



# Logan: Vengeance

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# PRELUDE

I FEEL ANGRY I FEEL HELPLESS  
I WANNA CHANGE THE WORLD  
ONE - CREED

Background: *noun* - your family and your experience of education, living conditions, wealth, etc.

Estrea said that I should write down my background and the things that have happened to me in the last few months. She said it was important to remember where you come from, and I guess she'd know since she can't remember where she came from. So she bought me this cool computer and told me to write.

She said I should tell you my name is Alexandra Maria Servantez, and really, it is. I guess since her name is Estrea Louisa Dominique Moreno, she thinks everyone needs a half dozen names. I don't agree.

Rey gave me the name I like best when I was eight. He said I was like that guy in X-Men, the tough one with a heart of gold. Ever since he said that, I insisted everyone call me Logan. It was the first thing Rey ever gave me, and I'll always treasure it.

My name is Logan. If you have to have a last name, Servantez will do. I don't know what my real name is, maybe my mom never gave me one before she walked away. The state named me Alexandra Maria, and when the Servantez adopted me, I got their last name. But I like Logan, just Logan. If Cher and Madonna can do it, why can't I?

Estrea said that writing this stuff would help me work through the anger and helplessness I felt after what happened to Rey. What she didn't understand was that I was used to feeling angry and helpless. I agreed to write this stuff down mostly so that I'd never forget my brother or what happened to him.

They tell me my real mother dropped me off at a hospital in San Francisco when I was a baby. They never found her, but I like to think she wanted a better life for me than the one she had. I'll never know the truth. Maybe she just didn't want to deal with a kid.

I was in foster homes for a long time after that, but I don't remember most of them. All I remember is a bunch of different people trying to tell me what to do and punishing me when I did what I wanted. I didn't like it much.

When I was eight, the Servantez adopted me. They already had a son, Reymundo, but they wanted a little girl they could dress up and coddle. They should have picked someone else.

Rey liked me from the start and the feeling was mutual. He was the best big brother anyone could ever have. He took care of me when the Servantez gave up on me. He taught me how to speak Spanish, helped me with my homework, and held me when I woke from childhood nightmares. He was everything to me.

Louis and Carmen Servantez considered Rey their golden child. He was smart and funny, kind and responsible. He got straight A's in school, was on the wrestling team and the football team, and still found time to work around the house when Louis needed it, or do the dishes when Carmen was tired. He was popular in school but never missed a curfew. Everybody loved Rey.

When he graduated, Rey started getting serious about his kickboxing, Savate. His parents wanted him to go to college, but he said he wanted to take a couple of years off first to make some money and see how far Savate would take him. It would have taken him far, I know it would have. He was good, damn good.

Rey was good at Savate, but bad with money. Rather than let his parents find out about it, I took over his investments when I was fifteen. Pretty soon I was making all of the arrangements for his boxing, doing the bookings, handling the prize money and going with him to some of his matches.

He started teaching me how to fight. He told me I was a natural, but I was in school and his parents really didn't want me getting into the whole kickboxing world. They told me I was better off finding a nice boy to marry than waste Rey's time like that. My brother didn't agree so he taught me anyway when they weren't around.

I did pretty well in school too, mostly because Rey helped a lot and I didn't have anything better to do. The Servantez didn't let me go out much, and they didn't approve of any of the boys I liked, so I didn't date. I took extra classes so I could graduate early, and once I did I went on the road with Rey.

He never told me how he convinced his parents to let me go with him, but they did. We were able to spar a lot more, and Rey talked me into entering a few matches myself. I won some and lost some, but my brother encouraged me to keep trying. He thought I had what it takes to be a champion, and for his sake I did my best.

Rey never lost a match, never. I took all his prize money and invested it for him, hoping that by the time he decided to go to college he'd have enough to pay for it all and have plenty left over to live off. He would have too, if he hadn't been murdered.

When I told her I was writing this to make sure I didn't forget Rey, Estrea said that maybe it would also help me feel less alone. I didn't tell her that I hardly ever really feel that way.

See, my brother started looking after me the day his parents brought me home, and I don't think he ever stopped. I know it's corny, but sometimes I feel like he's still with me. Sometimes I still hear him telling me the best way to defeat an opponent, warning me when something bad is about to happen, comforting me when I need it the most.

I guess I'm writing this for him in the hopes that he would be proud of me. My life has changed in ways I could never have imagined, and I hope he would approve of the choices I've made. Estrea told me he would have and I hope she was right.

I hope that he approves of the goal that drives me now. See, someone murdered my brother in cold blood. That was their first mistake. They tried to kill me too, but they didn't, and that was their second mistake. Somewhere along the way they're gonna make more mistakes, and I'm gonna be there to see it.

Vengeance: *noun* - the punishing of someone for harming you or your friends or family, or the desire for such punishment to happen.

Rey, wherever you are, I love you, bro. I'm doing my best to find the guys that killed you, and I swear I'm gonna make them pay. *Me vengaré le, mijo. Su sangre para el tuyo.*

# SNEAK ATTACK

AND I NEVER SAW IT COMING

NEVER SAW IT FADE AWAY

DAYS AND DAYS - CONCRETE BLONDE

One Saturday night in September I was with Rey when he fought a match in San Francisco. It was a tough fight, the guy was almost as good as my brother. Almost, but it took Rey a while to make the points he needed to win. He was tired when he climbed out of the ring, more tired than I'd seen him in a long time.

I remember being very concerned about how much the fight had taken out of him, but he just laughed it off.

"I'll be okay, *mija*," he said, messing up my hair. "I won, isn't that what mattered?"

He was right, of course. He was tall and strong and handsome, and to me he seemed invincible. I never thought anything would ever happen to him, I thought he would live forever.

I was wrong.

It was almost an hour after the fight when we left the arena through the back door. I was carrying his duffel bag with the prize money inside. Rey slung his arm around my shoulders and told me that soon I'd have my own prize money and we'd travel the country winning everywhere we went.

My brother was smiling down at me when all hell broke loose.

Suddenly I was hit from behind, knocked away from Rey by two hundred pounds of muscle, bone and leather. I went sprawling on the pavement, losing my hold on the bag as I tried to roll like Rey had taught me. It wasn't easy with some guy riding my back, but somehow I managed to regain my feet.

What happened next was a blur to me for a while. I knew that there were at least five of them, and that Rey did his best to fight off the three that were trying to take him down. They were good, and too fast to be believed.

The one that had tackled me hit me hard and fast. I tried to block, but I felt like I was moving in slow motion compared to how quick this guy could move. Somehow I managed to get in a few good shots of my own before another one grabbed me from behind and spun me around.

I remember feeling a blade sink into my chest, and that when the guy pulled it out I couldn't breathe. I remember hearing a woman's voice call out through the alley, and falling to the pavement stunned. Through a haze I could see a woman kneeling next to me, and looking past her I saw Rey lying on the ground, blood pooling all around him.

Estrea says that when she came on us, my brother winning. She says that if they hadn't had knives, Rey might have been able to take them down. She saw one of them plunge the knife into Rey's chest, saw him twist it before driving the blade out the side of my brother's rib cage.

She told me she yelled at the guys who had attacked us, and at first they were going to assault her too. Then she turned on something she calls Presence, and they took off.

Now I can remember her bending over me and holding her wrist to my lips. I remember the taste of her blood in my mouth and the bliss that washed over me. It seems like a dream to me now, but at the time I was in ecstasy.

She says she came to me first because it looked like she could help me. She fed me some of her blood and whispered in my ear to concentrate on healing. Afterward she went to Rey and fed him too, but he was already pretty far gone. I don't remember that, but I'll take her word for it.

The next thing I knew someone was shining a light into my eyes. I pushed it away and sat up, searching for my brother. I crawled over to him and shoved the paramedic aside so I could see his face.

"Logan," he whispered with a weak smile before his eyes closed.

"Rey," I breathed, tears falling down my cheeks. There was too much blood on the ground, on his clothes, on his lips.

"Miss, you have to move away," a man told me firmly.

When I would have protested, the woman I'd seen earlier took me by the shoulders and pulled me back gently but firmly.

"Give them room," she said softly, her voice melodic with a Spanish accent.

I let her move back and watched as they ripped off his shirt and tried to stop the bleeding from the gaping hole in his chest. One of the other paramedics tried to get a look at my chest, but I told her I didn't need it. Minutes later they loaded my brother into the ambulance and I climbed in after him, sitting on the bench and trying to will my brother to live.

The ride to the hospital was a nightmare. I watched them work on Rey, saw them put an IV in his arm and try to stabilize him, but the worried look on their faces told me they didn't have much hope.

Things were chaotic when we got to the hospital. The wheeled Rey into an examination room and shut me out of it. Someone directed me to the waiting area, so I went. I was pacing when the woman from the alley showed up.

She introduced herself as Estrea Moreno, and handed me what was left of my purse. I don't remember exactly what else she said, I was too worried about Rey. I know I told her my name, though. And I remember telling her that Rey's parents were going to blame me for him getting hurt. Estrea didn't understand that, and I guess I wasn't very clear.

See, even though I've always thought of Rey as my brother, I never considered his parents my mom and dad. I know they tried hard to accept me at first, but I've never been real easy to get along with and it didn't take long for them to regret adopting me. Oh, they never said so, to my face anyway, but I knew they did.

When the intercom blared to life calling for more doctors to the emergency room, I knew things weren't going good for Rey. When one of them opened the door to go in, I saw them using those paddle things on him. He was pale, deathly pale, and I guess it was then I knew he was going to die.

Estrea did her best to keep me calm and distract me from what was going on in there, but I was stressed to the max. I couldn't figure out who would want Rey dead, everyone had loved him.

When one of the doctors came out with a solemn look on his face, I went to him and demanded to know what was going on.

"His internal organs were damaged very badly," the doctor explained. "I'm afraid we couldn't save him. Really, I don't know how he held on as long as he did."

Just then Louis and Carmen burst into the waiting area. They identified themselves to the doctor and he broke the news that Rey was dead. I watched and listened, but it was almost as if I was watching a movie. It couldn't be real, could it? Rey couldn't be dead.

Dead: *adjective* - no longer living.

Funny how such a simple concept can be so hard to understand, and so difficult to deal with for those of us still living.

His mother finally looked at me and asked me what happened at the arena. I told her, stumbling over my words. At the time most of what had happened was a haze, it was hard to remember. I didn't get very far anyway before Louis interrupted me.

"Why didn't you go for help?" He demanded.

"I tried," I whispered. "There were too many of them, I couldn't get away. I tried to help Rey fight them off, but—"

"If you weren't trying to prove yourself to him, you could have gone for help," Carmen insisted. "Always trying to show off. Look what you've done to my poor boy!"

"Mrs. Servantez," Estrea said softly, "this wasn't Logan's fault."

Carmen ignored her. "I want you gone from our house. Get your things and get out and don't come back, Alexandra."

Louis put his arm around his wife and led her toward the room that Rey's body was still lying in.

"Carmen," I pleaded, trying to follow. "I tried to help him."

"You got him killed," she shot back. "Leave our house. We never want to see you again, *comprende?*"

I looked at Rey's father, hoping for some kind of a reprieve. "Louis?"

He didn't answer, just led his wife away.

For the longest time I stood there and stared after them. I guess I'd never really known how much they had resented me being a part of their lives. I mean, I knew they didn't like me, but to tell me to leave this way was totally unexpected. If Ray were alive, they never would have done it because they knew how much he cared about me. Of course, if Ray were alive, none of this would be happening.

# DARK ANGEL

DOING ALL THOSE THINGS YOU DO  
MAKING SURE THAT I'M ALL RIGHT  
GOIN' DOWN - GODSMACK

Estrea offered to put me up in a hotel room, and since I didn't really have any other choice, I let her talk me into it. We went to a decent hotel on the outskirts of town, and I stood to one side while she checked me in. When she was done she led me by the arm to the elevators without a word.

The room was bigger than my bedroom at home, nicer too. Estrea suggested I take a bath, so I went into the bathroom and locked the door. I leaned against the cold surface for a moment, trying to get a little perspective on the night, but I couldn't do it.

Rey was dead. It was hard to get my mind around it. The one person who had meant more than anyone else in the world to me was gone forever, murdered in a back alley by thugs.

I pushed away from the door and took a look at myself in the mirror. My clothes were trashed, blood stained and ripped beyond repair. My hair looked like something had made a nest in it and died. I turned away from the grim reminder of my brother's death and bent to start the water running in the tub.

It took me a few minutes to peel off the remains of my clothing. Some of it was stuck to with blood and other dried fluids that I refused to try and identify. Eventually I climbed into the steaming water and tried to relax.

The warmth of the water seeped into my frozen body, but it didn't make me feel any better. I was sore and tired and my hands wouldn't stop shaking. Rey was dead.

I cried a little, but knowing Estrea was in the other room helped me keep a handle on my raw emotions. I wanted to be alone when I broke down, completely alone with no one to make comforting noises or try to tell me everything was going to be all right.

Rey was dead, nothing would ever be all right again.

What was I going to do? I had no money, and the Servantez certainly weren't willing to let me come back home. I didn't even have any clothes to wear to try and find a job, even if I had the transportation to find one. I had to start over but I had no idea where to begin.

I didn't stay in the bathtub for very long. When I'd drained the tub and dried myself off, I pulled on a thick robe I found hanging on the bathroom door. A quick twist of a towel got my wet hair off my neck. I gathered my courage and walked out of the bathroom.

Estrea smiled reassuringly at me and came over to lay a comforting hand on my shoulder. She led me to the bed and covered me in a blanket, explaining that room service was on its way as she sat on the bed next to me.

"I made a few calls," she told me softly. "Don't worry, someone will get your stuff for you. I also found a place that needs a trainer if you're interested." She gave me the name and phone number for the gym written neatly on a piece of paper.

"Thank you," I said gratefully.

"There is no need to thank me," she replied, putting her hand on my knee. "You're just a victim here."

"I'm sorry you had to get involved in this," I told her. "I know you did everything you could to help us."

"I'm just sorry I couldn't have done more," she said softly. "Why don't you let me buy you some clothes to wear until your stuff gets here?"

I would have refused, but she talked over my protests.

"I insist. I've been blessed with material things and I like to give back to those who need it when I can," she said with a smile. "See, I had an accident a few years ago that robbed me of my memories and instilled in me a need to help others."

She seemed very sincere, so what was I supposed to do? I agreed, I really didn't have any other choice. "I'll pay you back when I can," I promised.

"It isn't necessary," she assured me.

A soft knock at the made me jump, but Estrea just patted my knee and went to answer it. She tipped the waiter and brought the food into the room where she set it up on a small table near the window.

I wasn't very hungry, but since she'd gone through the effort to get me the food I figured I had to eat it. I sat down and picked up a fork, looking down at the meal with very little interest.

"Give me your sizes," Estrea said as she pushed the car toward the door. "I'll go and find you some clothes while you eat."

Once I'd given her my sizes, she went off and left me alone to eat.

The moment the door closed behind her I sat down the fork and dropped my face into my hands. Crying helped a little, but nothing could ease the ache in my heart. In the space of an hour I'd lost the only person in the world that mattered to me, my home, my job, and my family. All the tears in the world wouldn't make that go away.

Eventually I pulled myself together and started eating. The food was good, and I knew I'd need the nourishment before thing settled down. God only knew where my next meal was going to come from.

Plan: *noun* - a set of decisions about how to do something in the future.

I needed a plan. I found a notepad and a pen and started making a list of people I could call. Some of them were Rey's friends that needed to know what had happened. I didn't trust his parents to make those calls, they had never approved of his many friends.

Other people on my list were contacts in the kickboxing circuit. If Estrea's lead didn't pan out, I needed to get my name out there to let people know I was available. I wasn't sure anyone would hire me as a trainer, but I had to try.

Eventually Estrea came back with several large bags in one hand and a garment bag over her shoulder. She had obviously bought more than one set of clothes, but when I tried to protest she brushed my concerns aside.

"You need an interview outfit," she told me as she unzipped the garment bag to show me a black pantsuit. She started talking about colors and professionalism, and told me that if anything didn't fit, there was an in house seamstress downstairs that could make whatever adjustments were necessary.

So much kindness from a stranger seemed too much for me after the Servantez had hung me out to dry. I couldn't help crying, and Estrea came over to lay a hand on my shoulder.

"You deserve a chance," she told me as she pulled me into her arms to comfort me. She murmured other things, light, supportive things to me and after a few moments I was able to control my tears.

"I'm sorry," I whispered. "I didn't mean to cry all over you."

She took the tie from my robe and wiped away my tears. "That's all right," she said softly. "I've had weirder bodily fluids on me."



