



DANCES-AT-TWILIGHT: CURIOSITY AND THE CAT

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PRELUDE

Under the water

I hear who I'll become

Jewel - Under the Water

"If they complain about packaging the cocaine in the nude, they are probably stealing it. Kill them and find new girls."

I shrunk back against the wall, suddenly terrified that they would see me through the partially open door. Outside I could hear the revelry of Carnival echoed through the streets of Rio de Janeiro.

"Okay, boss," Ramirez replied.

"Bring me the blonde before you kill her, she looks...interesting."

"Sure thing."

I began to edge my way down the hall toward my room.

"Alicia wants to attend Carnival tonight, does she have your permission?" Ramirez asked.

I froze, waiting impatiently for the answer.

"No, I think it is too dangerous for her there," my father replied. "She's only twelve, I don't want my daughter around that type of crowd."

I fought not to laugh: he could kill the girls who packaged his drugs for him, but wouldn't let me go to Carnival. I moved away from the door slowly until I felt I was far enough down the hall, and then I ran as if the demons of hell were chasing me.

My father had always been kind and loving to me, but I had known for some time that he was neither kind nor loving to others. Overhearing his conversation with his business manager only confirmed the worst of the rumors I'd heard about him.

I sprinted to my room and changed to American designer jeans and a white peasant blouse. Working quickly, I packed a satchel of clothing and the money from my bank. I knew I couldn't stay with my father any longer, that it was time for me to look for my mother.

My father had told me that my mother had left when I was a baby. He'd said that she'd gone back to her people in Miami and that she didn't want to have anything to do with me. After hearing what he'd told Ramirez, I knew I couldn't believe anything he said.

Somehow I made my way out of the house without being seen, which was difficult because of the many guards my father had around the property. His house was on the outskirts of Rio de Janeiro, and I walked into the countryside for a mile or so before I hid my bundle of clothing.

I took an indirect route back into Rio and walked into the downtown area just before sunset. Carnival was in full swing and everyone was having a wonderful time. I was so short I couldn't see anything but the people close to me, but I loved it. I danced and laughed with complete strangers, the first time I had ever been free to do so in my life.

When a young man offered me a drink from his bottle, I gleefully accepted. I had never drunk alcohol before that night, but I thought that it would be a good time to start. It isn't every day a girl confirms that her father is one of the major drug lords of South America.

I tipped the bottle up and took a long drink of the fiery liquid. Laughing I handed him back the bottle, and he danced away into the twilight.

I swayed a bit on my feet and my head felt strange. I made my way through the crowd to the side of a building and leaned back against the cool brick. I felt feverish and wondered if there had been hallucinogenic drugs mixed with the tequila I drunk.

I blinked to clear my vision and suddenly I could easily see over the crowd. People began to stare at me in shock and point. I looked down at my arms; my skin was darker, almost black and covered with downy black fur. What had happened to me?

THE PUSSYCAT

What the dark and the wild

And the different know

Melissa Etheridge - The Different

I stretch cat style on the bed and my movements bring a chuckle from Cassidy, my bedmate. He is sitting against the headboard lazily smoking a cigarette and watching me with his cat's eyes. I can see the point of fangs behind his lips. I roll to my stomach and rub my face against the black silk sheets, enjoying the feel of them against my naked skin. I bought the sheets for just that purpose, and although Cassidy claims he hates them, I'd know he's ordered more of them.

Cassidy is a vampire, and a handsome one at that. He's tall and has dark blonde hair that I love to run my fingers through. We've been dating for the last few months but don't get the wrong impression; I'm not a vampire, far from it. A lot of people find it strange that I would share my bed with one of the undead, and a few months ago I would have said it would never happen.

I am Bastet, a werecat, daughter to Seline, the mother of all cat kind. Other shapeshifters deplore vampires, but I find them fascinating, this one in particular. Some of the dogs in town call me 'Cassidy's pussycat', but I don't let the dogs get under my skin. It's the truth for now and besides, how better to get to know the enemy than to sleep with one?

Not that Cassidy is the first vampire I've ever known. I've run with them on occasion, although the memory of most of those times seems hazy, almost as if they were stories I've heard once upon a time. Lots of things about my past seem that way, but I never let it bother me. I live in the here and now.

I reach over and run my nails lightly down Cassidy's bare thigh. His skin is soft and cool to the touch, but there are strong muscles beneath the surface. He's a hard man, my Cassidy is. As the right hand man to the Frenchman, vampire prince of Detroit, he has to be. In fact Cassidy is so important to the Frenchman that it's sometimes difficult for us to find time alone together. I don't mind. I have other things to keep me busy.

Most nights I dance at a little club downtown, although dance might be too tame of a word. The truth is that I strip. I make good money doing it, and I've never been much for modesty, so I enjoy it. My stage name is 'Miss Kitty', which amuses Cassidy to no end. Of course he stops laughing when I dance for him. My specialty is the Dance of the Dominatrix, complete with whips and leather.

