

The Glass Vampire - Chapter 20 (Final)**Author: Dave Page****Editor: John Belmont****Type of editing: light copyediting**

"Richard?" Beth gripped both of his shoulders and shook him.

If Richard had not been sitting on his bed, he would have fallen. As it was, a bout of nausea closed like a fist around his stomach. Colette's image burned in his mind along with the memories of shock and betrayal he had felt when she had revealed herself to be a vampire and, for all intents and purposes, had "reprogrammed" Terrence.

"It was her." He gripped the blanket tightly. "There is no longer any doubt."

"What?" The spot between Beth's eyebrows crinkled as she frowned.

"I saw her kill twelve men... saw her feeding." He blinked. "Men I had known, men who had betrayed me and wanted to kill me."

"Do you remember her bringing you over, making you a vampire?" Beth released him but continued to stare at him intently.

"Not as such, but there can be no doubt it was she." He was baffled by how he could have gone from fleeing into the woods to allowing Colette to bring him across. The feelings he had developed for her paled in comparison to the revulsion that had overwhelmed him when he had seen her lapping up his friends' blood.

And then there was Terrence. In Richard's original memories, he had chanced upon his "friend" in the woods days after the battle. Terrence had remembered nothing of what had occurred and the mystery of his broken wrist had never been

solved... until now.

"What else do you remember?" Beth asked, her eyes betraying her eagerness.

Richard's body suddenly grew heavy, as if his limbs were made of lead. As the cobwebs of past memory were dusted from his mind, he remembered that on the surface above, the golden orb of the sun had just risen from behind the Cascade Mountains. The sleep of the dead dragged at him like a drowning victim threatening to take down the healthy swimmer.

"It... will have to... wait." He fell over onto his side as the darkness swallowed him.

Richard awoke with a start, pulling his face from his pillow and sitting bolt upright. He knew before looking that it was still daylight, could feel the solar death reaching into the earth for him with ultraviolet tentacles. The small analog clock next to his computer verified that it was a little after four in the afternoon. His stiff muscles protested, but he managed to slide his legs off the bed and hunch forward into a sitting position. He rubbed his eyes, trying to clear away the last remnants of sleep and his tortured dreams of Colette. His forearm muscles spasmed over the second tracking device. He rubbed it gently. He had two days to figure out what to do with the knowledge of Radovan's identity. As he saw it, his only real chance was to tell Beth everything and determine if she and Nash could help him. His only problem was that he still did not fully trust the doctor.

He glanced at his computer. Assuming that Stan had not simply taken the money and run, Richard surmised that there could be an answer waiting for him there. He moved to the desk,

slid into the uncomfortable metal chair, and booted up his laptop. A metal ping sounded as someone knocked on his door interrupting him.

"Come in." He swiveled the chair towards the door. Nash's lab coat swirled about him as he stopped short a few feet from Richard. His face was red and sweat beaded on his forehead. In one hand, he held a manila folder that Richard guessed was a lab report. He frowned making Richard instantly nervous. He straightened.

"What is it, Doctor?"

Nash ran a hand over his bald head. "There's something wrong with your blood."

"What do you mean?" Richard braced himself.

"The Department's virus is mutating." Nash frowned. "I've never seen anything like it."

"Is this a good thing?" Richard's throat tightened. Frederick had told the truth.

"We'll have to run a lot more tests before I can answer that from a medical standpoint. They could have encoded their virus with some kind of time released mutation that could be harmful to your species." He started to pace back and forth across the small room.

"What is our next course of action then?" Richard gritted his teeth.

"More tests for now." Nash stopped pacing. "Have you had any strange symptoms, any dizziness, sweating, or palpitations?"

"No." Only visions of a past he had forgotten and the occasional bout of power. He kept his expression stoic. No one could know.

Nash studied him for a moment. "I want you in the lab for tests—ASAP."

"Very well, however, I would like to take a few moments to

fully awaken." He had to check his email before he did anything. "It's difficult to get moving after rising from the dead."