I took her hand and looked down, ashamed at my lack of control. Abruptly I realized that her hands were cold, but when I mentioned it, she said something about poor circulation and pulled away.

Estrea turned the conversation back to the clothes, and rather than push the issue of her ice-cold hands, I let her.

She showed me everything she'd bought, and from what I could tell it was of the highest quality. The suit was Versache and the shoes were mid range Gucci heels. There was a matching purse and more shoes that were more suitable to wear with the designer jeans she showed me. Even the tee shirts and underthings were expensive.

Mentally I tried to calculate how much it would take to pay her back but it was hard because she'd removed all the tags from the clothes, and there were no receipts in the bags. Just when I thought we were done she pulled out a short silk nightgown with spaghetti straps that must have cost at least a hundred dollars.

Estrea put everything away for me, then sent me to bed. It was just after three in the morning, and it had been a long night. She handed me a business card that didn't have a name on it, only a number.

"Call me if you need anything," she told me. "I've paid for the room for a week, and if you need more just call me, it's not a problem." She tucked the covers up around my neck and headed for the door.

I was asleep before she'd even left the room.

# PICKING UP THE PIECES

IT'S A TRAGEDY FOR ME TO SEE THE DREAM IS OVER  
AND I NEVER WILL FORGET THE DAY WE MET  
I'M GONNA MISS YOU - MILLI VANILLI

The phone rang at eleven thirty and it woke me from a deep sleep. I reached over for the phone and answered it feeling very disoriented.

"Miss Servantez?" a male voice inquired politely but hesitantly.

"Yes," I replied, rubbing the sleep from my eyes.

"I'm Caleb Scott," he told me, "an associate of Ms Moreno's. She arranged for me to pick up your things, and I have them here in the lobby. Would you like me to bring them up?"

I sat bolt upright. "Now?" I asked.

"At your convenience," he said softly. "Perhaps you need a little time to freshen up. Would you like to meet me down here for lunch in, say, half an hour?"

I agreed, and jumped up to take a quick shower. As I was drying off I noticed a pink scar on my shoulder near the collarbone. I'd never seen it before, but it looked several weeks old. Vaguely I remembered being stabbed the night before, but I didn't understand how the wound could have healed so quickly.

It didn't take long for me to dress in jeans and a tee shirt. I threw on the jacket Estrea had bought because I still felt cold and out of it. It was almost like last night had never happened, but I knew it had. Rey was dead.

I wasn't sure where the restaurant was, but when I got off the elevator a man was sitting in one of the nearby chairs. He got up and straightened his clothes before walking toward me. He seemed out of place in the lobby, almost out of his element.

After we introduced ourselves, he explained that my things were at the front desk. It wasn't a lot really, just two suitcases and a couple of boxes. Caleb told me that he'd have someone take it up to my room for me while we had lunch.

He pointed out the direction of the restaurant, and I led the way across the lobby. Even though it was lunchtime, the restaurant wasn't overly busy. The price of the meals probably had something to do with that. We sat at a table to one side, and right away a waitress came over with menus and water.

Once she left us alone, Caleb laced his hands together on the table. "Estrea wanted me to check on you," he said softly.

"I'm fine," I told him. "I hope there were no problems getting my things."

"Not at all," he replied, although from the look in his eye I figured he was lying.

"I'm sure Carmen and Louis were upset," I added apologetically. "They're not the easiest to deal with."

"There was no problem," he repeated. "I didn't tell them where you were."

That meant they hadn't asked.

The waitress came back and we both ordered burgers and fries. Afterward, Caleb reached into his pocket and pulled out an envelope that he handed to me. "Estrea wanted me to arrange for this stuff for you."

Frowning, I picked up the thick envelope and opened it. Inside were a driver's license, Social Security card, birth certificate and high school transcripts all with my name on them.

"She told me that your license had been lost," he added, "and she wanted me to get them and the other things so you could reestablish yourself."

"How did you get all this?" I asked. Normally it took weeks to get replacement identification, and it was harder than hell.

"Estrea has connections that sped things along," he told me, taking a second, smaller envelope from his pocket and sliding it across the table.

"What is it?" I asked, afraid to look.

"Estrea said that you would need some cash until you could get a hold of your financial information," he told me. "Was anything else was missing? Credit cards or a check book?"

I peeked in the smaller envelope to find five hundred dollars in cash inside. "There was a check book," I told him absently, stunned at Estrea's generosity, "and a debit card for our checking account." My checking account now, Rey had insisted my name go on it even though only his winnings had gone into it. Relief flooded me that at least I had some money to fall back on.

"I can call and put a stop on the account if you'd like," he offered, taking a leather bound notepad from his pocket. "I can also have your brother's name taken off of the account."

I gave him the account number and sighed. "It's pointless to have him on, isn't it?" Rey was dead, he'd never write another check again.

"I'll take care of it when I get back LA," he assured me as he put the notebook back in his pocket.

Over our food we talked about kickboxing and how he thought I could probably kick his ass if it came down to it. I enjoyed explaining the circuit to him, and he seemed genuinely interested.

He told me that Estrea was worried about me and asked what my plans were. I told him I had people I could call and mentioned the number Estrea had given me. When I told him that I didn't want to impose any more on Estrea, he brushed my concerns aside.

"Have you known her long?" I asked him.

"A couple of years," he replied. "I work for her." He asked about any investments I might have had, and when he learned I didn't have any he suggested I go to college. He seemed to think I could get a scholarship, or that Estrea would be willing to put me through it, but I didn't want to impose.

"Does she make a habit of helping the less fortunate?" I asked.

"I was working for some Mafioso types in LA when I got busted screwing up a scam," he told me with a smile. "They decided to make me an example. They beat the crap out of me and left me by the docks. Estrea found me, nursed me back to health, and hired me."

For the first time I began to hope that I could pick up the pieces of my life and go on. Caleb was doing half the work by getting my identification and handling the financial details and Estrea seemed to think I'd be able to find a job quickly. Maybe I could go on without Rey to help me.

Conversation: *noun* - talk between two or more people in which thoughts, feelings and ideas are expressed, questions are asked and answered and news and information are exchanged.

The way Caleb talked, this was the most conversation he'd had in a good long while. He'd been pretty distant at first, but by the time we were done eating he'd warmed up quite a bit. I guess it helped that neither of us felt the need for small talk to fill the silences.

"Estrea will stop by around seven thirty for dinner," he told me as he took care of the bill.

I thanked him as he walked me to the elevator, and too quickly he was gone. I'd enjoyed having lunch with him, he was intelligent and attractive. Still, I had other things to think about, a life to plan. I pushed Caleb out of my mind and went up to my room.

My first task was calling the number Estrea had given me. Jon, the gym manager, listened while I explained my situation and background, then agreed to meet with me that afternoon. He gave me the address and told me to meet him by the medicine ball at three o'clock.

I made some other calls to Rey's friends. Of course the Servantez had told them their version of what happened, so I had to patiently explain the truth. It took a little while, and I don't think some of them believed me, but I did the best I could.

I also asked if anyone knew any job openings, but there wasn't much out there. One local gym was looking for a secretary, but I couldn't type and didn't think I'd make it behind a desk. Someone else told me there was an opening for a sports apparel model downtown, which sounded better than the secretary job, but still didn't appeal to me. I took the number just in case the lead Estrea gave me didn't work out and got ready for my interview.

# PROVING MYSELF

NO TIME FOR MOURNING

AIN'T GOT NO TIME

MY OWN PRISON - CREED

I took a cab to the gym and got there a few minutes early. It seemed like a decent place, newer equipment and all. There was a large ring in the center of the room and lots of men working out. One of the guys looked familiar, but I couldn't place him.

I went over to the medicine ball and asked one of the staff if Jon was in. He went off to get him, and I watched Jon come out of one of the back rooms. He was thin and wiry, built like Bruce Lee more or less.

We were talking about kickboxing when a ball zoomed across the room toward my head. I didn't break the conversation, but I did move out of the way. Jon seemed a little impressed at my quick reaction and offered me his office to change into work out clothes.

It didn't take me very long to change, but it did take a few minutes to stretch out and limber up. I strapped on my protective gear and walked toward the ring where a very large guy was talking to Jon.

Bruno was well over six-foot and three hundred pounds if he weighed an ounce. He seemed very athletic, and I was a little intimidated by his build. Jon introduced us and we shook hands.

"I knew your brother," Bruno told me, his deep voice echoing through the room. "I was sorry to hear about what happened."

"Thanks," I said softly, my voice cracking with the effort it took not to cry.

"Look, I'll take it easy if you want," he offered as he held the rope for me to climb into the ring.

"Thanks," I repeated, "but no thanks. Rey taught me, I can handle myself."

He nodded and smiled as other people came over to watch little old me take on the incredible hulk.

Boxing: *noun* - a sport in which two competitors fight by hitting each other with their hands. It follows therefore that kickboxing is a sport in which two competitors add hitting each other with their feet to the fighting with their fists.

We circled the ring for a moment, then he moved in a little too quickly and I couldn't avoid his leg sweep. I hit the mat with a thud that almost took my breath away and I bit my tongue to stop from swearing.

We'd just begun and already this was not going well. I had to prove myself here or I'd never be able to find a job. I'd have to find an office position, or start modeling if I couldn't do this. Even the thought of that made me want to try harder.

I glanced at Jon for a second, but I couldn't read his face. I did a kippup, a move designed to bring you to your feet in seconds, and faced my opponent again. I told myself I had to watch it, I had to do this.

He threw a punch I wasn't fast enough to block, then a scissor kick I didn't see coming. Before he could strike again, I hit him with a spinning thrust kick to the chest, followed by a punch to the jaw.

I was going to kick him again, but I had an overwhelming feeling I should sweep instead. Rey had always told me to follow my gut instinct, so that's what I did. Bruno went down like a ton of led.

He didn't stay down for long, he climbed to his feet and shook it off like a dog shakes off water. He came at me with a flying kick I tried to avoid but didn't get out of the way in time. I bounced off the ropes and ran the back of my glove across my mouth to wipe away the blood.

"Watch it, Bruno," Jon yelled.

I spun and kicked Bruno with my right foot, then followed with my left. He went flying to the mat and didn't move. Immediately I knelt at his side and tried to make sure he was all right.

Bruno was stunned, but he was okay. Jon was impressed enough with me knocking out his star trainer that he immediately offered me the job. We worked out hours and a salary fairly quickly.

When I asked about any apartments that might be available in the area, he told me there was one above the gym that was open. We went up to look at it, and it was a surprise, to say the least.

After walking through a cramped hallway up a set of steep stairs to a small foyer, the luxury of the apartment was almost a shock. The rooms were large and nicely furnished. It looked like its last occupants had simply walked out, which was what Jon told me had happened. Apparently they'd ransacked the bedroom and taken the computer, but little else.

We worked out rent and the deposit, and he told me I could take it over right away. I thanked him for his help and went to meet Estrea for dinner.

# TOOTH AND CLAW

I CAN'T COME TO GRIPS WITH WHAT IS REAL  
FOR I ONLY KNOW WHAT IS SURREAL  
BAD MAGIC - GODSMACK

I wore the suit to dinner, and I was glad I had. Estrea was also dressed very nicely, and I had to wonder if she even owned a pair of jeans or sneakers. We went to a very nice restaurant by the bay that was simply wonderful.

She asked me about my day and I found myself telling her everything. Somehow Estrea and I had connected like I'd never connected with anyone except Rey. I knew deep down I could trust her, so I didn't have a problem confessing how frightened I'd been that I couldn't beat Bruno. She seemed to understand, completely.

We'd already ordered dinner when a rough looking guy came in and made a beeline for our table. He was wearing a worn leather jacket, and it looked like he hadn't combed his hair in days.

"We have a problem," he said to Estrea without preamble. "Sasha's with Eddie. They just hit the Casino, ripped it off and cops will be there soon. There's a lot of kine in there, you know Eddie."

Estrea didn't hesitate, just threw down some money on the table. "Wait for me," she ordered as she went off with what was obviously her friend.

I quickly called the waiter over and told him to hold the table for us. Moments later I was outside in time to see Estrea following two motorcycles away from the restaurant. I grabbed one of the cabs waiting at the curb and told him to follow them.

Ten minutes later they pulled up behind an office building where other cars were already parked. I told the driver to pull to the curb far enough back so that I could see what was going on. When he started to get impatient, I handed him a fifty and told him to wait.

As I watched, four people came out of the office building wearing masks. They stopped when they saw Estrea and her friends, and to my amazement, gunfire rang out. I saw guns materialize in Estrea's hands from nowhere, and she moved toward cover as she and her friends fired at the masked bandits.

I got out of the cab almost absently noting a black limo parked down the street while I headed for the fight. I saw the blond who'd come into the restaurant knocked back as if he'd been shot, but he returned fire as if nothing had happened. Another of the masked men rushed toward Estrea and jerked when she shot him, but kept on coming.

I was almost to Estrea's car when I heard a roar and saw Estrea drop her guns. Long talons grew from the end of her fingers and she slashed at her attacker. He hit her and she fell back to the ground.

Someone grabbed me from behind before I could intervene. I shot my head backward and ignored the pain that went through my head as he released me. I spun and caught him across the jaw with the back of my fist. For a moment I stared in shock at his long fangs, glowing eyes, and sharp claws on each hand.

Supernatural: *adjective* - caused by forces that cannot be explained by science. Preternatural: *adjective* - more than is usual or natural.

I didn't know what he was, but that guy definitely was not normal. It didn't take me long to realize that if I just stood there I'd probably die. I hit him with a spinning thrust kick, then spun and kicked him again, following through with another kick that knocked his head around. He fell to the ground, either unconscious or dead.

When I turned around, Estrea was standing only a few feet from me, with fangs and claws of her own. She muttered something under her breath and I watched as both claws and teeth retracted.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

Estrea watched the limo pull closer with a wary eye, then turned to me. "I'm fine. Are you okay?"

The blond in the leather jacket leaned down to talk to someone in the limo, and I could hear angry voices, although not what they said.

"Yeah," I replied as I watched my taxi take off. "There goes my fifty dollars."

She pulled out her cell phone and dialed. "There has been a breach of the masquerade," she said quickly. "A taxi driver witnessed the altercation. We did clean up but he saw way too much."

The limo pulled away, and the blond kicked at the door viscously.

"Cash," Estrea called, "are you letting him go?"

"I don't have a choice," the guy replied angrily. "They're not his."

"What do you mean?" she demanded, walking over toward him.

"They're Gangrels."

She seemed surprised. "From town?"

Cash didn't answer, just pulled out his own cell phone and made a call. When he got no answer, he swore softly and put his phone away. "I'm heading to the house," he told Estrea.

"Is Julian in danger?"

"I don't know," he replied, looking worried, "we'll take care of it."

Estrea turned to me. "You'll have to come with me," she said firmly, "but lay low."

I didn't understand what was happening. "What's going on?" I demanded.

"Bad moon rising," she replied cryptically as she headed for her car.

I followed intent on finding out just what in hell was going on.



# KINDRED SPIRITS

I UNDERSTAND THAT SOME THINGS ARE BETTER LEFT UNSAID

I'M AFRAID OF THE TRUTH

IF WE COULD START OVER - CELINE DION

We sped through the streets of San Francisco after the motorcycles without saying a word. I could tell Estrea was very worried about something, but I didn't know what. She didn't seem concerned that I'd seen her teeth and claws and I didn't understand why.

I also didn't understand why seeing Estrea like that hadn't changed my opinion of her. Okay, so she was something preternatural. She'd still helped me and tried to help Rey. She had my loyalty no matter what the hell she was.

We pull through an ornate set of gates at a large mansion above the Golden Gate Park. It looked like all the lights inside were on, and there were a few cars parked in front of the house. Estrea pulled up next to the motorcycles and turned the jeep off.

"Stay here," she said firmly, looking pointedly at me. "Your life depends on it." When I nodded she followed Cash into the house.

I was going to stay in the car, really I was. Estrea says I should have considering she tried to dominate me into staying in it. I only lasted about five minutes.

The steps were curving, wide and made from marble, but I was more interested in what was going on inside the house. I climbed them slowly, trying to see in the windows and figure out what was going on. I'd hit the top of the stairs when I hear the click of a gun being cocked behind me.

Guard: *noun* - a person or group of people whose job it is to protect a person, place, or thing from danger or attack. *verb* - your readiness to defend yourself from physical or other types of attack.

I wasn't there to attack, but I wasn't about to let myself get captured, either. I spun quickly and took the gun from the guard before he realized what had happened. "Get back," I ordered, pointing the rifle at him.

Amazingly enough, he did. The gun in my hand seemed bigger than usual, although I wasn't real familiar with guns so I didn't know why. When I saw the guard glance to the side, I knew I was in trouble. Sure enough I heard another gun cock.

