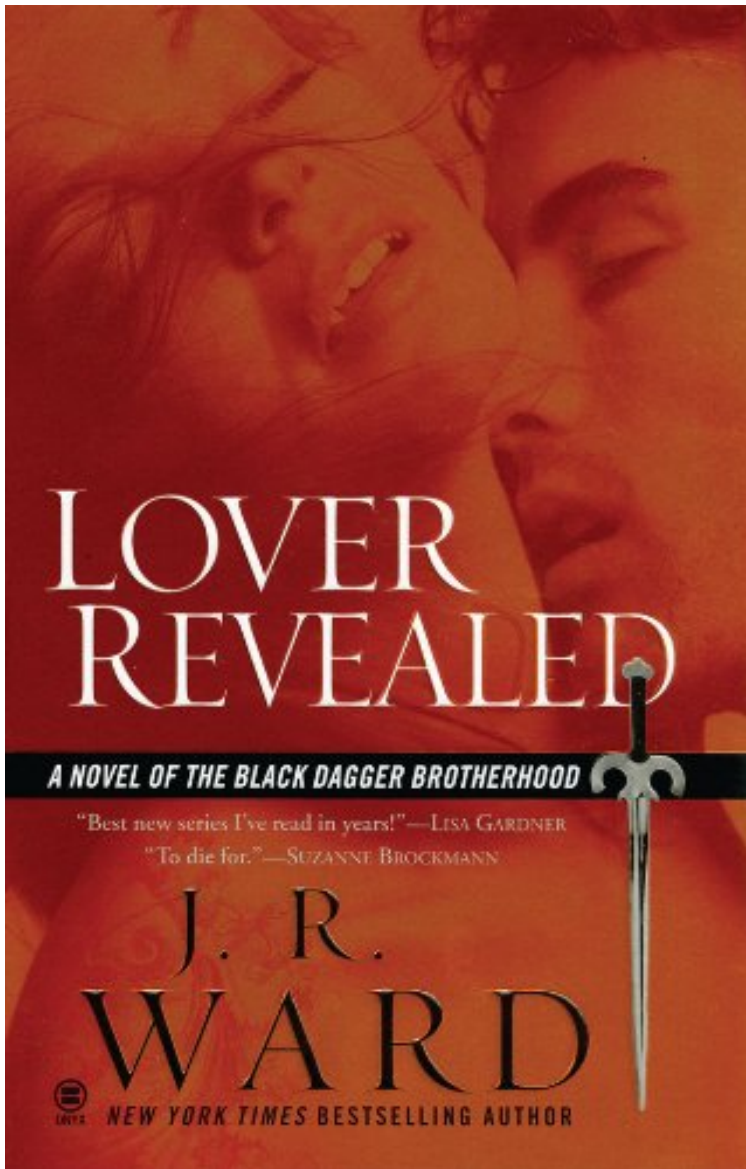


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Lover Revealed (Black Dagger Brotherhood, Book 4)



Par J.R. Ward

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Description : Description du produitButch O'Neal is a fighter by nature. A hard living, ex-homicide cop, he's the only human ever to be allowed in the inner circle of the Black Dagger Brotherhood. And he wants to go even deeper into the vampire world to engage in the turf war with the lessers. He's got nothing to lose.

His heart belongs to a female vampire, Marissa, an aristocratic beauty who's way out of his league. If he can't have her, then at least he can fight side by side with the Brothers... When Butch sacrifices himself to save a civilian vampire from the slayers, he falls prey to the darkest force in the war. Left for dead but found by a miracle, the Brotherhood calls on Marissa to bring him back, though even her love may not be enough to save him...

Presentation de l'auteur#1 New York Times bestselling author J. R. Ward's instantly addictive* novels of the Black Dagger Brotherhood return as an ally of the Brotherhood must face his own dark desires. Butch O'Neal is a fighter by nature. A hard-living ex-homicide cop, he's the only human ever to be allowed in the inner circle of the Black Dagger Brotherhood. And he wants to go even deeper into the vampire world. He's got nothing to lose. His heart belongs to a female vampire, an aristocratic beauty whose way is out of his league. If he can't have Marissa, then at least he can fight side by side with the Brothers. Fate curses him with the very thing he wants. When Butch sacrifices himself to save a civilian vampire from the slayers, he falls prey to the darkest force in the war. Left for dead, he's found by a miracle, and the Brotherhood calls on Marissa to bring him back. But even her love may not be enough to save him. *Lynn Viehl Extrait Praise for J. R. Ward and her novels J. R. Ward's unique band of brothers is to die for. I love this series! Suzanne Brockmann, New York Times bestselling author of Into the Storm Lover Awakened Best new series I've read in years! Tautly written, wickedly sexy, and just plain fun. Now here's a band of brothers who knows how to show a girl a good time. Lisa Gardner, New York Times bestselling author of Gone Lover Awakened is utterly absorbing and deliciously erotic. I found myself turning pages faster and faster and then I wished I hadn't, because there was no more to read! The Brotherhood is the hottest collection of studs in romance, and I can't wait for the next one! USA Today bestselling author Angela Knight Lover Eternal Ward wields a commanding voice perfect for the genre, and readers new to the world of the Black Dagger Brotherhood should hold on tight for an intriguing, adrenaline-pumping ride featuring a race of warrior vampires who fill enemies with terror and women with desire. Like any good thrill ride, the pace changes with a tender story of survival and hope and leaves readers begging for more. Fans of L. A. Banks, Laurell K. Hamilton, and Sherrilyn Kenyon will add Ward to their must-read list. Booklist [An] extremely intense and emotionally powerful tale. Ward's paranormal world is, among other things, colorful, dangerous, and richly conceived. Intricate plots and believable characters. Romantic Times (Top Pick) Dark Lover It's not easy to find a new twist on the vampire myth, but Ward succeeds beautifully. This dark and compelling world is filled with enticing romance as well as perilous adventure. With myriad possibilities to choose from, the Black Dagger Brotherhood series promises tons of thrills and chills. Romantic Times (Top Pick) A dynamite new Vampire series delicious, erotic, and thrilling! J. R. Ward has created a wonderful cast of characters, with a sexy, tormented, to-die-for hero. A fabulous treat for romance readers! Nicole Jordan, New York Times bestselling author of Fever Dreams: A Novel J. R. Ward has a great style of writing, and she shines. You will lose yourself in this world; it is different, creative, dark, violent, and flat-out amazing! If you read only one paranormal this year, make it Dark Lover. All About Romance An awesome, instantly addictive debut novel. It's a midnight whirlwind of dangerous characters and mesmerizing erotic romance. The Black Dagger Brotherhood owns me now. Dark fantasy lovers, you just got served. Lynn Viehl, author of Dark Need Novels in the Black Dagger Brotherhood series by J. R. Ward Dark Lover Lover Eternal Lover Awakened Lover Revealed LOVER REVEALED A Novel of the Black Dagger Brotherhood J. R. Ward AN ONYX BOOK Glossary of Terms and Proper Nouns

