



ELIZA: DARK EMBRACE

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PROLOGUE

No one was more surprised than me when the Tremere Clan let Mac and I move into a house not too far from Corrine's apartment. I mean, Mac hadn't been in town that long, and god knows they wouldn't do any favors for me. They did need someone to live in it though, and Brenda Thompson's house was getting real crowded with four vamps and three ghouls living in it.

Caine Security installed the metal shutters on the bedrooms upstairs, and a complicated alarm system to protect us when we slept. Mac insisted on multiple phone lines and a computer, but hey, I like to surf as much as the next person.

They had a contractor come in to fix the holes in the rec room walls, and replace all the carpeting that needed it. Mac was pleased to have his own library, but my personal favorite was the mini gym they built for me in the basement. Gotta keep my figure, right?

Mac's 'sister' Christina came back from her honeymoon practically glowing with happiness. She was a little disappointed that we were moving out of the Bathori Mansion, but I was glad enough to go. It's hard enough to sleep with my spider-sense going off over one vamp, four made it almost impossible for me to get any rest.

We moved into the house the last week of October. It was nice, too big for just the two of us, but I liked it. During the day I'd open all the blinds and curtains and let the sun shine in. Sometimes I'd stand there in the light and feel the warmth sink into my skin.

I liked the house, but I liked the yard better. It needed a lot of work, but the only thing I like better than working with plants is being with Mac. And it was good to finally have someplace to call my own where I could put in what I wanted and pull out the rest. I was content, for the second time in my life.

Yeah, I had a job to do for the clan, and sometimes that meant doing things I'd rather not be doing. Protection for the clan and policing the city's vampires is hard work, but somebody's gotta do it. Still, it was way better than working in the Inquisition, and I am good at what I do. As long as I keep my temper with the other puppies, everything's five by five.

One afternoon Corrine and I were putting things away in the kitchen when she asked me the hard question. I felt so uncomfortable telling her the truth about what my contract covered, but she handled it fairly well. She seemed to think that blood bond the contract called for left me with no free will, but when I explained that Kindred blood didn't affect me that way, she was cool with it.

So I got my house with the picket fence, my lover, and a daughter that is forgiving me for years of hiding things from her. You'd think there'd be no more stories to tell, wouldn't you? I thought so too.

I was wrong.

NEWS

DO YOU THINK YOU CAN SAVE ME
FROM LIVING THIS WAY?
FORGIVE ME — GODSMACK

We'd just got home from our usual Sunday dinner with Corrine and her boyfriend Brian when Mac got a call from his real sister, Siofra Johnson.

I still wasn't used to them getting along, but as long as it made Mac happy, I wasn't going to complain. Of course, that didn't mean I had to be real nice to her, just polite.

"Hello, Mac," she said warmly. "How are things?"

"Quite good actually Sprite," he replied. "How are things in Nashville?"

"Quiet, for the most part," she told him, "although Glenn has heard some information that we thought you should know about. Can we meet somewhere?"

"The park," he replied, suddenly very serious. "Give us a half hour."

"Maybe another location would be better," she suggested. "Where you met Eliza? Half hour?"

She was being cryptic-girl, and I couldn't help but wonder why.

"Fine, see you." He hung up the phone and turned to me. "Get your coat. We are going somewhere."

I got up and went to the closet for my coat and the extra weapons I kept there. "What's going on?"

"Siofra says Glenn has something I might be interested in," he told me.

Like I hadn't heard the conversation, but I'd play along. "It's not something sharp, is it?" At one time Glenn had wanted to put Mac out of his misery. As if being a vampire was that hard on him.

"No, information."

It was a Sunday night, so there weren't a lot of people at Guilty Pleasures, the nightclub I'd found Mac at a few months ago. Or rather, he'd found me, I hadn't exactly been looking for him. I'd thought he was dead.

Glenn and Siofra were sitting at an out of the way table with Bobby. I still thought it was wicked strange that Glenn had married Mac's sister, and that Bobby was still hanging with Glenn. Of course, when our world went to shit in Baltimore twenty years ago, Glenn had been the only anchor the young Bobby had to hold on to, so maybe that part wasn't so strange.

There were a few other vamps at the club, and a few of them nodded at Mac as we came in. Mac nodded to them and we walked over to the others.

"Hello all," he said as he held my chair for me. He sat down and smiled fondly at Siofra.

"Glad you could make it on such short notice," Glenn said seriously.

"I heard it might be important."

"Could be," he replied. "What do you know about a woman named Lydia Gretzke?"

I tried not to react to that name, but I couldn't help it. Lydia was really Linda Gentry, the woman who raised me. Luckily the waitress came by to take our order right about then.

"I know a lot," Mac murmured when she was gone. "What about her?"

"Her daughter has apparently hired a private eye to find her," Glenn told him. "He's been in Nashville asking about a man and a woman who look an awful lot like the two of you."

Siofra gave her brother a worried look. "He's also mentioned Angus' name."

Mac turned to me. "I was afraid we hadn't heard the last of Natasha." He looked back at the others. "Did he find anything?"

"From what my source tells me, he's traced the plane you used through Pittsburgh, Boston, LA and Nashville," Glenn said with a humorless smile. "Apparently he's having a difficult time tracing the ownership of the plane, there are so many dummy corporations involved."

"We think it's only a matter of time before he traces you to Salem," Siofra added. "What is it he's going to find?"

"Me," Mac replied calmly, "waiting for him. We'll see what he really knows."

Siofra leaned forward. "Be careful, Macalister. Plenty of humans start hunting when they find out what's really out there."

"Present company included," he reminded her softly. "I will be careful."

She sat back, but it seemed like something about his answer had upset her. Glenn reached over to take her hand and gave her an unreadable look.

"His name is James Price," Glenn said to Mac a moment later, "and he runs a detective agency out of Flint, Michigan. Lydia's daughter hired him to find her mother. From what I can tell all he has to go on is the flight records and Angus' name, but who knows what else he could turn up. My source tells me he's good, and he's been specializing in... strange cases for the last two years, since his wife died."

"Strange cases?" Mac prompted.

Glenn glanced at Bobby and shrugged. "You know, the 'odd' thing. Hauntings, curses, things that go bump in the night. As far as I can tell he's come close to a few things he couldn't explain, but not close enough to find out the truth."

"That is fortunate," Mac murmured. "How reliable is your source?"

"Very. He knows a lot of people in Flint, people this guy is friends with."

Mac nodded thoughtfully. "I will be on the watch for him."

"Take care that he doesn't find the truth," Glenn warned. "It would go bad for both of you, I'm sure."

"Yes, that would be bad."

The waitress came back with drinks. When she was gone, Siofra asked Mac if he knew where Linda was.