"Tell him to drop the gun or I'll shoot you," I told the first guard.

He just looked back at me calmly like he expected me to pull the trigger. Damn.

I kicked to the side and the second guard's gun went flying upward. I caught it as it came back down and pointed it at him. When I told him to go stand by the other guy, he did.

I moved backward until my back was against the door so I wouldn't get surprised again. A moment later the door opened inward and I stumbled back trying to catch my balance.

A tall bald man stood looking at me in amazement. His earlobes were long and hung almost to his shoulders, and there was something... horrific to his appearance. When he told me to drop the guns I did it without thinking as I backed away from him.

"Sit," he ordered, and I found myself sitting on the bottom step of a grand staircase. The man picked up the guns I'd dropped and handed them back to the guards outside. I was surprised to hear him chuckling.

"Is she a friend of yours?" he asked of someone behind me.

I turned to see Estrea walking down the stairs, and she didn't look pleased.

"Yes Daedelus," she replied, giving me a harsh look as she joined him in the foyer.

"It was... entertaining," he told her with a smile, "although I think you have some explaining to do. I suggest you speak with Julian."

"I have," she replied grimly as she reached his side.

"No, about this," he stated.

"Ah, he viewed the tapes," she told him hesitantly. "Someone let us know she was here."

He nodded and told her he was going to rejoin the conclave. I watched him walk up the steps past me, trying to figure out just what the hell he was. He obviously wasn't human.

"I thought I told you to stay in the car," Estrea said harshly.

"What was that?" I asked softly, still looking after the creature.

"Daedelus, a friend of mine," she replied.

I stood up and walked toward her, feeling like I had to explain what I was doing in the house. "I was just looking around and this guy—"

"Does staying in the car and looking around sound like the same thing?" she interrupted.

"What did I tell you before I left the car?"

"Stay in the car," I replied softly.

"And what else?"

I thought for a moment. "My life depended on it."

The front door opened and the man named Cash walked in. He looked me up and down like I was a contestant for his dinner. "Who's the babe?" he asked Estrea.

"Logan Servantez," she replied dryly, "Cash."

"Looks kinda tasty," he murmured.

I blinked, remembering the teeth on the guy I'd knocked out earlier. Were they all like that? Could they all grow teeth and claws? And what exactly did they do with them?

He must have seen my unease. "Oh, you look good," he assured me.

"She took out two of your men," Estrea told him bluntly before turning to me. "Come into the sitting room," she ordered.

I followed, feeling really good about the surprise on Cash's face. Estrea told me to sit on the couch and I did without a word. I knew I was in trouble, I just didn't know how much.

"I'm guessing you have questions," she said softly.

"Just one," I agreed. "What the hell is going on?"

Before she could answer, a young woman came in with a tray that held two wineglasses. Estrea took them both and smelled them before handing me one and sitting down on a chair across from me.

"I apologize for you witnessing that," she told me not unkindly.

I knew she wasn't human, and neither were most of her friends. As far as I could tell there were only two possibilities as to what they were. "Is this a vampire thing, or a werewolf thing?"

"A vampire thing," she admitted with a sigh. She got up and walked across the room to look out one of the tall windows. "We call ourselves Kindred, and this is a serious violation of our masquerade." She would have said more, but her cell phone rang.

Vampire: *noun* - an imaginary humanlike creature, said to be a dead person returned to life, which sucks blood from people at night. Masquerade: *verb* - to pretend or appear to be.

As she talked on the phone, I thought about what she'd said. They were vampires and they pretended to be what, human? That only made sense.

"Where were we?" she asked when she finally hung up the phone.

"Vampires, masquerade," I reminded her.

She explained that the masquerade enabled vampires to live among humans without being hunted by them. She said that vampires didn't normally kill when they fed from people, they just took what they needed and did whatever they could to disguise the event.

"The prince was impressed with your performance," she added.

"Who?"

"Kind of like the mayor," she replied.

"Oh?" a deep male voice from the doorway murmured. "I've been demoted? Mayor?"

Estrea introduced me to Julian Luna, the prince of the city. Once I got the gist that he was the ruler of the vampires in the city, I tried to curtsy, but I'm afraid I didn't do a very good job.

"That was a very interesting scene," he told me.

I apologized, unable to hide the blush that stained my cheeks.

Estrea leaned in and whispered something in his ear, and he looked up, a sad expression on his face.

"I was sorry to hear what happened to your brother," he told me.

"Thank you," I whispered.

After a moment of silence, he turned back to Estrea. "We will have to step up training."

"I was going to talk to you about that," she replied. "The girl has some valuable skills."

"Don't talk about me like I'm not here," I said irritably.

Julian turned to look at me with a finger across his lips. "Shh."

While I sat mute, they discussed 'bonding' me to Estrea. I really didn't understand everything they said, but one thing was perfectly clear; if I didn't agree and she couldn't alter my memories about what had happened tonight, I'd be killed. After a few minutes of conversation, Julian left us alone.

# A NEW LIFE

I FEEL VIOLENT I FEEL ALONE  
DON'T TRY TO CHANGE MY MIND  
ONE - CREED

"I didn't mean for this to happen for a while," Estrea told me, sitting back down across from me.

"What?" I asked softly, needing some clarification.

"What Julian and I were talking about was I had thought to ask you to work for me," she replied simply. "This could be an opportunity to better your life in a way you couldn't imagine. Would you like to become my ghoul?"

I'd seen ghouls in movies and I didn't like the idea. "Don't they eat insects and fall apart?" Wasn't Renfield a ghoul? He'd gone insane.

"You met Caleb," she reminded me. "He's a ghoul."

Apparently Hollywood had it wrong. "What exactly is a ghoul?"

Estrea explained that at least once a month ghouls must ingest blood from their 'employer'. With the blood came certain abilities like greater strength, stamina, and heightened senses. What those abilities were varied from case to case, but one thing that remained the same was the lack of aging.

Ghouls could and did walk in the daylight. They acted as the eyes and ears of the Kindred during the daytime, and ran many of their mortal concerns. It all sounded too good to be true.

"What's the downside?" I asked.

"There wouldn't be much," she replied. "You are already estranged from your parents so there is no worry about secrecy because there will probably be no contact. Aside from that, the only other, well, not downside, but you will end up blood bound to me. I like to look at it as a way to keep ghouls safe," she told me with a smile. "Some use it in a negative way like those we saw tonight. It would enable me to keep you safe, and you'd be more apt to listen to me."

I wasn't sure what to say. It sounded good, but what if she was lying?

"What is it that is blocking you," she asked softly, "the blood?"

"I really don't have a choice, do I?" I asked resentfully. "Death or Dominate."

"If it worked," she reminded me. "It has once."

"When?" I demanded.

She leaned forward and looked deeply into my eyes. "Remember the attack," she whispered intently.

Instantly my mind was flooded with memories of the night before. One of our attacker's eyes had glowed, just like the guy I'd knocked out earlier. On another I'd seen fangs but not really understood what I was seeing in the heat of the moment.

A vampire had killed my brother.

I wanted to cry, but I knew my tears weren't going to make things better. The only thing that would help would be for me to find Rey's killers and destroy them. Logically I knew that if our attackers were Kindred like Estrea, my best bet for finding them and destroying them was to agree to work for her. My heart cried out for vengeance, and I knew I had no choice but to agree.

Finally I looked up at her. "Okay, I'm in."

"Okay, that was too easy," she murmured. "What is it you hope to gain?"

I told her about seeing glowing eyes during the attack, but that was something she hadn't seen. She explained their rules and told me that it took a blood hunt for their society to allow the murder of one of their own. She couldn't guarantee I would ever find vengeance.

Whether she could guarantee it or not, I knew she was the only chance I had to find them. Just because she had to play by the rules didn't mean I had to. "I don't see a downside except for the blood thing," I told her.

Then in the back of my mind I remembered Estrea leaning over me and holding her wrist to my mouth. I remembered the taste of her blood and how it had made me feel. I'd never felt anything like it in my life, and if being her ghoul meant doing it again, how could I refuse?

"Let's see if you are in agreement," she said softly as she took off her jacket. She pulled a knife from her boot and came over to sit next to me on the couch. Slowly she made a small incision on her wrist and offered it to me.

I sat there and stared at it for a moment before taking her arm and bringing the wound to my lips. I drank deeply of her blood, but even remembering what had happened outside of the arena didn't prepare me for how I felt.

Pleasure: *noun* - a feeling of enjoyment or satisfaction, or something that produces this feeling. Ecstasy: *noun* - a state of extreme happiness or pleasure.

Once I started drinking, I didn't want to stop. I remember that at one point she tried to pull away, but I wouldn't let her. Finally she managed to push me away and I fell back on the couch in ecstasy.

On the fringes of my mind I was aware that Estrea had taken my arm and was drinking from my wrist. I didn't fight her, hell I didn't have control of my body, how could I? Plus there was the fact that her drinking only intensified the pleasure that wracked my body.

I'd never felt anything like this before in my life. A part of my mind insisted on comparing it to what I'd read of sex, but I really had nothing to compare it to. All I knew was that I was feeling more pleasure than I'd ever felt, and Estrea's blood had given it to me.

When I came to my senses much later, we were alone. I sat up on the couch and brushed the hair from my face while I tried to process what had happened to me. Estrea told me it was normal, that all her ghouls felt the same, which made me feel a little better.

She took me to see Julian so we could let him know what I had decided, then we went back to the hotel for the rest of my things. She liked the apartment, but she seemed sad when she saw what little belongings I had.

We worked out the hours that she'd need me to be available for her. I'd still be able to keep my job, which was good, and working for her wouldn't really interfere with my work schedule. She gave me a list of things she needed me to handle during the day and we spent most of the rest of the night talking and making plans.

# SAYING GOODBYE

LITTLE WHITE FLOWERS WILL NEVER AWAKEN YOU  
NOT WHERE THE BLACK COACH OF SORROW HAS TAKEN YOU  
GLOOMY SUNDAY - SARAH BRIGHTMAN

Rey's viewing was at a small funeral home in Sacramento. When I called the house, Louis told me about it before Carmen could stop him, and she wasn't happy when I showed up. In fact she met me outside of the building and did her best to make me leave.

"If I had my way, you wouldn't be allowed here," she nearly growled at me, "but I suppose I can't convince you to leave."

"No, you can't," I agreed, my voice hard and cold.

"Fine," she spat back. "Stay if you must, but remember that you were the one who killed him."

Every time she said that it was like a knife sunk into my heart. "I didn't—"

"I don't care what you say," she interrupted bitterly. "This is your fault. I always knew something bad would happen to him because of you, and now you know it too. So does everyone else. I wish you had been the one to die, not my Rey."

Louis finally stepped forward. "Carmen—"

"Hush," she said, turning to glare at him.

Louis had never been able to stand up to her, and he fell silent again.

"You don't deserve to live," she told me harshly. "In our eyes you are dead, Alexandra. Dead." With that she grabbed Louis' arm and pulled him away.

I watched them go wondering what I could have done differently to make her love me.

There weren't many people there when I went inside, so I had a bit of privacy to visit my brother one last time. I walked over to the casket and stood looking down at my brother. He almost looked like he was sleeping, almost. I hated seeing him there, knowing that he'd never smile at me again, never call me his *mija*.

Death: *noun* - the end of life.

Rey had always been so full of life, it was hard to believe that death had taken him from me. I'd thought he'd live forever, that he'd always be there for me.

I bit back my tears and reached out to touch his face. "Goodbye, my brother," I whispered. "*Espero que los vuelos de ángeles le toman a su resto.*"

My thoughts were interrupted by a voice behind me.

"Is it true?"

I turned to see Rey's best friend, Roberto Sanchez, standing behind me, a lost look on his face.

"Is what true?" I asked softly.

"Did you kill him?"

"No, Roberto, I didn't kill him," I said with a sigh. I looked down at my brother's body. "We were attacked outside the arena. We tried to fight them off, but there were too many of them."

"Too many for Rey?" he asked disbelievingly. "Did you even try to help?"

"Of course I tried to help," I replied coolly, fighting tears. "I'm not as good as he was, and he was tired from the fight. I fought as well as I could, but they were just so many of them. They would have killed us both, but someone showed up and she scared them away."

I paused to brush a tear from my cheek and looked up at Roberto. "She called the ambulance and tried to help him, but it was too late. Even with all the doctors at the hospital it was too late."

In his eyes I could see that he believed me. "I'm sorry, Logan. I'm sure you did what you could," he said sadly.

"I tried, Roberto." It was an effort not to sob out the words. "If I could change places with him, I would. He was too good to die like that."

He put his hand on my shoulder comfortingly. "I know you loved him. I couldn't believe that you would just let him get killed."

"Is that what Carmen is saying?" I asked, already knowing the answer. It shouldn't have hurt to hear that she was telling everyone that I'd killed Rey, but it did. I'd loved my brother more than anyone else in the world. I would have given my own life if it had brought him back.

"To everyone who will listen," he confirmed.

That certainly explained the hostile looks and attitude I was getting from everyone. "Thank you for believing me, Roberto," I said softly, grateful that at least one person knew how much I'd loved Rey.

He smiled a little. "Where are you staying?"

"A friend helped me find an apartment and a job in San Francisco." I didn't want to give him Estrea's name, I didn't want her involved with my family troubles any more than she had already been.

"Do you need anything?"

"No, but thank you." Estrea was making sure I had everything I needed.

"Call me if you need anything, Logan," he offered kindly. "Rey loved you like a sister, he wouldn't want to see you in trouble."

I nodded simply because I knew if I spoke I would cry. He hugged me briefly then left me alone in that room full of hostile people I'd once thought were my friends.

Funeral: *noun* - a ceremony honoring someone who has recently died, which happens before burying or burning the body.

When the preacher spoke I sat near the back of the room. His speech was nice, full of good stories about the brother I'd lost. I tried not to cry, but it was a losing battle. Rey had been a good man, and I'd loved him.

I chose not to go to the gravesite, I didn't think I could handle seeing them put his body into the ground. I went back to my apartment and spent the rest of the day downstairs trying to work through my grief.

The next few weeks passed in somewhat of a blur. During the day I worked at the club, training fighters and spotting for customers when they needed it. Nights I spent with Estrea learning about Kindred society and how to use my new abilities. I tried to keep busy so I couldn't linger on my brother's death.

Estrea told me that her blood had made me look like a Kindred to other vampires. She said that all of her ghouls looked that way, and that I was to pretend that I was Kindred just as they did.

When I asked about her other ghouls, she admitted that Caleb was one, and that the other was Joshua Baxter, a soldier of fortune type that had been with her a long time. She didn't say how long.

Working for Estrea took some getting used to, but she helped me get everything I needed and didn't demand too much of me. She quickly became my best friend, my reason for living. I loved Estrea, and I knew I would die for her if she asked me to, as long as I could find Rey's killers first.

I tried to find out what I could about the murderers of my brother, but I kept hitting dead ends. Estrea cautioned me to wait before digging into it, but I couldn't. Those men deserved to die, and I wanted so badly to make that happen. I refused to think about what would happen if I found them.



# UNDER SIEGE

LOADED UP FROM DUSK 'TILL DAWN

LOADED - RICKY MARTIN

It was almost a month later that Estrea flew to Austria for her friends' wedding. I took her to the airport in LA so she could fly out with a friend of hers, Talon Graves. He was the prince of LA and he had a private jet that he'd offered to share with her.

Talon was tall, with long blondish hair. He was attractive in a forceful sort of way, and he seemed fond of Estrea. Somehow I knew I didn't have to worry for her safety while she was with him.

A week later I picked her up at the same place I'd dropped her off at. While we drove toward San Francisco, she told me all about the beautiful wedding and the christening of another friend's baby.

We were almost out of LA when her cell phone rang. Whoever it was, I could tell it wasn't good news. As soon as she hung up, she ordered me to turn the car around.

"What's going on?" I asked as I looked to see if I could change lanes.

"The prince's house is under siege," she said urgently. "Hurry"

I barely made the upcoming exit and quickly crossed over the expressway to go back the way we'd come. Luckily traffic was pretty light, and it didn't take long to get to the exit Estrea told me to get off at.

When I stopped at a light with my turn signal on, four motorcycles ripped through the intersection heading for the prince's house. A moment later another cycle roared after them with two men on it, one of who was wearing a long gray coat. I followed them as soon as the light changed.

We could see the fire lighting up the sky from at least two miles away. Estrea told me to speed up and I did, driving as fast as I could through the traffic. I thought about putting on the Kevlar Estrea had given me, but she told me there wouldn't be time. While I drove, she checked the ammo in her guns, then checked the draw.