My hand on his leg brings a predictable response from my vampire friend. He smiles wider, flashing his permanent fangs as he crushes out his cigarette. I smile and purr when he moves closer to run a cool hand down my back. There are perks to sleeping with Cassidy, and his skill as a lover is definitely foremost among them.

Most think that Cassidy is a cold man, but I know different. I knew from the moment I laid eyes on him that he hid great passions behind his icy façade. Most of the time that passion comes out in violence, but I've seen a different side of him. I can't say that he loves me or even that I love him, but our passion ties us together tighter than most 'loving' relationships I've seen.

After a few hours of passion I shower and dress before taking the elevator down to the main floor of Detroit's Renaissance Center. The clerk smiles at me as I walk across the lobby.

In the last few months I've spent a lot of my free time at the center, and I'm on speaking terms with most of the night employees. Tonight I don't have time to stop, so I just wave and head outside.

The night is warm and the city streets are well lit as I make my way into the parking garage that sits across the street from the Center. My Harley is parked in the basement of the garage, and within minutes I am on it. Traffic is light this early in the morning, and it doesn't take me long to hit the expressway and head for the suburbs.

I'm not a country girl, but it seems like I was one once upon a time. These days I love the city at night, but I'm no housecat. Every once in a while I hear nature's call and I have no choice but to heed it. Almost an hour later I find myself at my favorite park just north of Detroit. The park is closed at night, but I know other ways in than through the gate. I park my bike among some brush and shed my clothing.

The full moon is riding high in the sky and I wait until it skids behind a group of clouds before I answer nature's call. My body grows larger at first and hair springs out all over my skin. My tail swishes impatiently as I grow larger still, falling to four paws in the darkness. Then the change subsides leaving me in the form of a black jaguar.

In a single movement I jump the fence that surrounds Kensington Park. The trails are familiar ribbons in the dark night and I run down them at top speed, searching for prey. Sometimes Cassidy comes with me when I hunt, but tonight I want to enjoy the chase alone. In the darkness I smell deer and slow to a crawl so that I don't frighten them away.

I move closer to the herd, staying down wind as much as possible. Within moments I'm in position and I pounce. The deer tries to run with his friends, but my claws in his throat make it impossible. A few quick swipes of my paw and it's down for good. I roar my victory at the moon and settle in to feed.

Sometime later I lie on the edge of the lake and begin cleaning myself. I know it will take a while, but I have time. Dawn is still an hour or so away. As I lick the dark blood from my paws, I think about how I came to be Cassidy's 'pussycat'.

RECRUITED

My mind is starting to burn

With forbidden thoughts

Janet Jackson - Any Time, Any Place

It had been a long night, too long. Oh, the dancing part of my job was fun, but sometimes the customers got a little frisky. I'd tried to help when a guy had gotten a little too friendly with one of the other girls and had been manhandled myself before the bouncers had stepped in and kicked the guys out. Not that I couldn't have handled the businessmen mind you, but somehow I knew my boss wouldn't have appreciated me disemboweling one of his customers.

It was eight o'clock by the time I walked out of the back door of the club, nearly an hour later than I usually left work. The shower I'd taken had gone a long way toward making me feel better, but I was anxious to go home. I wanted to be alone so I could change into... something more comfortable, so to speak. The dark jeans, leather jacket and tank top I wore were as close as I could get to being comfortable with clothes on, but tonight I wanted nothing more than to be in my own skin.

The second I walked out the back door I knew my plans for a quiet evening were optimistic at best. My bike was parked at the far end of the lot and next to it was parked a black Lincoln. Standing near the care were an Englishman and three other guys. I knew the one was English because he'd been to the club many times and I'd heard his accent, but usually he came alone. Tonight he'd shown up with his friends, and they had been watching me very closely as I'd danced. Now they looked like they were waiting for me.

I put my hand in the pocket of my leather jacket and on the knife I always carried. I didn't really need it, but sprouting claws when I needed something sharp was a bit too obvious for this city. They didn't look like they wanted trouble, but in downtown Detroit it was never a good sign when the clientele tried to meet a dancer outside of the club and it was always better for a girl to be safe than sorry.

Behind me I heard a group of familiar voices come around the side of the building. I winced, knowing that trouble was about to breathe down my neck. A glance over my shoulder showed the four businessmen that had given me a hard time earlier. You'd think the monkeys would have left when they'd been thrown out, but apparently they'd stayed around for more fun.

As I walked faster I wondered why it was that of all men, businessmen always seemed to behave the worst. Give me a redneck over a suit any time. At least when you tell them no, they usually listen. Businessmen think they own the world and almost always end up treating you like they owned you too for the price of a lap dance.

"Miss Kitty!" one of the men behind me called. "Bring that pussy over here!"

I ignored them and walked even faster toward my bike as I pulled the balisong out of my pocket. A discreet flick of the wrist brought the knife blade out for business.

When the monkeys behind me started running, one of the guys near the Lincoln looked like he wanted to give me a hand until the Englishman grabbed his arm. I knew I'd get no help from those four so I sprinted toward my bike. I wasn't that fast on two feet so I didn't think I'd make it before the monkeys caught up with me but it was worth a shot. At least they'd bleed a little further from the back door of the club.