"Yes," he replied, "and he will never find her."

"She's dead, isn't she?" Bobby asked. It was the first time he'd spoken since we sat down.

"Yes, she is." Mac replied, looking at him calmly before turning back to Glenn. "And so is Kate."

Glenn smiled grimly. "About twenty years too late, I'd say."

"Why?" Bobby demanded, ignoring his friend.

Mac smiled a little at Glenn's comment before turning to face Bobby again. "This Lydia person our friend is seeking was Kate's Ghoul. They crossed the clan one too many times and I proved it. Kate was involved with I don't know how many plots against various members of the clan. And Lydia was so far past the edge of sanity due to Kate 'mind warping' her for half a century."

"So you kill her instead of putting her in an institution or trying to heal her?" he replied coldly.

"She was ghouled," Mac reminded him. "When a ghoul goes for so long with out their domitors blood, they tend to—" He paused, looking for the right word. "—deteriorate rapidly, especially if they have been ghouled for a long time."

Bobby shot me a pointed look. "See what you have to look forward to?"

"Eat shit, Bobby," I said bluntly. "I never asked for your approval."

Glenn smiled a little. "Still working on those social skills, are we Eliza?"

That set me on a slow burn. I'd never been one for social niceties, but then again why should I be nice? Bobby was obviously pissed that Mac had ghouled me and maybe he thought he had reason to be, but damn it, this was my life, and he had no right to judge me. Before I could say so, Siofra surprised me by speaking up.

"Boys," she said warningly.

Bobby sat back broodingly, and I really didn't like the way he looked at me. It made me feel like I was prey and he was on the hunt. I kept my eyes on his and reached slowly for the silver-laced knife I kept in my boot, holding it ready under the table in case he decided to try and take me on.

"I'm sorry, Eliza," Mac's sister said after a moment. "The boys are just a little disappointed in the choice that you have made. They don't understand."

"And you do?" I asked, not taking my eyes from Bobby.

"I think so. When it's important a woman does what she has to do." From the corner of my eye I saw her look pointedly at her husband. "They will behave themselves, won't you boys?"

"I'm sorry, Eliza," Glenn said. "That was uncalled for." That was what he said, but when he said it he was looking at Mac.

Bobby gave a grim smile. "I'll be a good 'puppy'."

I nodded reluctantly. We both knew he'd said it that way just to hurt me, but I wasn't feeling especially sensitive at the moment. I was still prepared for battle, if he moved wrong I was more than ready to try and take him out before he killed me.

Siofra glanced at the men she sat between with a disappointed look on her face before she turned back to Mac. "I'd hoped we'd get along a little better than this, I'm sorry."

From the corner of my eye I saw him nod, but he didn't say a word.

Glenn sat back with a heavy sigh and finally looked at me. "Look, I'm the one who's sorry. You're the one who has to live with it." He really sounded like he meant it.

I gave him a hard smile. "I *like* living with it." Yeah, given the choice I would rather have my lover be anything but a vampire, but you live with what you have to.

He glanced at Mac and smiled sadly. "I know."

Bobby stood up slowly, still watching me intently. "I'll be upstairs," he growled before turning his back and stalking toward the stairs.

"I'm sorry about him," Siofra said sincerely. "He's just a little touchy right now. His girlfriend hit him with some news that has made him rethink things and he's a little confused right now."

I didn't answer, I was too busy making sure he was really leaving. When he went up the stairs, I eased the knife back into its sheath in my boot.

"What news?" Mac asked.

She glanced at Glenn and shrugged. "She's pregnant."

"His?" Mac's question earned him a surprised look from me and an amused one from his sister.

"Yes," she replied. "It's forcing him to rethink his... profession."

Mac smiled. "Yes, a child tends to change your outlook on things. They change your priorities."

Siofra glanced at Glenn and he took her hand. "You might want to know that we're going to be at the farm for a few weeks. I've talked to Da and he's agreed to oversee a seeking for me."

"I'll have to see how fast our friend arrives," Mac told her, relaxing a little for the first time, "and how much trouble he is going to stir up. But we will try and make it, although we might need to use a portal if one of you would be so kind as to open one. It would minimize our time away from the city."

"I'd like that," she said with a smile.

He smiled back. "We'll see what we can do."

"We should be going," Glenn suggested reluctantly. "Bobby doesn't have too much patience lately and I'd hate to see him get in a fight up there without us to calm him down."

He threw some money on the table to cover the bill and Mac got up to kiss his sister's cheek. The men shook hands and after we said our goodnights, they went upstairs after Bobby.

A few minutes later, Mac and I left to cruise the usual places in town. It was pretty quiet, nothing much going on anywhere. We went to the chantry where talked to Zane about tracking the detective, and getting some background on him.

Elvira had told Mac that Zane wanted to work into a security position, and since he was her childe, Mac couldn't refuse. The vamp was more than happy to check into the detective's background, and he actually came up with the detective's credit card history pretty quickly. Mac told him to keep track of where he went and let us know where he showed up at, and Zane agreed.

Before we left, Mac also talked to Micky about Mr. Price. He filled him in on everything, and Micky agreed that the guy could be dangerous to the Masquerade. Micky was satisfied with the steps Mac had taken to track Price, and when Mac asked if he should take him out right away, Micky said no.

"Just keep an eye out for him," he suggested. "It's possible he may not even find you." Then he asked for details about our conversation with Natasha.

Mac told him what he could remember, which was pretty much everything. He has a great memory.

"I don't think confrontation would be wise at this stage," Micky said when Mac was done. "We'll just keep an eye on him and see if he learns anything. If he shows up in town we'll have ghouls follow him during the day and a few of us watch him at night. It's probably best to keep Eliza close to you for now, he might spot her alone during the day and we don't want any confrontations with her either." At that, he gave me a pointed look, then turned back to Mac. "It probably wouldn't hurt for you to talk to him if he comes up to you, see what he knows. Try to throw him off if you can."

"As you wish," Mac replied. "Would it be possible for me to get next weekend off?" He'd called Siofra to find out when her seeking was, and she'd also said that they would be checking a little further into the detective's contact in Nashville.

Micky shook his head. "I don't see a problem, as long as Price doesn't show up and cause problems. If that happens, we'll need you to come back right away."

"Of course," he replied. "Thank you."

We left soon after that and got home about three o'clock. Mac sat upstairs studying while I unleashed my frustrations in the work out room in our basement. Bobby's reaction to my ghouling really bothered me, although I didn't understand why. A long time ago we'd been close, but the years had changed both of us. If he couldn't deal with my being happy, screw him.

About an hour before dawn, Mac called me upstairs. He was working on teaching me Latin, and I can't say it was very much fun. Sometimes I got it, and sometimes I didn't. Part of the problem was that I couldn't see why in hell I had to learn it, but Mac had mentioned something about trying to teach Thaumaturgy sometime, so maybe that was it.