I pulled through the gates of the prince's house a few minutes later, but the driveway was almost a third of a mile long. The fire was burning out of control, but everyone was too busy fighting each other to try and put it out.

Siege: *noun* - the act of surrounding a place by an armed force in order to defeat those defending it.

Estrea was right, the house was under siege. She said it was our job to help stop it. There were men attacking the guards at the gate, and in the distance I heard a bugle sound. Ahead of us I saw two men getting off their motorcycles, and I thought of a quick way to take them out.

After making sure Estrea didn't mind I gunned the engine and hit them both head on. The jeep went over the motorcycles, and we heard something rip loose from the exhaust system. The jeep ground to a halt and I threw it into park and shut off the engine. Estrea headed for the prince, and I went after her.

Other than the night I'd agreed to be Estrea's ghoul, I'd never been in a situation like this before. I wasn't sure who the bad guys were or who was supposed to be there, so I figured I'd do better protecting Estrea than trying to help and killing the good guys on accident. Besides, it looked like there were plenty of people fighting already.

Near the end of the drive were the blond and the bearded gentleman we'd seen on the motorcycles earlier. Over by the prince a guy in a suit was using a Tommy gun to protect both

Talon and a woman in an expensive suit. There were plenty of other people fighting all over the yard.

The tall blonde intrigued me and scared me at the same time. He was wild, absolutely wild. His ears were pointed like an elf, but he didn't look cute and cuddly. He had a black tank top on, and I could see tattoos down both of his arms.

I learned later that his name was Warchild. He held a baseball bat in one hand, long claws on the other and he was attacking the bad guys with both. There was something about his eyes that told me he didn't follow very many rules.

To my surprise there was what looked like a Confederate officer among the fighting. He wore a long gray coat and wielded a Calvary sword against his opponents. He had a long beard and looked like he'd just stepped off a Civil War battlefield. His name turned out to be Jonathan Abram Taylor.

Warchild and Jonathan were fighting what Estrea says were Brujah. She was shooting at them when Jonathan started running after two guys who were headed for their car and chanting over their shoulders. He cut one in half, then turned and beheaded the other one.

One of the Brujah went after the prince and had almost gotten to him when Warchild intervened. The Brujah dropped his weapon and Warchild clawed and stabbed him at the same time, bringing him down.

Estrea fired at one of the others that had gone after the prince, and he managed to take out the other two. This caused the other bad guys to start taking off. Jonathan took out another one as he raced to his car, and Warchild raked a second with his claws.

As the last Brujah sped away on his motorcycle, a car pulled up and parked. A pretty young woman with long dark hair got out and took a look around at the carnage before walking toward Estrea.

I'd met Talon Graves when I'd picked Estrea up at the airport, and now the tall Gangrel went around checking the bodies lying on the ground. Jonathan was standing over one of the bodies watching the prince, waiting for his attention.

"May I finish him?" the officer asked when Talon finally looked his way.

The prince nodded absently, and Warchild asked the same question about another of the bodies he was standing over. Talon nodded again, and Warchild, like Jonathan, bent to feed.

Estrea fired into the head of one of the prone Brujah before putting her gun away. She bent to pick up a large handgun from the ground as the woman who'd arrived late walked up to her.

"What's going on?" the woman asked softly.

Estrea explained the situation and called the woman Emma. Estrea says she's known Emma for a while, but it had been a couple of years since she'd been back to LA and she hadn't kept in touch with any of her friends. She never said why.

"Oh, and it's good to see you," she told the woman.

"Madelyn called and told me to come here," Emma said softly. "I guess I'm a little late."

We could hear sirens in the distance, and Estrea called out to the prince. "We need to get rid of these bodies, now."

Talon gestured toward the house that was still blazing. The fire had spread to every wing, and it didn't look like the fire trucks would get there in time to save anything.

Everyone started taking the bodies and throwing them on the fire. The prince was there, of course, along with four people who looked like servants. Estrea told me later that the other people were Madelyn, the Toreador Primogen, and Vinney, a Malkavian.

Vinney looked very interesting. He was dressed in a suit from the nineteen fifties and had his Tommy gun strung over his shoulder. He seemed very protective of Madelyn.

I helped Estrea with the bodies, and she made sure we checked each one for IDs, although we didn't find any.

"Is this a normal night?" I asked softly.

She smiled. "Be glad they're not bugs."

"Shouldn't there be funerals or something?" It seemed wrong to just toss the bodies into the fire like so much garbage.

"They're already dead," she reminded me sharply. "Hear the sirens? Remember the Masquerade?"

Estrea always knew best, so I let it drop. "Okay."

When some of the victors started claiming the attackers abandoned motorcycles, I hesitantly asked Estrea if I could have one too. She said yes and I went over to get dibs on a Harley Davison Sportster. I'd always wanted one, and Rey had promised I could have one once I started winning more matches.

Strength: *noun* - the ability to do things that demand a lot of physical or mental effort, or the degree to which something is strong or powerful.

Warchild started picking up the unclaimed bikes and throwing them on the fire. His strength amazed me, but I guess I shouldn't have been surprised. It was that whole preternatural thing, after all.

Estrea looked at Emma. "Is he one of your friends?"

When Emma looked at Warchild, he leered at her.

"How ya doin'?" he drawled, making Emma take a step closer to Estrea.

Warchild turned and lifted up the back of the jeep with one hand and pulled the motorcycles out from under it with the other. When Estrea suggested he take the exhaust too, he ripped it off and tied it in a bow before throwing it onto the fire along with the motorcycles.

Estrea looked at Talon. "You are going to pay for that, aren't you?"

He sighed. "And he is of my clan."

She told one of the servants to take the jeep around the back of the house, but Talon told him to take it to the safe house instead. He wasn't sure exactly where we would all be safe, but he thought that was the best bet.

I was standing next to Estrea when the blond walked up behind me. I didn't even know he was there until he picked up a lock of my hair and started sniffing it. I turned and gave him a harsh look, but he just grinned at me. His fangs were down, and there was blood on his mouth. I stared for a moment, lost in memories of the attack that had killed my brother.

"Logan," Estrea said loudly.

I got the feeling that it was not the first time she'd called my name. "Yeah?"

"Can you drive that motorcycle you picked out?"

"Yeah," I told her, glancing over my shoulder at the blond.

"I'm going to ride with Emma, follow us," she ordered.

I nodded and went toward the Roadster. As short and as small as I am, it should have been almost impossible for me to right the bike. I didn't have a problem. I followed Emma's car through the dark streets of LA to the 'safe house' Talon had talked about. It felt nice to be on a bike again. Rey had owned one, but the Servantez had sold it after his death. Estrea's jeep is neat, but I'd missed the wind in my face.

# THE GATHERING

GOT TO PROVE THEM WRONG OR WE WILL LOSE THE BATTLE

DON'T YOU KNOW YOU'LL START A WAR, WHICH WILL BE WON BY NONE?

MOVE OVER - STEPPENWOLF

I followed Estrea for twenty minutes through the dark streets of LA to Talon's safe house. Everyone who had been left standing at the house had gone there too. The prince invited us inside and into a large meeting room with a long table. Vinney, Madelyn and another guy I learned was Ventrue sat on one side of the table and so did Jonathan.

When Estrea sat down next to Emma on the other side of the table, I stood just behind her chair. Yeah, she'd told me to act Kindred, but she had also told me that I had to show a certain amount of respect to her.

Warchild was the last one to enter the room, and when he walked past me I could hear him smelling my hair again. Estrea says that I should use the best products available for my hair so I do, and I know it smells good. Still, the guy was being way rude to sniff at me like a dog.

"You may sit as well," Talon told me as he sat down at one end of the table.

I glanced at Estrea to make sure it was all right, and when she nodded I sat next to her. Talon shot her a meaningful look I didn't quite understand but I knew this wasn't the time or the place to ask. Warchild started making puppy dog comments under his breath toward me, but I just ignored him.

Prince: *noun* - a member of a royal family, esp. a son of a king or queen, or a male ruler of a small country.

Estrea says that Talon is the prince of LA like Julian is the prince of San Francisco. He rules the vampire population completely, and all of them bow to his wishes. Well, they're supposed to. Like any country in the dark ages, cities of this day in age can change hands pretty quickly.

"This is the remains of the conclave," Talon said, his deep rich voice ringing through the room. "The Tremere is out of town and of course the Nosferatu remain neutral."

At the word 'Nosferatu', Warchild growled low in his throat.

"Do we have a problem with the Nosferatu?" Talon asked softly.

Warchild just shrugged.

"Please state your clan and affiliation," the prince said after a moment. "I know most of you, but there are a few I do not."

Clan: *noun* - a family, especially a large group of relatives.

In Kindred society, clan defines your lineage, what powers you have, and how respected you are. Most princes are from the Ventrue clan like Julian, but some of them weren't. Estrea says that Talon is Gangrel, and that the prince of Vegas is Nosferatu.

"I am Estrea Moreno," my friend began, "and this is Alexandra Servantez."

I rolled my eyes, and the prince saw it.

"That is not what you prefer to be known by?" he asked softly.

"I prefer Logan," I told him. When he asked why, I explained how I'd gotten the name. Telling the story made me a little sad, but I did my best to hide it.

"This is quite the city, plenty of opportunities for advancement," the confederate officer said with a soft southern drawl. "I am Jonathan Abram Taylor."

"Clan?" Talon inquired.

He shrugged. "I don't have one."

"By choice?"

"No sir," Jonathan replied.

Estrea says that some Kindred don't know what clan they are. She says that sometimes Kindred embrace people and leave them or die before they can explain everything to their childer. Sometimes Kindred have bad experiences with their sires and don't want to claim the clan they belong to.

Talon turned to Warchild. "And you sir?"

"Warchild," he said simply.

"I take it you are Gangrel?" the prince murmured.

He grinned. "Yeah."

The prince nodded. "This will be the active conclave for the moment. You," he said to Jonathan, "will be recognized."

The soldier half bowed in his chair. "You are most kind sir."

"Is your friend of the same clan as you?" Talon asked Estrea.

She nodded. "Or lack thereof."

Estrea had told me that she didn't know who her sire was, that when she'd woke with no memories she was alone. She said that a Tremere in Las Vegas had once accepted her into his clan, and that another Kindred, a Ventrue, had done the same a few years later in LA.

"Would you like to act as the Ventrue Primogen until we find another?" he asked her.

She smiled. "I would be honored."

Talon proceeded to offer Warchild the seat of Gangrel Primogen, and Jonathan the title of sheriff. When they both agreed, he said. "Has anyone heard anything that is going on with this other group?"

Warchild answered saying that David, the Brujah Primogen, had stepped down and allowed a newcomer to take over control of the anarchs in the city. From what he said, David wasn't the type to step down for anyone.

"Does anyone know anything about this person?" Talon asked.

"It's the first I've heard of him," Vinney replied.

"It's a Brujah," Emma said. "Whoever it is has been keeping low profile, but he's been in town about four days now. No one's seen him, but there have been a lot of new faces around."

"They're recruiting," Warchild agreed. "Embracing without permission."

Estrea took out her phone and made a call. When I realized she had called Caleb, I tried to listen to the conversation, but all I could tell was that he didn't know much about the situation and that he planned on looking into it.

"Are there any suggestions?" the prince asked once Estrea was off the phone.

"What has been done already?" she asked him.

"I don't know," he replied gravely. "I haven't been filled in yet. No one has contacted me."

"Who was in charge?"

"Vinney was," he told her.

"Perhaps we should split the group up," Emma suggested. "Have everyone check around."

"Jon and Warchild are better on the streets," Talon admitted, glancing at the two men.

Warchild grinned and caught my eye. "You ride with me," he mouthed.

It surprised me so much I choked.

"Are you all right?" Talon asked me.

"Yes, sire," I replied as I waived a hand in front of my face. "I'm fine. I just caught a whiff of something horrible."

"I could take a shower," Warchild offered.

Persistent: *adjective* - 1. Refusing to give up or let go; persevering obstinately. 2. Insistently repetitive or continuous.

I'd tried to show him I wasn't interested, but that fact didn't seem to be getting through to him. I just stared at him wondering what it was about me that appealed to him so much.

"I assume you have people you can talk to?" Estrea asked Vinney and Madelyn.

"Yes," Vinney replied. "We'll take care of it."

Talon made sure everyone had everyone else's cell phone number. When he learned that neither the new Gangrel Primogen or the Sheriff had a phone, he went to a cabinet and took out a sturdy cell phone and tossed it to Warchild.

"How's everyone doing on Ammo?" the prince asked.

He saw to it that everyone who needed ammo had it, then looked at Jon. "Are you armed?"

"Why yes, I am," the gentleman drawled.

"Is it muzzle loaded?" Emma asked.

"No," he replied softly. "I've recently upgraded."

Warchild was acting restless, which prompted Emma to ask the prince if he was sure he hadn't made a mistake appointing the Gangrel Primogen.

"Who's going to mess with him?" Talon grinned.

"Can we go now?" Warchild demanded. "I want to sink my teeth into something." He was staring at me when he said it, a hungry look in his eyes.

"Logan," the prince called softly.

When I broke from staring at Warchild to look at Talon, he threw me a large rifle. I caught it with a smile and held it pointed over Warchild's head.

"You know they do have a spray that will keep the dogs away," Emma told me, earning a hard look from Talon.

"Who let the dogs out?" the dog in question started singing.

"Can I shoot him yet?" I whispered under my breath to Estrea. "Please?"

She just smiled and patted my hand.

"If there's nothing else, sir," Jonathan said, "we believe we will make our exit."

"Can't we just use the door?" Warchild asked.

Once they'd gone, Talon turned to me. "Have you been to our city before?"

"A few times," I replied. "I know the general layout."

He nodded. "We meet back here at four," he told everyone. "Vinney, that would be four our time. Be careful you aren't followed when you come back and if anyone sees the new archon and the...."

"The new Gangrel Primogen," Estrea offered.

"Yeah," he agreed wryly. "Let them know as well. I don't think we have to worry about the civil war gentleman, but the other one has a few... issues"

"Screws loose," she murmured.

"Bricks shy of a load," Emma added.

# KILLING IN THE NAME OF

WHAT IS RIGHT OR WRONG?

I DON'T KNOW WHO TO BELIEVE IN  
IN AMERICA - CREED

I left the safe house with Estrea and Emma in the Toreador's car. We talked as she drove about various avenues to try and get information. Emma called her law office and instructed them to check into police records of recent murders and disappearances, hoping they would find some information about the Brujah's new recruits.

Estrea explained that she wasn't sure who she knew in the city anymore since she'd been gone over two years. She wanted to check in with the city's Ventrue, and visit the Tremere Chantry.

Emma took us to a store where we actually did buy dog repellent. She didn't know for sure if it would work if Warchild tried to get friendly, but we all agreed it was worth a try.

We were just pulling back into traffic when my cell phone rang. I answered it, somehow knowing exactly who it would be.

Pest: *noun* - An annoying person or thing; a nuisance.

"How ya doin'?" Warchild drawled.

I closed my eyes. "What do you want?" I demanded.

"You," he replied. "You, me and a jar of peanut butter."

*Dios Mio*, did this guy never quit? "If this is about the matter at hand, state it," I said harshly. "If not, goodbye." I paused for a moment, but when he didn't say anything else, I hung up on him.

Immediately I turned to my employer. "Can I ask you something?" When she nodded, I asked, "Why are his ears pointed?"

Estrea said that the Gangrel Clan had an unusual flaw. She said that every time they frenzy they take on an animalistic aspect to their bodies or face. Sometimes it is something simple like cat's eyes or pointed ears, but others can develop more unusual things like a tail or whiskers.

"I've even seen some with striped fur on their face," she added.

"Can I hit him if he sniffs my hair again?" I asked softly.

"Yes," she replied with a smile.

"Thank you." If he came that close to me again I'd give him the surprise of his life.

On the way to the Tremere Chantry, I changed into the body suit of Kevlar Estrea had bought me. It was a little difficult to do in the dark cramped space of Emma's back seat, but I managed. When we got to the chantry, I was glad I had.

The house and grounds looked ransacked, and the gates stood crooked on their hinges. Most of the windows were broken and there were no lights anywhere. A few dogs ran toward the car when we pulled in, large black rotweillers who looked more than a little confused.

We couldn't see any bodies or blood in the dim light, but there was something moving around upstairs. I used the night vision Estrea had taught me, and it made the building look like it was giving off heat waves.

Emma parked at the end of the drive and we all climbed out of the car. Since I didn't know what to expect, I took the gun Talon had given me. The dogs came closer and Emma growled at them, which sent them slinking away.

