, not having opposable thumbs and all.

Luke set the tote down, then dropped a scoop of kibble into the cat's empty bowl. Alfred ran to the bowl, buried his giant head in it, and chomped down. Luke shucked his ripped, wet hoodie and grabbed a hand towel to dry his wavy hair. He unlaced his boots and left them on a mat by the door before heading to the fridge. Grabbing a Pfriem Pils out of the fridge, he walked back and snagged the tote.

"I'm headed down to the Batcave, Alfred, if you want to come..." The tinkling of the cat's collar bell as he sauntered over to Luke answered the invite.

Once in the office, he engaged the hidden mechanism that opened the passage behind one of the bookcases, revealing a steel spiral staircase. At the bottom of the stairs was a square room with dark hardwood flooring. Along one wall, two Danish mid-century chairs sat, an end table of the same style between them. A huge rug covered the

floor. Luke set the tote on the floor near a workstation recessed along the wall furthest from the stairs. Alfred ran over to one of the chairs, hopped onto the seat, spun a couple donuts, then sprawled out, taking up most of the seat.

Luke looked at the cat. "What's it going to be tonight, eh, Alfred? We feeling up? Down? Al Green?"

"Mrao!"

"Ah! Good choice, Alfred. 'Let's Stay Together' it is!" He walked to the wall of records and flipped through the albums in the "G" section until he found the right one. Pulling out the album, he stopped half-way, shoulders slumping as he stared at the wall, then slid it back into its spot. Luke stepped over to the "Ns." Taking the second disk most of the way out of "The Downward Spiral" album jacket, he hesitated again. "What do you think, Alfie? Nine Inch Nails? Or is 'sad guy listens to Nine Inch Nails' too cliché?"

Alfred responded to his name with a raspy purr.

"You're right. Al Green was the correct choice." He opened the top of the huge console unit and set the needle down on side one. Luke released an exhausted sigh as the smooth interplay of horns, guitars, and drums led into the silky voice of Al Green. He grabbed a glass from the bar shelf and poured the beer.

Luke stopped to listen for a moment before setting his glass down on the worktable. Sitting down, he popped the top off the tote and pulled out his swords, both wooden and steel. He meticulously cleaned both, checked for damage, and oiled them before placing them on a rack. He opened a tall cabinet next to the worktable and rolled out an armor stand on a rotating base. With both hands, he reached into the tote and carefully pulled out an ancient set of armor and placed it gently on the armor stand. Phrases engraved in Ancient Greek, Latin, and Old Persian covered every flawless band. The lettering—so thick the light didn't quite know how to reflect off the steel—wove protections into the armor that made it far stronger than it naturally was while also keeping it silent for the hunt.

It would take more than vampire claws to damage it. He gently ran the fingers of his right hand over the bands that sat just over his heart where there was a crescent moon engraved. The armor and swords

were nearly as old as he was, his longest relationships, and after nineteen-hundred years, his only relationships besides the orange tabby grooming himself on the chair.

Luke let out a long sigh, his face drooping and his lips closing into a frown as he squeezed his eyes shut, placing his head in his hands. "A gladius, a rudis, a set of lorica segmentata, and an Alfred..."

"Mrao."

Alfred was sitting at his feet, staring up at him. He sat up and made room for the cat to jump into his lap. He scooped up the cat and held him close, supporting his weight while scratching his ears. "I'm tired, Alfie, so tired..."

He listened to the music as Alfred purred in his arms. He'd hoped Portland would be a good place to avoid vampires, at least in serious numbers. When he'd picked it as his new home all those years ago, it was a city, but only nominally, certainly not one important enough to become a hub of vampire activity. All he'd wanted was a place free from his past and all the blood, but it didn't matter how far he ran, he couldn't escape his past. The vampires wouldn't let him.

TWO



“WELL, BUDDY.” Luke bent down to scratch Alfred between his ears. “I’m going to the Howling Moon for some dinner, so you’re on your own tonight.”

Luke slung his backpack over his shoulder and pulled the door open before turning and looking back at the cat. “See you later, Alfred. No wild parties while I’m gone.”

Howling Moon Brewing had moved into an old brick building on North Lombard Avenue just over a year ago. Since then, it’d become Luke’s regular watering hole. The beers and food were delicious. Best of all, the atmosphere was usually exactly what Luke liked. Often brewpubs were bright and sterile, but Howling Moon’s owners created a space both dark and warm. The high back booths provided intimacy ideal for a date night, or if you preferred, you could sit at the bar and chat with the owner or one of the bartenders. Best of all, it was a short walk from his home, and they left him alone after he placed his drink order, except for the rare times he felt like human interactions. Then, they were good for some light bar chat.