A hand wrapped itself around my ankle, but somehow I was able to keep my balance. I dove to the side and undid the catch on my belt with my left hand, dropping the long chain to the ground. As I crouched there I struck with the chain, tripping one of the monkeys and making him fall into one of his friends. Unfortunately, only one of them went down. The other one made a grab for me and I slashed up with the knife in my right hand. Too bad the only thing I cut was his coat.

A strong arm grabbed the guy around the waist and pulled him back. I stood up as my new friends hauled the other two to their feet. I put my knife away and refastened the chain around my waist as they let my attackers flee drunkenly down the alley. In the dim light I realized that none of the four men who had helped me were exactly human.

The Englishman held his hand out to me and said something in a softly cultured voice that threw me off guard. "Dances."

Most people in town knew me as 'Miss Kitty'. My friends called me 'Amante Solitario'. Absolutely no one in Detroit knew that my true name is 'Dances-at-Twilight'.

"My boss has a proposition for you," he continued as I hesitantly took his hand.

"Your boss?" I asked softly, wondering how he knew my name and what exactly he was.

Before he could answer, a dark low slung sports car pulled up near the Lincoln. A tall black man got out and walked over to the Englishman, smiling. He was wearing what looked like a very expensive suit.

"Hi, Giles. Remember me? I'm Adam," the newcomer announced in a friendly voice. "I'm looking for Micky, have you seen him?"

Giles stopped and looked at Adam thoughtfully. "Adam White?"

"That's right," he replied. "Have you seen Micky around tonight?"

The Englishman shook his head. "I haven't seen him, but I'm glad you showed up. The Frenchman would like to have a word with you."

That explained what Giles and his friends were. I knew that the Frenchman was the Vampire king of Detroit, and vampires often had human... confederates they called ghouls.

Adam didn't seem surprised. "Sure, lead the way."

I pulled back when Giles began once more to lead me toward my motorcycle, but he didn't let go of my hand.

"Is the Frenchman your boss?" I asked.

"Yes," Giles replied. "He has a proposition for you."

Somehow I didn't think it involved dancing. Most vampires cared more for drinking blood than sex, in fact most of them considered feeding to actually be sex. "Why?" I asked politely, trying to hide my impatience. "And how do you know my name?"

"I know many things, Dances," he told me. "Come, talk to my boss and everything will be made clear."

I didn't want to go with him, but I'm curious by nature. I had to find out how he knew my name. "All right."

"Oh, good," he said enthusiastically, making me wonder if I should rethink my agreement. When he led me toward the Lincoln, I hesitated again.

"I'd rather take my bike," I told him firmly. I didn't want to end up somewhere that I needed to leave quickly without a ride. Also, I didn't want to leave my bike here, it wasn't the best of neighborhoods and it probably wouldn't have been there when I came back.

"You can follow us," he agreed easily enough, finally releasing me.

Two of the guys had motorcycles parked on either side of mine, and I followed them through the streets of Detroit toward downtown. We ended up at the parking garage next to the Renaissance Center, and pulled into the basement of the lot. It took the Lincoln and the sports car a few minutes longer to catch up with us.

Adam and I followed Giles across the street and into the lobby of the Renaissance Center. The Englishman dismissed the other men as we walked toward an elevator set off to one side. As we entered the car, I noticed that it was a much more luxurious elevator than the one I'd ridden to visit the top floor viewing lounge of the center.

Given the length of the ride we must have been near the top of the building when the car finally stopped. The doors opened to reveal a waiting room of sorts that was just as luxurious as the elevator had been. Sitting on chairs against one wall were two women, one Hispanic like myself, the other tall and blonde.

The Hispanic woman seemed familiar to me somehow, and as I studied her I realized something else; she was a vampire, as was the blonde woman and Adam. It didn't really bother me, but I had to wonder why I was the only shapeshifter in the group the Frenchman had brought together.

"Alida," the Hispanic woman said, looking at me and coming to her feet.

Perhaps that name was mine once, but now I am Amante Felicia Solitario so of course I didn't answer her.

"Alida, it's Isabel," she continued as she moved closer.

"I'm sorry," I said politely, "My name is Amante, not Alida."

She looked confused. "I don't understand, you lived with our group for several months in Texas a few years ago. Don't you remember me?"

I did, in a vague sort of way, but I wasn't about to admit it. It seemed like maybe I'd seen someone like her in a movie somewhere. "I don't know you," I insisted.

"Alida, I gave you the tattoo you have on your back," she said firmly.

Although I wanted to touch the small of my back where a black panther rode my skin, I didn't. Her knowing about the tattoo didn't mean she *knew* me. I'm a stripper after all, many people see my naked back every day.

"Don't you remember Lando?" she asked softly, something like pain in her voice.

"Lando from Star Wars?" I replied smoothly. "Of course I remember him."

Before she could say anything else, a large door opened behind her and a tall man with dark blonde hair stepped into the waiting room. He wore sunglasses and a hard expression on his face as he gestured for us to enter the room behind him. It was my first sight of Cassidy, and believe me, I did look my fill as I followed the others into the room.