I heard a soft sound that I couldn't identify, then another. Estrea jerked a little, then cursed softly under her breath. It took me a moment, but I finally understood the sound I'd heard was silenced gunfire. I pointed the gun at the window I'd seen movement in, but Estrea reached out and lowered the barrel, long claws on the fingers of her hand.

"My name is Estrea Louisa Dominique Moreno," she called out, "former pupil of Antonio Miguel Santiago Moreno. Lay down your weapons."

A moment later the soft sound came again and the car exploded behind us. In a flash Estrea ran for the front door, but I raised the weapon and fired a three round burst. The remaining glass in the window exploded along with the surrounding frame.

From the corner of my eye I saw Emma heading for the house, keeping to cover as she went. I ran after Estrea and reached the front door just as she kicked it in. Inside we found that the house was trashed. Everything seemed to be broken except one curio cabinet in the drawing room. It stood alone against a wall undamaged, and even its contents were still standing upright.

Emma came through a set of sliding glass doors in the drawing room, and Estrea motioned that she was going upstairs. I followed cautiously and tried to listen for movement ahead of us.

Once we reached the top of the stairs, Estrea moved to the left where a long hallway stretched. She motioned for me to go to a door further down the hall and as I did, I noticed that a security camera at the end of the hall seemed to still be in operation. There was a red light glowing above the lens, which seemed amazing considering the power was out in the rest of the house.

When I was standing by the far door, Estrea mouthed that we would go in on two. I watched as she counted and when she gave me the signal, I turned the knob and swung the door open.

Immediately I saw a figure crouched by the window with a gun in her hand. I rolled to the left and came up firing. My bullet barely caught her, and she fired again just as my cell phone started ringing. Once more I rolled away from the bullet and shot at her.

This time my aim was a little better. She collapsed to the floor screaming, burning, dead. For the first time in my life I'd killed someone. I stood there staring at her body for a long moment, wondering if I'd made the right choice by agreeing to become Estrea's ghoul.

Kill: *intransitive verb* - 1. To cause death or extinction; be fatal. 2. To commit murder. Murder: *noun* - The unlawful killing of one human by another, especially with premeditated malice.

I hadn't planned to kill the woman, it had just happened. I'd reacted to her shooting at me and not thought about what I was doing. Somehow I didn't think that defense would stand up in court.

My phone rang again bringing me back to reality. Damn it, I didn't have time for Warchild and his immature banter. I took my phone out and answered it. "What?" I demanded.

"How's it goin'?" It wasn't Warchild, it was the prince.

"Other than the exploding car and the empty chantry? It's okay when I'm not being shot at," I said dryly. I was having a hard time breathing and I struggled to catch my breath.

"Welcome to LA," he drawled.

"Thanks," I whispered. I was trying to get my mind around the fact that I'd committed murder, but it was difficult to do. What would Rey think?

"Did you find anything yet?" Talon asked.

"Not yet," I replied softly, lowering the barrel of my gun.

"What did you find?" he demanded.

"The chantry is trashed," I told him, my voice flat, "and everyone left is a black hat."



"Get whatever information you can," he ordered. "Warchild is brining in a Brujah for questioning."

At least someone was getting somewhere. Idly I wondered how many people Warchild and Jonathan had killed to get their informant. "Do you want us to come in?"

"Take your time, find whatever you can," he told me. Almost as an afterthought, he added, "Oh, and tell Estrea to turn on her phone."

"I will," I whispered as he hung up.

I walked over to stand looking down at the body for a long moment, wondering who this woman had been before I'd brought her life to an end. Why had she been shooting at us? Had she been one of the ones who had destroyed the chantry? Had she been kind or cruel? Did she have someone who would miss her the way I missed my brother?

Numbly I walked toward the door where Estrea was waiting for me. She took one look at my face and frowned.

"Are you all right?" she asked softly.

I couldn't find the words to answer her. I didn't even realize how badly I was shaking until she took the gun from my hand and asked me the question again.

"I'm fine," I told her.

"You haven't been hit?" She ran one hand down my arms searching I'm sure for wounds.

I wanted to laugh but I couldn't bring myself to do so. "She's dead, but I'm fine," I told her tonelessly. I wrapped my arms around myself to stop my hands from shaking, but it didn't help.

"Calm down," she told me.

"I-I'm fine," I lied, gritting my teeth.

*You need to calm down,* I heard a voice in my head say. *It had to happen.*

Despite the peaceful tone of the words, they frightened me. I'd just killed someone, and now I was hearing voice? "Did you hear that?" I demanded of Estrea.

"What?"

"That voice," I told her.

She looked closely at my face. "Are you sure you're okay?"

"Maybe not," I whispered. Not only had I just murdered someone, I was hearing voices in my head.

"You need to calm down," she told me again.

She was right of course. It wasn't like the voice had told me to freak out. It had even been reassuring in a way. "You didn't hear that voice?" I asked her.

"What did it say?"

"That I need to calm down, that it had to happen," I repeated.

"It's true," she said not unkindly. "If you hadn't killed her, she would've killed you."

"I know." And I did know, intellectually. Still it was hard to get over the fact that I'd brought an end to someone's life.

Estrea gave me back the gun and we started going through the upstairs rooms. From the sounds of things, Emma was doing the same thing downstairs. I ripped the security camera from the wall in the hallway and turned it off.

We found a few pillowcases that Estrea wanted to put the items from the cabinet downstairs in. We were looking for a security room, but we didn't find one. We were almost done with looking through the second floor when my phone rang.

"How ya doin'?" Warchild asked when I'd said hello.

I put my hand to my forehead wishing I'd chosen to turn my phone off after the prince had called.

"Where are you at?" he asked.

"The Tremere Chantry," I replied.

"How you guys doin'?"

"Fine now that we got people to stop shooting at us," I said dryly.

"We've got Brujah coming up on us fast," he told me. "Wanna party?"

I looked to Estrea. "It's Warchild, he says they need help."

"I'm asking if you want to party," he corrected firmly.

"Excuse me," I said dryly. "They want us to join the party. Where are you?" I asked the Gangrel.

"Headed your way."

I assured him we'd be waiting and went to find Emma while Estrea worked at opening the display case downstairs. Emma was on the front porch with a young girl she called Beth. The Toreador sent the girl back to Graves with the car that had arrived and it pulled away just as Warchild and Jon pulled up the drive. I handed Emma one of my handguns and turned to watch the arrivals.

# ONCE MORE TO THE BREACH

I REACH OUT FOR YOU

ONLY TO LOSE GRIPS WITH MY MIND

BAD MAGIC - GODSMACK

Warchild and Jon separated as they approached and drove around the house, then came back after the motorcycles that had been following them. I fired the rifle, aiming to miss the driver of one of the bikes, but I missed all together.

War reached behind him and grabbed the Brujah who had been tied behind him on the bike, throwing the body at one of the newcomers. Both Brujah went flying as Jonathan beheaded another one.

Emma fired at the Humvee that was following the motorcycles, but her bullets just careened off. Warchild turned his bike and went after the vehicle. He grabbed the door with a hand made a weapon with Protean claws and peeled it off the Hummer.

A shot rang out from the second floor of the house and a front tire on the Hummer blew. Within moments the vehicle upended and slid on it's roof toward the house. Warchild turned his bike on a dime and went after one of the Kindred who was trying to crawl out of the Hummer while it was still moving.

Emma scrambled back into the house even as the vehicle ground to a stop only inches from the porch. I heard Jon headed back toward the house and I took aim at the last Brujah motorcycle. My bullet hit the gas tank and the bike exploded. It's rider screamed in agony, flying through the air to land on his back with a sickening thud.

The smell of burning flesh and the sound of his screams overwhelmed me. I ran to the side of the porch and leaned over the railing, spilling my guts into the remains of the flowerbed.

I knew I'd only done what I had to, but to know that I was capable of killing not once but twice was a shock to me. Estrea had told me that I'd be required to defend her and whatever ideals she needed to fight for, but I hadn't expected it to be like this.

It wasn't that killing these things was that hard. Actually, that was the problem. Killing them was easy, too easy, and I didn't like knowing that I had that kind of violence within me to call upon at will.

What would Rey think of me now?

After a few minutes I ran out of things to throw up and got a hold of myself. I ran a hand across my mouth and turned to look at the Hummer.

Warchild was fighting two Brujah on the side of the vehicle closest to me, and Jonathan was busy with a few on the other side. As I watched, I could see several gun barrels appear through specially designed ports in the bulletproof windows. I couldn't let the black hats kill Estrea's allies, I had to do something.

I jumped on to the bottom of the vehicle, then to the ground near the back of it. I shoved the barrel of my rifle in one of the empty slots in the window and took a deep breath. Before I could squeeze the trigger, the window flew open and I landed on the ground trapped beneath it.

I'd lost my hold on the gun, although it was lying on my chest. To my relief, it had been Warchild who had opened the window, and he leaned closer to me, grinning down into my face.

"Come here often?" he drawled, sniffing at me as I lay beneath him.

I'd had it with both him and his nose. I used Estrea's blood to make myself stronger and shoved up on the window as hard as I could. Warchild tried to roll out of the way and he did,

after a fashion. He landed on the ground next to me and relaxed, lying back with his hands behind his head.

Fun: *noun* - 1. A source of enjoyment, amusement, or pleasure. 2. Enjoyment; amusement. 3. Playful, often noisy, activity.

I turned my head to look at Warchild. "In what universe is this fun?" I demanded.

He ignored me, just laid there looking up at the night sky.

Disgusted, I rolled to my feet away from him. I caught sight of two men standing at the end of the driveway, one very tall with dark skin, and another man not much shorter who looked very familiar to me.

"What?" I squealed incredulously.

At the same time in my head, I heard a voice say, *Dios Mio!*

That phrase was one Rey had often used when he was surprised or confused. It was kind of confusing that I heard his voice in my head when there I was staring at a mirror image of my brother standing at the end of the drive.

I heard silenced gunfire from above me and both men stepped out of sight. A moment later Estrea darted across the yard almost quicker than the eye could follow. I ran after her as fast as I could.

"Where'd they go?" I demanded when I caught up with her.

"I don't know," she murmured.

"Did you see who it was?" I had to know if I was seeing things.

She met my eye gravely. "Yeah."

"What's going on?"

"If I knew, they'd be dead," she said flatly.

I stared at her in shock, surprised that she could talk about killing my brother so easily.

Lose it: *slang* 1. To lose control; blow up. 2. To become deranged or mentally disturbed.

To put it simply, I lost it.

I swung and came awfully damn close to punching her, but she moved out of the way and lunged for my throat. I dodged her taloned hand and moved back. She swung her arm and hit me across the chest, but the blow didn't even move me.

"Why would you want to kill Rey?" I demanded, struggling for a hold on my temper.

She swung the rifle at me and the barrel hit me in the face. Once again, the blow didn't faze me. Her left hand came at me again, her claws reaching for my face. I rolled out of the way and landed in a crouch, ready to defend myself.

Then reality hit me. My brother was dead, I'd watched him die, seen his body at the funeral. Whoever had been standing in the drive was not my brother, and Estrea must have known that.

"Estrea, chill out," I pleaded, trying to calm the situation.

She brought the barrel of the rifle up and pointed it at me. "Stand down," she barked harshly.

I relaxed my stance and brought my hands up, palms toward her. "Whoa, chill," I soothed.

Suddenly Jonathan was at her side and yanked the rifle from her hands. "I shall have to ask you to restrain yourself," he drawled.

She put her hand on his arm and pointed at me with a clawed finger. "Never strike me again," she growled harshly.

"I'm sorry," I said sincerely, regretting my attempt to hit her with all my being. "But you were talking about killing my brother."

The feel of something being driven into either side of my ribcage simultaneously startled me. I moved instinctively to defend myself as Rey had taught me, bringing my elbow up and back to hit my attacker in the face. Warchild dove at me trying to bring me to the ground, but I was able to move aside from his lunge.

Then Estrea was standing between us, glaring at Warchild. "Stand back," she ordered brusquely.

He just stood and glowered at her for a moment, then took a slow step back.

Emma grabbed my arm and dragged me toward Jonathan, who drew his sword and walked toward Estrea and Emma, coming to a stop between them.

I pulled away from Emma and followed him toward them, but suddenly Emma was between them as well. "Knock it off!" she commanded harshly.

Estrea turned to look at Emma as Jonathan enfolded my master in his coat and led her to one side.

"Ma'am I'm going to have to ask you to come with me," he said soothingly.

"Go sit on the porch," Emma told Warchild sternly.

He stared at her fiercely and made no move to head for the house. "Whatever."

She turned and gave me a hard look. "Go sit on the porch," she demanded.

I looked at her in awe for a moment, suitably impressed with her ability to take command before I went to sit down on the porch as she'd commanded.

# PROBLEMS

AND I'M HAUNTED BY THE LIVES THAT I HAVE LOVED  
AND ACTIONS I HAVE HATED  
HAUNTED - DOE

A few minutes later, Estrea and Jonathan came toward the house while Warchild blew off steam by mutilating the bodies that were lying about and throwing motorcycles. I envied him the ease of his release while I sat on the step and pondered the mistake I'd made by attacking my master.

Jonathan asked Emma and Estrea to hurry as they went into the house to gather what they could from the ruined chantry with the driver of the car. Jonathan and Warchild gathered their bikes and one of the staked Brujah and sat waiting for the others.

A few minutes later, Emma came out of the house alone and paused at the top of the steps. "Are you okay?" she asked me.

I shrugged as we heard sirens in the distance.

"Get Estrea," Emma ordered me as she and the ghoul headed for the car with their hands full of books.

I stood and went inside to fetch my master. She was in the main room of the house, sitting cross-legged in the middle of a circle drawn in chalk on the floor. She didn't seem to hear me come in.

"Estrea, the cops are almost here," I urged her, not sure what it was she was doing.

When she didn't respond, I knew I didn't have time for her to finish her meditation. I swung my elbow at the glass and it shattered, falling to the floor at my feet. I reached for a pillowcase and started stuffing the contents of the case inside.

Estrea gasped, and I turned to look at her. "Are you okay?"

"Are you absolutely insane?" she demanded angrily.

I blinked. "What?"

"Never, ever interfere in a ritual," she told me as she rose to her feet. "I could have been killed."

Ritual? Was that what she'd been doing? "I'm sorry, I didn't know."

"Get to the car," she ordered, grabbing the pillowcase from my hands and filling it quickly with items from the display case.

I hurried outside and told the others that Estrea would be right out. By the time I got into the back seat, she was right behind me.

Warchild and Jonathan went around the back of the house, and Emma told the ghoul who was driving to drive away, but not to look like we were in a hurry. We pulled onto the road, and as we crested a nearby hill, we could see two cop cars coming around a curve behind us.

Estrea pulled the back seat of the car down and stuffed the things she and Emma had taken from the house into the back. Then she glanced at the blood splatters on my clothes.

"You too," she ordered.

I stared into the dark hole that was the trunk and swallowed my fear to climb inside.

Claustrophobia: *noun* - An abnormal fear of being in narrow or enclosed spaces.

The dictionary definition of my phobia seems so straightforward, so simple. The terror I feel when I'm in an enclosed space is nothing so easy to deal with.

When I was a little girl, Carmen had locked me in a closet when I misbehaved. I can still remember the terror I felt, and now being shut in any small space makes me relive it. I tried to stay calm, I really did, but within moments I was pounding on the seat.

"We're almost there," Estrea called soothingly.

It didn't work. I felt the terror closing off my throat and pounded on the seat even harder. After a few moments, she relented and pulled the seat forward.

The minute Estrea opened the seat, I shot out of the trunk like a bat out of hell. I landed on the floor in the back seat, gasping for air, relishing my freedom.

"Shit," the ghoul murmured in front of me.

Estrea looked behind quickly, then down at me. Her eyes were hard. "They're pulling us over," she told me. "You have to go back in there, and you have to be silent."

Reluctantly I nodded, but I knew she was right. If the cops saw the shape my clothes were in, we'd be arrested right off. I did my best to swallow my fear and climbed into the trunk just as my phone started to ring.

"Shut that phone off," my master barked.

As she pushed the seat into place, I hit the answer button. "Hello?"

"Meanwhile back at the ranch," Warchild's voice came through. "How ya doin'?"

"Well, I'm in a trunk and I don't like it," I said, trying to control my fear.

"Ooh," he drawled. "What are you wearing?"

"Look, can I call you back?" I asked impatiently. "We're getting pulled over by the cops."

"Sure." As he moved to hang up the phone, I heard him ad, "Hey dude, she said she's gonna call me."