“Hey, Pablo. How’s it going tonight?”

Pablo stood about five foot six and had the brown complexion of Latin America that marked him as having indigenous and European

heritage. His black hair was coiffed into a hip modern cut with the sides shaved and the top left long. He wore black jeans and a black tee featuring the brewery's logo of a wolf's head howling at a full moon. Tattoos covered his muscular arms.

Pablo walked over, standing across the bar from Luke. "A bit quiet. It's been that way a lot lately. All the crime on the news is keeping people home. Did you hear about the weird shit they found by the Portlandia statue this morning?"

"I must have missed that story," Luke replied.

"They found a full outfit oozing some black goop. And get this, someone had cut the arms off the leather jacket. Weird, man."

Luke chuckled nervously. "That does sound weird. Anything new on tap I should know about?"

"Yeah! I've got a Belgian-style wit I've been experimenting with. I think I got it dialed in."

"I'll take one of those. Wits are one of my favorites."

"Really? Not IPA? Seems that's all anyone orders these days." Pablo grabbed a glass and poured a hazy blond beer with a thick, frothy head. "Let me know what you think."

Luke pulled out his usual chair at the bar, hung his backpack on the hook underneath, and grabbed his beer. "Nice aroma. Good balance between citrus, coriander, and grainy notes." He took a sip.

"Excellent nose," Pablo said.

"I like the flavor. Let me finish this glass, and I'll give you a full report."

"Good man. You can't really judge a beer from one sip. I'll be back." Pablo wandered off to check on other customers.

Luke worked his way through his first beer, then another. Pablo checked back in periodically to see how he was doing. Luke's dinner and a third beer showed up about the same time three guys walked in. Their popped-collar polos under jackets and their jeans with bedazzled rear pockets marked them as young bros who could be mistaken for University of Portland students if not for Luke's ability to tell the living from the unliving. He'd have to keep an eye on them.

He distractedly ate his dinner and mixed in a couple glasses of water while he sipped his beer. The bros chatted up a trio of women

and then joined them in their booth. Fortunately, the mirrored back bar afforded Luke a decent view of their booth.

Luke had only wanted a quiet night down at the local pub, but life and vampires in Portland had another plan for him. He was mildly annoyed by the turn of events. He ignored the flavor of the food, shoveling it down while trying to inconspicuously stare at the undead jackasses flirting, buying beer, and glamouring their targets.

The crowd had largely thinned out as the evening progressed on what was a work night for the Monday-Friday crowd. After the last people in the pub who weren't the vampires, their soon-to-be-victims, Luke, or Pablo left, the vampires gave it a few minutes before they ushered the three women toward the door, opting to take their meals to go. Luke made eye contact with Pablo, set some cash on the bar, grabbed his backpack, and followed the group out the door. After exiting, he heard the door shut and open again behind him. Pablo must be following him.



THE THREE BROS and the women they'd glamour'd walked toward the alley behind the bar. Pablo placed his hand on Luke's shoulder to stop him from walking further into the alley and stepped in front of Luke, putting his body between the bros and his regular customer.

"Step away from the ladies, gentlemen. Doesn't seem like they're interested in what you're offering," Pablo said, trying to distract what he probably thought were sexed up bros.

Luke unzipped his backpack, grasped the hilts of the gladius and rudis, and slowly drew them from the custom sheaths in his backpack. "Pablo, back up a bit, please. I appreciate your effort, but you don't want to tangle with this lot."

Pablo kept his eyes on the trio. "I'm OK, Luke. I can handle myself, and no one comes into my pub and assaults people in my alley."

"I'm not saying you can't handle yourself. I'm just saying you should trust me about these guys. They might be a bit more than you're expecting..."

The three bros reluctantly set aside their prey and turned toward the interlopers. The one in the lead said, "If you two don't want a rough evening, I suggest you keep walking."

"I think you're messing with more than you can handle here. Leave the innocents alone and get the fuck out of here. Otherwise, things might get a touch...splattery," Luke said.

The three vampires chuckled, casually dismissing the implied threat as non-existent.

"I guess our dinner just got tastier." The lead vampire focused, making eye contact with Luke and Pablo, and tried to glamour them.

"Look, 'bros.' Just get the fuck out of here before you regret your choices," Pablo threatened.