I think Zora wanted to see just how much I could learn. For real now, a Dhampyr is a rare thing, but that didn't mean I liked being a Guinea pig for her experiments. She wanted to study me at the chantry every night, but Ford had vetoed that one, thankfully. I did have to put up with her prodding three nights a week, but it was only for a few hours at a time, so I could deal.

By midnight the next night, Zane had background information on the detective for Mac. He was all proud about it, acting like Mac needed to pat him on the head for getting it, but at least we had some info on the detective.

James Price had lived in Flint all his life, and his parents had died when he was young. He was raised in foster homes and was a little wild until a very nice cop took him under his wing. James got himself together, finished school, met a nice young lady, and got married. They opened a private eye firm and she did all the office stuff while he did the legwork. Unfortunately, his wife got ovarian cancer during their second year of marriage and died.

From what Zane was able to find out, Price had become more and more disenchanted with life in the year since his wife died. He'd started looking for unusual jobs to work on, and it looked like some parts of the business had been slipping.

Natasha had hired James about a week ago, and at first he'd had a hard time coming up with leads. He traced Linda back to Pittsburgh, then somehow to Massachusetts. In the mean time he also traced the plane we'd taken looking for Dougal's grimoire to Nashville, where he'd talked to his contact and alerted Glenn to his investigation.

Apparently he knew Devin Norris, a Flint cop who'd come to Salem looking for answers about what had happened to his sister when she was in town two years ago. Somehow he'd gotten involved with the local Arcanum house, but I wasn't sure how involved he was. I knew him by reputation only, and there was no way to know what Devin had been able to tell the detective.

Mac wasn't too concerned about the whole deal. He just said that if Price showed up, we'd deal with it. I just hoped 'deal with it' didn't mean killing the guy.

THE DETECTIVE

CAREFUL WHAT IT IS YOU SAY
'CAUSE I CAN SEE RIGHT THROUGH YOU
NOT A VIRGIN - POE

Tuesday night our first stop was at David's bar to check on the Brujah. We hadn't been there too long when I got up to use the little girl's room. On my way across the bar, I noticed two men sitting at a table near the rest rooms. The younger one watched me for a minute, then turned to say something to his friend.

The friend was Devin Norris, which mean the younger man was James Price. I recognized him from the picture Zane had come up with, and he didn't look much different from the photo. I didn't like the fact that he'd found us so easily.

After using the facilities, I checked my weapons to make sure I had clear draws. It wouldn't do for us to run into problems and have something stick when I tried to pull it.

Mac was watching Mr. Price's table when I came out. As I walked across the room, I could feel the man's eyes on me the entire way. "Did you see him?" I asked as I sat down close to him.

"Yes, we're going to go talk to him," he replied, glancing around the bar. He stood and walked toward one of the larger tables, motioning for our new friend to join us. I followed close behind.

The detective said something to Devin then picked up his glass and started toward us.

"Let me do the talking," Mac said before he reached us. "If he thinks I am Angus, let him, okay?"

Our friend joined us before I could reply, and he nodded respectfully at me. "Ma'am. "Mr. Brennan, I presume?" he said to Mac.

He nodded. "Mr. Price."

"And who do we have here?" he replied, looking at me.

"A friend of mine," Mac said coolly. "Please, have a seat. May I call you James?"

"Please, call me Jimmy," he corrected, waiting for me to sit down before he did. "May I call you Angus?"

Mac nodded again. "If you wish."

"You're a hard man to find, Angus," he said, his voice friendly. "Are you hiding from something?"

"If I were hiding, you wouldn't have found me, now would you, James?"

He smiled. "I suppose not. Since you know who I am, you probably know who I'm looking for. Do you know where I can find Lydia Gretzke?"

"No, I am sorry," Mac replied. "I haven't seen her in several weeks."

The detective looked at Mac probingly, then said almost nonchalantly, "And where was this?"

"Here in town."

When he didn't say anything more, Jimmy looked at him expectantly. "May I ask where?"

"Around somewhere," he replied vaguely, earning him an exaggerated disappointed look.

"You know as well as I that Natasha will not take that for an answer," Jimmy said firmly. "She hired me to find her mother and I intend to do so. It would be so much easier for all parties concerned if you just told me now where she is."

I felt vamps move into my radar and touched Mac's leg under the table to warn him. Good thing too, Rob French and Blacky, two Brujah, were coming in the door. The bartender was Rob's ghoul, so the vamp spent a lot of time here. They noticed us right away, and Rob shot me a knowing smile, but they kept walking toward the door.

Mac sat back. "I honestly don't know where she is."

Jimmy studied his face. "You told my client that her mother would be safe in protective confinement. Is that true?"

"Lydia is no longer confined," he replied.

I might have laughed at Mac's evasions if the Brujah hadn't distracted me. They were being loud and obnoxious at the bar, and they were watching us.

"But is she safe?"

Mac glanced toward the bar before turning back to Jimmy. "Would you care to go somewhere a little less rowdy, where we can talk more?"

Jimmy looked over at Devin. "Do you mind if my friend joins us?"

"No," he replied. "Devin is welcome to join us."

The detective raised his eyebrow at Mac's knowledge of his friend's name. "Where did you have in mind for us to go?"

Mac shrugged. "Somewhere quieter. I am getting a headache here."

"Your place?" Jimmy suggested.

He smiled. "No. How about the Pig's Eye?"

"That's fine," he replied. "Just let me get my friend and we'll follow you over there."

As Jimmy went over to talk to Devin, the Brujah started talking about flavors and feeding. I didn't like it, but there was nothing I could do. I didn't think it would look real good if I went over and staked the bastards with Jimmy watching us. We were leaving anyway, so it wasn't that big a deal.

The Brujah looked disappointed we were leaving, but we ignored them as the detective and his friend followed us out. We drove to the Pig's Eye and quickly found a table inside. The waitress took our drink orders then left us alone.

Jimmy introduced us to his friend, although things were a little awkward since he didn't know my name. Mac didn't share, and I just kept my mouth shut.

"Now, what was your question?" Mac asked.

"I asked if Lydia was safe," Jimmy replied.

"I can not honestly comment on her condition at this moment," he evaded smoothly.

"Cannot, or will not?" Devin asked.

"I have not seen her in over two weeks."

Devin opened his mouth to say something, but his pager went off. He glanced down at it, then looked up at Jimmy. "I have to go. Business."

Jimmy shook his hand. "I'll be in town a few more days, I'll give you a call."

"It was nice meeting you," Devin told us.

"What business is your friend in?" Mac asked when he was gone.