I hung the phone up and turned it off as the car came to a stop. I laid in the dark listening to distant voices, waiting for the cop to go away so I could get out of the trunk and breathe again. As soon as the car started moving, I pounded on the seat. Moments later, Estrea pulled the seat forward and I climbed out.

I crouched on the seat and rolled the window down, letting the air blow over my face. It's hard to describe how the darkness can close in on you that way, even harder to know that it's just your imagination, but be unable to control the fear.

Estrea called the prince and told him that someone was masquerading as an individual who was dead. I could only assume she meant the guy who had looked like Rey. Then she told him that the cop had had no aura. Apparently that was something that wasn't supposed to happen, not with a mortal anyway.

Graves didn't seem too concerned about that, he was more concerned about finding a Setite temple under his safe house. He was thinking seriously about relocating, even though the temple seemed abandoned. Estrea told him that we were planning on staying the night at Caleb's anyway, but I noticed that she didn't invite the prince.

When Estrea hung up, Emma mentioned that the police officer had worn a ring that was the same as one she'd seen in a vision at the Tremere chantry. She said that the cop had been mortal, although probably a mage, but the man in her vision had definitely been Kindred.

"Maybe it's a hunter," she suggested.

"Possibly," Estrea agreed. "The prince has found a Setite temple beneath his safe house."

"What's a Setite?" I asked. It sounded like a bad thing.

"Another clan of vampires," Emma explained.

The safe house turned out to be a mausoleum. Talon and Vinney were talking in the main room when we got there, and from what they said Jonathan and Warchild were in another room with the Brujah Warchild had staked. We could see the little girl from the Tremere chantry through a doorway playing with some toys.

"David's base of power has been threatened since most of the Brujah are dead," Talon told Vinney. "He'll probably start recruiting."

"Who of the Tremere clan is alive?" Estrea asked the prince.

"No one has contacted me," he replied.

She gave him a meaningful look. "We need to keep these items safe for the clan."

"We haven't gotten any further?" he asked, sounding very tired all of a sudden.

"Not really," she told him sympathetically.

Warchild and Jonathan joined us, trailed by another Kindred who seemed miserable. He kept looking warily at Warchild as if he expected the primogen to tear his head off at any moment.

"What did you learn?" Talon demanded.

"Not much," Warchild replied. "David usually hangs at the bar at one o'clock."

"Maybe we should stick someone in their group rather than try to take over," he murmured.

"We have a candidate," Warchild suggested. "Brian is on the way to being a good little boy."

"How?" the prince asked, suddenly interested.

"You've fed him?" Estrea demanded, surprised.

Warchild grinned. "He's begun seeing the way."

"Would it help to implant thoughts?" she suggested to Talon.

"That would be helpful," he conceded.

"Is this something you would like us to proceed with?" she prompted.

"I don't trust mind-fuckers," Warchild growled.

The prince shrugged. "It's his party."

"A cop stopped us on the way here," Emma interrupted. "I think he was a mage, he was wearing a ring that was a symbol for one of the Traditions."

"We have Brujah, Setites, and now mages," Talon murmured, disgusted.

"We need to take the fight to him," Warchild insisted.

"We need to know where the fight is," he reminded the Gangrel. "We should start recruiting ourselves."

"If you don't need me, I'll go see what I can find." Warchild turned to the southerner.

"Jonathan, would you like to join me?"

He grinned. "Indeed, I find that my schedule for the evening is quite open."

Warchild moved closer to me and leaned down toward my ear. "If you liked it rough, all you had to do is ask," he whispered.

I was about to answer when there was a knock on the door. When no one looked like they were going to answer it, I walked over and opened it. Outside there was a pizza delivery guy holding a pizza box.

"Just a minute," I told him. I closed the door and turned to look at the others. "Did anyone order pizza?"

"No," Talon asked, puzzled.

"Then we have a problem," I said simply.

Problem: *noun* - A situation, matter, or person that presents perplexity or difficulty.



If no one had ordered pizza, then someone had been followed to the safe house. The bad guys knew where we were, and it was only a matter of time before they came to storm the place.

Estrea apparently didn't agree. She went to the door and opened it, then apologized to the delivery guy. "No one here has ordered pizza," she explained.

He looked down at his delivery tag. "It was ordered by Warchild, and this is the address."

"I didn't order anything," Warchild denied.

"It was called in twenty minutes ago," the delivery guy added.

Estrea opened the box carefully, but there was only a pizza inside.

Warchild took the pizza box and handed it to me. "As long as you're here," he murmured, taking the guys arm. At Talon's stern gaze, Warchild let him go with a disappointed look on his face.

After paying the delivery boy, Estrea took the box from me just as I was about to pick up a slice of pizza. "I don't think so," she cautioned me.

"But I'm hungry," I whispered.

"If you're hungry and there's nothing here, we'll get you something," she said firmly. She checked over the pizza, but there seemed to be nothing wrong with it. Then just as she was about to put the box down, the pizza slid to one side, revealing writing on the bottom of the box.

It said 'BOOM'.

# HUNTING

THIS TIME YOU'VE GOT TO PAY  
THIS TIME YOU'VE GONE TOO FAR  
THIS TIME - JANET JACKSON

"Get the fuck out of here!" Estrea yelled, making a grab for the pillow cases she'd taken from the Tremere chantry.

Warchild's voice stopped her. "You step out that door, you're dead." He grabbed the Brujah's arm and threw him through the doorway.

The Kindred didn't even hesitate, he started running for the road. When he realized his puppy wasn't going to be killed, Warchild followed him, yelling at the rest of us to move it.

I followed the others outside and immediately noticed the bombs placed around the outside of the building.

"They probably had a tracking device on the car," Emma growled in disgust as Estrea got on my motorcycle behind me.

"Talon, we'll regroup at Caleb's," my master told the prince as we pulled away.

He nodded and grabbed the little girl. They managed to get on a very large Harley before the bombs went off. The rubble buried them completely.

"Turn around!" Estrea yelled in my ear.

Obediently I turned the bike on the uneven ground and got her as close as I could to the pile of rocks that had been the prince's safe house. Amazingly enough the rocks were moving as if something was trying to break out of the rubble.

"Stay with the bike," Estrea ordered as she climbed off. "Keep it running."

I did as she said while she dug at the rocks covering the prince. Emma joined her and soon the prince pushed himself up out of the debris. He handed the unharmed child to Emma, his expression hard.

Pissed: *vulgar slang* - 1. Extremely irritated or angry. Often used with *off*.

Talon was pissed off.

"It was bad before," he bit out, obviously trying to control his temper.

"I'm ready to call in reinforcements," Estrea murmured.

"Now they fucked up my bike," he continued.

"Let's get out of here," she said urgently.

"Let's find them," he growled.

"There are things that have to be secured," she reminded him.

"Vinney can take care of the girl," he told her.

They argued for several minutes about the girl and the things we had taken from the Tremere chantry. Finally they agreed to send the items and the girl to Caleb's apartment with the ghouls and sent them on their way.

I'd been watching the surrounding area with the night vision Estrea had taught me, and as the car pulled away, I saw shadows moving through the darkness. In less than a heartbeat, Warchild was on his bike and after them with Emma right behind. The prince transformed into a wolf and he followed quickly behind as did Estrea. I bit back a sigh and started my bike to head after them.

There were three shadows, two of which I was pretty sure were men. I couldn't be sure about the other one, but it was bipedal. Warchild gained on them with Emma just a step behind. Estrea and the wolf kept pace, and in the darkness I saw Estrea pull one of her guns.

As I turned my bike to the side and sped up, Warchild shot the Kindred who was closest to him and she went sprawling, her entire back on fire. The wolf jumped on the next Kindred and brought him to the ground. Talon kept him pinned, growling when he tried to move.

Estrea fired as she ran and her bullet caught him in the shoulder. He stumbled and fell face forward to the ground. Emma stopped by the woman who was rolling on the ground trying to put herself out. The Toreador shot her once in the head and she finally stopped moving. She grabbed her and dragged her back toward the remains of the building as I brought my bike to a stop and killed the motor.

The one Estrea had shot was rolling to put out the fire, and Estrea moved closer to him, keeping her gun pointed at him. "Talon, we got a live one here," she called out.

Warchild joined her. "He was the third highest in my clan before everything went down before everything went down," he murmured.

Talon growled something, and Warchild glanced over before asking Estrea if the Kindred was savable.

"I could stake him and put him out," she suggested.

Jonathan stepped up beside them. "I'm thirsty," he drawled.

"So am I," my master agreed.

"We all are," Warchild added. Talon growled, and the Gangrel turned toward him. "What's that lassie? Timmy fell down the well again?"

"What's he doing?" I whispered to Estrea.

"I believe Talon is giving him directions and he's translating them," she told me. To Warchild, she said, "Does he want this one saved?"

After listening to a series of growls from Talon, Warchild grinned. "Lunch time."

I watched as the three of them fell on the injured Kindred like a pack of greedy hyenas. I'd never seen anything like it in all my life, it was wild. A part of me was disgusted and wanted to turn away, but another, bigger part of me was thrilled to see their animal instinct take over. I watched.

When they were done, Warchild went through the guy's pockets. He found some money and some keys that he kept, and a pistol that he threw into the field. Then he turned and crooked a finger in my direction.

"What?" I asked warily, glancing at Estrea. She was on the phone and not paying me any mind.

"Benji requires your assistance," he said, gesturing to where Talon crouched on top of the Brujah.

The prince growled.

I parked my bike and walked slowly forward, not quite sure what the Kindred wanted me to do. He looked up at me, then down at the vampire and growled again.

"He wants you to help hold him down," Warchild prompted.

"Oh." I knelt and put my hands on the captive's shoulders, holding him down while Talon backed off. I almost jumped out of my skin when crouched beside me and draped an arm around my shoulders, his hand holding a gun that he held point blank at the Kindred's forehead.

The prince got up and shifted back to human form. "Benji?" he said angrily to Warchild. "Where we gonna take him? I'm out of places."

"I've got a warehouse," the Kindred beside me suggested. When the prince nodded, Warchild looked at me. "I got him, why don't you go see what they were running to?"

"Okay." I didn't see any harm in doing as he said, and I was interested to know what they had been going after.

Warchild shifted a little to hold the Kindred to the ground and I stood, walking toward the woods in the direction they'd been running.

"Logan?" Estrea called after me.

I stopped and turned to look at her. "Yeah?"

"Where are you going?" she asked, her voice deceptively soft.

"To see where they were running to," I told her.

She turned away. "Fine."

What did I do? "Did you not want me to?" I asked.

"I guess it's irrelevant now," she said dismissively.

Warchild looked at the prince. "I get the feeling she doesn't trust me."

Great, I'd managed to irritate her not once, but twice in the same night. I'd be lucky if she didn't drink me dry before sunup. I buried the memory of her feeding from the injured Kindred and walked into the woods.

I followed a broken trail into the woods, and a few minutes later Jonathan caught up to me on his motorcycle. Just as he reached me, I caught a glimpse of a figure in the trees to my left. It was big and furry, and I knew whatever it was it meant trouble. I pointed my gun at it.

Jonathan turned his bike off and parked it, following the direction of my gaze. The creature jumped from the tree and landed only a few feet from the caitiff.

Werewolf: *noun* – a person transformed into a wolf or capable of assuming the form of a wolf.

It was a werewolf, an actual, real life, gigantic werewolf. I supposed it made sense after all, if vampires were real, why not werewolves? Didn't werewolves eat people?

I kept my gun on it, terrified but in control enough of myself that I knew it would be useless to flee. Shooting it would probably be useless too, but at least I had something to hold so my hands wouldn't shake.

The creature looked at Jonathan, then at me. I didn't like the way it sniffed at the air, but I thought that shooting it would only piss it off so I waited.

"I beg your pardon sir," Jonathan said politely, "are we intruding?"

It pointed to several nearby trees where there were claw marks about ten feet from the ground. They looked like territorial markers.

"We were... arguing with some Gangrel," he explained. "They were running in this direction."

Abruptly the werewolf turned and disappeared into the trees.

"Stay here," Jonathan told me, "or better yet, go back and tell everyone what is going on. I'll be back in a few moments."

I kept staring after the werewolf, trying desperately to calm my mind. "Was that a werewolf?" I whispered.

"Yes," he replied not unkindly before following the creature into the darkness.

Glancing around, I knew the smartest thing I could do was follow his advice. There was no telling how many other werewolves hid in the darkness. I turned and hurried back to the others.

When I cleared the woods, Estrea was standing where I'd left her, looking like she was listening intently. I walked over to her and she looked up at me.

"Problem?" she asked.

"Th-there was a werewolf," I told her.

"Where is it now?" she asked urgently.

"J-Jonathan followed it." I hated the hesitation in my voice, but it wasn't every day you saw a werewolf in the woods.

"Did he say anything else?" she demanded.

"No, just to come back and tell you what's going on," I replied, glancing back at the woods.

"Actually," she corrected me sharply, "he said he'd be back in a moment."

I raised an eyebrow at her and tried to smile. "I must have missed it when I saw the werewolf." I was lucky I hadn't forgotten my name.

Warchild and Emma were near the car with two of the Kindred they'd captured. I followed Estrea and Talon in that direction, pushing my bike and trying not to jump at the shadows that suddenly seemed everywhere.

"Are you going to be nice?" I heard Warchild ask as he grabbed the guy's head and pointed a gun at it.

The Kindred stared down the barrel. "Do I have a choice?"

"Well, you can always run," the Gangrel drawled.

"I tried that," he protested.

Right then a truck pulled into the drive sending everyone ducking for cover. It parked not far from the ruins of the safe house, and when Jonathan climbed down from the cab, everyone relaxed.

Warchild told Emma to watch his captive and walked toward his motorcycle, pausing to sniff at me as he went by. I tried to ignore him.

Jonathan moved toward the woods, he paused and turned to the rest of us. "I would like to suggest that everyone stay out of the wood line, it's been claimed," he warned us.

When they returned, Talon and Warchild discussed the location of the warehouse the primogen had mentioned earlier. The prince didn't like the fact that it was downtown, but he knew there might not be another choice. Estrea pulled Jonathan aside, leaving me standing by the car.

A few moments later I noticed that Warchild was staring at me again. I put my hand in my pocket on the can of dog repellent we'd bought earlier, but I was hesitant to use it. The last thing we needed right now was an internal battle, there were still bad guys to be fought. But the voice inside my head kept whispering at me to use the spray. I did my best to ignore it.

"You know," he drawled softly, "if you ever get tired of being on that short leash..."

He turned his head a little, and I saw that Estrea was standing nearby glaring at him with dislike written plainly on her face.

"I'm talking to your ghoul," he said roughly. "Do you mind?"

"As a matter of fact, I do," she shot back.

In the blink of an eye Warchild had a gun pointed at Estrea's head. As I moved to stop him, she laughed and he pulled the trigger. Luckily, she was able to move out of the way and he missed. I didn't.

I punched him hard in the upper chest, but it didn't seem to phase him. He moved back a little, and I could see the prince behind him. I waited to see if Talon would put an end to this, or if I had to try and kill this man who seemed to like me so much.

"Listen children," Talon barked harshly, stepping forward. "We have enough problems in the city as it is. You were each recruited for a reason and there will be animosity between you, but we need to take back our city or every night will be like this one."

"She's not even from this city," Warchild bit out. "She hasn't been here."

"She's still a guest of mine," the prince said flatly.

"She's not fighting for her city," he insisted.

"I was here before you knew where this city was," Estrea replied contemptuously.

"I've always known where it was," Warchild growled.

"I'm going to Caleb's," Estrea announced impatiently to Talon. "Call me if you need me."

"I'm going downtown and raise hell," he countered. "Who's going with me?"

"I'll go," Emma offered quickly.

"Who's truck?" the prince asked.

"I believe it belonged to our Gangrel friends," Jonathan drawled.

"Should we send our friend home with a few parting gifts?" he glanced at the Gangrel Warchild had been threatening earlier, then punched him hard enough to knock him out. "Does anyone know how to blow up the truck?" he asked us.

When no one volunteered, he looked at my master. "Estrea, come here."

"What?" she said, complying.

"As I was saying," Warchild murmured to me as she approached the prince, "if you ever get tired of that choke chain..."

I bit my lip and tried to ignore him as I followed Estrea. A part of me wanted to accept Warchild's offer, but the part of me that loved my master was stronger.

The prince looked at Warchild. "Do you want to stow away?"

"What?"

"Let him take us to where we want to go," he explained, pointing to the unconscious Gangrel. "Brainwash him, return him to where the truck was stolen, then follow him. Send him back thinking he did his job. If we're dead, maybe it will bring them out of the woodwork."

Talon sighed and ran a hand through his hair. He had the look of a man who was at the end of his rope. "I don't know what the hell is going on."