av. Act of mortal retribution, carried out typically by a male loved one. Black Dagger Brotherhood pr n. Highly trained vampire warriors who protect their species against the Lessening Society. As a result of selective breeding within the race, Brothers possess immense physical and mental strength as well as rapid healing capabilities. They are not siblings for the most part, and are inducted into the Brotherhood upon nomination by the Brothers. Aggressive, self-reliant, and secretive by nature, they exist apart from civilians, having little contact with members of the other classes except when they need to feed. They are the subjects of legend and the objects of reverence within the vampire world. They may be killed only by the most serious of wounds, e.g., a gunshot or stab to the heart, etc. blood slave n. Male or female vampire who has been subjugated to serve the blood needs of another. The practice of keeping blood slaves has largely been discontinued, though it has not been outlawed. the Chosen pr n. Female vampires who have been bred to serve the Scribe Virgin. They are considered members of the aristocracy, though they are spiritually rather than temporally focused. They have little or no interaction with males but can be mated to Brothers at the Scribe Virgins' direction to propagate their class. They have the ability to prognosticate. In the past, they were used to meet the blood needs of unmated members of the Brotherhood, but that practice has been abandoned by the Brothers. cohntehst n. Conflict between two males competing for the right to be a female's mate. Dhunhd pr n. Hell. doggen n. Member of the servant class within the vampire world. Doggen have old, conservative traditions about service to their superiors, following a formal code of dress and behavior. They are able to go out during the day, but they age relatively quickly. Life expectancy is approximately five hundred years. the Fade pr n. Nontemporal realm where the dead reunite with their loved ones and pass

eternity. First Family pr n. The king and queen of the vampires and any children they may have. ghardian n. Custodian of an individual. There are varying degrees of ghardians, with the most powerful being that of a sehcluded female, known as a whard. glymera n. The social core of the aristocracy, roughly equivalent to Regency England's ton. hellren n. Male vampire who has been mated to a female. Males may take more than one female as mate. leahdyre n. A person of power and influence. leelan adj.; n. A term of endearment loosely translated as dearest one. Lessening Society pr n. Order of slayers convened by the Omega for the purpose of eradicating the vampire species. lesser n. De-souled human who targets vampires for extermination as a member of the Lessening Society. Lessers must be stabbed through the chest in order to be killed; otherwise they are ageless. They do not eat or drink and are impotent. Over time, their hair, skin, and irises lose pigmentation until they are blond, blushless, and pale-eyed. They smell like baby powder. Inducted into the society by the Omega, they retain a ceramic jar thereafter, into which their heart was placed after it was removed. lheage n. A term of respect used by a sexual submissive to refer to her dominant. mahmen n. Mother. Used both as an identifier and a term of affection. mhis n. The masking of a given physical environment; the creation of a field of illusion. nalla (f.) or nallum (m.) n. Beloved. needing period n. Female vampires time of fertility, generally lasting for two days and accompanied by intense sexual cravings. Occurs approximately five years after a female's transition and then once a decade thereafter. All males respond to some degree if they are around a female in her need. It can be a dangerous time, with conflicts and fights breaking out between competing males, particularly if the female is not mated. newling n. A virgin. the Omega pr n. Malevolent, mystical figure who has targeted the vampires for extinction out of resentment directed toward the Scribe Virgin. Exists in a nontemporal realm and has extensive powers, though not the power of creation. phearsom adj. Term referring to the potency of a male's sexual organs. Literal translation something close to worthy of entering a female. princeps n. Highest level of the vampire aristocracy, second only to members of the First Family or the Scribe Virgins Chosen. Must be born to the title; it may not be conferred. pyrocant n. Refers to a critical weakness in an individual. The weakness can be internal, such as an addiction, or external, such as a lover. rythe n. Ritual manner of assuaging honor granted by one who has offended another. If accepted, the offended chooses a weapon and strikes the offender, who presents him- or herself without defenses. the Scribe Virgin pr n. Mystical force who is counselor to the king as well as the keeper of vampire archives and the dispenser of privileges. Exists in a nontemporal realm and has extensive powers. Capable of a single act of creation, which she expended to bring the vampires into existence. sehclusion n. Status conferred by the king upon a female as a result of a petition by the female's family. Places the female under the sole direction of her whard, typically the eldest male in her household. Her whard then has the legal right to determine all manner of her life, restricting at will any and all interactions she has with the world. shellan n. Female vampire who has been mated to a male. Females generally do not take more than one mate due to the highly territorial nature of bonded males. symphath n. Subspecies within the vampire world characterized by the ability and desire to manipulate emotions in others (for the purposes of an energy exchange), among other traits. Historically, they have been discriminated against and during certain eras hunted by vampires. They are near to extinction. the Tomb pr n. Sacred vault of the Black Dagger Brotherhood. Used as a ceremonial site as well as a storage facility for the jars of lessers. Ceremonies performed there include inductions, funerals, and disciplinary actions against Brothers. No one may enter except for members of the Brotherhood, the Scribe Virgin, or candidates for induction. trahyner n. Word used between males of mutual respect and affection. Translated loosely as beloved friend. transition n. Critical moment in a vampire's life when he or she transforms into an adult. Thereafter, they must drink the blood of the opposite sex to survive and are unable to withstand sunlight. Occurs generally in the mid-twenties. Some vampires do not survive their transitions, males in particular. Prior to their transitions, vampires are physically weak, sexually unaware and unresponsive, and unable to dematerialize. vampire n. Member of a species separate from that of Homo sapiens. Vampires must drink the blood of the opposite sex to survive. Human blood will keep them alive, though the strength does not last long. Following their transitions, which occur in their mid-twenties, they are unable to go out into sunlight and must feed from the vein regularly. Vampires cannot convert humans through a bite or transfer of blood, though they are in rare cases able to breed with the other species. Vampires can dematerialize at will, though they must be able to calm themselves and concentrate to do so and may not carry anything heavy with them. They are able to strip the memories of humans, provided such memories are short term. Some vampires are able to read minds. Life expectancy is upward of a thousand years or in some cases even longer. wahlker n. An individual who has died and returned to the living from the Fade. They are accorded great respect and are