I'd thought the lobby and the waiting room were luxurious, but the office the man led us into was downright decadent. Our feet sank into the plush carpeting, and I couldn't help but wonder what it would be like to roll in it. Two of the walls were floor to ceiling windows giving us a view of Canada at night that couldn't be rivaled anywhere else in Detroit.

A large expensive looking oak desk stood near the windows with four chairs sitting before it. Against one wall was a bar that held what looked like Austrian crystal glassware. A table was to one side of the room, and two very old Greek statues rounded out the furnishings.

Behind the desk sat a dark older looking man who might have once been handsome. Claw marks ran down the right side of his face, disappearing behind a black eye patch. He exuded an aura of authority that was clear and unmistakable. "Sit down," he told us, gesturing toward the chairs.

I watched Cassidy walk back around the desk to stand behind the older man before I followed the others to the chairs. There was something about him, something dangerous, that made me curious about him, and it wasn't the fact that he was a vampire. I listened to the older man with only half an ear as I studied my future lover. Of course I didn't know then that we would be lovers, at that point I didn't even know his name. I could sense the passion beneath his cold demeanor, and it fascinated me.

Under the cover of his dark blonde hair I realized that his ears were pointed. I'd never seen a vampire with pointed ears before, and it made me wonder what his sunglasses were hiding.

I'd heard vague rumors about the scarred Frenchman and his right hand man but I'd never thought I'd be summoned to his office. The Frenchman went on for a few minutes about how Detroit was his city and each of us were seeking something within it.

Adam it seemed was looking for a job. Jocelyn Smith, the blonde woman, was searching for someone. Isabel was running from something the Frenchman called the Sabbat, which rang a few bells in my head although I couldn't really remember what that was. And of course I was hiding.

I suppose I should explain that there is a man searching for me, a very persistent, very dangerous man. Sometimes I think he's my father, but at other times I can barely remember what he looked like. I do know that he's searching for me, and that he has a lot of money to waste on finding me. Carlos Sanchez is a big shot South American drug lord, and he wants to make sure his daughter is safe. If I am his daughter, I never want to see him again. If I'm not his daughter, why would I want to see him?

It seems like there have been a few occasions when Sanchez' men have come close to finding me. Each time something has happened and I've been able to get away from them. At least I think that's what has happened. Sometimes my long-term memory isn't so good.

"If you expect to stay in my city," The Frenchman continued in a hard tone, "you have to play by my rules. I have a job for the four of you to do. Understand that this is not a request. My associate will give you the details."

With that Cassidy gestured toward the door. I thought about refusing, but my curiosity got the better of me. Vampires are abominations of nature, they exist without life, and they serve the Wyrms more than most other creatures. If I were a werewolf, I probably would have destroyed the lot of them, but I'm not a dog. I'm Bastet, and there are times when my curiosity is my undoing.

Giles had remained in the waiting room, and was standing by the elevator when we came out of the Frenchman's office. He looked expectantly at Cassidy so the rest of us turned to face him.

"You have until four o'clock to gather your things," he told us firmly, his voice low and rough like sandpaper. "Then you will meet back here and you will stay together until your task is complete or you will die."

"How long will that be?" I asked sweetly.

"You don't need to know that," he replied harshly.

I smiled, wondering how easily I could get under his skin. "I need to know how many changes of undies to bring."

"I could help you with that," Adam offered.

"I think not," I replied coolly before turning back to Cassidy. "It would help if we knew what we are supposed to be doing."

"There are new Kindred coming into the city," Cassidy told me. "We need to stop them."

Kindred is what vampires called themselves. I glanced at the other recruits before smiling again at Cassidy. "I didn't realize you wanted to keep vampires away, given the company we're in."

He stared at me for a moment, then the ghost of a smile touched his lips. He relaxed a little, making me realize how tense he'd been initially. "You're going to be a problem, aren't you?"

I didn't answer him, just kept smiling. If he were mortal, I knew he would find me attractive. Knowing that isn't vanity, it's experience. Men like my lithe body and long dark hair. Even my height at five foot even seems to please them. I didn't think vampires cared about anything more than blood, but I intended to find out if they could. Cassidy intrigued me in a way I didn't quite understand and it bothered me that I couldn't see his eyes. I wondered again what he was hiding, and what it would cost me to learn.

As I turned away and hit the elevator button, I remembered that these people, the Frenchmen and his crew, knew more about me than they should. Somehow they had learned my true name, and that could prove dangerous for me, very dangerous.

Cassidy told us that the 'boys' would accompany us to get our things, but I was only half listening. I was remembering a vampire named Lando who had been a friend to me, or at least he'd been a friend to someone. My memory was vague once again, but it seemed like I had trusted Lando. Had it been in Texas or was it just something I'd read in a book somewhere?

Giles rode down the elevator with us, and we all separated in the lobby of the hotel. When I got to my bike one of the three men that had been with Giles earlier was leaning against another bike nearby. He told me he was my escort, which made him one of the 'boys' so I didn't even try to argue. At least I could try and get some information out of someone.