"Until recently, he was a police officer," Jimmy replied. "He moved here a few months ago looking for some information about his sister's past. He hasn't really told me what he's been doing now. What do you do for a living?"

"Security."

"What kind of security firm investigates homicides?"

"The kind that protects the homicide victim's friends and families," Mac said simply.

The waitress came back for our food order before Jimmy could ask anything more. The detective and I both ordered dinners, but Mac just asked for soup. I guess it's a little easier to throw up, which was what he'd have to do before sunrise.

We made polite conversation while we waited for our food. Jimmy seemed like a real nice guy, but you could see shadows in his eyes. I was betting he wasn't over losing his wife and I had to feel sorry for him. In all the years I'd thought Mac was dead I'd never gotten over losing him.

When our food came, Jimmy sat back in his chair and studied Mac for a long moment. Then he glanced at me and sighed. "You won't tell me where you saw Lydia, or even if she's safe. You won't introduce me to your friend, not that she's much of a conversationalist. Have I done something to offend you or do you just not like the way I look?"

"You are here to investigate matters in which we are, or were involved," Mac said smoothly. "Your presence here in that capacity threatens the very organization we represent."

"And what organization is that?" he asked as he started eating.

Mac leaned closer to him and lowered his voice. "I could tell you, but then we'd have to kill you."

Jimmy smiled as if he doesn't believe him, but I had to stifle a laugh. If Jimmy found out what we really were, it was likely he'd die, and quickly.

"Is this a government organization? CIA? NSA?"

"We have ties to many things," Mac replied, leaning back. "Some things are government, others are not."

"And how do I threaten it?" Jimmy demanded softly. "By wanting to tell Natasha what really happened to her mother?"

"Lydia wasn't Natasha's mother," he told the detective. "Natasha was kidnapped by a rouge 'agent' some years ago and brainwashed to believe that Lydia was her mother. If it got out to the public that we existed, and not all of us are just, it would shatter our veil."

Jimmy looked at him skeptically. "And who exactly is Natasha?"

"Some poor little girl in the wrong place at the wrong time," Mac said sadly.

"Don't you think letting her wonder about what happened to Lydia will make it worse for her?" he replied thoughtfully.

"Than telling her that her whole life is a lie and she may have a family out there that she was abducted from?" Mac replied, his voice dripping with sarcasm.

Jimmy sighed. "Regardless of where she originated, Natasha was raised believing that Lydia is her mother. Telling her that was a lie will not change what she feels for the woman any more than a child who finds out they were legitimately adopted would stop caring for the parents that raised them."

I tried not to wince. Corrine's feelings for the Wrights certainly hadn't changed a bit since she found out Mac and I were her birth parents. I hoped Jimmy hadn't found out about her, then I would have to kill him myself.

"True," Mac admitted, "Or it might shatter her hold on sanity. If that happened, what would become of the boy?"

Jimmy looked confused. "Are you saying that I shouldn't tell Natasha she was abducted, or that she'd be better off not knowing what happened to Lydia?"

"Both."

He sat back and gave Mac a determined look. "I'm sorry, but my client hired me to bring her information. She deserves to know the truth and that's what I intend to give her."

"As you wish."

Jimmy studied Mac's face for a long moment, then put his napkin on the table. "Look, I respect your need for secrecy," he said impatiently, "but I have a job to do. Unless you can give me a really good reason not to, I intend to find out where Lydia is and why."

Mac folded his napkin and stood. I took the hint and one last bite of my food before I got up too. Mac put some money down on the table and looked one more time at Jimmy. "I wish you luck." We left without another word.

"He seems pretty persistent," I said when we were outside. "What can we do about it?"

"We will address the Prince about this situation," Mac told me, looking at license plates as we walked to the car. "If he's given too much time, he becomes extremely dangerous to the Masquerade."

"What do you think she'll want us to do?" I asked as we got into the car.

"Watch him." He pulled out of the parking lot but didn't go far. While we waited for Jimmy to come out, he called Micky and filled him in on what was going on.

Micky told him to keep an eye on Jimmy, but to keep a low profile. He said that he'd talk to the prince and call Mac if she wanted him to do anything else.

Mac followed him through the streets of Salem, keeping back out of sight and flowing with the light traffic. A few minutes after leaving the restaurant, Mac noticed that we weren't the only ones following Mr. Price. He pointed the dark sedan out to me and asked me to try and identify who was inside.

At first I couldn't really tell, but in the light of an oncoming car I figured it out. "I should have left him staked in the sun when I had a chance," I muttered darkly. To Mac I said, "It's Rob French. Why does it seem like every time I turn around he's there?"

"Is he following us or him?"

I back at him again. "It's kinda hard to tell, could be either."

After a few minutes the sedan passed us without noticing we were there. Rob never was very bright, if he were he wouldn't have bitten me when I first got to town.

"Can't we just kill him?" I asked, only half joking.

Mac smiled at me. "Let's see what he does."

We followed them both to the Morning Glory bed and breakfast. Jimmy pulled into the parking lot while Rob slowed down, but kept driving. We parked in the street and watched while he took a briefcase from the back seat of his car before going in. A few minutes later, a light went on in an upstairs room and we could see him moving around inside, talking on a cell phone.

He went back and forth a couple of times, still on the phone, then what was probably a bathroom light went on and all movement inside the room stopped. About ten minutes later he went back into the main room and apparently settled down for the night.

INTERROGATION

BUT I AIN'T NEVER CROSSED A MAN
THAT DIDN'T DESERVE IT
GANGSTA'S PARADISE - COOLIO

We waited for a little while to see if Rob came back, but he didn't. Gary did, however. He was Gwenyth's ghoul, another Brujah. I guess Gary was a little brighter than Rob because he did notice us. He nodded as he drove by, then continued down the block.

"There are too many Brujah in this town," I said under my breath.

Mac heard me and smiled. "Yes there are." He pulled out his phone and called Micky to tell him that the Brujah were interested in James too. "Very interested. They're showing more organization than I would have thought them possible of."

That made Micky laugh. "Sometimes they surprise us. It's one of the reasons we keep such a close eye on them. Any idea why they're so interested in the boy?"

Mac told him about Devin and the two of them being together at David's bar. "I think the Brujah may have their own ideas about putting an end to his investigation," he added.

"It is possible," Micky replied. "I'm not sure why they would be involved in this though, we have tried to keep it a clan matter. Perhaps there is another reason they are interested in him."

"Perhaps it is because we are interested in him," Mac suggested.

"They do have a tendency to try and get in our way."

"Do you have any suggestions?"

"We'll need to keep an eye on them and this James, see if we can figure out what they want," he replied. "I'll send someone out to watch the bed and breakfast, why don't you see what you can find out from Rob?"