"No problem." Nash nodded reluctantly and hurried from the room.

With a sense of renewed purpose, he returned to the computer desk and opened his email. It was a sure bet that Frederick was monitoring his messages, but Stan would take precautions. A single email awaited him. It was from someone named Nat S. The subject line read "Vampire Vixens." It had a file attached to it that would probably open some kind of pornographic viewer on his screen. His lip curled involuntarily at the vampire pornography spam. He had known lows since the Department had taken his powers, but nothing as low as making X-rated films for money.

He poised his finger over the delete key and froze as he realized that Nat S. was the reverse spelling of the name Stan. Simple but effective. He clicked on the message link. It opened a blank message, clearly showing an attached executable file but nothing else. Richard saved it to his desktop and launched it. The program opened a word processing window. A single sentence had been typed in: "The account belongs to Questor Corporation. Don't contact me again, asshole!"

Richard closed the window as soon as he read it and turned off the machine. He leaned back in his chair and stared at the blank computer screen. Questor Corp's questionable use of laboratory animals had sent the company's stock spiraling downwards and nearly drove them into bankruptcy. The newspaper had predicted an end to the company altogether unless the board of directors could come up with some last-minute financing. Richard opened and closed his fists. It would seem that they had found their money.

He got to his feet, throwing his chair back in the process.

It clattered to the cement floor with a loud bang, but he barely noticed. Questor Corporation had earned its reputation for cutting corners and for performing shoddy research. They were using him just as the Department had. He punched his open palm making it tingle as he turned around in a circle looking for something, anything, that might make him feel less betrayed. There was nothing. Questor Corp would not have to answer to anyone about a lab that did not exist—a lab that had used dogs in horrific vampire experiments and now wanted to use him as a guinea pig. They had no intention of searching for a way to restore his powers any more than they would help him if he were to reveal the truth about why his virus was mutating. Many had speculated that vampire blood could hold the cures to cancer, AIDS, and dozens of other maladies, however, the religious right had banned all such research calling it an affront to God and his followers. Questor could say their cures came from normal lab animals. It would be a simple matter to fake the research.

Anger scorched his blood. His fangs sprouted and he felt the power slamming against the shield within him. It was there, screaming to be released, crying out for vengeance against the Department, against Questor Corp, and against anyone who had slighted him during the past ten years. Frederick was never going to give him an antidote, and although Nash and his people might, he would be relegated to the same slavery for which he had suffered the past decade. He kicked the desk. The metal bent inwards, and the computer nearly slid from the desk.

He closed his eyes and reached deep within himself, pressing the full weight of his mind, his soul, or whatever it was within him that tapped the preternatural powers of the undead, against the shield. At first, he felt nothing but unyielding smoothness; then, the small fissure returned. Wisps of power leaked outwards from his core, slowly filling him. He

pressed himself into that gap, forcing it to open wider.

His vision changed as different spectrums of light became visible to him. He heard the beating heart of the guard outside his door as if his ear were pressed against the man's chest. He latched onto his powers like a leech, siphoning all the energies he could squeeze through the still miniscule opening. He felt lighter, stronger.

Mist trickled out from the rubble pile behind him.

His senses expanded until he could hear the men talking in the room fifty feet down the hall. He tasted their anxieties and fears. He spread his arms wide and breathed deeply. Humans had reduced his kind to the lowest sentient beings on the planet. He had been humiliated, beaten, stabbed, shot, harassed, taunted, and even buried alive. No more.

"Who are you?" A dark voice echoed through the room.

Richard spun in a complete circle, but there was no one there.

"Who... are you? I'm so hungry... so hungry." Desperation tinged the voice.

Richard understood, suddenly, that the voice was inside his own head. The darkness, the despair, the death he had sensed every time he had crossed through the old storefront on the way into the labyrinth of underground passages was not what he had thought. No one had died there, and the feeling was not from dead dogs as Nash had suggested. There was a very old and twisted vampire buried in or near that room. Richard shivered as the malevolence of the creature washed over him. It was pure evil. He shoved the voice from his mind, shielding it as he had done to keep out other vampires in the past. So, Nash and the others had lied to him about this too.