LIVING ARRANGEMENTS

What would I tell you?

Where would I begin?

Melissa Etheridge - Please Forgive Me

Once we reached my house in Sterling Heights, my new friend followed me to the door but refused to come in any further than the entry. Even the offer of cookies wouldn't move him and since he wouldn't answer any of my questions either I let it rest. I packed a gym bag with everything from clothes to books, and a few minutes later I was ready to go. The guy helped me bungee the bag onto the back of my bike, and we soon found ourselves back at the Renaissance Center.

The 'boy' left me in the lobby and was very clear that I should wait for Giles to return. I was impatient, but I agreed. Giles didn't take too long to rejoin me.

"Do you have everything you need?" he asked.

"I think so." I gestured toward the bag at my feet. "Unless we're going to be longer than a week or so, then you'll have to have the boy escort me home again."

"That boy is older than you'd believe," he advised me with a secret smile before leading me to the elevator and changing the subject. "You handled yourself well earlier tonight."

I gave him a dry look. "You might have let the boys step in a little sooner, I could have gotten hurt."

"You were holding your own," he replied. "I'm sure you would have been all right had we not been there to assist you."

"You're sure about that?" I prodded. "Have you been watching me?"

"I have." He looked a little uncomfortable at the admission.

Turning my body to show off my finer, er, points, I purred, "Did you see enough?"

He loosened his tie a little and looked away. It appeared that dear old Giles was a gentleman to his toes and looking at my body made him uneasy. He cleared his throat. "I saw that you can take care of yourself."

"Me?" I asked, pretending innocence. "I'm just a girl, what can one girl do all by herself?"

That earned me an amused look. Giles knew what I was and we both knew that if I'd wanted to I could have eaten all three of the men who had attacked me and never broken a sweat. Diplomatically, he changed the subject.

"If you don't mind my asking, where is the rest of your pack?"

Pack? Oh my, he thought we ran in packs. Truth is most Bastet can't tolerate each other that long. A mentor will stay with a cub for a year and a day, but that's the longest I've heard of my kind to stay together. Mostly we just meet during the full moon to exchange stories and teach each other gifts, but that lasts only days.

I smiled smugly at Giles' obvious lack of knowledge. "I'm a loner."

He glanced at me for a quick moment, taking in my body lounging relaxed against the wall of the car. Apparently Giles wasn't that much of a gentleman after all. "Are all your kind loners?"

There is a method of shrugging your shoulders that shows one's entire body to perfection. When I used it now, Giles quickly looked away.

"Like I said, I'm a loner," I told him. "Although that could change," I added, thinking of Cassidy's dark glasses.

"He's dangerous," Giles said suddenly. When I shot him a curious look, he added, "Cassidy. He's dangerous, you shouldn't mess with him."

If Giles knew me at all he wouldn't have bothered to warn me. The fact that he had just made me even more curious to know about the Frenchman's right hand man. Of course I didn't tell him that, I just shrugged again.

The ride to the top of the Renaissance Center was a long one, and during the rest of it Giles kept trying to get information out of me. Unfortunately for him, I've had years of practice avoiding answering questions. It really was rather fun, but by the time we got to the top, he was a little frustrated.

The elevator doors opened into another waiting room nearly identical to the one I'd been in earlier. Everything was maroon and plush from the couches on two of the walls to the smaller chairs lined up across from the elevator. As I walked into the room I saw three piles of equipment stacked beside the door. Adam, Isa and Jocelyn were waiting impatiently on the couches and when Giles followed me out of the car, they stood.

"There is a conclave meeting tomorrow night," the Englishman told us. "The Frenchman and Cassidy expect you to attend."

"Why?" Adam asked.

"I do not have access to that information," Giles replied calmly. He spent the next few minutes giving everyone the third degree he'd already tried on me. He had better luck with them.

Adam was a private detective, and he was in town looking for something to detect. His dogs were ghouls, which I found fitting. He knew how to use a gun when he needed to and seemed pretty confident in his own abilities.

Jocelyn drove trucks for a living, and her dog was also a ghoul. She was soft spoken, but she said she knew how to use a gun and could defend herself. She was looking for someone, but she was a little vague about who that was.

Isabel seemed out of place in our group. She was from Texas and had a soft Spanish lilt to her voice that came from English being one's second language. Actually her accent sounded a lot like mine. She had been Sabbat until her pack was killed off, and now she was looking for a change. She seemed willing to do whatever it took to prove herself to the Frenchman and remain in the city.

Giles asked me if I knew how to shoot a gun, and I told him I did. I'd gathered my gun with my clothing earlier, but I wasn't as confident in my ability to use it as everyone else seemed to be with their guns. I don't know where I'd picked the thing up, I'd found it one day among my belongings. Sometimes things like that happened so I'd never questioned it.

The Englishman knew about the knife in my pocket and the chain I used for a belt, but he had all kinds of questions about what I could do. I answered the questions I wanted to and avoided the rest of them. When he finally got sick of questioning us, he told us there was a car waiting for us in the parking garage next door.

