

BLADE'S ESCAPE

When Henry Rachinger is turned into a blue blood against his will, he must decide what his future holds...

Blood. The scent of it rich and coppery in his nose... That was the first thing that he remembered.

And then the rest hit him, as he began to come to. A nightmare of vignettes he could barely piece together, but all of it told the same story.

Henry lashed out, pushing away as if to escape it.

"Lad looks like's 'e's comin' round." The boot in his side made his lip curl in a silent snarl and Henry dug his fingers into the thin blankets beneath him as the hunger rose, thick and choking. Like a wash of pure darkness through him, obliterating all sense of a man or woman's identity. They became nothing more than blood then...

Like Emily.

His eyes shot open and he surged upright, breathing hard. *Emily.* An arm wrapped around his chest and Henry shoved blindly, sending the man staggering across the room and into the far wall.

"Little bastard!" the man he'd pushed snapped.

Another man watched Henry from his seat in a chair, his worn boots hooked up on a table as he peered through a wreath of cheroot smoke. Canny green eyes focused on Henry with all the intensity of a hawk and he held a hand up in warning as the other man surged to his feet. "I told you not to touch 'im, Derek." He nodded slowly at Henry. "Ain't nobody 'ere to 'urt you, lad."

Henry's gaze locked on the man's scarred knuckles and raked over those bruiser's shoulders. Braces strained against a chest wrought through years of carrying slabs of beef—or barrels of ale maybe. Slowly Henry levered himself to his feet, crouching low. His hands shook from the hunger and need, but he didn't dare betray a weakness here. Life on the streets had taught him that if nothing else.

"Do you know where you are?" the fellow asked.

Henry shook his head.

"Name's Rory O'Loughlin. I run the Sharks gang as owns these parts. We're in Whitechapel, lad. What d'they call you?"

Henry remained silent. They'd tell him what they wanted

soon enough. And he could hardly think through the splitting pain in his chest. *No, no, no.* Let this be a nightmare. Let it not be true.

"Little runt," the other man muttered. "You tell 'im your name or I'll beat it out o' you."

A slight smile creased over O'Loughlin's weathered lips. "You couldn't if you tried, could you Derek? You know what 'e is." Slowly O'Loughlin reached forward and picked up a cup on the table. "You want it, lad?"

And suddenly Henry could smell it, the sudden dryness in his throat like razor blades. Here was the source of the blood. He staggered back, wrapping his grimy sleeve over his mouth and nose. *No. God, no.*

Memory flashed. Emily. Covered in her own blood. And the Duke of Vickers, the man who'd infected him with the craving virus that made him this way, staring down at him in shock. Henry had been his little experiment; to see how long a lad stricken with the craving virus could hold himself together without blood.

Then Vickers had brought Emily to his cell when she begged and pleaded to see her younger brother.

Vickers had killed his sister as surely as if he'd pulled the trigger himself.

Henry sank down into the corner, shoving his fists against his mouth and eyes. No matter how tightly he clenched his eyes he could still see her there, tattooed on the back of his eyelids it seemed.

"No." *Please, no.* But he couldn't take it back. He couldn't stop himself from watching as his sister died. The pain of it sliced through him, a fist of nausea in his stomach. *Please, please, please...*

He hadn't been himself. That was his only excuse. He hadn't even recognized her, until it was too late, the hunger of the craving virus stealing away his humanity until all that remained was a predator.

Fabric shifted. "Easy now, lad. You'll feel better after you've 'ad a sip."

The scent of blood wafted closer as O'Loughlin knelt beside Henry with the cup. It made his mouth water, the pain in his head tightening until he thought it would explode. The world was washed in tones of black and white and it was all he could do not to wrench the cup out of O'Loughlin's hand. Or worse, to go for his throat.

"Never be better," he sobbed, wrapping his arms around his head. "Go 'way. Leave me 'ere."

Or better yet, kill me.

Pain speared through his scalp as a hand fisted in his hair. Before he could even lash out the cup was to his lips and blood gushed into his mouth, thick and cold.

Henry couldn't fight it. Not now. He swallowed even as he struggled but the grip in his hair was merciless. Despite his superior blue blood strength, O'Loughlin pinned him with ruthless ease and forced him to drink.

The world went black as the hunger surged. All he could see was the cup as he wrenched it from O'Loughlin's hands and drained it dry. Then it was empty. He hadn't had enough. Looking up, he saw the man in front of him, gaze narrowing on the heady kick of pulse in the man's throat.

He didn't even realize he'd moved until he was flat on his face in the blankets, an arm wrenched behind him and a heavy knee in his back.

The pressure was merciless but not cruel. Henry blinked as his vision shifted, becoming nothing but shadows again as the hunger settled.

"That's the way, boy. Let it go. Let it ease." O'Loughlin leaned closer. "First lesson: starve yourself and sooner or later you'll end up cuttin' a swathe through the rookery...where you'll come up 'gainst me. Or feed the 'unger. Give it what it needs so it don't take control." A warning wrench on his arm. "That's what 'appened before, ain't it? You starved it and that's what 'appened?"

Henry gasped in pain. "Ow'd you know?"

A pause in the pressure. "That's 'ow it always 'appens. Cravers can't control 'emselves when they're bang up with the 'unger. Seen it enough times before."

"No blue bloods in Whitechapel," he said. No, the craving virus was solely offered within the aristocratic Echelon that ruled the city. Anyone infected by chance was considered a rogue blue blood and a price placed on his head.