revered for their travails. whard n. Custodian of a secluded female. Chapter One Chapter Two Chapter Three Chapter Four Chapter Five Chapter Six Chapter Seven Chapter Eight Chapter Nine Chapter Ten Chapter Eleven Chapter Twelve Chapter Thirteen Chapter Fourteen Chapter Fifteen Chapter Sixteen Chapter Seventeen Chapter Eighteen Chapter Nineteen Chapter Twenty Chapter Twenty-one Chapter Twenty-two Chapter Twenty-three Chapter Twenty-four Chapter Twenty-five Chapter Twenty-six Chapter Twenty-seven Chapter Twenty-eight Chapter Twenty-nine Chapter Thirty Chapter Thirty-one Chapter Thirty-two Chapter Thirty-three Chapter Thirty-four Chapter Thirty-five Chapter Thirty-six Chapter Thirty-seven Chapter Thirty-eight Chapter Thirty-nine Chapter Forty Chapter Forty-one Chapter Forty-two Chapter Forty-three Chapter Forty-four Chapter Forty-five Chapter Forty-six Chapter Forty-seven Chapter Forty-eight Chapter Forty-nine Chapter Fifty Epilogue Chapter One

What if I told you I had a fantasy? Butch O'Neal put his Scotch down and eyed the blonde who'd spoken to him. Against the backdrop of ZeroSum's VIP area, she was something else, dressed in white patent leather strips, a cross between Barbie and Barbarella. It was hard to know if she was one of the club professionals or not. The Reverend only trafficked in the best, but maybe she was a model for FHM or Maxim. She planted her hands on the marble tabletop and leaned in toward him. Her breasts were perfect, the very best money could buy. And her smile was radiant, a promise of acts done with knee pads. Paid or not, this was a woman who got plenty of vitamin D and liked it. Well, daddy? she said over the trippy techno music. Want to make my dream come true? He shot her a hard smile. Sure as hell, she was going to make someone very happy tonight. Probably a busload of someones. But he wasn't going to be riding that double-decker. Sorry, you need to go taste the rainbow somewhere else. Her total lack of reaction sealed the deal on her professional status. With a vacant smile, she floated over to the next table and pulled the same lean and gleam. Butch tilted his head back and swallowed the inch of Lagavulin left in his glass. His next move was to flag down a waitress. She didn't come over, just nodded and beat feet for the bar to get him another. It was almost three A.M., so the rest of the troika were going to show up in a half hour. Vishous and Rhage were out hunting lessers, those soulless bastards that killed their kind, but the two vampires were probably going to come in for a landing disappointed. The secret war between their species and the Lessening Society had been quiet all January and February, with few slayers out and around. This was good news for the races civilian population. Cause for concern for the Black Dagger Brotherhood. Hello, cop. The low male voice came from right behind Butch's head. Butch smiled. That sound always made him think of night fog, the kind that hides what's going to kill you. Good thing he liked the dark side. Evening, Reverend, he said without turning around. I knew you were going to turn her down. You a mind reader? Sometimes. Butch glanced over his shoulder. The Reverend was poised in the shadows, amethyst eyes glowing, mohawk trimmed tight to his skull. His black suit was sweet: Valentino. Butch had one just like it. Although in the Reverend's case the worsted wool had been bought with the guys own money. The Reverend, a.k.a. Rehvenge, a.k.a. brother of Zs shellan, Bella, owned ZeroSum and took a cut of everything that went down. Hell, with all the depravity for sale in the club, he had a forest worth of green funneling into his piggy bank at the end of every night. Nah, she just wasn't for you. The Reverend slid into the booth, smoothing his perfectly knotted Versace necktie. And I know why you said no. Oh, yeah? You don't like blondes. Not anymore he didn't. Maybe I just wasn't into her. I know what you want. As Butch's newest Scotch arrived, he gave it a quick vertical workout. Do you now? It's my job. Trust me. No offense, but I'd rather not about this. Tell you what, cop. The Reverend leaned in close and he smelled fantastic. Then again, Cool Water by Davidoff was an oldie but goodie. I'll help you anyway. Butch clapped a hand on the male's heavy shoulder. Only interested in bartenders, buddy. Good Samaritans give me the scratch. Sometimes only the opposite will do. Then were SOL. Butch nodded out at the half-naked crowd writhing on hits of X and coke. Everyone looks the same around here. Funny, during his years in the Caldwell Police Department, ZeroSum had been an enigma to him. Everyone knew the place was a drug hole and a sex pool. But no one at the CPD had been able to pin down enough probable cause to get a search warrant even though you could walk in any night of the week and see dozens of legal infractions, most of them happening in tandem. But now that Butch was hanging with the Brotherhood, he knew why. The Reverend had lots of little tricks in his bag when it came to changing people's perceptions of events and circumstances. As a vampire, he could scrub clean the memories of any human, manipulate security cameras, dematerialize at will. The guy and his biz were a moving target that never moved. Tell me something, Butch said, how have you managed to keep your aristocratic family from knowing about this little night job you got going on? The Reverend smiled so that only the tips of his fangs showed. Tell me something, how did a human get so tight with the Brotherhood? Butch tipped his glass in deference. Sometimes fate takes you in fucked-up directions. So true,