By the time we hit the Suburban, I was more than a little annoyed with Isabel. She kept calling me Alida, so I started 'accidentally' forgetting her name. She didn't like it much, but then I didn't much like being called something other than Amante, so we were even.

Unfortunately, she wouldn't let it rest. Once we were in the Suburban and on our way to the safe house Giles had told us we were to stay at, Isabel pulled out a photo album. She took a picture from it and handed it to me without a word. It was a picture of my tattoo.

I tried to blow it off, but I couldn't deny that it was mine. "How is this Lando you were talking about?" I asked.

Her face went still. "He's dead."

Sadness filled me. Lando had been a friend to Alida, a close friend. "He is in the arms of Seline," I told her softly, "the mother of catkind." I glanced out the window toward the moon where it rode in the sky, knowing that when I died I would join him there.

I didn't want to talk anymore. I pulled a CD player from my backpack and listened to Sarah McLachlin as one of the boys drove through Detroit. As we drove through Grosse Point, the moon glinted off the water to our right. The road changed from Jefferson to Lake Shore Drive. We turned off somewhere in St. Claire Shores on a road with no street signs.

The house had a high brick fence around it, and a spiked iron gate. The driver stopped at the small booth and talked for a moment to the men inside before they opened the gate for us. We drove through and the drive meandered through acres of trees, topiaries and grass.

I put away my CD player as we passed the large Georgian style mansion. We'd seen several groups of men walking the property, and now another security guard came out of the back of the house and walked toward the smaller guest house we pulled to a stop in front of.

A well dressed man came out of the guesthouse and walked toward us. He introduced himself as Edward and asked us to get our things from the back of the Suburban. "I'll give you the quarter tour," he said after we introduced ourselves.

The guesthouse was small if you compared it to the main house, but it was luxurious just the same. The dark green carpet was deep and plush and I longed to take off my boots and sink my toes into the pile. The black leather couch looked like it would pull you in if you sat down on it. Along one wall sat an oak entertainment center that had all the bells and whistles anyone would ever need. The room made me want to roll on the floor and stretch from the tips of my fingers to my toenails.

We could see three doors off the main room, and Edward looked a little embarrassed. "There are only three bedrooms," he told us, gesturing toward the doors. "The one in the corner has a double bed."

"Jocelyn and I will share," Isabel said softly.

"The phone rings into the main house if you need anything," he told us. "You are to stay in the guesthouse until tomorrow night." Then he looked at me questioningly. "Are you mortal?"

"Yes," I purred.

My answer made him seem even more uncomfortable. "There are bathrooms off the bedrooms, but we weren't expecting someone who needed a...."

"A toilet?" I asked.

"Yes." He seemed relieved that I had grasped the situation so quickly. "There are no facilities here, or a kitchen. We'll have food brought in for you."

"What do you expect me to do when I have to go potty?" I inquired politely. In all honesty, I could have simply shifted to feline form and used an area outside, but I wasn't about to tell him that.

"I'll have to clear it, but maybe you can use the facilities in the house," he told me.

I hoped I wouldn't have to relieve myself before then. Edward showed me into one of the rooms, and I was a little impressed by it. The bed was soft and covered with a pale yellow bedspread that reminded me of daffodils. The carpeting, like that in the living room, was green and deep. The large closet on one wall was empty, and close to it was a long oak dresser. A comfortable chair stood in a corner next to the bathroom door.

The bathroom itself was a wonder, but as Edward had said there was no toilet. The shower was large enough for three, and the vanity shone in hues of gold. Large fluffy tan towels were stacked on a wicker rack underneath the window.

I went back into the bedroom and realized that there were sliding steel shutters for the window. I wouldn't be using them, but I could see where they would be handy for vampires. The bed was turned back and a gold wrapped chocolate lay on the pillow.

Edward showed the others to their rooms, and Adam was nice enough to give me his chocolate. Our guide asked us again to stay in the guesthouse, and told us he'd be back later with some supplies. We all went to our rooms to unpack while we waited for him to come back.

I ate the chocolates and wandered around my room for a little while. Earlier I'd wanted to go home and shift into feline form before falling asleep in the deep carpet of my living room. Now I was stuck in a small house with three vampires. I was less than thrilled, but curious too. What could the Frenchman possibly want with the four of us?

When I went out into the living room, Adam was watching television. It didn't interest me and since I was curious about what would happen if I called the house, I did so. The person who answered was polite and patient with me, but not as forthcoming with information as I would have liked.

Eventually Edward came back with a small cart filled with food. He smiled at me as he wheeled it in the door and pushed it against the wall nearby. "You have permission to leave the cottage to use the facilities in the main house," he told me.

"Thank you," I replied as I walked over to the cart. It had been hours since I'd eaten, and I was starved. I noticed a bottle of expensive wine and felt a thrill of satisfaction that they didn't know everything about me after all. It wasn't long after I'd realized I was Bastet I learned that drinking alcohol forced the transformation upon me, had in fact been the reason for my first transformation into Crinos form.

I picked up the bottle and held it out to Edward. "I don't drink. Could you bring me some soda?"

