

Chapter 1

For the second time in less than six months, Kurt, vampire regent and Master of Seattle, was terrified.

Fear turned to anger. *This cannot be happening to me.*

He stood in the dark before a wall-sized, plate glass window on the top floor of his office tower in downtown Seattle. Turning, he stepped over to a small lamp on his sculpted steel desk and switched it on. In the low light, the plate glass reflected everything in the room—except him. Baring his teeth, he swept his arm over the desk, sending the lamp crashing to the floor. His office was plunged into darkness again.

Kurt glared at the shattered lamp. *It's inexplicable. My powers are supposed to strengthen with age, not weaken.* Yet here he was, losing the powers he'd nearly died twice to obtain.

His first indication that something was wrong happened about a month ago while dining at Harrow, his flagship restaurant. He and a client, Jack Hewitt, had been lunching in one of the restaurant's private dining rooms. It had been a celebration on Kurt's part for having closed a deal for a complete renovation of one of Hewitt's sprawling luxury hotels to the tune of thirty-five million dollars. His thoughts drifted, remembering.

"A perfect lunch, Kurt," Hewitt had said. He put his fork down on his now-empty plate.

"Of course. I wouldn't have it any other way." Kurt had popped the last piece of filet mignon into his mouth. He chewed the morsel, and then tried to swallow. He choked, instead. He bent over the table, trying to dislodge the piece of steak that had gotten stuck in his throat.

“Kurt? Kurt,” Hewitt had shouted. “Oh, my God!” He’d leapt from his seat and ran around the table to where Kurt sat. Kurt had waved him away, but Hewitt hadn’t seemed to notice. Lifting him out of his seat, Hewitt had proceeded to perform the Heimlich maneuver, not knowing that the technique would be useless. Kurt had managed to dislodge the piece of food on his own, and spat it into his napkin.

Back in the present, he shivered as if to shake off the humiliating memory. Now, the only human foods he could manage were clear soups and wine.

Lips pursed, he reached for a bottle resting near the edge of the desktop and poured some of its contents into a large, heavy crystal goblet. Upending the cup, he drained the murky liquid, its slightly viscous texture coating his tongue and throat. When the cup was empty, he set the goblet back on the desk and fixed it with a baleful stare. “Nothing like a pint of blood to ruin a perfectly good wine,” he muttered.

From the day of his lunch with Jack Hewitt, his losses had only worsened. He had a near-constant need for blood. A vampire regent need only feed once or twice a year, but now Kurt had to feed every day. *Stealing blood from my own blood bank, hiding my tracks...no one’s caught on, but how long will it be until someone does?* He used the stolen blood to make his bloodwine, mixing the concoction himself. Kurt hid his stash in a wine cellar he had built in the deeper recesses beneath his nightclub. *And when the hunger comes, I sneak away to my cellar and drink like a secret alcoholic until I can face a live human or zot without attacking him. It’s embarrassing, is what it is.*

He started pacing. *And then there are the other powers I’ve lost. I can’t read minds. I’m no longer telepathic. I can still go out in daylight, but I have to stay out of the sun because I*

don't cast a shadow. He shook his head. For every day that passed, it was getting harder and harder to maintain the lie that, for him, it was business as usual.

Kurt stopped in his tracks and clapped his hands over his face. *And what's so maddening is that I don't know why this is happening.*

Dropping his hands, he walked back to the window and stared at the dark construction cranes guarding their sites like skeletal sentries. He traced a perfectly-manicured fingernail over his cheek. *Could Balthus Coven have put a hex on me?* It was possible. Vampires are not immune to magick. He thought about it, then dismissed it. *No. It would take a coven of mages to hex a regent like me. Balthus only has one mage—Garrett. And she wouldn't dare. She has just as much to lose as I do.*

He pursed his lips again. *Could I be ill? I've never heard of it happening to our kind before. But there's always a first time. Maybe...* Then he grabbed his head in both hands and gritted his teeth, knowing he was grasping at straws. "That's simply absurd. I'm getting the vampire equivalent of senile, not catching a damned cold."

His jaw relaxed, but he didn't let go of his head. Whether senile or something else, his diminishment could cost him dearly. *I deal with humans nearly every day. Before all this—whatever it is—started, it was impossible for anyone to guess I'm a vampire. But now...if any human figures out what I am, I'll be permanently dead in short order.*

Kurt let his arms fall to his sides. His—infirmity—could cost him in other ways, too. Kurt was of some renown among his kind for having attained his full regency at two hundred years old, a comparatively young age for a vampire. But if word of his disability got out, who knew how many of the undead would try to topple him from his Seattle throne?

And Seattle was a prize any would-be Master or Mistress would covet. Kurt had been among the city's founders. He was the reason Seattle had become a place where zots could live and work relatively free from human molestation. But his influence went far beyond his control over the city's zots. Through his human servants, he pulled most of the strings in the city and county governments. The lieutenant governor was one of his human servants. He had influence in the state legislature, and even held influence over the state's delegation to Congress. As far as he knew, no other vampire in America wielded that kind of power.

I'll have to defend my domain against all comers, just like I did over five hundred years ago. His jaw tightened again. The prospect didn't cheer him. That never-ending chess game had been fun while he'd been a prince among the living, but now that he was dead, he'd no appetite for it. *And I'm not fool enough to think my zots would help me keep what's mine. They hate me, and right now they hate me even more because of that damned revolution last June.* He sighed. *I really should have paid closer attention to those so-called college students. Those idiots...burning my city. Equal rights for exotics is all well and good, but that won't happen as long as humans outnumber us by thousands to one. All those morons managed to accomplish was nothing.*

Kurt returned to his desk and decanted the rest of the bloodwine into the goblet. He narrowed his eyes and poured the foul concoction down his throat. He set the goblet down and shuddered. "Ugh." Then he began pacing again.

If the tryst had worked the way Garrett said it would... His lips tightened. *It isn't her fault.* It had been the mage's idea to combine her own formidable talent, Kurt's regent's powers, and the extraordinary psychogenetic strength of her werewolf ex-lover, Parker, by casting a magick spell to create a tryst. When they'd joined forces last June, they'd planned to use the tryst

to cast a second spell that would have erased human Seattleites' fear and hatred for zots. *She couldn't have foreseen the revolution. And the conditions under which we had to work... 'less than optimal' would be an understatement. The only thing the spellcasting accomplished was to stop the rioting.*

A thought struck him. *Could whatever's happening to me now be because of the tryst?* He thought about it for a few minutes, and then shook his head. *Can't be. It's been over five months since we cast that spell. If the tryst was behind this, I'd have noticed something long before now, wouldn't I?*

He stopped his pacing, returned to his desk, and sat in his black leather executive's chair. Leaning back, he stared at the ceiling. Wasn't there any way he could stop his deterioration? Then he abruptly sat forward. *No. There's a reason why this—cancer—is happening to me, and I'm going to find out what it is. And then I'm going to beat it.*

He nodded once and stood. Then he dissolved into mist and flew across the city, back to his Last Chance nightclub.