human. So very true. As Butchs cell phone went off, the Reverend got up. Ill send you over something. Unless its Scotch I dont want it, my man. Youre going to take that back. Doubt it. Butch took out his Motorola Razr and flipped it open. What up, V? Where are you? Vishous was breathing like a racehorse with the dull roar of wind distortion backing him up: a symphony of ass hauling. Shit, cop. We got problems. Butchs adrenaline kicked in, lighting him up like a Christmas tree. Where are you? Out in the burbs with a situation. The damn slayers have started hunting civilians in their homes. Butch leaped to his feet. Im coming. The hell you are. You stay put. I only called so you wouldnt think we were dead when we didnt show. Later. The connection cut off. Butch sank back down in the booth. From the table next to him, a group of people let out a loud, happy burst, some shared joke teeing their laughter off like birds flushed into the open air. Butch looked into his glass. Six months ago hed had nothing in his life. No woman. No family he was close to. No home to speak of. And his job as a homicide detective had been eating him alive. Then hed gotten canned for police brutality. Fallen in with the Brotherhood through a bizarre series of events. Met the one and only woman whod ever awed him stupid. Also had a total wardrobe makeover. At least that last one was in the good category and had stayed there. For a while the change had been a great mask of reality, but lately hed noticed that for all the differences, he was right where hed always been: no more alive than when hed been rotting in his old life. Still on the outside looking in. Sucking back his Lag, he thought of Marissa and pictured her hip-length blond hair. Her pale skin. Her light blue eyes. Her fangs. Yeah, no blondes for him. He couldnt go even remotely sexual with the pale-haired types. Ah, hell, screw the Clairol chart. It wasnt like any woman in this club or on the face of the planet could come close to Marissa. She had been pure in the manner of a crystal, refracting the light, and life around her improved, enlivened, colored with her grace. Shit. He was such a sap. Except, man, shed been so lovely. For the short time when shed seemed to be attracted to him, hed hoped they might get something off the ground. But then shed up and disappeared. Which of course proved she was smart. He didnt have much to offer a female like her and not because he was just a human. He was treading water on the fringes of the Brotherhoods world, unable to fight at their side because of what he was, unable to go back to the human world because he knew too much. And the only way out of this deserted middle ground was with a toe tag. Now was he a real eHarmony contender or what? With another rush of happy-happy-joy-joy, the group next door let off a fresh buckshot of hilarity and Butch glanced over. At the center of the party was a little blond guy in a slick suit. He looked fifteen, but hed been a regular in the VIP section for the past month, throwing cash around like it was confetti. Obviously, the guy made up for his physical deficiencies through the use of his wallet. Another example of green being golden. Butch finished his Scotch, fingered for the waitress, then looked at the bottom of his glass. Shit. After four doubles, he didnt feel buzzed at all, which told him how well his tolerance was faring. Clearly, he was a varsity alcoholic now, no more of that training at the junior levels thing. And when the realization didnt bother him, he realized hed stopped treading water. Now he was sinking. Well, wasnt he a party tonight. The Reverend says you need a friend. Butch didnt bother glancing up at the woman. No, thanks. Why dont you look at me first? Tell your boss I appreciate his. Butch glanced up and clapped his mouth shut. He recognized the woman immediately, but then again, ZeroSums head of security was pretty damn unforgettable. Six feet tall, easy. Hair jet-black and cut like a mans. Eyes the dark gray color of a shotgun barrel. With the wife-beater she had on, she was popping the upper body of an athlete, all muscles, veins, and no fat. The vibe she gave off was that she could break bones and enjoy it, and absently he looked at her hands. Long-fingered. Strong. The kind that could do damage. Holy hell he would like to be hurt. Tonight he would like to hurt on the outside for a change. The woman smiled a little, like she knew what he was thinking, and he caught a glimpse of fangs. Ahshe was not woman. She was female. She was vampire. The Reverend had been right, that bastard. This one would do, because she was everything Marissa wasnt. And because she was the kind of anonymous sex Butch had had all his adult life. And because she was just the sort of pain he was looking for and hadnt known it. As he slipped a hand into his Ralph Lauren Black Label suit, the female shook her head. I dont work it for cash. Ever. Consider it a favor for a friend. I dont know you. Youre not the friend Im talking about. Butch looked over her shoulder and saw Rehvenge staring across the VIP section. The male shot back a very self-satisfied smile, then disappeared into his private office. Hes a very good friend of mine, the female murmured. Oh, really. Whats your name? Not important. She held out her hand. Come on, Butch, a.k.a. Brian, last name ONeal. Come back with me. Forget for a while whatever makes you hammer those shots of Lagavulin. I promise you, all that self-destruction will be waiting for you when you get back. Man, he really wasnt psyched about how much she had on him. Why dont you tell me your name first. Tonight you can call me Sympathy. How bout that. He

eyed her from bangs to boots. She was wearing leather pants. No surprise. You happen to have two heads there, Sympathy? She laughed, a low, rich sound. No, and I'm not a she-male, either. Yours isn't the only sex that can be strong. He stared hard into her cast-iron eyes. Then looked back at the private bathrooms. God, this was so familiar. A quickie with a stranger, a meaningless crash between two bodies. This shit had been the cash-and-carry of his sex life since he could remember except he didn't recall ever feeling this kind of sick despair before. Whatever. Was he really going to stay celibate until he kicked it when his liver corroded? Just because a female he didn't deserve didn't want him? He glanced down at his pants. His body was willing. At least that part of the math added up. Butch slid out of the booth, his chest as cold as winter pavement. Let's go. On a lovely tremble of violins, the chamber orchestra glided into a waltz and Marissa watched the glittering crowd coalesce in the ballroom. All around her, males and females came together, hands linking, bodies meeting, stares locking. The mingling of dozens of different variations on the bonding scent filled the air with a rich spice. She breathed in through her lips, trying not to smell so much of it. Escape proved futile, however, which was the way things worked. Though the aristocracy prided itself on its manners and style, the glymera was, after all, still subject to the races biological truths: When males bonded, their possessiveness carried a scent. When females accepted their mates, they bore that dark fragrance on their skin with pride. Or at least Marissa assumed it was with pride. Of the hundred twenty-five vampires in her brother's ballroom, she was the only unmated female. There were a number of unmated males, but it wasn't as if they would ever ask her to dance. Better that those princeps sit out the waltzing or take their mothers or sisters to the floor than get anywhere near her. No, she was forever unwanted, and as a couple twirled by right in front of her, she glanced down to be polite. Last thing she needed was for them to trip all over each other as they avoided looking her in the eye. While her skin shriveled, she wasn't sure why tonight her status as shunned spectator seemed a special burden. For God's sake, no member of the glymera had met her stare for four hundred years and she was used to it: First she had been the Blind King's unwanted shellan. Now she was his former unwanted shellan, who had been passed over for his beloved half-breed queen. Maybe she was finally exhausted with being on the outside. Hands shaking, lips tight, she picked up the heavy skirt of her gown and made for the ballroom's grand archway. Salvation was just outside in the hall, and she pushed open the door to the mistresses lounge with a prayer. The air that greeted her smelled of freesia and perfume and within the arms of its invisible embrace there was only silence. Thank the Scribe Virgin. Her tension eased marginally as she went in and looked around. She'd always thought of this particular bathroom in her brother's mansion as a luxurious locker room for debutantes. Decorated in a vivid Russian czarist motif, the bloodred sitting and priming area was kitted out with ten matching vanities, each makeup station holding everything a female could want to improve her appearance. Extending out the back of the lounge were the private lavatory chambers, all of which were done in the scheme of a different Fabergé egg from her brother's extensive collection. Perfectly feminine. Perfectly lovely. Standing in the middle of it all, she wanted to scream. Instead, she bit her lip and bent down to check her hair in one of the mirrors. The blond weight, which reached the small of her back when down, was arranged with watchmaker precision on the top of her head and the chignon was holding up well. Even after several hours, everything was still in place, the pearl strands woven in by her doggen exactly where they'd been when she'd come down to the ball. Then again, standing on the fringes hadn't really given the Marie Antoinette job a workout. But her necklace was out of whack again. She jogged the multitiered pearl collar back into position so that its lowest drop, a Tahitian twenty-three-millimeter, pointed directly down into what little cleavage she had. Her dove gray gown was vintage Balmain, one that she'd bought in Manhattan in the 1940s. Shoes were Stuart Weitzman and brand-new, not that anyone saw them under the floor-length skirt. Necklace, earrings, and cuffs were Tiffany, as always: When her father had discovered the great Louis Comfort in the late 1800s, the family had become loyal customers of the company and had stayed that way. Which was the hallmark of the aristocracy, wasn't it? Constancy and quality in all things, change and defects to be greeted with glaring disapproval. She straightened and backed up until she could see her whole self from across the room. The image staring back at her was ironic: Her reflection was of utter female flawlessness, an improbable beauty that seemed sculpted, not born. Tall and thin, her body was made up of delicate angles, and her face was absolutely sublime, a perfect combination of lips and eyes and cheeks and nose. The skin over it all was alabaster. The eyes were silver blue. The blood in her veins was among the very purest in the species. Yet here she was. The forsaken female. The one left behind. The unwanted, defective, spinster virgin who not even a purebred warrior like Wrath had been able to bear sexually even once, if only to rid her of being a newling. And thanks to his repulsion, she was ever unmated, though she'd been with Wrath for what had seemed like