"From Rob?" Mac asked, barely keeping the excitement from his voice. "You mean like an interrogation?"

"Not exactly," he said softly. "More like subtly trying to talk it out of him."

"As you wish."

I could tell he was disappointed, and apparently so could Micky, because he laughed.

"Don't worry, Cormac," he reassured him. "I'm sure the time will come when force is needed. Be patient."

"We'll wait for the back up," Mac replied.

"He wants us to talk to Rob?" I asked when he'd hung up the phone.

"That's what he said."

"Doesn't he realize that you can't talk to something that thinks with its teeth?" I said irritably.

"We must try," he told me patiently.

I shot him a long look, but he seemed unconvinced. "Okay, but if he tries to bite me again, I'm staking him."

Mac didn't say anything, just smiled.

When a couple of the house ghouls showed up fifteen minutes later, we turned the watch over to them and went to find Rob. It wasn't hard, most nights he hung out at David's bar aggravating customers and looking for someone to bite.

He was there tonight, sitting at the bar with Gary and talking to Jasper, his ghoul. When we walked in, Rob whispered something to Gary who got up and left, grinning at us all the way to the door.

Mac walked up to Rob. "A word please."

The Brujah looked him up and down insolently, then grinned. "Sure, *jefe*. What can I do for ya?"

He motioned toward the door. "Outside?"

Rob shrugged, then glanced at Jasper. "Okay."

We followed him outside where he leaned against a car with his arms crossed. I really didn't like the way he kept looking at me, and from the expression on Mac's face, he didn't either.

"What can I do for you?" the Brujah asked.

"What do you want with the man who was in here tonight?"

He grinned. "What man?"

"The one you were following," Mac replied.

Rob tried for a shocked look, but didn't quite make it. "What are you talking about, *jefe*? I've been here all night."

"You passed me while you were following him," Mac said calmly. "You had Gary check in on him as well."

A blank look crossed his face, then he smiled. "Oh, that guy. Why were you following him?"

"Answer my question first."

"Sorry, what was the question?"

"Eliza, hit him," Mac ordered.

I grinned and punched the Brujah in the stomach and he doubled over, surprised. There are some perks to my job, and this was definitely one of them.

"Now then," Mac said patiently, "why were you following him?"

"Dude, take it easy," Rob protested.

I don't think he was planning on it, considering the fact that he pulled a gun from inside his jacket. "Answer the question."

Rob put his hands up defensively. "Hey, wait a minute. I was just checking out where he was staying."

"Why?"

The vamp glared at me as if I had something to do with this mess. "I wanna know why you're so interested in him," he told Mac. "Maybe he tastes as good as she does."

"Answer my question first."

"I did, that's why I was following him," he said firmly. "I thought I could get him alone, have a taste."

Somehow I didn't quite believe him.

"Do I have to let her hit you again?" Mac demanded.

"*Jefe*, I'm telling the truth!" he exclaimed before I could do more than draw my fist back.

"Not all of it," Mac replied coldly.

Rob gave him a stubborn look, and I knew he wasn't planning on telling us the truth.

"Eliza," he began. When Rob looked at me, Mac punched him in the face. An instant later, the barrel of his gun was resting on his forehead.

Rob looked at the gun in shock. "Malachi ain't gonna like this, *jefe*."

Malachi was the Brujah primogen, and I was just betting he wouldn't like it. The thing was, I don't think Mac cared.

"Just answer my question then," he demanded.

"I had my orders," Rob said slowly.

"Why? To what end?"

He shrugged. "I just do what I'm told."

I heard a sound behind us and spun quickly to catch Jasper before he could bring his gun up and shoot Mac. Using Mac's blood to make myself stronger, I threw him on the hood of a car with one hand at his throat and my knife pressed against his ribs. "Don't move, dick-head," I growled.

Jasper froze and let the gun in his hand fall to the ground.

I was surprised at the rush I'd gotten from using Mac's blood. I'd had a lifetime of practice using my blood to be stronger or faster, and this was the first time I'd used any of the blood Mac had fed me. It was like a drug, making me feel like I could do anything.

"Talk," Mac demanded.

"I had my orders," Rob said nervously. "Malachi told me to watch him so I did. I don't know why."

I heard Mac move back and glanced up to see him look at me meaningfully. "Thank you for your time," he told Rob.

Very slowly I let Jasper go and moved away. He stayed on the hood of the car until I was out of reach, then he stood up slowly. Mac kept his gun on them until we got to our car. I slid into the driver's seat so he could keep an eye on them, but surprisingly enough they didn't try anything.

"You know they're going to cause problems later," I told him as I pulled out of the parking lot. "We should've killed them."

"We'll deal with whatever they can come up with when it comes up," he replied softly, putting his gun away.

"Whatever you say," I murmured with a shrug. I felt like I'd drank three pots of coffee in ten minutes. It was hard to sit still long enough to drive, and more than anything I wanted to go back and kick a little Brujah butt. "Where we going?"

"Patrolling a little more," he told me, reaching for his phone. He called Micky once again and told him what Rob had said. "He didn't know why they are interested in James. I had to get a little physical, but nothing drastic, just enough to make them see I meant business."

Once he assured Micky that the 'business' didn't involve weapons, he was okay with it. He told Mac that we should check out the Brujah territory until the end of our shift just to make sure they weren't up to anything they shouldn't be.

We spent the rest of our shift cruising the dock area of town, but surprisingly enough we didn't see any Brujah. Things were pretty quiet, too quiet as it turns out.

THE BRUJAH PRIMOGEN

THIS IS BEGINNING TO FEEL GOOD
WATCHING YOU SQUIRM IN YOUR SHOES
CONTROL — POE

When we showed up at the chantry the next night, Micky met us in the foyer. "The shit has hit the fan," he said seriously. "Malachi is here throwing a fit about your 'conversation' with Rob."

"I couldn't have done any permanent damage," Mac replied calmly.

"No, but that doesn't mean he's not pissed. Come on." He led us into the ballroom after warning us to be quiet and listen.

Elvira was sitting in a large wing backed chair by the fireplace, with Ford on one side of her and Alden on the other. Zane stood to one side and there were a few ghouls stationed around the room. Everyone was watching Malachi, who looked really pissed.

"The Brujah clan has been known to work for it's own ends independent of my wishes," she said calmly. She almost looked bored. "Cormac was merely ensuring that this was not the case here."

"It is an outrage that a newcomer to this city would attack my childe this way," Malachi told her. "And his ghoul was the one who attacked him a few months ago and left him staked in a warehouse."

That's true, I did.

Ford had seen us come in, and he gave a small smile. "I believe it is impolite to bite without permission. She could have left him in the sun," he reminded the Brujah. "Instead she made sure he was returned to his home in one piece."