"I do," an unfamiliar woman's voice chimed in.

# ANSWERS

DRAG ME THROUGH YOUR WASTED LIFE

ARE YOU FOREVER DEAD?

KEEP AWAY - GODSMACK

We all turned to see a beautiful woman leaning against one of the trees that had been relatively undamaged by the explosion. She had long brown hair, and a beautiful complexion.

"Who are you?" Talon demanded.

"Lana Centopolis," she replied softly. The prince's aggressiveness didn't seem to bother her at all.

Emma stepped forward to shake hands with the woman and introduce herself. "What is it that you know?"

"The answers to your questions," she replied with a half smile. "Why, who, what."

"Please explain," Emma prompted.

Lana pointed at Talon. "He's caused this."

The prince seemed shocked. "What?"

"Why is he responsible for all this?" Emma asked.

Responsible: *adjective* – 1. Liable to be required to give account, as of one's actions or of the discharge of a duty or trust. 2. Involving personal accountability or ability to act without guidance or superior authority. 3. Being a source or cause.

Lana looked calmly at Talon. "Think back, Graves. Of all the people, who's the one person would help you. He had a friend that was a Nosferatu."

The prince's face reflected shock and fear. Obviously he knew exactly what she was talking about.

"How did this happen?" Emma prompted.

"Surely they must have finished him off by now," Talon murmured.

"Come on, Graves," Lana drawled. "Explain to them exactly who it is."

Emma looked to her prince. "Have you led us on a wild goose chase?"

He didn't answer, and from the look on his face, he couldn't.

"There is another Brujah in town," Lana told us.

"You're Brujah?" Emma asked.

"I'm Brujah," the woman admitted. "He's what's left from the other half. He killed our founder."

Talon sat down hard on a pile of rubble and ran his hand through his hair. After a moment he began to explain. It seemed he was embraced six years ago, but prior to that he'd been a ghoul. One night a Gangrel had come to his prince and explained that there were three Kindred from the third generation left, a Gangrel, a Nosferatu, and a Brujah. I didn't understand the reference to generation and he didn't pause to explain.

The Nosferatu and the Brujah were looking to reclaim old ways, they wanted to destroy the clans and restore the old vampiric order. Talon and his master tried to stop it, and in the process the Gangrel was killed, but not before he embraced Talon.

Talon went to a friend's mansion and found that the Nosferatu had already killed her. He diablerized the Elder vampire, something else I didn't understand.

At that point, Warchild started clapping. He'd made it plain already this evening that he hated the Nosferatu clan.

The prince went on to explain that he'd fought the Brujah, but they'd been too well matched and near dawn he'd lost the other Kindred. He hadn't seen him since.

"Didn't this cross your mind before?" Emma demanded.

"No."

"How could it not?" she asked incredulously.

"If I blamed everything on this I'd truly be paranoid," he replied calmly.

"I didn't say you had to blame everything on this," she said acidly. "Why haven't you thought it a possibility before now?"

"Seven years is a long time," he reminded her. "I thought he'd moved on since he was alone."

"What's to stop him from getting another partner?" she asked.

"Looks like he's got another," he said gravely. "We have a third generation recruiting."

"How do you know this?" she demanded.

"He killed the founder of our bloodline," Lana interrupted them. "We want him dead. We've been tracking him, we thought Graves would take care of it."

"Do you know where he is?" Estrea asked.

"We have no way to take him down," she replied sadly.

"Where is he?"

Lana met my master's gaze calmly. "In a sewer beneath a bar. Cozy living from what I understand. That's where they're recruiting from."

"You expect us to do what about this?" Warchild demanded.

"Why are you telling us?" Emma asked.

"Graves is the only one that can keep him busy," Lana reminded them.

"If your prestigious prince couldn't take him out," he replied coldly, "why do you think we can?"

"Talon may be able to take him out," she reluctantly agreed.

"If he has the ability why are we involved?" Emma shot back impatiently.

"They are identically matched," she insisted. "Can he win? Will the other be alone? I have some abilities that can help, but we need graves as bait. He'd slaughter me in a minute. Graves may not survive."

"He's only here for Graves," Warchild reminded her.

"He wants everything," she corrected him. "To take over and return to old vampire order."

"You're just making it brighter for me," he drawled. "Let me know how it turns out, kiddies." With that, he turned and walked toward his motorcycle.

"I don't want to live in a world where humans are grown on farms for their masters." Lana said firmly as he drove away. "I have a place near the bar that cannot be scanned."

"How many of you are there?" Emma asked.

"Few and far between." She smiled sadly, as if the low number of her kind caused her grief. "In this area, just me, but we have others on the way."

"Don't you think he'll know that?" Emma replied.

"He can't sense us," Lana explained. "With Graves diablerizing the Nosferatu, there is a slight touch of his blood there. He can trace Graves, but it took him a long time."

Estrea looked to the prince. "Do you have any idea who is still loyal?"

"No," he said sadly, running a hand through his hair. "Obviously you are or you wouldn't have stayed. There are a few, the Tremere."



At the name of the clan he despised, Jonathan spit harshly to one side.

"If there are any left," Estrea murmured.

"There are at least three," Talon told her.

"Shouldn't you see who else is on your side?" Emma asked.

He looked at her sharply. "What, wave a flag and see who shows up?"

"There are more subtle ways," she reminded him.

He nodded. "I will check. If the ghouls come back to me we know they're loyal." To my surprise, I saw that his hand was shaking. "Getting it done would be easier unless he has a posse. We need to draw him out."

Estrea looked at the caitiff. "Jonathan, what would be the likely hood of making use of this truck?"

"If we can find someone with the knowledge of demolition," he said in his southern drawl. "Perhaps Graves knows of someone. For now, I have used a great deal of blood tonight as have we all. I suggest we feed and rest before anything else is done."

"Good idea," Talon agreed. "Shall we retire to her haven? We have no reason to distrust her yet."

"Well, I think Jonathan's advice is sound," Estrea put in. "We should prepare for tomorrow night. I'm going to Caleb's house, then we'll meet you where you wish."

"We'll separate, meet back after sundown," he replied.

Lana gave everyone the location of her have as Estrea and I went for my motorcycle. When she was done, she flickered a little then disappeared. I started the bike and we headed for Caleb's.

# RECRIMINATIONS AND REGRETS

NO APPEAL ON THE DOCKET TODAY

JUST MY OWN SIN

MY OWN PRISON - CREED

I parked behind Caleb's house and turned the bike off. Estrea led the way inside, and I tried to focus on the house itself rather than what I was afraid she was going to say to me.

Caleb greeted us and led us into the living room. The house was beautiful, very simple and modern. I stood next to a couch, feeling very uncomfortable and out of place.

"Are you still hungry?" she asked, her voice almost emotionless.

"Yes," I replied softly.

"If you'll excuse me, I'll go get her something," Caleb offered.

Estrea motioned for me to have a seat on the couch so I sat down on the edge. She looked at me for a long time, pacing back and forth. I kept my eyes on my hands, not sure what kind of apology I could offer to her.

Finally I couldn't take it any longer. "I'm sorry about what happened earlier," I said softly. "It won't happen again."

She stopped and looked at me sternly. "It had better not," she agreed.

I nodded. "It was just that I saw Rey and then you said something about killing him."

"Did you really think it was him?" she asked, surprised.

"At the time." I glanced up at her. "But I know it couldn't have been him."

"I'm not in the habit of worrying about what's going to come from people who are supposed to be protecting me," she said with a sigh. She looked very serious and very worried. "If I have to start doubting your loyalties, we might as well nip this situation in the bud."

Heartbreak: *noun* - overwhelming sorrow, grief, or disappointment.

For the first time I realized that my vengeance and the sensations her blood gave me were not the only reasons I needed to be with Estrea. Even the thought of never seeing her again sent agony through my soul. How could I live without her friendship, without her love?

I nodded and looked down, a tear falling from my eye. "I can understand why you would feel that way," I whispered, trying not to break down and cry. "What I did was uncalled for. All I can say is I'm sorry and it will never happen again."

She came over and sat down on a footstool in front of me. "What you have to remember is that I will have your best interests at heart," she told me. "If I thought for a second that that was your brother, I wouldn't have had that viewpoint. You are still new to this way of life and there are things that I still have to protect you from."

I looked up and nodded again, brushing the tears from my cheeks as Caleb came back into the room with a tray. He sat it down on a table near the window.

"Do you want to eat this here or take it to your room?" he asked me.

Estrea didn't seem to have a preference when I looked to her for one, so I stood up. "If you don't mind, I'll just take it to my room," I told him. I wanted to be alone, away from the condemnation and sympathy I saw in my master's eyes.

It took me a long time to get settled down to sleep. I kept seeing the faces of the people I'd killed and wondering if I'd done the right thing.

Then there was the fact that I could have died tonight. There were so many things I hadn't done in my life, and I'd almost lost the opportunity to do any of them. If I had died, I would have gone to my grave a virgin, and that was the least of the things I'd never done.

It also bothered me that I was starting to believe Warchild was right, that Estrea did have me on a choke chain. Granted, until tonight it had been a gentle one, but now I was beginning to feel the steel beneath the silk.

After a while I realized that I had to learn to live as Estrea's ghoul. Working for her gave me the opportunity to do so many things I'd never thought about doing, and I needed to take the time to do them. I fell asleep wondering what I could do tomorrow while I waited for night to fall.

I woke up around four o'clock and dressed quickly before joining Caleb in the kitchen.

"How are you doing?" he asked when I joined him in the kitchen.

I shrugged. "Okay, I guess."

He studied me as he handed me a plate of sandwiches, to my surprise, I was actually hungry so I started to eat.

"I heard you had your first kill last night," he said gently.

I glanced up, but there was no censure in his eyes. He'd been Estrea's ghoul for a long time, he'd probably been in a lot of situations like we'd been in last night.

"Was it hard for you?" he asked.

I looked away. "I suppose I'll get used to it."

"It gets better," he assured me. "Fighting like that is never easy, but you do get used to it."

"It wasn't the same as the night Rey died," I said softly. "Last night I realized that there was real danger, that I could die at any time just from a stray bullet."

"It's not always so dangerous," he told me.

Suddenly it occurred to me that there was one thing I could do before the sun went down. "I guess I just didn't realize until last night how much I hadn't done in my life," I added, watching him closely.

"Well you're young yet," he murmured meaninglessly.

"There are a lot of things I haven't experienced," I continued hesitantly, not sure if I really wanted to do this, or how he'd respond to it. "Rey was very protective and his parents really didn't let me date."

"Estrea isn't that restrictive," he told me. "Now you can date anyone you want to."

Could I? "Somehow I think there are a few people she'd object to." Warchild for one. "Would she object to you, Caleb?" I asked.

"You mean you dating me?" Obviously I'd surprised him.

"Yes."

"That's not a good idea, Logan," he said slowly.

"Why not?" I demanded, suddenly impatient. "Am I too young for you?"

"No, that's not it," he replied quickly. "You're a beautiful woman, Logan, but I'm afraid that our dating would be out of the question. Estrea—"

"But you just said she wasn't that restrictive, Caleb," I reminded him.

"That's not it," he protested. "She wouldn't stop us from dating."

"Then it's me." What was wrong with me that I couldn't get a man to look at me twice? Well, a man other than Warchild, and he was out of bounds.

"No, Logan, it's just that—" He was interrupted by the phone ringing and he got up to answer it. "We'll talk about this later."

"No, there's no need," I replied as he picked up the phone. I got to my feet and headed for the door. "Forget I said anything." It had been a bad idea, obviously.

He stood there with the phone in his hand. "Logan—"

I turned to look at him. "Are you going to get that?"

When he looked down at the phone, I walked out, heading back to my room.

It had been stupid of me to approach Caleb like that. I should have known he wouldn't be interested, he'd always looked at me like I was a child that needed tending to.

Mortification: *noun* - 1. A feeling of shame, humiliation, or wounded pride.

I took a shower trying to shake the mortification I felt from my conversation with Caleb. I'd done everything but throw myself on a man who wasn't the least bit interested in me. I spent the rest of the afternoon in my room avoiding him.

Soon after sundown I went looking for Estrea. I heard voices from the kitchen so I went to find out what was going on.

"We don't have a lot of time," I heard her tell him. I stopped just outside the doorway to listen. "I need blood, do you feel up to giving it to me?"

"I'll give you whatever you need, Estrea," he replied softly. "You know that."

I heard the faint sounds of movement, then a soft gasp from Caleb. Slowly I peeked around the corner to see Estrea in Caleb's arms. He held her close to him, and her face was buried in his neck. There was such a look of bliss on his face that I had to bite my lip to stop from crying.

Then he looked up and saw me standing in the doorway. Regret flashed over his face, but then he closed his eyes and lost himself once more to the kiss. In that moment I knew he would never come to care for me like I did for him. I turned and fled to my room.

I knew they'd been lovers, but I hadn't realized that he still loved her. He'd tried to tell me, but I guess I hadn't been listening. No wonder he hadn't been willing to try a relationship with me. Estrea owned his heart just as she owned his soul.

The blood bond I'd so easily agreed to weighed heavy on my soul because I knew she owned that too. She'd warned me about the bond, but at the time it had seemed like a small price to pay for avenging my brother. I'd been wrong.

# RENDEZVOUS

AND IF MY DAY KEEPS GOIN' THIS WAY  
I JUST MIGHT BREAK SOMETHIN' TONIGHT  
BREAK STUFF - LIMP BIZKIT

The sound of my cell phone ringing cut through my brooding. Of course it was Warchild, once again calling at the most inopportune time. I didn't need his reminders about how much of a puppy I was. Thankfully, he got straight to the point.

"So where's the party?" he asked.

I took a deep breath to control my voice. "At Lana's haven. We're supposed to meet there."

"Where's there?"

It took only minutes to give him directions, then once again I was left with the knowledge that I was alone.

I couldn't take it any more. I knew how long it took for Estrea to feed, she'd drank from me several times in the last month, so I went looking for them. I was anxious to work out my aggressions on the bad guys.

They were in the kitchen, arguing about whether or not Caleb could go with us. They argued as only lovers can do and I couldn't take it. I walked into the doorway and cleared my throat.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt," I said softly.

Estrea just looked at me as if to say, why did you?

"I was just wondering what we're doing tonight." It sounded stupid, but I couldn't think of anything else to say that didn't sound worse.

"I just have to change and I'll be ready to go," she replied, looking at me sternly.

"I'll wait in the living room," I told her, beating a hasty retreat.

I paced the floor in the living room trying hard not to listen to the sound of their voices from the kitchen. I wondered how I was going to spend the rest of my life under Estrea's thumb when I couldn't seem to please her.

A few minutes later I heard Estrea walk down the hall toward the bedrooms and Caleb entered the room behind me.

"I'm sorry you had to see that," he said softly.

I hardened my expression and turned to look at him. "See what?"

"You know," he chided.

"No big," I lied looking him straight in the eye.

He let me keep my dignity. "Are you loaded?"

"Totally." I was wearing my body armor and all my weapons were loaded with phosphorous.

Estrea joined us a moment later and to my amazement she let Caleb come with us. Or rather, she went with him while I followed his car through town to Lana's haven.

Lana lived above a dance club that Estrea had said was mortal owned, but had Kindred ties. The entrance to her home was in the back off the parking lot. As we pulled in, I realized that one of the two mercury lights over the lot was out.

I parked the bike and looked around, but other than some kids down on the corner, everything seemed quiet. Emma had pulled in right after we had, and now she and her party joined us by Caleb's car.

We walked to the door together and Estrea hit the bell. After she had identified herself, a buzzer went off allowing us to open the door and go in. As the door closed behind me I heard the drone of motorcycles in the distance.

The steep stairway didn't have any obvious security devices installed, but there was a smoke detector at the top that looked a lot like the one we'd found at the Tremere chantry. I wondered what had happened to it just as Estrea reached the top of the stairs and hesitantly opened the door.

"Hello?" she called out.

"Just a minute," a woman's voice replied.

Estrea stepped into the apartment, and the rest of us followed.

Emma took the time to introduce everyone while we waited for Lana to join us. She had brought her ghoul, Martin, and her sire, Benjamin. I stood quietly by the door as they exchanged small talk.

A few minutes later Lana came down from the balcony in a long flowing gown. She didn't look ready for battle, but then I wasn't exactly sure what Kindred normally chose to wear in war.

The sound of someone knocking on the lower door floated into the room, and Lana walked over to the intercom. "Who is it?"

"Warchild!" came the reply.

Lana buzzed the door and when she walked over to talk to Estrea, I was left to open the upper door at Jonathan's knock. It drove home once again that I wasn't equal to the Kindred in the room.