forever. You had to have been taken to be considered someones shellan. Their end had been a surprise and no surprise at all. To anyone. Despite Wrath declaring that she had left him, the glymera knew the truth. She had been untouched for centuries, never carrying the bonding scent from him, never spending a day alone with him. More to the point, no female would have left Wrath voluntarily. He was the Blind King, the last purebred vampire on the planet, a great warrior and a member of the Black Dagger Brotherhood. There was no higher than he. The conclusion among the aristocracy? Something had to be wrong with her, most likely hidden beneath her clothes, and the deficiency was probably sexual in nature. Why else would a full-blooded warrior have no erotic impulse toward her? She took a deep breath. Then another. And another. The scent of the fresh-cut flowers invaded her nose, the sweetness swelling, taking over, replacing the air until it was only fragrance going down into her lungs. Her throat seemed to close up, as if to fight the onslaught, and she pulled at her necklace. Tight it was so tight on her neck. And heavy like hands choking her. She opened her mouth to breathe, but it didn't help. Her lungs were clogged with the flower stench, coated by it. She was suffocating, drowning, though she was not in water. On loose legs, she walked to the door, but she couldn't face those dancing couples, those people who defined who they were by ostracizing her. No, she couldn't let them see. They would know how upset she was. They would see how hard this was for her. Then they would despise her even more. Her eyes shot around the mistresses lounge, skipping over everything, bouncing off all the mirrors. Frantically she tried to do what was she doing? Where could she go? Bedroom, upstairs. She had to go, but she couldn't breathe. She was going to die here, right here and now, from her throat closing up tight as a fist. Her brother she needed to reach him. He was a doctor. He would come and help her but his birthday would be ruined. Ruined because of her. Everything ruined because of her. It was all her fault. Everything. All the disgrace she bore was her fault. Thank God her parents had been dead for centuries and hadn't seen her for what she was. Going to throw up. She was definitely going to throw up. Hands shaking, legs like pudding, she lurched into one of the bathrooms and locked herself inside. On the way to the toilet, she fumbled with the sink, turning the water on to drown out her rasping breath in case someone came in. Then she fell to her knees and bent over the porcelain bowl. She gagged and wretched, her throat working through the dry heaves, nothing coming up but air. Sweat broke out on her forehead and under her armpits and between her breasts. Head spinning, mouth gaping, she struggled for breath as thoughts of dying and having no one to help her, of ruining her brother's party, of being an abhorred object swarmed like bees in her head, buzzing, stinging. Causing the death thoughts like bees. Marissa started to cry, not because she thought she was going to die but because she knew she wasn't. God, the panic attacks had been brutal these last few months, her anxiety a stalker with no solid form, whose persistence knew no exhaustion. And every time she had a meltdown, the experience was a fresh and horrible revelation. Propping her head on her hand, she wept hoarsely, tears running down her face and getting trapped in the pearls and diamonds at her throat. She was so alone. Caged in a beautiful, wealthy, fancy nightmare where the bogeymen wore tuxedos and smoking jackets and the vultures swooped down on wings of satin and silk to peck out her eyes. Taking a deep breath, she tried to get some control over her respiration. Easy now. You're okay. You've done this before. After a while, she looked down into the toilet. The bowl was solid gold and her tears made the surface of the water ripple as if sunlight shined within it. She became abruptly aware that the tile was hard beneath her knees. And her corset was biting into her rib cage. And her skin was clammy. She lifted her head and glanced around. Well, what do you know. She had picked her favorite private chamber to fall apart in, the one based on the Lilies of the Valley egg. As she sat draped over the toilet, she was surrounded by blush-pink walls hand-painted with bright green vines and little white flowers. The floor and counter and sink were pink marble veined with white and cream. The sconces were gold. Very nice. Perfect background for an anxiety attack, really. But then, lately panic went with everything, didn't it? The new black. Marissa pushed herself up from the floor, turned off the faucet, and collapsed into the little silk-covered chair in the corner. Her gown settled around her as if it were an animal stretching out now that the drama was over. She looked at herself in the mirror. Her face was blotchy, her nose red. Her makeup was ruined. Her hair was a ragged mess. See, this was what she looked like on the inside, so no wonder the glymera despised her. Somehow they knew this was the truth of her. God, maybe that was why Butch hadn't wanted her. Oh, hell no. The last thing she needed was to think about him right now. What she had to do was straighten herself up as best she could and then scoot up to her bedroom. Sure, hiding was unattractive, but so was she. Just as she reached up to her hair, she heard the outside door to the lounge open, the chamber music swelling, then easing off as it closed. Great. Now she was trapped. But maybe it was only one female so she didn't have to worry about being an eavesdropper. I can't believe I spilled on my shawl, Sanima. Okay, so now she was an eavesdropper as well as