"That does not change the fact that your clan bears watching, Brujah," Elvira added, her voice hard.

Her tone made Malachi back off a little. "Noah was wild, my prince. We tried to keep him in line, but he was headstrong." He spoke hesitantly until he caught a glimpse of Mac. He pointed at him and said coldly, "like this Neonate who attacked my childe. That behavior cannot be tolerated. I demand retribution." His voice gained conviction as he went on until the end when he was almost shouting.

The prince's face was very hard and she said in a warning voice, "Your clan no longer holds the power in this city that it did under Beth. No one makes demands on me, Malachi, you would do well to remember that."

He hesitated for only a moment before saying in a more reasonable tone, "My prince, this upstart had no right to attack Rob. He has done nothing wrong, he should not be punished for following orders."

"What interest do you have in this detective, Brujah?" she asked thoughtfully.

Malachi glanced at the others in the room, then looked back to the prince. "As you know we have recently lost a clan member." That would be the traitor who had decided to help the Sabbat a few weeks ago. "As the prince has generously allowed each clan five members within the city, we are looking for someone to fill our ranks. We believe that Mr. Price has qualifications and skills that would be valuable to our clan."

Elvira raised an eyebrow at him. "None of the Brujah have been given permission to embrace," she said, her voice as cold as ice.

"Of course not, my prince," he replied respectfully. "We were only investigating him. No one would have embraced him without first gaining permission. If you would rather see him embraced Tremere, we would not interfere."

"As you interfered in the matter of Sarah Hamilton?" Micky demanded, which confirmed the rumor I'd heard about the Brujah trying to embrace his lover before he could. They'd failed.

A look of apprehension crossed the Brujah's face and he looked to Elvira. "No, no, my prince. I was not involved in that, as you know. I would not dare order or allow an embrace without your permission."

"Of course you wouldn't, Malachi," Micky said sarcastically. "We all know that you wouldn't be so bold as to offer the embrace to one earmarked for our clan."

"But I'm curious," Elvira interrupted. "What makes you believe we want this man for our own?"

Malachi glanced at Mac. "It is rumored that the newcomer has performed a task for the clan that has granted him the right to progeny, my prince."

Her surprise showed on her face. "And what is it that he is supposed to have done?"

"I had not heard that, my prince," he replied, "only that he pleased you. May I inquire as to the truth of that rumor?"

"No," she said indifferently. "It is a clan matter, nothing for you to concern yourself with."

"Yes, my prince," he said, but he kept looking at her speculatively.

"I seem to have a problem, Malachi," the prince told him. "Perhaps you can help me with it."

He gave her a low bow. "Whatever my prince wishes."

"Excellent," she said, obviously pleased. Then her voice turned hard. "My problem is that you do not seem to have control of your clan in the city. They run about, biting people at will, embracing whenever they wish, aiding our enemies. I cannot in good conscience allow any additional Brujah into the city. Your clan will stand at four."

Since Elvira had taken over the city two years ago she had limited the number of every clan in the city to five. Every clan but the Tremere, of course. There were over a dozen of her clan members in Salem and she didn't seem inclined to control their numbers.

Malachi was outraged by her edict. "My Prince—"

Micky cut him short by reaching into his jacket and putting a hand on his gun. "Do you question your prince?"

Malachi glanced about the room to see that everyone but Elvira was reaching for a weapon, including Mac and me. I almost hoped he'd try something, it would mean one less Brujah in Salem.

"I would not think of it," he said in mock offense.

Ford smiled dangerously. "Very good. Perhaps there is hope for your clan in this city, Brujah."

He nodded coldly, trying to hide his anger and resentment.

"There will be no retribution against Cormac," Elvira said firmly, closing the subject. "We do not punish our people for following orders."

"Yes, my prince," Malachi replied, barely concealing his anger.

"Call off your dogs," she ordered. "Keep your people away from Mr. Price, is that clear?"

"Crystal," he said coldly.

"Excellent." She held her ring out for him and I could tell he had to force himself to step forward and kiss it. "You may go," she added dismissively.

"Yes, my prince," he repeated and with one last angry look around the room he stalked out.

Elvira sighed and everyone else relaxed.

"He will cause more problems, my dear," Ford told the prince softly. "He must be watched closely."

She smiled. "As well I know, my lord."

"We should take care of them before they rise up, sire," Zane said boldly. "If we show them weakness they will attack."

"You have much to learn, my childe," she told him patiently. "If Boston were not so close we could destroy them all and have a better city for it. Perhaps someday it will be feasible, but tonight we must deal with the trouble they bring."

He nodded but you could tell he was disappointed.

"The Brujah will not let this rest," Alden said softly. "If Malachi believes we want this man, he will do everything in his power to ensure we do not get him."

"We'll just have to keep the Brujah in line," the prince replied. She turned to Mac. "Keep an eye on this detective, see if you can dissuade him from learning things he should not know. Keep me informed."

He bowed to her respectfully. "As you wish, my prince."

ANOTHER CONFRONTATION

FEEL LIKE YOU'RE WASTING ALL OF YOUR TIME
YOU'RE GOING OUT OF YOUR MIND
THE WAY YOU WANT ME TO — 98°

As we left the ballroom, Mac called the ghoul who was watching Jimmy. The detective was at The Coven asking questions, so that's where we went. I was a little concerned about going there because sometimes people from St. Stephen's hung out there, but luckily none of them were tonight.

When we went inside Jimmy was sitting down talking to a couple of guys at a table. We sat behind him and watched, listening while he described me to them. At first they didn't recognize my description, but then one of them happened to glance at our table. He pointed us out to the detective, who turned and shot us a smile.

"Hello," Mac said when Jimmy came over. "Sit."

Jimmy raised an eyebrow at him, but he sat. "Good evening. Small world, isn't it?"

"Not when you're being followed," Mac replied coolly.

He nodded thoughtfully. "I wondered if that was your boy. Learn anything interesting?"

"Oh, I'm not the one following you," Mac denied. "I'm following them, keeping you from getting yourself perished."

Jimmy looked surprised. "I would have thought the only one out to kill me would be you, Angus."

"I'm not out to kill you, *James*," he said firmly, "but others are. They may still want to."

"Why would they want that?" he asked doubtfully.

"Sometimes they don't really need a reason," Mac replied.

"Who are they?"

"Another section of the organization."

"And you government boys don't play together?" he asked sarcastically.

"Not always," he replied seriously. "Some tend to act without our boss's approval."

"That's a good way to get fired."

"Something like that." Killed was more like it.

"And they just go around killing people for no reason?"

"If they had it their way," Mac replied.

Jimmy thought for a moment, then shook his head. "I don't believe it. No one does anything without a reason. Sometimes it's a twisted reason, but there's always a reason there."