"*You* get the fuck out of here before we rip you a new asshole and then shove your fucking brown head up it," the lead vamp said.

"Of course, they have to be racists too. I guess they're not going to move along. I'm not sure you need the hardware, Luke." Pablo rolled his shoulders, loosening up his muscles.

"For these three, yeah, I think I'll keep them out." Luke twirled the gladius once.

Despite the distraction provided by Pablo and Luke, the three women didn't move from their positions propped against the alley wall.

"Hey, girls! Run!" Pablo shouted.

Pablo's shout failed to rouse them. The angry smiles of the three vamps got progressively meaner as their fangs descended, their razor-sharp claws joining them for the party.

Luke stepped in front of Pablo, keeping his eyes on their opponents. "OK, Pablo. Stay behind me. Try to avoid their claws and fangs, and don't let them get you pinned down. They're faster than your normal run of the mill beered up bros and a lot stronger."

Luke stalked forward, keeping himself between Pablo and the creeping vampires. The vamps opened space between the three of them, hoping to outflank Luke and attack from multiple sides. Luke spared a thought for his armor, neatly placed on its rack in his basement. He usually didn't need it for trips to the pub.

He fainted left and low with his rudis, then whirled and lopped off

the head of the vampire on his right with a backhanded swing. He kept his rudis between himself and the other two vampbros. Taking a moment, he peeked over his shoulder to check on Pablo. The bartender had peeled his shirt off and was sprouting prodigious volumes of body hair and a lupine snout. *"Shit, what have I gotten myself into?"* Luke thought to himself.

He carefully stepped over the decapitated vamp, trying to maneuver himself around so the girls would be behind him and he'd have the vampires between him and what was quickly becoming a very large werewolf in bipedal form, the hybrid shape that only the most powerful shifters could achieve. He hoped Pablo would keep his cool and not go berserk on him or the victims they were trying to save. He'd hate to have to hurt Pablo; he brewed good beer.

The two remaining vampires suddenly realized that neither of the men were going to be the pushovers they'd initially assumed. The lead vampire eyed the sword-wielding hunter and the hulking werewolf, then settled his gaze on Luke.

"You're the one who's been killing our brethren. You're 'The Hunter.' You'll pay for this." His casual dude-bro dialect dropped away and was replaced by an antiquated, upper crust English accent. He looked at his partner. "Break free and report what's happened here. Bring reinforcements if you can."

Things were about to get interesting. If this vamp was as old as his accent indicated, he'd be much more powerful than the newly whelped bloodsuckers Luke'd been dispatching with ease lately. It'd been several months since he'd encountered an older, more powerful fanger. Luke's eyes narrowed, and he backed off a bit, switching to a defensive stance. He needed to protect those he could while keeping the vamps from scampering off. Pablo had finished his transformation and was stalking toward the vampires while ensuring he cut off their escape route.

The British vampire pulled a long double-edge dagger from under the back of his shirt. As he slid into a fighter's stance, it became clear he knew how to handle himself and his blade. His young companion, however, was a lot less cocksure than he'd been before Luke had shortened their pal by a head and Pablo'd turned into a massive werewolf.

The younger vampire's eyes darted around nervously, looking for an escape route.

Luke narrowed his eyes, planning his next move. "Pablo, keep the little guy from getting away."

Pablo grunted and growled, answering Luke's instructions as he slashed his gladius toward the Brit's head. He met Luke's sword with his dagger as the two blades slid together and down toward their hilt guards. The fanger took a swipe at Luke's midsection with his claws. Luke slapped the vamp's hand away with the flat of his rudis; when the silver inlay touched the vampire's skin, he yanked his hand back and yelped as the metal and anti-vampiric enchantments burned his hand. He disengaged his blade from Luke's and leapt back, maintaining eye contact with Luke. Blisters rose where the silver had burned him. He lost a bit more of his confidence, but his eyes narrowed into shrewdness and speculation. Shifting his feet, he put some distance between himself and Luke.

The vampire crouched and then launched himself at Luke with a feral grin on his face, but instead of striking at Luke, he leapt high into the air over Luke's head. The vamp dropped into a crouch, landing on his hands, and rolled onto his back and spring up again. Luke sliced his gladius low, cutting deep into the back of the fanger's legs, and severed his hamstrings.

The vamp dropped like he'd been shot in the head. "You bloody bastard!"