Like himself.

"Dunks, opium-eaters..." O'Loughlin shrugged and let him go. "Every man's got 'is poison and I seen enough o' that to understand 'ow it is with you cravers."

One last wrench and Henry gasped as he collapsed on the blankets. The last of the shadows fled his vision as O'Loughlin stood. He felt better, his stomach not cramping as badly as it had.

Still... he weren't about to admit that.

"What brings you to me turf?" O'Loughlin asked, crossing back to where his smoldering cheroot rested. "Found you covered

in blood in the middle o' Petticoat Lane with three dead men and a pair of broken metaljackets. You were beat pretty bad, and I thought you were 'alfway to the grave 'til the bruises started fadin'. Figured out right quick what you were." O'Loughlin flashed a sudden smile. "Though the torn-up metaljackets ought 'ave given that away." A shake of the head. "Ain't never seen anyone bring down one of them brutes."

Memory was starting to intrude. Henry licked his lips and sat up slowly. Vickers's face. Flashes of vision as he'd fled down the tunnel to the exit of the cells. He hadn't been wholly himself then.

Three months since Vickers had injected him with his own blood and he'd not seen daylight in all that time. Starving in the cell. The hunger in him raging. *Not himself.*

Henry flinched. No excuse. It would never be an excuse. He'd carry this with him until the day he died. But first... he wanted Vickers to pay.

"Metaljackets ain't that 'ard to bring down," he whispered through a hoarse throat. The shining steel automatons were built between seven and eight foot tall. Some of them had flame-throwers that hurled Greek fire mounted on their forearms, but the joints at their knees and elbows were their weakness.

For a human, near impossible. But he wasn't human now. *Not anymore.*

"I did something... bad."

"Aye." O'Loughlin twitched aside the curtains on the small room and peered out. "The Echelon wouldn't be 'untin' you if you 'adn't. They're out there now. Combin' the rookery. Got scores o' them spitfires with 'em but we'll 'elp you. Keep you 'oled up so they don't find you."

Henry stilled. After he'd fought his way free of the Echelon's Ivory Tower, he'd fled through the streets, half-blind with fear and the blood-hunger. However he'd ended up here, he didn't quite know. But if the Echelon's hunters found him, it wouldn't take long before he found himself on the steps to the guillotine.

A fierce surge of fury swept through him. He didn't deserve to live. Not after what he'd done. But he'd be damned if he let Vickers survive him.

He owed Emily that, at least.

"So, what do you want?" he asked. He'd never lived in the rookeries but the streets where he grew up were almost as hard. People didn't scratch each other's back's for nothing.

O'Loughlin smiled again. Pleased. "You're a bright, lad. So I won't lie to you. I got me a little problem with the gangs 'round this

part.”

“I won’t kill for you.” He had enough blood on his hands.

“Not even the Slashers?”

The bane of the East End. The Slasher gangs ruled the night, dragging people from their beds and draining them of their blood in small laboratories deep in the bowels of the abandoned underground train lines. Rumor said they sold it to the Echelon-owned draining factories down by Brickbank.

To join a Slasher gang required an initiation; cut off a hand or foot and replace it with a mech part. Even the legitimate mechs—those forced to pay for their clockwork limbs, who had nothing to do with the Slashers—were eyed with distrust in these parts.

“See, I don’t ‘ave no problem with the ‘uman gangs,” O’Loughlin said. “I can ‘andle ‘em on me own. But the Slashers... They’re startin’ to get greedy. Bandin’ together and draggin’ whole families away in their sleep. You could stop that. Pay back some o’ that debt you owe yourself.”

Their eyes met.

“And the Echelon?” Henry asked.

O’Loughlin nodded slowly. “You let me deal with that. The people round ‘ere don’t like ‘em blue bloods none—beggin’ your pardon. I got me an idea ‘bout ‘ow to make the Echelon tuck tail and run.”

Henry drew his knees up to his chest. He was so damned tired. And alone. Emily had been the only person he’d ever had... and he’d betrayed her in the end.

God, it hurt so much.

He nodded numbly. “I want to kill a man.”

“Thought you didn’t want blood on your ‘ands?” O’Loughlin asked.

He thought of Vickers. “I want ‘is blood.” He looked up, met O’Loughlin’s eyes. Weren’t right for the man not to know what he was getting himself into. “I want the Duke of Vickers’s ‘ead.”

A long moment of silence filled the room. O’Loughlin sat back in his chair and scraped his hand over his mouth. “Jaysus.”

Derek swore under his breath. “That’s madness.” He took a step forward. “e’s on the Council that rules the city, ‘e is! Rory, the brat’ll bring ‘em all down upon our ‘eads.”

“I won’t,” Henry promised. “ad enough o’ blood. I’ll be patient. I’ll wait ‘til I can get at him, I promise.”

O’Loughlin considered it for a long moment. “You’ll wait,” he said slowly. “You ‘elp me with me little problem and I’ll ‘elp you.” A heavy hand came down on his shoulder. “I’ll teach you ‘ow to live

‘ere. I’ll teach you ‘ow to make the Echelon fear you. All the street lessons you need to learn, lad, I promise. So, what’s your name?”

“Blade,” he said softly, thinking of the weapon he vowed he’d become.

It was time he buried Henry.

Time for revenge.