"Of course," he murmured, frowning at my refusal of the three-hundred-dollar bottle. He explained how to get to the side door of the main house for the facilities and, after I thanked him again, left.

I stood looking out the window and watched him walk away. I didn't want to admit it, but I had to use the facilities rather badly. I tried to give him enough time to be gone by the time I headed for the main house, but he must have been waiting for me. He held the side door open for me, and pointed the way to the bathroom.

When I returned to the guesthouse, the others were discussing possible reasons the Frenchman had recruited us. I joined in as I ate the food Edward had brought me. The obvious reason that Isabel came up with was that none of us were known, or well known, to the Kindred of the city. That was the only explanation that made sense to me, but I still didn't understand why he'd wanted me involved.

Near dawn we heard the sound of motorcycles outside the guesthouse. When Adam checked the door, he laughed a little and called me over. "It's for you," he said simply.

Lying on the doorstep were a six-pack of Coca-Cola, a twenty-five pound bag of kitty litter, a package of pounce, a can of Nine-Lives, and a can opener. Lying under the soda was a note that read 'Compliments of the boys' and was signed *D, T, A*.

After Adam helped me carry everything to my room, I changed into a silk nightgown. I laid on the bed and slept for a couple of hours. When I woke, I dressed and went outside and took a walk around the house.

The grounds were truly beautiful, if a little too cultured for my tastes. Of course most of the plants had died off for the winter, but I could tell that someone was paid handsomely to keep everything in order. Beds of flowers and shrubs surrounded the guesthouse, and a little further out were several planting areas that would have looked lovely if this were summer. I took a trip to the main house before going back to my room and sleeping some more.

This time when I woke there was a shopping bag waiting for me in the living room. I made a sandwich from the supplies inside, and drank several of the sodas I found. It wasn't the finest meal I'd ever had, but it was filling.

On one of my trips to the house, I heard what sounded like an argument from a stand of trees about a hundred feet away. Looking in that direction, I saw Cassidy's boys dressed in fatigues. One of them stood with a duffel bag at his feet while the other two wrestled. My curiosity took over and I walked toward them.

"Is this play time?" I asked when I was close enough for conversation.

The one with the duffel bag turned and grinned at me. "Want to play tag?" he drawled.

The other's stopped wrestling and joined us. "The rules are survival," the dark skinned one told me. "We play a little rough."

Somehow I doubted these boys knew what rough could be. When a human wrestled with a jaguar, the cat almost always won. "I wouldn't want to hurt any of you," I murmured.

The third boy grinned. "Sister, you and what pack?"

I wanted to play with them, but I knew it wasn't a good idea. First of all I wasn't supposed to be this far away from the guesthouse. Second, I seriously didn't want to hurt any of them, and third, I didn't want to shift to feline form out in the open like that. I reluctantly declined their invitation and returned to the guesthouse.

After taking a shower, I returned to my room and looked at the supplies the boys had left me the night before. I wondered if the boys would be responsible for keeping the guesthouse clean. Since they were still on the grounds, I thought they probably would be.

With a grin, grabbed everything up and went into the bathroom. I poured the cat litter into the bottom of the shower and used a cup to fake several urine locations. Then I opened the cat food and dumped half of it outside. I put a fork in the remaining food and left it on the bedside table, just to give the boys something to think about.

TRIALS AND ENGAGEMENTS

Hand in hand, they walk the night

But never know each other

The Monkees - Daily Nightly

When the sun went down, I was reading on the couch. The others joined me within half an hour, and soon after that Edward returned.

"I got a quick memo from the prince," he told us. "He wants you to be at the Renaissance Center by eight thirty this evening for the conclave meeting." With that he tossed the keys to the Suburban to Adam.

"I'd like to see my dog, if I may," Jocelyn said almost timidly.

"I'd like to see mine as well," Adam added.

"They're in the kennel," Edward replied, then quickly told us how to get there.

After a quick stop to visit the dogs, we were piled into the Suburban. As we passed the main house, several people came out dressed in evening clothes. I tried to question Adam on our way back to Detroit, but he was as cagey as a dog I met once in Tennessee. He went by the name of Oz and no matter what you asked him, he gave vague answers that didn't really tell you anything.

When we pulled into the parking garage next to the Renaissance center, Adam pulled into the same spot we'd left from. I noticed that his car and my bike had been washed, and the rear tire of my Harley, which had been a little low, had been filled with air.

Giles found us in the lobby and let us know the conclave was waiting for us. I didn't know what he was talking about really, but it sounded interesting and made everyone else start hurrying so I went along. He pushed the up button twice, and after a slightly shorter ride than we'd had the night before we ended up in an identical waiting room.

"Have a seat," he said as he disappeared through the tall doors opposite the elevator door.

Jocelyn and I sat on one of the couches while Isa paced and Adam struck a pose against a wall. I've never been one to hold on to my curiosity, so I turned to Jocelyn.

"What's a conclave?" I asked her softly.

She shot me a surprised look, but answered the question. "A conclave is a group of Kindred, usually the head of each clan in the city. They help the prince make decisions about what happens in the city."