Even downed, he was still dangerous. Out of the corner of his eye, Luke caught Pablo and the last vampire squaring off. Pablo had no problem keeping the other vamp occupied; of course, not much can trouble a werewolf in their bipedal form. Luke's vampire was trying to scuttle backwards and away from Luke and toward the dropped dagger. Luke kicked it away, keeping an eye on the vampire in case it decided to lunge.

The sound of snapping bones and tearing flesh from the direction of Pablo caused Luke to cringe involuntarily. He ducked as something flew past his head and into his field of vision and smashed into the face of the British vampire. Pablo had thrown the other vampire's head.

"It appears this night didn't go the way you wanted it to." Luke surged forward and lopped off the distracted vampire's head. He flopped backward, his black sludge-like blood leaking into the alley. "Pablo, you better shift back and get these women out of here. The glamour they're under is about to wear off."

"I'm on it," Pablo said from behind Luke.

Luke wiped his gladius on the vamp's shirt and resheathed it in his custom backpack. He knelt over the headless body and set the point of his rudis over the heart, plunged it in, lowered his forehead to the pommel, and whispered the incantation that set the rudis glowing. Instead of dissolving into goo like the vamp from last night, the old Brit transformed to dust and blew away. Luke snagged the wallet out of the vampire's pocket so he could check it later for any useful information. He repeated the process, finalizing the transformation from corpses to less solid matter on the other two bodies. When he was done, Pablo was standing at the entrance to the alley, leaning against the wall with his arms crossed.

"Let's step inside for a beer and a chat."

Luke nodded slightly and followed him in.

THREE



AS LUKE STEPPED through the entrance, Pablo turned off the “open” sign and locked the door behind them.

“The girls called an Uber and got out of here. I don’t think they’re any wiser. They’ll probably just chalk it up to a bad interaction with booze and some douchebags,” Pablo said.

“Yeah. They were glamoured pretty hard. That’ll fuzz out their memories fairly aggressively.”

Pablo walked behind the bar. “Can I get you a beer?”

“I’ll take a pilsner, please.”

“Ah, a refreshing choice after a bit of a scuffle,” Pablo said sardonically.

Luke took off his backpack and slid into a chair at the bar. Pablo had his back to him as he poured Luke’s beer and one for himself. The awkward silence was nearly palpable.

“So, werewolf, eh?” Luke asked.

“Yup. I know what I am. I know what they were, although this was my first encounter with one. But I don’t know who or what you are.”

Luke set his rudis on the bar.

“He called you ‘The Hunter.’ Are you some sort of vampire slayer?”

I'd make a joke about watching too many episodes of Buffy and getting delusions of grandeur, but that's some weird ass hardware you're packing," Pablo said, glancing at the rudis. "I can practically feel the power pulsing off it." He continued eyeing it warily, like it was a snake about to strike.

"That's a long story. One I usually don't tell virtual strangers." Although the two men were friendly in a regular patron/bar owner way, they weren't friends. It had been a while since Luke had been close enough to anyone to tell them pieces of his extended past. He wasn't sure about breaking his silence this time either, but they'd fought together—immortal vampire slayer and werewolf. It had only been a few months since he'd last seen a Child of Tuty. They were masters of blending into normal society and living undetected by humans. He knew there was a pack in Portland, there had to be in a city this large, but he'd never encountered any werewolves in the over sixty years he'd lived there.

Pablo looked down at his beer. "Well, you know my secret. I usually don't wolf out around strangers, but got a little over excited when the vampire fangs popped out. I'm assuming you can keep your lips shut about that."

Luke held his hands up to placate Pablo. "Have no fear. Your secret is safe with me. You're not the first werewolf I've encountered."

"You've run into other shifters?" Pablo's eyebrows shot up in surprise.

Luke nodded. "A few here and there over the years."

"It's obvious the vampires know who or what you are, but shifter lore doesn't speak of a 'hunter' or 'slayer,' at least none I've heard. I'm assuming you keep your activities limited to bloodsuckers?" Pablo took a sip of beer.

"I'm not surprised you've never heard of me. I'm guessing you were born in and lived your entire life in the Americas. My reputation, what little of it may still make the rounds, is mostly confined to Europe. You have nothing to fear from me. Bother me not and I shall not bother you."

Pablo relaxed slightly.

"Vampires though. Vampires have feared me for a long, long time." Luke chuckled. "I'm the bump in the night that terrifies the bump in the night."

"Are you human?" Pablo asked.

"I was born one. I imagine I still am, although I've not submitted myself for scientific testing." Sitting in silence, Luke took a few drinks of the pilsner, sizing up Pablo while the bartender leaned against the bar and drank from his beer.