"For the fun of it then," he suggested.

"See, there's a reason," the detective said with a smile.

"If you think that is a good reason to kill someone, maybe you are more of a threat than I thought." After a pause, he added, "Maybe not."

"I didn't say it was a reason for me to kill someone," Jimmy protested. "I just said it was a reason. We were talking about reasons, remember? Personally I think things can be settled without getting that... final about it."

Mac nodded slightly.

"So are you ready to tell me what happened to Lydia yet?"

"I told you, I haven't seen her for some time."

"But you know what happened to her," Jimmy said, sounding very sure.

"What would make you say a thing like that?"

He shrugged. "Call it intuition."

"I call it a desperate guess," Mac said coolly.

"You could call it that, I suppose," he said with a slow smile before turning to me. "What would you call it, Eliza?"

It took an effort, but I managed not to show my surprise that he knew my name. I kept looking around the room and ignored him. Mac didn't seem too impressed either, by the look on his face.

When Jimmy called my name again, I turned to him in what I hoped passed for surprise. "Are you talking to me?"

The detective looked at Mac. "When are we going to stop playing games here?"

Mac leaned in, very serious and very fast. "Who's playing?"

"My client needs to know what happened to her mother," Jimmy said in a cold voice. "If you're not going to help me, stay the hell out of my way." With that he got up and walked out of The Coven.

Mac turned to me. "He seems very intent."

"Ya think?" Obsessed would be more like it.

"Let's see where he's going," he said with a smile as he stood up.

"I'd like to know how he got my name," I murmured as we walked out of the coffee shop.

"Perhaps we'll find out."

We got to the parking lot just as Jimmy was leaving, and followed him through town. He drove to the neighborhood I used to have an apartment in, and pulled into a familiar driveway.

"That's my ex-landlord's place," I told Mac with a sigh.

He just took out his phone and called Micky.

"He seems to have the skills to find information he shouldn't find," Micky said when Mac had filled him in. "Any ideas on how to dissuade him?"

"No," Mac replied. "He seems too headstrong to take the hint."

"Perhaps a little physical persuasion might do the trick," Micky suggested.

"Would you like us to do it?" Mac asked. "Or were you thinking someone he hasn't seen?"

"I was thinking someone he hasn't seen," Micky told him. "That way if we need you to talk to him again later, he won't try to kill you before you say anything."

"Who did you have in mind?"

"I need a work out," he murmured. "Why don't you go check on the Brujah? Jonah will keep following him. He'll give me a hand."

"James was able to ID Jonah," Mac warned. "It may tip your hand."

"Or it may let him think nothing will happen," Micky said. "We'll handle it either way."

We did as Micky suggested, but once again the Brujah were nowhere to be seen. Near the end of the night Mac got a call from Micky to let him know that they had 'persuaded' Jimmy to leave town, but he could be back. Everyone on the security staff had orders to keep an eye out for him. If he came back, he'd have to be dealt with. As much as I didn't like the sounds of that, I knew he couldn't be allowed to learn the truth.

THE BLOOD IS THE LIFE

ITS SENSUALITY

ITS IMMORTALITY

MY LOVER - MELISSA ETHERIDGE

We got home a couple of hours before dawn and Mac followed me into the kitchen when I went to get something to eat. He watched me move around the kitchen, and his eyes on me made me feel warm.

I sat down at the table to eat, and Mac sat next to me. He was pretty quiet, and I wondered what he was thinking about. I hoped it was nothing I couldn't interrupt, because I had a question I'd been wondering about for a few nights now.

"Mac?" I said hesitantly.

"Yes, luv?" he replied.

"You know the other night, when I threw Jasper up against the car?"

"Yes, you dented the hood quite nicely," he drawled with a smile. "I was surprised."

"Well," I said slowly, "I was a little surprised myself. I used blood to make myself stronger, and it gave me a boost I didn't expect."

"Oh?" he asked, interested. "Was it the first time you had used blood since we renegotiated the contract?"

"No," I told him, "but it was the first time I used *your* blood."

"Interesting," he murmured. "Have you been stronger without boosting since you fed from me?"

I shook my head. "I really haven't felt much different at all."

"Perhaps using my blood boosted your Potence above and beyond what you naturally posses," he suggested.

"Is that normal?" Not that anything about me was normal, but I still had to ask.

"Most ghouls gain Potence when they are ghouled," he told me. "Do you still feel the extra strength?"

"No, it wore off like it usually does when I use blood to pump strength." It usually took anywhere from fifteen minutes to half an hour for my strength to drop back to normal levels.

He shrugged. "Perhaps you will only have the extra Potence when you use my blood. We will have to experiment."

I had to open my big mouth, didn't I? Well here was another question I had to ask. "How much of your blood am I supposed to keep on hand, so to speak?" He had fed me three nights in a row after I'd signed the new contract, but the first feeding I'd taken two blood points without realizing it. The upshot was that it helped me get back on my feet after healing a knife wound had left me weak.

"You must have one point of blood in your system at all times to remain a ghoul," he answered. "After that it's a matter of what your body can handle. You took a total of four when I ghouled you."

"And my body processes one point a month, right?" That's what stopped ghouls from aging, not that I'd aged much before Mac had fed me.

"That's right," he agreed.

"Then I'm down one," I murmured.

He held out his wrist and smiled.

I'd hoped he'd offer, but I hadn't wanted to ask. I took his hand hesitantly and smiled back at him. "Aren't you going to cut it for me?" I asked softly. "I don't have the convenient can opener you do."

He reached down and pulled the knife from his boot. In a single swift motion he punctured the vein of his wrist for me. It occurred to me that he'd never let me see his fangs.

Kindred don't bleed like humans, they don't have a heartbeat to drive the blood around their veins, but they do bleed. Blood welled at the cut and began to slowly seep down his wrist. I leaned closer and touched it with my tongue, surprised again at the richness of the taste. A moment later I covered the wound with my mouth.

I closed my eyes and drank slowly, drawing out the feeding without realizing what I was doing. It was strange, a month ago the thought of drinking any Kindred blood disgusted me, but here I was actually enjoying the act. I was taking his life force into my body, keeping it there until I needed it to make me strong or fast or whole.

The blood was cool, but it burned a warm path to my stomach. It's hard to describe how feeding from him made me feel. Knowing I held a part of him inside my body made me flush with need. I wanted more than just his blood inside me.

When I'd replaced what I'd used, I slowly lifted my head and looked at my lover. I watched as he licked the wound closed and took my hand. He lifted my wrist toward his mouth so slowly that I wanted to scream in anticipation. He turned his head for a moment, then kissed the pulse point on my skin. Very gently he slid his teeth into my flesh and I gasped at the sensations that ran through me.