a coward. Its barely noticeable, Sanima said. Although thank the Virgin you caught it before anyone else did. Well go in here together and use some water. Marissa shook herself into focus. Dont worry about them, just fix your hair. And for the Virgins sake do something about that mascara. You look like a raccoon. She grabbed a washcloth and wet it quietly while the two females went into the little room across the way. Obviously, they left the door open their voices were undimmed. But what if someone saw? Shh lets take the shawl off oh, my Lord. There was a short laugh. Your neck. The younger females voice dropped to an ecstatic hush. Its Marlus. Ever since we were mated last month, hes been Now the laughter was shared. Does he come to you often during the day? Sanimas secretive tone was delighted. Oh, yes. When he said he wanted our bedrooms connected, I didnt know why. Now, I do. Hes insatiable. And he doesnt just want to feed. Marissa stopped with the washcloth under her eye. Only once had she known a males hunger for her. One kiss, only one and she held the memory with care. She was going to her grave a virgin, and that brief meeting of mouths was all she would ever have of anything sexual. Butch ONeal. Butch had kissed her with Stop it. She went to work on the other side of her face. To be newly mated, how marvelous. Though you mustnt let anyone see these marks. Your skin is marred. Thats why I rushed in here. What if someone told me to take off the wrap because of the wine I spilled? This was said with the kind of horror usually reserved for accidents involving knives. Although, given the glymera, Marissa could understand all too well wanting to avoid their attention. Tossing the washcloth aside, she tried to rework her hair and gave up not thinking about Butch. God, she would have loved having to hide his teeth marks from the eyes of the glymera. Would have loved to hold the delicious secret that under the civilized gowns she wore, her body had known his raw sex. And she would have loved to bear the scent of his bonding for her on her skin, emphasizing it, as mated females did, by choosing the perfect complementary perfume. But none of that was going to happen. For one thing, humans didnt bond, from what shed heard. And even if they did, Butch ONeal had walked away from her the last time shed seen him, so he wasnt interested in her anymore. Probably because hed heard about her deficiencies. As he was close with the Brotherhood, no doubt he knew all kinds of things about her now. Is there someone in here? Sanima said sharply. Marissa cursed under her breath and figured shed just sighed out loud. Giving up on her hair and her face, she opened the door. When she stepped out, both females looked down, which in this instance was a good thing. Her hair was a train wreck. Worry not. I will say nothing, she murmured. Because sex was never to be discussed in a public place. Or any private ones, really. The two curtsied dutifully and did not reply while Marissa left. As soon as she walked out of the lounge, she felt more glances sliding away from her, all eyes going elsewhere especially those of the unmated males smoking cigars over in the corner. Just before she turned her back on the ball, she caught Haverss stare through the crowd. He nodded and smiled sadly, as if he knew she couldnt stay a moment longer. Dearest brother, she thought. He had always supported her, had never given any indication he was ashamed of how she had turned out. She would have loved him for their shared parents, but she adored him for his loyalty most of all. With a last look at the glymera in all its glory, she went to her room. After a quick shower, she changed into a simpler floor-length dress and lower-heeled shoes, then went down the mansions back stairs. Untouched and unwanted she could deal with. If that was the fate the Scribe Virgin laid upon her, so be it. There were far worse lives to be led, and bemoaning what she lacked, considering all she had, was boring and selfish. What she couldnt handle was being purposeless. Thank God that she had her position on the Princes Council and that her seat was secure by virtue of her bloodline. But there was also another way to leave a positive mark on her world. As she keyed in a code and unlocked a steel door, she envied the couples dancing at the other end of the mansion and probably always would. Except that was not her destiny. She had other paths to walk. Chapter Two Butch left ZeroSum at three forty-five, and though the Escalade was parked in the back, he headed in the opposite direction. He needed air. Jesus he needed air. The middle of March was still winter so far as upstate New York was concerned, and the night was meat-locker cold. As he walked alone down Trade Street, his breath left his mouth in white clouds and drifted over his shoulder. The chill and the isolation suited him: He was hot and crowded even though hed left the clubs crush of sweaty people behind. As he went along, his Ferragamos hit hard against the sidewalk, the heels grinding the salt and sand on the little concrete strip between dirty snowbanks. In the background, muffled music thumped out of the other bars on Trade, though business hours were soon going to be over. When he came up to McGriders, he popped his collar and upped his pace. He avoided the blues bar because the boys on the force hung out there and he didnt want to see them. Far as his former colleagues in the CPD knew, hed up and disappeared, and that was the way he wanted to keep it. Screamers was next and hard-core rap pounded, turning the whole damn building into a bass extender. When he got to the far side of the club, he

paused and looked down the alley that ran the length of the place. It had all started here. His weird trip into the vampire world had started right here the previous July, with a car bomb he'd investigated at this site: a BMW blown to shit. A man asked. No material evidence left behind except a couple of martial-arts throwing stars. The hit had been very professional, the kind of thing that sent a message, and shortly thereafter the bodies of the prostitutes had appeared in the alleys. Throats cut. Blood levels sky high with heroine. With more martial-arts weapons around. He and his partner, Jos de la Cruz, had assumed the blast was a pimp-related turf toaster and the dead women payback, but soon enough he'd learned the whole story. Darius, a member of the Black Dagger Brotherhood, had been taken out by his race's enemies, the lessers. And the murders of those prostitutes were part of a strategy by the Lessening Society to capture civilian vampires for questioning. Man, back then he'd never have even guessed vampires existed. Much less drove \$90,000 BMWs. Or had sophisticated enemies. Butch walked down the alley, right to the spot where the 650i had been blown to high heaven. There was still a black soot ring on the building from the bomb's heat and he reached out, putting fingertips on the cold brick. It had all started here. A gust of wind came up and flashed under his coat, lifting the fine cashmere, getting to the fancy suit underneath. Dropping his hand, he looked down at his clothes. Overcoat was Missoni, about five grand. Suit underneath, an RL Black Label, about three grand. Shoes were amateur night at a mere seven hundred bucks. Cuff links were Cartier and into the five-digit category. Watch was Patek Philippe. Twenty-five grand. The two forty-millimeter Glocks under his pits were two grand a piece. So he was sporting Jesus Christ, about \$44,000 worth of Saks Fifth and Army/Navy. And this wasn't even the tip of the iceberg for his threads. He had two closets worth of the shit back at the compound none of which he'd bought with his own cash. All of which had been purchased with Brotherhood green. Shit he dressed in clothes that weren't his. Lived in a house and ate food and watched a plasma screen TV none of which were his. Drank Scotch he didn't pay for. Drove a sweet ride he didn't own. And what did he do in return? Not a whole hell of a lot. Every time action went down, the brothers kept him on the sidelines. Footsteps rang out at the far end of the alley, pounding, pounding, getting closer. And there was more than one set. Butch eased back into the shadows, slipping free the buttons on his coat and his suit jacket so he could get at his heat if he needed it. He had no intention of mixing up someone else's biz, but he wasn't the type to hang back if an innocent was getting cracked. Guess the cop in him wasn't dead yet. As the alley had only one open end, the track-and-fielders heading this way were going to pass by him. Hoping to avoid any crossfire, he got tight with a Dumpster and waited to see what turned up. Young guy flew by, terror on his face, his body all jerky panic. And then well, what do you know, the two thugs in his trunk were pale haired. Big as houses. Smelling like baby powder. Lessers. Going after a civilian. Butch palmed one of his Glocks, speed-dialed V's cell phone, and took off in pursuit. As he ran, the call dumped into voice mail, so he just shoved his Razr back into his pocket. When he caught up with the drama, the three were at the base of the alley, a loose knot of bad news. Now that the slayers had the civilian cornered, they were moving all lazy, closing in, backing off, smiling, toying. The civilian was shaking, eyes so wide the whites glowed in the dark. Butch leveled his gun at the scene. Hey, Blondies, how 'bout you show me your hands? The lessers stopped and looked at him. Man, it was like getting pegged with headlights, assuming you were a deer and the thing coming at you was a Peterbilt. Those undead bastards were pure power backed up by cold logical nasty combination, especially in duplicate. This isn't your business, the one on the left said. Yeah, that's what my roommate keeps telling me. But, see, I don't take direction real well. He had to give the lessers credit; they were smart. One focused on him. The other closed in on the civilian, who looked as if he was way too scared to be able to dematerialize. This is quickly going to become a hostage situation, Butch thought. Why don't you head out? the bastard on the right said. Better for you. Probably, but worse for him. Butch nodded toward the civilian. An ice cube breeze shot down the alley, ruffling orphaned newspaper pages and empty plastic shopping bags. Butch's nose tingled and he shook his head, hating the smell. You know, he said, this whole baby powder thing how do you lessers stand it? The slayers' pale eyes traveled up and down him as if they couldn't figure out why he even knew the word. And then they both flipped into action. The lesser closest to the civilian made a grab and hauled the vampire against its chest, turning the hostage potential into a reality. At the same moment, the other one lunged at Butch, moving quick as a blink. Butch wasn't into getting rattled, though. He calmly angled the muzzle of the Glock and shot the steamrolling sonofabitch right in the chest. The second his bullet penetrated, a screech worthy of a banshee exploded out of the slayers' throat and the thing hit the ground like a bag of sand, immobilized. Which was not the normal lesser response to getting plugged. Usually they could throw it off, but Butch was packing something special in his clip, thanks to the Brotherhood. What the fuck, the upright slayer breathed. Surprise, surprise, cocksucker. Got me