He refocused his attention on Questor, his anger returning in a hot flood.

The mist floated down from the rocks and curled along the floor. The hole in his shield halted its outward progress, but for the moment it remained frozen in place. Richard let the energy flow into his body. He turned slowly towards the camera and flashed his fangs.

"Questor Corporation!" They couldn't see him, but he said it loud enough for anyone listening to the security cameras to hear.

The hair on his arms stood on end as strength vibrated through him. The fog filled the room now, so thick that he could barely see the door. His vampire senses held fast, and he heard a distant alarm bell sound. They had gotten his message. His smile widened as he stepped forwards into action.

He crossed the room faster than he had moved in ten years and grabbed the iron handle with one hand and the edge of the door with the other. The metal shrieked as he tore it off its hinges. It clanged as it hit the cement floor next to his computer. In the distance, there were frantic cries mixed with the clicking of guns being readied.

Richard knew that one of Jack's black-clad men stood to the right of the door. He could hear the man's steady breathing, could feel his heart pulsing on the very air. The man reacted to the door being ripped from its casing as if he were in slow motion. Richard sensed the guard's heart rate lurch as he turned towards him and reached for his pistol. Richard shot out of the room with fantastic speed, pulling fog along behind him. He grabbed the man's nine-millimeter automatic from his belt holster, just as the man's hand brushed its handle, and tossed it to the side. The man gasped, looking down at his now missing gun. Richard backhanded him, sending him spiraling through the air. He crashed to the floor several feet down the corridor and remained unmoving.

Richard retrieved the pistol, tucked it into his belt, and then glided down the hallway, the mist flowing around him like a billowing robe. He froze at the sudden smell of fresh blood. The unconscious guard lay beside him now. The man's heartbeat pounded in Richard's ears begging to be stilled. A wave of dizziness overtook him. It had been so long.... The man's blood was fresh and healthy. He shook himself. He did not drink unless offered. He staggered back, shaking his head in an attempt to clear it of the bloodlust.

"This way!" Jack's voice was close, just one section ahead.

Richard looked up and snarled at the closed pressure door at the end of the hallway. They were coming. He stepped back against the red-bricked wall, shying away from the dim fluorescents as he tried to lose himself in the vapor. The metal squeaked as the door opened. Three men appeared in the opening, their guns leveled.

Their fear smelled like food to a starving man. Richard licked his fangs. He had to stay focused long enough to get out of there. He poured the fog around them, obscuring their vision.

"Richard! This isn't going to work, with or without your powers!" Jack barked.

Richard detected the body heat of the three men. He could smell the gun oil on their pistols and see the outlines of their infrared goggles. Behind them Jack stood with his weapon ready.

"I am leaving, Jack." Richard sped forwards in the blur of an eye.

He dove over them, rolled in midair, and landed on his feet behind them. He grabbed Jack, pushed him into the others, and hurled the lot of them through the door into the hallway from which he had just come. He pulled the door closed, slammed home the iron latch, and bent it with ease, effectively sealing it shut.

Richard could hear the squawk of Jack's radio. "He's through. Unit two move in!"

The mist was not as thick here. Richard had lost much of it when he had entered this new passageway. As he continued forward through the brick passage, he called more fog out of the walls and up from the dirt beneath his feet. There were more lights here, making it harder for him to disappear.

Two more masked soldiers, followed by Ringo, darted around the corner ahead of him. They brought automatic rifles up, and laser-sighting dots appeared on Richard's chest.

"That's enough!" Ringo ordered.

"I don't think so."

Gun muzzles flashed, discharging multiple bullets in his direction. Bits of brick and mortar blasted apart, sending a cloud of debris into the air, adding to the building fog. Richard leapt straight up, latched onto an old water pipe, and hung upside down. He shimmied across and was nearly above them when they realized that he was no longer standing in the hall.