"Good afternoon," the Caitiff said as I let him in.

"Good evening, Jonathan," Estrea replied before I could.

I swallowed my resentment and went back to standing next to the door.

Emma was studying Lana's dress as if looking for flaws. I myself had to wonder again why the Kindred had chosen those clothes to wear into battle.

Suspicious: *adjective* - 1. Arousing or apt to arouse suspicion; questionable. 2. Tending to suspect; distrustful. 3. Expressing suspicion.

Apparently I wasn't the only one suspicious of Lana's wardrobe.

"Why are you so dressed up?" Emma asked the woman.

"I was downstairs," she replied simply.

"On a Wednesday?" Emma seemed surprised.

"There was a party," she explained dismissively. "Come in, have a seat."

Jonathan was the only one to take her up on the offer, sitting on a wide window ledge nearby.

"Is everyone ready for this evening?" our hostess asked as she glanced around the room.

"I suppose," Emma replied.

"What is everyone's strengths?" Lana asked. "What are you good at?"

Warchild had been standing quietly in front of the door, but now he laughed.

Lana looked at him cautiously. "You're scaring me, childe," she said softly.

He nonchalantly leaned over and rested his elbow on my head. He was so much taller than me that it wasn't a stretch by any means. I just shot him a disgruntled look and stepped away.

"You seemed to know everything last night," he reminded Lana coldly. "You tell us what we're good at."

"I know what I have followed up on," she told him simply. "Some of you are new, quite new." At that she looked right at me.

I didn't need her to remind me I was still wet behind the ears when it came to the wars Kindred fought. I wanted to say so, but a glance at Estrea's face told me it was best if I kept silent.

"Is everyone ready?" Talon called as he came down the stairs.

Emma wasn't, she had some questions for the prince before she would agree to go. "If you had such a big fall out with the Brujah," she asked, "how could you not have known this was him?"

"Especially since you didn't kill him," Warchild added.

"How could it not have crossed your mind?" the Toreador continued. "How could you put everyone in danger this way?"

Jonathan spoke up. "If this is such a threat, where is the rest of your precious Camarilla?" he demanded. "I don't want to play a pawn in your petty Jyhad. Where are your Justicars? Your Archons?"

"This was going on before I became prince," Talon reminded them. "I could have dealt with the Brujah and the Gangrel of this city on my own. If it had been just the Brujah, I would have considered that he was behind it."

"Now it is just the Brujah," Emma stated.

"Just lately." The prince sighed and ran a hand through his hair. "I can't spend my existence worrying about one enemy from the past, but you're right, I should have considered it."

"Why didn't you tell us about this before?" she asked.

"Oh, by the way," Jonathan put in, his voice dripping with sarcasm, "there's a threat to the Camarilla and the Masquerade in the middle of your city"

"The message has been sent to the Justicars," Talon replied, looking more stressed than seen him yet. "We have yet to get a response."

"We could put this off as human weakness," Emma said harshly, "but you're not human."

"That doesn't make him a God," Estrea shot back.

Talon smiled at my master. "Thank you, Estrea."

"The end result is that you are a weak prince and a poor ruler," Jonathan drawled. "I suppose if for not other reason than to cover myself in glory I will assist you this night."

Freedom: *noun* - 1. The condition of being free of restraints. 2. Liberty of the person from slavery, detention, or oppression. 3. The capacity to exercise choice; free will. 4. Frankness or boldness; lack of modesty or reserve. 5. A right or the power to engage in certain actions without control or interference.

Talon was giving the Kindred present the freedom to question him, which surprised me. He took the insult without flinching. I believe he thought he'd need every one of us before the night was over. "Warchild?"

"You don't think I'm going to let him have all the fun, do you?" he asked with a grin. "Who else do you have to guard your ass, some puppy?"

I tried not to let his words hurt me, but they did because I knew they were true. I was a puppy, and it was too late for me to do anything but live with that fact. My freedom had been mortally wounded the night Rey and I were attacked, and it had died when I'd agreed to become Estrea's ghoul.

My master agreed quite readily when Talon asked if she planned on joining him. Of course since Caleb and I belonged to her, we were in whether we wanted to or not. Neither of us had the freedom to chose that the Kindred involved had.

"We will help you if you tell us all there is without holding back," Emma put in, speaking for herself, Benjamin and Martin.

Talon described the Brujah as a black man looking to be in his mid twenties, tall and thin. In addition to the strength, speed and charisma of the Brujah clan, Talon knew he could grow claws like Gangrel could, as well as some magic.

"What do you expect us to do?" Warchild demanded.

"I am evenly matched," Talon said slowly.

"Yeah, you're a god," Warchild bit out impatiently. "What do you expect us to do?"

"Help me take him down," the prince replied simply.

The Kindred spent a few minutes talking about the truck loaded with explosives, and the prince made a call to have it brought to Lana's haven. Then they started talking about the numbers of Talon's allies.

It turned out that all told there were about forty people willing to fight with Talon, Kindred and ghouls included. Jonathan spit to one side when he learned that four Tremere were among those numbers.

Lana was convinced that the Brujah had only brought five people with him into the city, but she wasn't sure if they were Kindred or ghouls. And of course he'd had plenty of time to recruit, to embrace others and bring greater numbers to his cause.

There would be three groups of Talon's people converging on the club where the Brujah was planning to speak to his followers tonight. It was decided that Warchild would drive the truck loaded with explosives into the side of the building while our group, including Talon and Lana, would enter through a passageway from another building.

"Do you know demolitions?" Jonathan asked Warchild.

"No," he replied glibly, "but I can jump from a moving truck real fast."

"If we can take out the leader, the others will fall," Lana assured us.

I didn't know how she could be so sure about that, but she seemed to know everything else, and the others decided to take her at her word.

When the truck arrived, we all went down to the parking lot and watched as Warchild prepared it for the battle. He took two sticks of dynamite from the back of the truck and taped them to the dashboard, twisting the wicks together to make them easier to light. Then he ripped off the driver's door and turned to look at Graves.

"Let's go," he said confidently.

As I got on my bike to follow the others, I wished I were as confident about surviving the evening.



# TALON'S JUSTICE

YOU COULD WALK AWAY

BUT I KNOW YOU WERE BORN TO FIGHT

BILLY GET YOUR GUNS - JON BON JOVI

There were eight of us in the prince's party including Talon himself. We waited in the basement of a nearby building for Warchild to bomb the club the Brujah was supposed to be at tonight.

Emma stood to one side with her sire, Benjamin, and Martin, her ghoul. Jonathan and Estrea were talking with Talon making final plans, which left me right where I didn't want to be, with Caleb.

Now I could see the love on his face as he watched his master. Estrea had told me weeks ago that she and Caleb were just friends, but it was plain to see that they had once been more than that. I had to wonder what had happened to split the two of them up.

When an explosion rocked the building above us, we knew that Warchild had hit his mark. Talon threw open the door that led to a tunnel between the two buildings and headed down the steep steps.

"How far are we in this?" I whispered to Estrea as I followed her down. "I mean, to the death or until he starts losing?"

"To the end," she replied, looking back at me quite seriously. "We don't want the Brujah to win no matter what it costs."

Which meant that if I had to I was to give my life to make sure the Brujah didn't win. Surprisingly enough that thought didn't bother me as much as it should have. What did I have to live for after all?

Talon hesitated at the landing at the foot of the stairs. It was too dark to see why until I activated the night vision Estrea had taught me. There were two hallways that led from the landing, one to the left and the other to the right. The Kindred argued about which way to go until Warchild joined us.

He sniffed once and pointed to the left. "That way."

The rest of us followed him down the dark hallway, guns pulled, ready for battle. Caleb and I stayed close to Estrea's side. As irritated as I was with her treatment of me, I knew that either of us would protect our master with our lives.

Out of the darkness a hoard of rats came squeaking, crawling over our feet and startling more than a few of the Kindred. Most of us ignored them and kept moving toward the smell of smoke.

Through the darkness I could see movement down the hall, and I wasn't the only one. Warchild asked softly for an automatic weapon, and held his handgun in his mouth as he took one from Caleb. He braced himself and opened fire.

Talon crouched beside Warchild and fired his own automatic weapon. Between the two of them the hallway was quickly filled with fire from their phosphorous rounds. When they ran out of bullets, nothing moved but the rats.

The walls had caught fire from the phosphorous, making going down the hall difficult but not impossible. Warchild and Jonathan were the first ones threw, followed by everyone else except Estrea, Caleb and me. Estrea seemed hesitant to run the gauntlet of fire, and we waited with her until she gathered herself enough to go through it.

A few moments later we found ourselves in a banquet room of sorts. In the far corner stood of the room was a bar with a Kindred behind it. There were tables and Brujah scattered around the

room and the others had engaged many of them in battle. Warchild had jumped on top of a table that ran through the center of the room and was headed for the Brujah Talon had described to us.

To my left was a table against the wall, and hanging on the wall at the far end was a man who looked exactly like my brother. He looked injured, but I steeled my heart against feeling anything for him. Rey was dead, this man was merely an imposter.

In a flash Estrea was gone, and I jumped on the table to my left. I fired at the Brujah just as Warchild did, and our bullets knocked the Kindred off his feet. I shot twice at the nearest Brujah, but somehow he kept his feet even though he was on fire. I heard the sound of Caleb's gun behind me and realized that he'd jumped on the table as well.

From the corner of my eye I saw Warchild slash at a Kindred with his claws, and shot fire toward another Brujah. I felt a bullet hit the vest over my ribs, but I didn't let the impact slow me down. I shot the Kindred I'd fired at before and this time he went down screaming.

I headed for the end of the table and saw Warchild jump down off the table that the Brujah had been standing behind. The Gangrel flipped the heavy table over, hitting another Kindred who stood in the way before he headed toward the man hanging on the wall.

Warchild got to the imposter before I could and sunk his fangs into the guy's wrist. By the time I got to the end of the table I could see the body begin to decompose. I stood there stunned for a moment, staring at it while Warchild glanced down a hallway to his right.

"Our beloved prince is down here," he called out sarcastically, pointing down the hall.

I stood on the edge of the table looking down at the remains of the vampire that had disguised himself as my brother. "He was Kindred?" I asked softly.

"Yeah," Warchild replied, licking the blood from his lips.

The Kindred was dead, and I'd probably never find out who had killed my brother. All my leads had dried up and there I was with no power to find any more.

Frenzy: *noun* - 1. A state of violent mental agitation or wild excitement. 2. Temporary madness or delirium.

At the time I really didn't know what was happening. It was like a rabid animal took over my body and ripped into the nearest standing person. I could see what I was doing to the Brujah, but I couldn't control myself.

When it was over I stood looking down at the tattered remains of the Brujah, covered in blood and panting to catch my breath. Caleb was still standing on the table, staring at me as if I'd become a monster, and Warchild was gone.

Estrea came over and laid a hand on my shoulder. "Are you okay?"

I stared down at the body parts at my feet and tried to control my breathing. "Yeah. Are you?"

"Yeah." I knew she was concerned about what I'd just done, but I couldn't explain why I'd done it. Estrea had tried to discourage me from finding Rey's killers since I'd first taken her blood.

"Are you okay?"

I looked up to see Jonathan nearby. "Yeah," I answered again.

He nodded and followed Emma down a hallway that led off to the left past the body that was hanging on the wall.

To one side I heard Estrea and Caleb talking, but I didn't pay attention to what was said. I was too busy trying to understand what had happened, why I'd gone so crazy and ripped someone apart like so much trash. I sat down on the table and tried again to control my breath.

"Do you want me to stay with you?" Caleb asked softly.

I looked up and realized that there was fighting down the hallway everyone had gone down, and that Estrea was waiting for Caleb.

"No, stay with her," I told him. "Just give me a minute."

He nodded and went with our master to help Talon.

After a moment I took off my jacket to take a look at the Kevlar covering my upper body. There was a large dent in the side, and I could feel the bullet flattened inside the hole it had left. I stripped off the vest and dropped it on the table. To my surprise, my ribs beneath it didn't even feel bruised.

I put my jacket back on and sat looking down at the mess I'd made at my feet. I could hardly believe I'd had the strength to pull a body apart that way. The thought sickened and excited me at the same time.

What was happening to me? Was it Estrea's blood or was this what I'd really been like all this time? I was stronger now than I'd ever been in my life. Her blood made it possible for me to do things I never thought I was capable of, but was it also turning me into a monster?

Eventually I realized that the sounds of battle coming from the next room had stopped. I wiped my face with the corner of my shirt and went to find out what had happened.

Emma and Jonathan were standing next to a man who turned out to be the old Gangrel primogen in the far corner of the ruined room. Obviously it had been one hell of a fight. Lana, Vinney and Warchild were standing near where Estrea was kneeling next to an unconscious Talon. Caleb was with Martin and Benjamin near the remains of a Kindred who I assumed was the Brujah Talon had been trying to kill.

I stood in the doorway and listened while they talked about what to do with the prince's body. Apparently the battle, while victorious, had been difficult enough for Talon that he'd gone into torpor.

Torpor: *noun* - 1. A state of mental or physical inactivity or insensibility. 2. The dormant, inactive state of a hibernating or estivating animal.

From what I could gather, the prince could remain in a torporus state for years or even centuries, depending on the severity of his wounds. Vinney planned on taking over the city and maintaining control until Talon managed to rouse himself.

"I'm leaving," Warchild announced.

"Tonight?" Vinney asked.

"Now," he replied. "See ya." With that, he walked past me through the doorway and was gone.

Vinney watched him go, then turned to Estrea. "Let's get Talon somewhere safe. I know just the place."

# EPILOGUE

DON'T KNOW WHAT I'M LIVING FOR  
HERE I AM SO ALONE  
BACK HERE - BBMAK

Before they carted Talon's body away, Estrea pulled me into a corner. She read me the riot act for abandoning Caleb when his gun was jammed. I just stared at her in surprise, unable to say anything to her accusations. How the hell was I supposed to know his gun wasn't working?

She wouldn't listen, wouldn't even let me try to explain my side of the story. She ordered me to go back to San Francisco and wait for her. What was I supposed to do, really? I went.

On the way back through the tunnel, I had to admit that Warchild had indeed been right about me. He'd told me I was on a choke chain and he'd pegged it good. I hadn't realized until tonight just how tight Estrea intended to keep that chain, but now it was crystal clear.

It was too late to look back now and say that I should never have become her ghoul, too late really to do anything about the mess I'd put myself in. I'd jumped in to the pool with both feet before I'd thought to check the depth and now I was in way over my head.

Now I had to resign myself to a life as Estrea's pet bodyguard. It wouldn't be so bad, would it? All I had to do was... anything she wanted. I hoped it would be enough for her, but somehow I doubted that it would be.

How long before she decided that I was a liability? I couldn't help but wonder what she'd do to me then. Would she kill me outright or would she simply cut me out of her life, leaving me longing for the taste of her blood? Knowing that she could probably make me forget her didn't help. I knew the craving would still be there, haunting me until I died. Even thinking about her blood now made my mouth water.

I wanted so badly to get on my bike and ride off to where she would never be able to find me. I longed to be free again, free to live my life as I pleased, free to find Rey's killers, free to finally wreak vengeance for his death.

Even before I reached the street I knew I could never do it, I couldn't just walk away like that. There was no way I could leave Estrea without breaking the craving I had for both her company and her blood, even after what had happened here in LA. Unfortunately I had no way to break those cravings short of killing myself.

Tears filled my eyes and I tried my best to blink them away. I mourned the loss of my brother and the freedom of my old life as I walked toward my bike. As much as I wanted to believe that I'd rebuilt my life, I really had lost everything when Rey had died in that hospital emergency room.

What was there left for me to live for? Vengeance? At first it had seemed like a valid reason to continue, but the more time that passed the more I realized that I couldn't live for vengeance alone. Estrea's friendship had helped, but now I realized that it hadn't been true friendship at all.

Estrea had made it crystal clear that she didn't want me to make my own judgement or do anything other than follow her orders to the letter. It seemed to me that she wanted me to be the puppy Warchild thought I was. That knowledge was like a bitter taste in my throat and no matter how hard I tried I couldn't swallow past it.

And yet... and yet I knew I wouldn't try to find freedom by killing myself either. Rey had taught me a lot in our years together, but the most important thing was that shit happened. As soon as you thought you had life figured out, planned to perfection, something always happened to change it, good or bad.

I just had to be patient, wait and see what life had in store for me. Maybe life with Estrea wouldn't be as bad as it looked right now. Maybe when we got back to San Francisco and things calmed down we could come to some sort of an accord. Hell, maybe something would come along to give me an out from the puppy way of life.

Still, it looked like I was in for a long stint in Estrea's doghouse. Damn.