ForeWord Reviews
Clarion Review

FANTASY

Mandate of Blood
John D. Kell
Lulu
978-1-105-93924-2
Four Stars (out of Five)

Just when one thinks the market has reached the saturation point in the vampire category, along comes John D. Kell's refreshingly innovative *Mandate of Blood*.

In this bloodsucker society, vampires live in groups, known as Houses, each one controlled by an old bloodsucker known as an Ancient. Alexis serves as a Hunter in the European House of Adamus; she and her fellow Hunters use firepower to bring down Rogues—vampires who flout the rules of the Council. Alexis and her friends Rene and Nikita slaughter one such Rogue who warns them of sweeping changes ahead in the vampire world.

Meanwhile, in Boston, a human named Duncan has a disturbing dream about a serial killer who crucifies his victims. Alexis and Duncan's paths cross when Alexis, Rene, and Nikita are dispatched by the Council to investigate the murders, which have really happened.

Most of Kell's characters, both human and vampire, are well developed with complicated backstories. They fire off wry quips that lend humor to an otherwise bloody story. They also routinely engage in volleys of sly sexual puns that represent a welcome change from flying bullets and gore.

It is fascinating to hear the other characters describe Alexis as somewhat cold and ruthless, because she never appears to act like this when the story is written from her point of view. As she writes it, she is stoic and follows the call of duty; however, the reader can sense that she also feels fear and doubt.

Duncan gains nuance when the author explores how he is affected by a tragedy that befell his little sister, Avryl, many years ago. Readers can understand his grief and pain, and his transition from disbelief in the supernatural to belief in vampires is smoothly done. As Duncan forces himself to face the mysterious horror that enveloped Avryl, he faces memories that suggest bloodsuckers were involved in the tragedy.

The love that develops between Alexis and Duncan is, to them, unexpected, but to the reader, it feels natural. The secondary characters of suave Rene, sexy Nikita, and Duncan's

tortured little sister, Avryl, are also nuanced.

Mandate of Blood hums along at a suspenseful pace, with action galore to keep the audience hooked. Unfortunately, Kell bites off more than he can chew. The narrative becomes confusing because he continually adds details to the structure of the vampire society but neglects to adequately explain them. For example, by the end of the book, the difference between an Elder, an Ancient, and a Guardian remains unclear. Also troubling, vampires develop abilities as the plot progresses. Some of them are telepathic, some are able to create zombies, and some are able to control both humans and vampires with their powers of hypnosis. And the meaning of the book's title remains murky.

Despite these missteps, dynamic characterization and constantly unfolding plot wrinkles carry this generally solid debut.

Jill Allen