"Who are you?" the dark voice interrupted him, breaking through his mental defenses for a moment.

As Richard paused to shake away the other vampire's mind, one of the mercenaries looked up. "Look out!" He fired frantically.

Richard dropped from the ceiling. Bullets ricocheted off the thick pipe. The second man reacted swiftly to his comrade's warning, bringing his rifle up in time to aim it at Richard. Fiery pain stabbed Richard's abdomen as several bullets burrowed into his stomach. He fell on the men, his adrenaline and his vampiric strength allowing him to ignore the wounds. He caught them by the shoulders and slammed them together. Their heads cracked. Their eyes rolled up into their sockets, and they crumpled to the ground unconscious. Ringo fell back, dropped his

rifle, and had a pistol in his hand with surprising swiftness.

Richard gripped his gun arm, turned it away with ease, and knocked the gun across the room. He got to his feet, trying to pull Ringo with him, but everything slowed. He deflated like a burst balloon as his power winked out.

"No!" His senses collapsed, as did the presence of the other vampire's mind. He was alone with Ringo. His stomach burned, and it was all he could to remain standing.

Ringo launched himself from the ground, catching Richard around the waist with his muscular arms and bearing him back down the hallway. The man was a trained professional. Richard knew he was no match for him, not now. As he soared backwards under the man's weight and strength, he desperately tried to reach his powers, but it was no use. The world spun horizontally.

Richard's warrior's instincts took over. He folded one leg, managing to get his foot pressed into Ringo's hip as they hit the ground. He gripped the bigger man's shoulders and pulled back with the energy of their momentum as they hit the ground, rolling onto his back, and pushing out with his leg. As he had hoped, Ringo overcompensated and went flying above and past him, propelled by his own force and a little help from Richard.

Richard did not wait for him to get up. He rolled onto his side and propped himself into a crouch, pulling the stolen pistol from his belt. The safety was already off and a round chambered. He aimed it at Ringo's head as he came up onto one knee. They both froze for a moment. Ringo's steel eyes glared with unconcealed rage.

Richard slowly got to his feet, the bigger man mimicking his movements, and backed towards the other door. More booted feet scraped on the dirt floor behind him. He knew he could never get out now, but he still had a hostage.

The men skidded to a halt behind him. "Stop!"

"Stay where you are, or I will shoot." Richard did not take his eyes from his hostage.

"Go ahead. Do it!" Ringo smiled like a shark, revealing his own impressively sharp teeth. "I dare you."

"I don't want to kill you, but I will if I must!"

The metal screeched as the door behind Ringo burst open. Jack and two of his men entered the room, fanning out to fill the hallway and raising their weapons. Jack slung his rifle over his shoulder and stepped up next to Ringo.

"You can't do this, Richard. You have nowhere to run even if you could get out of here."

Richard did not move. "Perhaps I no longer wish to go anywhere. Perhaps I wish to die rather than live as a pawn in whatever game Questor is playing."

Jack nodded. "So, it's true. You know."

"We do work for Questor, Richard, but that does not change the fact that we want to help you." It was Nash's voice from behind him. Richard did not turn to look, still aiming for Ringo's forehead.

"You plan to use me as your lab rat. You have no intention of helping me." Richard gripped the gun so tightly that his knuckles hurt.

"I don't see why we can't do both. You help us, we'll help you." Nash sounded reasonable, but then he always did.

Beth slowly entered through the door behind Jack and his men. "Put the gun down, Richard. You can trust us—you can trust me. Let us help you." She pulled at her cross nervously, turning it over in her fingers as she stared at him, her eyes pleading with him to do as she asked.

The cross glinted in the dry light of the fluorescents. Richard grew dizzy, and his vision darkened at the corners of

his eyes. His knees buckled. Ringo lunged forward, grabbing his arm and pushing it up toward the ceiling. Richard squeezed the trigger.

Jack grabbed him from the side and together dragged him to the ground, but the blackness overtook him before he got there....