some fancy lead. The lesser snapped back to reality and hauled the civilian off the ground in a one-arm waist hold, using the vampire as a body shield. Butch leveled the gun at the twosome. Goddamn it. No shot. No shot at all. Let him go. A muzzle emerged from under the civilians armpit. Butch dove for a shallow doorway as the first bullet ricocheted off the asphalt. Just as he took shelter, a second shot ripped through his thigh. Fuuuuuck, welcome to roadkill-ville. His leg felt like it had a red-hot roofing spike drilled into it, the niche he was jammed into offered about as much protection as a lamppost and the lesser was moving into better shooting position. Butch grabbed an empty Coors bottle and tossed it across the alley. As the lessers head popped around the civilians shoulder to track the sound, Butch lit off four precisely targeted shots in a semicircle around the pair. The vampire panicked, just as expected, and became an unstable load. As he fell loose from the slayers grip, Butch put a slug into the lessers shoulder, spinning the bastard away, landing him facefirst on the ground. Great shot, but the undead was still moving, and sure as shit he was going to be on his feet in another minute and a half. Those special bullets were good, but the stun didnt last forever and it helped if you nailed a chest rather than an arm. And what do you know. More problems. Now that the civilian vampire was free, hed caught his breath and started to scream. Butch limped over, cursing through the pain in his leg. Jesus Christ, this male was making enough racket to bring in an entire police force all the way from goddamned Manhattan. Butch got up in the guys face, pegging him with hard eyes. I need you to stop yelling, okay? Listen to me. Stop. Yelling. Now. The vampire sputtered, then clammed up like his voice boxes engine had run out of gas. Good. I got two things I need from you. First, I want you to calm yourself so you can dematerialize. Do you understand what Im saying? Breathe slow and deep thats right. Nice. And I want you to cover your eyes now. Go on, cover them. How do you know Talking wasnt on your to-do list.

Close your eyes and cover them. And keep breathing. Everythings going to be okay provided you get yourself out of this alley. As the male clamped trembling hands over his eyes, Butch went over to the second slayer, who was lying facedown on the pavement. The thing had black blood oozing from its shoulder and little moans coming out of its mouth. Butch grabbed a fistful of the lessers hair, tilted the things head off the asphalt, and put the Glocks muzzle in tight to the base of the skull. He pulled the trigger. As the top half of the bastards face vaporized, its arms and legs twitched. Fell still. But the job wasnt done. Both slayers needed to be stabbed in the chest to truly be dead. And Butch didnt have anything sharp and shiny on him. He got out his cell phone and hit speed dial again as he rolled the slayer over with his foot. While Vs cell started to ring, Butch went through the lessers pockets. He lifted a BlackBerry as well as a wallet. Fuck me, Butch breathed. The slayer had activated his phone, obviously calling for an assist. And through the open line, the sounds of heavy breathing and flapping clothes were a loud and clear sign that the backup brigade was coming fast. Butch glanced at the vampire as Vs phone continued to ring. How we doin? You look good. You look really calm and in control. V, pick up the damn phone. V The vampire dropped his hands, and his eyes fell upon the slayer, whose forehead was now all over the brick wall on the right. Ohmy God Butch stood up, putting his body in the way. You dont think about that. The civilians hand came out and pointed downward. And you are shot. Yeah, you dont worry about me, either. I need you to cool out and leave, my man. Like right fucking now. Just as Vs voice mail kicked in, the sound of boots pounding the pavement drifted down the alley. Butch shoved his phone in the vicinity of his pocket and ditched the clip out of the Glock. As he slammed in a fresh one, he was through with the hand-holding. Dematerialize. Dematerialize now. Butbut Now! For fucks sake, get your ass out of here or youre going home in a box. Why are you doing this? Youre just a human I am so sick of hearing that. Leave! The vampire closed his eyes, breathed a word in the Old Language, and disappeared. As the hellfire beat of the slayers got louder, Butch looked around for shelter, aware that his left shoe was soaking wet from his own blood. The shallow doorway was his only bet.