"I guess I understand the name of the brewery a bit better."

"Ha! Yeah, it's not subtle if you're in the know. Although, most patrons are decidedly not in the know. Speaking of which, I'll have to report this to the pack leadership. Portland has been mostly vampire free, and I have no idea what to make of you. Vampires know you as their enemy. You claim to have been fighting them for a long time. Just how long are we talking? Your hardware looks like more than just an affectation. That's no *ren faire* souvenir," Pablo said, eyeing the rudis.

Luke gestured toward it, indicating Pablo could pick it up. "Mind the silver."

Pablo gingerly grabbed the rudis by the handle and eyed the blade. "Is the cutting edge made of silver?"

"No, silver is too soft to keep a good edge. It's a steel and silver alloy, enough silver to give it a bit of extra anti-vampire oomph."

"What kind of wood is this?" Pablo asked. "I'm not sure I've seen it before."

"It's Persian ironwood. In essence, it's a fancy stake. A rudis was granted to gladiators when they earned their freedom. This was awarded to me and symbolizes freedom from the undead."

"Like in that Russell Crowe movie?" Pablo set the rudis back on the bar.

"Yeah. Something like that. 'Shadows and dust...'"

"What?" asked Pablo, confused.

"That's what Proximo said..."

Pablo still looked confused.

Luke waved Pablo off. "Never mind. I've probably seen that movie too many times."

"Oh, OK. Can I, uh, can I see the other sword?" Pablo asked hesitantly.

"Sure." Luke chuckled lightly as he pulled the gladius out of his backpack. He flipped it around and handed it to Pablo, handle first. "Be careful; it's got some silver, and it's extremely sharp. You could shave with it if you didn't mind accidentally slicing your nose off."

Pablo stared at the blade. "What are these engravings? A sun and a crescent moon and star? Is this an Islamic symbol?"

"No. It predates the founding of Islam by a few centuries. The sun represents Sol Invictus and his cleansing flames. The moon and star represent Luna, goddess of the moon. Their symbols make it a potent anti-vampire weapon. Put it through a vampire's heart, and it'll give them a true death and start their decay."

"It's light!" Pablo exclaimed.

"Less than two pounds. Even that gets to feeling heavy after a full day of using it in earnest."

"They're...authentic?"

Luke nodded at him.

"Are...are you..." Pablo paused, searching for the right word. "'Authentic?'"

Luke raised his eyebrow in response. "'Authentic?' That feels like a loaded question. I am who I am. I use Roman era gear to slay vampires. That's my day job, I guess, or night job, to be more accurate."

He could tell the answer wasn't even coming close to satisfying Pablo. He'd lost that bit of trepidation and was getting a touch annoyed with just a soupçon of determination.

Pablo stared at Luke for a bit until his eyebrows lifted toward his hairline. "Earlier when I mentioned the weird shit at the Portlandia statue, that was you. Wasn't it?"

Luke nodded. "Yup. Sorry if I wasn't more forthcoming, but you know how it is."

"And the other similar messes the news is talking about? You?"

"Pretty much," Luke replied.

"Who are you?"

"I'm Luke. I live in the neighborhood and drink beer at your pub."

"There's something off about you..." Pablo narrowed his eyes as he stared at Luke. "You fight different. Your speech is different. Now that you're not playing the casual customer, it's almost like you're cataloging my details, seeing if you could take me."

Luke shrugged. "I am who I am."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. You are who you are. I get it. Stop deflecting. You don't act like other...like other modern men. There's something slightly different somehow. I don't know. It's hard to put my finger on it. Just that I've never met another human like you. What are you, dude?"

"Old. Very, very old, and some days I feel my age more than others. I've seen the fall of empires and witnessed the rise of Christianity and Islam. I've served emperors and kings. I've slain vampires beyond count. I was born Lucius, son of Ambeltrix Gaius Silvanus, in a village outside what is today called Brussels in the 839th year after the founding of Rome, the year 86 of the Common Era. I enlisted in Rome's legions when I was seventeen and fought under the Emperor Trajan in his second Dacian War where I ended up killing my first vampire."

Pablo's mouth hung open, and it looked like his brain had stopped working correctly. Luke wasn't sure why he'd told Pablo. He'd always enjoyed chatting with Pablo when he came to drink, but something clicked in Luke's head. He knew when to follow his intuition about people, and Pablo was good people. That, and he figured a secret was worth a secret. Pablo had revealed his secret to Luke when he'd stepped in to defend three innocent people and help Luke slay some vampires.