"Clan?" I asked, pretending ignorance. In truth, I had a good idea what a clan was, but I wanted a vampire's definition.

"A clan is a group of Kindred with the same bloodline and abilities," she explained. "I am Ravnos."

"And the others?" I prompted, looking at Isa and Adam.

"Adam is a Ventrue," she replied. "I believe Isa is Lasombra."

I nodded. "And Cassidy?"

"He is Gangrel," she said with a smile.

I would have asked more questions, but the man we were talking about opened the inner doors and bade us enter.

"Good evening," the Frenchman drawled as the door closed behind us. "Let me introduce you to our conclave."

There was a thin dark haired woman on his right that he introduced as Raquel LeBlanc, a Ventrue and his sister. The man standing behind her didn't get introduced. Countess Victoria was blonde and something called Tremere, but she pretty much ignored us. Paige Ellen stood behind her looking more like a maid than anything else. Bruce, a Brujah, sneered at us, but Billy Dean nodded from his position behind Bruce.

The Nosferatu Miquel wore a suit and was nearly bald. He and Bridgett, who stood behind him, also nodded at us. Honey had a look in her eye that told me she was most likely insane. The Frenchman called her Malkavian, and under the table I saw the handle of a chainsaw peaking out. Honey was fondling the shirtless chest of Ralph, who stood to her left.

There was an empty seat at the table, which the Frenchman told us belonged to Paul Racine, a Toreador and a firm supporter of the Masquerade. "He is usually quite punctual, but tonight he is quite late," the prince continued. "He must be located before we can begin."

The four of us glanced at each other, but I knew what was coming. This was a test to see if we could follow directions and stay together while getting the job done. The prince's next words confirmed my thoughts.

"I want you to go find him. He must have run into problems on the way here."

"How will we know where to look?" Adam asked. "What does he look like?"

"He will be easy to find," The Frenchman replied, glancing up at Cassidy, who had returned to his place beside him. "He always walks to the Center, and he will be the only Samari in Detroit. Go and find him."

Giles gave us directions when we rejoined him in the waiting room, and handed Adam a hard plastic compact disk that had a rose painted on one side and an opera mask on the other. Presumably Paul would recognize the case and know that the prince had sent us to help him.

"The Frenchman will not stay patient long," Giles warned us as he pushed the call button for the elevator and the doors opened. "Caine speed."

A few minutes later we were in the Suburban headed for where Giles had told us we would find the Toreador. Adam drove, and Isa took the passenger's seat, leaving Jocelyn and I to sit in the middle seats.

I had more questions so I turned to Jocelyn once more. "Who is Caine?"

"He was the first vampire," she told me. "When Caine killed Abel, God punished him by turning him away from the light. All Kindred are descended from him."

"When the prince introduced everyone, he called them something else as well," I commented. "Was that their clans?"

"Yes," she replied.

"There he is," Adam called, pulling into the parking lot of a gas station.

Paul was standing near the station's three gas pumps, a large sword in his hand that he was using to keep his four attackers at bay. A gas tanker was parked to one side, its hose disappearing into a hole in the ground. The lights at the station were out, and there were no other cars in sight, there wasn't even much traffic driving by.

Before getting out of the Suburban, I shifted to the Sokto form. I still looked human, mostly, but I was taller and downy hair covered my face and body. My ears were closer to the top of my head now, pointed and flexible enough to catch the slightest night sounds. Whiskers and a tail completed the form.

Of course the main reason I'd switched forms had less to do with my added size and strength and more to do with Padaa. I breathed in like a cat does, with my mouth slightly open. This allowed me to get more information from the smells in air than simply inhaling through my nose would. The almost overwhelming stench of gasoline nearly gagged me, but underneath that I could smell Paul and his attackers.

A brick wall suddenly appeared between the Suburban and the gas pumps, hiding us from the attackers' view. Isa ran toward the end of it, intent on aiding the Toreador. Jocelyn threw a knife at a man that appeared near the tanker as she followed Isa, but she missed and the knife imbedded in the side of the tank. Luckily, it didn't explode.

Jocelyn ran toward the bad guy, but he didn't seem to want to move. I wasn't sure why they didn't immediately start fighting, but I knew I couldn't let Jocelyn, my font of information about the Kindred, get hurt.

I shifted to Crinos form, half human, half jaguar, before walking toward Jocelyn. In this form I was over seven feet tall and nearly at my strongest. I stood behind the Ravnos and growled at the human in front of her.

Normally when faced with any shapeshifter in Crinos form, humans will run away screaming. Normally. This guy just stood there and stared at me. When he didn't freak, I reached over Jocelyn's head and clawed his chest. He fell to the ground, clutching the wound.

I didn't think he'd be getting up any time soon, but Jocelyn kicked him anyway. Her foot got stuck in the hole I'd made with my claws, and I had to pick her up and disentangle her before I could strike again. One more swish of a paw and his head went rolling away on the pavement.

Blood had splattered all over me, not to mention the fact that it had soaked my claws. I took a moment to lick some of the blood from my paw before following Jocelyn over to where Isa and Paul had finished off the rest of the bad guys.