Cursing again, he flattened himself in it and looked at what was coming at him. Oh, shit Jesus God in heaven there were six of them. Vishous knew what was about to happen next, and it was nothing he needed to be a part of. As a flash of brilliant white light turned the night to noontime, he spun away, shoving his shitkickers into the ground. And there was no reason to glance back when the great roar of the beast rumbled through the night. V knew the drill: Rhage had turned, the creature was loose, and the lessers theyd been fighting were about to be lunch. Pretty much business as usual except for their current location: Caldwell High Schools football field. Go, Bulldogs! Rah! V pounded over to the bleachers and Stair Mastered them, taking himself to the top of CHSs cheering section. Down below, on the fifty-yard line, the beast snatched a lesser, tossed the thing up into the air, and caught the undead between its teeth. Vishous glanced around. The moon wasnt out, which was great, but there were maybe twenty-five frickin houses around the high school. And the humans inside those split-levels and ranches and Middle America colonials had just woken up to a

flare as bright as a nuclear explosion. V cursed and whipped off the lead-lined driving glove that covered his right hand. As he put his arm out, the glow from his godforsaken palms inner core illuminated the tattoos that ran from his fingertips to his wrist on both sides. Staring at the field, V concentrated on the beat of his heart, feeling the pump in his veins and getting into the pulse, the pulse, the pulse. Buffering waves came out of his palm, something like heat waves rising off asphalt. Just as a couple of porch lights came on and front doors were opened and fathers of the household poked their heads out of their castles, the masking of this took over: The sights and the sounds of the fighting on the field were replaced with the nothing special illusion that all was well and as it should be. From the bleachers, V used his night vision to watch the human men look around and wave to each other. When one smiled and shrugged, V could imagine the conversation. Hey, Bob, you see that too? Yeah, Gary. Big light. Huge. Should we call the police? Everything looks okay. Yeah. Weird. Hey, you and Marilyn and the kids free this Saturday? We could do a mall crawl, maybe hit pizza afterward? Great idea. Ill talk to Sue. Night. Night. While the doors were shut and those men no doubt shuffled to the refridge for a night bite, Vishous kept up the masking. The beast didnt take long. And didnt leave much uneaten. When it was finished, the scaled dragon looked around and as the thing spotted V, a growl rippled up to the bleachers, then ended in a snort. You finished, big guy? V called down. FYI, goalpost over there would work righteous as a toothpick. Another snort. Then the creature lay down and Rhage appeared naked in its place on the black-soaked ground. As soon as the change was complete, V hauled it down the bleachers and jogged across the field. My brother? Rhage groaned as he shivered in the snow. Yeah, Hollywood, its me. Im gonna get you home to Mary. Not as bad as it used to be. Good. V whipped off his leather jacket and stretched it across Rhages chest; then he snagged his cell phone from a pocket. Two calls had come through from Butchs number and he hit back at the cop, needing a pickup fast. When there was no answer, V called the Pit and got voice mail. Holy hell Phury was at Haverss getting his prosthesis adjusted again. Wrath couldnt drive because of his blindness. No one had seen Tohrment for months. That left Zsadist. After a hundred years of dealing with that male, it was hard not to curse as the call went out. Z was not lifeboat material, not by a long shot; he was more like the sharks in the water. But what was the other option? Besides, at least the brother had been a little better since hed gotten mated. Yeah, came the sharp answer. Hollywood expressed his inner Godzilla again. I need a car. Where are you? Weston Road. Caldwell High School football field. Ill be there in ten. First aid? No, were both intact. Got it. Hang tight. The connection ended and V looked at his phone. The idea that that scary-ass bastard could be relied upon was a surprise. Never would have seen that one coming not that he saw anything anymore. V put his good hand on Rhages shoulder and looked up at the sky. An infinite, unknowable universe loomed above him, above them all, and for the first time, the vastness terrified him. But then, for the first time in his life he was flying without a net. His visions were gone. Those snapshots of the future, those bullshit, invasive telecasts of what was coming, those pictures without dates that had kept him on edge ever since he could remember, were just gone. And so were the intrusions of other peoples thoughts. Hed always wanted to be alone in his head. How ironic that he found the silence deafening. V? We okay? He looked down at Rhage. The brothers perfect blond beauty was still blinding, even with all the lesser blood on his face. Rides coming soon. Well get you home to your Mary. Rhage started to mumble and V just let him go. Poor miserable guy. Curses were never a party. Ten minutes later, Zsadist pulled right up onto the football field in his twins BMW, busting through a shrinking, dirty snowbank and mud-tracking it in. As the M5 came through the snow, V knew they were going to trash the leather in the backseat, but then Fritz, butler extraordinaire, could get stains out like you wouldnt believe. Zsadist got out of the car and came around the hood. After a century of being half-starved by choice, he was now packing a good two hundred eighty-five pounds on his six-foot-six frame. The scar on his face remained obvious, and so did his tattooed slave bands, but thanks to his shellan, Bella, his eyes were no longer black pits of hatred. For the most part. Without saying anything, the two of them manhandled Rhage over to the car and stuffed his massive body into the backseat. You poofing it home? Z said as he got behind the wheel. Yeah, but I need to clear the scene. Which meant using his hand to fry-clean the lesser blood that was splattered everywhere. You want me to wait? No, get our boy home. Marys going to want to see him ASAP. Zsadist scanned the vicinity with a quick head twist. Ill wait. Z, its cool. I wont stay here alone long. That ruined lip lifted into a snarl. If youre not at the compound by the time I get there, Im coming for you. The Beemer took off, back tires kicking up mud and snow. Jesus, Z really was backup. Ten minutes later V dematerialized to the compound, just as Zsadist was pulling in with Rhage. As Z took Hollywood inside, Vishous looked around at the cars parked in the courtyard. Where the hell was the Escalade? Butch should be back by now. V took out his phone and hit speed dial. When he got voice mail, he said, Hey,

buddy, Im home. Where are you, cop?As the two of them called each other constantly, he knew Butch would check in soon enough. Hell, maybe the guy was getting busy for the first time in recorded history. It was about time the sorry SOB shelved his obsession with Marissa and got a little sexual relief.From Publishers WeeklyNewbies to Ward's Black Dagger Brotherhood may struggle to fill in the backstory, but these erotic paranormals are well worth it, and frighteningly addictive. The six "brothers" are vampires: enormous, tattooed, tormented warriors who protect other vampires from destruction by the "lessers," desouled humans in the evil Omega's Lessening Society. Hero and ex-cop Butch is the only human allowed into the Brotherhood's inner circle, but Butch is no mere human, a fact suspected by one of his vamp colleagues, and confirmed by the sinister plans of the Omega. The book is fully committed to its urban sensibility, the vampires' rarified language (a glossary is provided) and their revved-up sex drives, and it all works to great, page-turning effect (with the notable exception of a chick litlike attention to designer brands). Though Butch's love interest, the virginal, aristocratic vampire Marissa, initially elicits more annoyance than empathy, she grows a spine as the book progresses and Butch's destiny comes to light. In just two years, the first three books in the series have earned Ward an Anne Ricestyle following, deservedly so; this entry should prove no less popular. (Mar.) Copyright Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc.

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