"You're... You're a two-thousand-year-old Roman legionnaire from Belgium who slays vampires? That's a bit far-fetched, don't you think?" He looked like he was trying to comprehend what he'd just been told, but wasn't quite connecting all the dots.

"You said it yourself. I don't act like other humans, or more correctly, like modern humans. I mean, I try to do my best to blend in." Luke pursed his lips, frustrated with how the evening had gone. "The swords are authentic. I typically have my armor too, but tend to not wear it to the pub. You can either accept what I've told you, or that I'm

just a weirdo with a penchant for using antique weapons to kill vampires. Well, I guess both are still true no matter how you slice it.”

Pablo chuckled at Luke’s pun, ran a hand through his hair, and let out a long sigh. He turned away, grabbed a couple more glasses and filled them with beer, setting one in front of Luke. He leaned against the back bar, appearing to think about what Luke had told him, occasionally taking a drink from his glass.

Luke let the silence hang in the air while enjoying the freshly poured pint of pilsner.

“Shit, man. I don’t know what to think. You’re just a dude who comes into my pub to drink beer. You’re a regular, so I know your name. Until tonight, that was the extent of our relationship. Now we’ve killed vampires. I mean, shit, I killed a vampire. Holy fuck. Now you tell me you’re an immortal vampire slayer. My packleader is going to think I’ve been hitting too much of my own sauce.” Pablo shook his head.

“I’ll make myself available to meet with your packleader. Now that both our cats are out of the bag and we’re sharing the same territory, we should probably be properly introduced as a courtesy between supernaturals. Here.” Luke grabbed a notepad out of his backpack and jotted down his number. “If your packleader wants to meet me, and you haven’t seen me down here drinking beer, give me a call.” Luke packed up his backpack and slung it over his shoulder. “I should get home and feed my cat.”

“I’ll let you out. And don’t worry about the mess out back. I’ll burn the clothes and wash the alley out. I wouldn’t want anyone sniffing around looking for their fanged friends.” Pablo pushed off the wall and walked around the bar.

Luke nodded and walked out the door, keenly aware that something new had just disrupted his normal routine. Werewolves in the neighborhood could immensely complicate his life, and more complications were just what he needed.



ALFRED WAS SUITABLY ANNOYED with his later than normal dinner but still managed to be magnanimous with his affections, despite the grave insult to his feline stomach and honor.

"Well, buddy. Looks like things are going to get a little more interesting. Apparently, we live in a neighborhood with werewolves." Luke scratched Alfred's head between his ears before grabbing his backpack and heading down to clean his swords.

He set the bag down near his worktable, grabbed The Rolling Stones' "Let it Bleed" LP off the shelf, and set down the needle. He reached down and turned the volume up as the atmospheric intro to "Gimme Shelter" floated out of the speakers. Turning around, he walked to the giant map pinned to the wall. He grabbed some pins from the tray and used them to mark the site of last night's and tonight's vampire sightings. Tonight's attack was the first in North Portland.

Most of the rest were more concentrated around downtown Portland. Downtown was expected. The high concentration of bars, hotels, and entertainment venues meant a steady stream of tourists or the bridge-and-tunnel kids coming in from the suburbs looking for booze to fuel their hookups. With the concentration of people and intoxicants, downtown Portland made for an irresistible hunting ground for creatures that haunted the night and overwhelmed weak-minded prey with a magical glamour. He flipped the record and returned to pondering the map, the Stones playing in the background, when he felt a persistent rubbing over his lower legs. He absentmindedly reached down, picked up Alfred, flipped him on his back, and rubbed his chest as the cat settled into a deep, raspy purr.

"There's at least one nest in town, maybe more. This isn't good," he muttered to himself. There had been random vampires wandering through Portland over the years he'd lived there, a few here, a few there, but nothing like the current spate. He'd killed at least a dozen since he'd returned from Belgium a few months ago, mostly weak and stupid newly turned vampires, which was also troubling. Newly turned vampires rarely strayed far from their creator's territory. Either an older vampire was getting highly ambitious and turning a lot of

new vamps, or there were several powerful vampires now operating in Portland. The last track from side two shook him out of his reverie.

“You’re right, Mick. I can’t always get what I want. I wanted a nice, quiet city where vamps were less likely to gather, yet here we are. Although, I doubt a pack of werewolves is actually what I needed. This shit is going to get messy if we have multiple elder vampires establishing a beachhead.” Luke was silent for a while before he sighed and shook his head, resigned to the evidence.