It was amazing to me that I could love this part of being with him so much. No other vampire had ever made me feel anything but pain in the 'kiss', but somehow with Mac it was different. Neither of us knew if it was my feelings for him or his for me that made it different, we just knew it was.

A CUP OF COFFEE

IF I ONLY COULD TELL YOU
IF YOU ONLY WOULD LISTEN
A WORD IN SPANISH - ELTON JOHN

Jimmy had been gone for a couple of days, so Mac said it was all right for me to go out again. Good thing too, we were running low on food. Not that Mac needed the stuff, but I did. I was almost done when I felt someone watching me. I turned around and sure enough, there was Jimmy.

I finished getting what I needed and went through the checkout. When I got to the door he was there holding it open for me.

"Perhaps you would join me for a cup of coffee," he suggested. He had the remains of bruises on his face and I figured Micky had given them to him.

"All right," I agreed, hoping I could either get some information from him or convince him to leave town.

He helped me put the groceries in the car and we walked next door to a restaurant.

"Get in a fight?" I asked when the waitress had brought us coffee.

"More like a discussion," he replied with a boyish smile. "Someone wanted me to leave town and I didn't want to go."

"Looks like you should have gone," I told him. "It probably would have been less painful."

"Can I assume your friend had something to do with it?"

"I seriously doubt it," I said coolly. "It's not his style. If he wanted you in pain, he'd have done it himself."

"How do you know he didn't?" he asked.

I smiled. "Because I would have helped him. What did you want to talk to me about, Mr. Price?"

"The truth about what happened to Lydia Gretzke."

"That's not something you're likely to find," I told him.

"You'd be surprised," he murmured. "Are you aware that you're wanted for questioning in a murder investigation in Pittsburgh?"

That did surprise me. "I am?"

"Yes. A girl matching your description was seen being attacked by one Derrick Matthews," he said, watching my face for a reaction. "Word has it she killed him."

I kept my face blank. "When was this?"

"Nineteen sixty-six," he replied.

"Mr. Price, surely you can see that couldn't have been me," I said with a smile. "Do I look old enough to have been in Pittsburgh then? Perhaps you're thinking of my mother, she and I look quite a bit alike."

"Jimmy, please," he corrected me. "And it's funny; I didn't think you looked anything like Lydia Gretzke."

"She's not my mother," I told him.

"Were you also a poor unfortunate who was in the wrong place at the wrong time?" he asked.

"Not quite," I replied. "I know who my mother was."

"If Lydia isn't your mother, who is?"

"My mother is dead," I said, my voice hard.

"I'm sorry to hear that," he told me apologetically.

"Don't be, I'm not." I was damned glad Mac had let me kill her.

"Look, I'm just trying to help Natasha find her mother," he said reasonably. "Why is that so bad?"

"I believe Mr. Brennan explained that to you, Jimmy," I reminded him. "She'd be so much better off not knowing."

"Ignorance is bliss?"

"Yes, it is."

"That's a crock, Eliza," he shot back. "Knowledge is power."

I had to laugh because he sounded so much like Mac. "Sometimes the wrong knowledge is worse than not knowing, Jimmy. Believe me, I've been there."

"I will find out what happened to her," he promised.

"And how will you do that?" The Tremere Clan was really good at hiding bodies.

He smiled smugly. "What did you do at St. Stephen's, Eliza?"

That got my attention. "My job," I said coldly, wondering how he'd found that information out. "I helped people, Mr. Price."

"Why did you leave their employ?" he asked. "Why did you fake your own death?"

"I don't believe that is any of your business." He was getting dangerously close to finding things out that would get him killed.

He leaned closer and dropped his voice. "Rumor has it that St. Stephens is a front for another organization. Is that true?"

"Where did you hear such a thing?" Not that I thought he'd tell me, but there was always a chance.

"I heard that they hunt supernatural creatures," he continued, "that they kill things like vampires and werewolves. Is that true?"

"Do you really believe those things exist?" I asked, trying to sound like I didn't believe it myself.

"I've seen a few things I can't explain in my time," he told me.

"Come now, Jimmy," I said, looking him directly in the eye. "You don't really believe that preternatural creatures exist." Dominate can be useful if you do it right.

He smiled. "It is a bit far fetched, isn't it?"

"It is." I hid a sigh of relief, but it was short-lived.

"So where is Cormac?" he asked.

I gave him a blank look. "Who?"

"Don't play stupid with me, Eliza," he said harshly. "Cormac Brennan, the guy who wears a wedding ring that matches yours. But you're not married are you? There is no record of a marriage any where on the east coast between the two of you. In fact, there is no record of either of you at all until two months ago."

For real now, he knew too much for the clan to let him live. "Mr. Price, I like you, so I'm going to tell you this for your own good," I told him, trying one last time to convince him to give up his investigation. I wanted to try and dominate him to giving it up, but sometimes it's a little tricky

"Go home," I said firmly. "Forget everything you've learned about me, my lover, and Lydia Gretzke. This kind of information is not good for your health, *trust me.*" That last bit was me trying to convince him I was giving advice he should follow.

"I do," he replied, sounding surprised. "I don't know why, but I do. The problem is that I've been hired to do a job, Eliza, and I intend to do it."

I shrugged, knowing I'd done my best. "Don't say I didn't warn you if you wake up one night dead. I hope your will is in order."

He smiled grimly. "Are you threatening me?"

"Don't you get it?" I demanded irritably. "We're trying to protect you. If you make one wrong move, learn the wrong thing, they will kill you, make no mistake about that. And we won't be able to stop them."

"Not high enough on the totem pole?" he asked with a raised eyebrow.

"Me? I'm just a puppy," I told him, "and my friend hasn't been with the... organization nearly long enough to make the big decisions. You have no concept of what you're dealing with here." Hopefully he'd never find out.

"Next you're going to tell me they are supernaturals," he said skeptically. "What, they're vampires? Rule the world from the darkness?"

"I don't think you'd believe me if I told you the truth, Jimmy," I replied with a sad smile. "But believe this: If you don't stop looking for Lydia, you'll end up exactly like her. Leave, before it's too late."

I didn't wait for him to say anything, just got up and walked out of the restaurant. I knew he'd follow me, so once I got in the car I called the chantry. Jax agreed to help me out, so I drove around until he could catch up. With Jax driving interference, it was easy to lose Jimmy.

After I made sure no one else was following me, I drove home. I had groceries to put away and retaliation to plan for. I knew the clan wouldn't let this rest.

FINDING TROUBLE

AND ATTACKED FROM ALL SIDES
BY A WORLD FILLED WITH POISON AND HATE
THE SKY IS A POISONOUS GARDEN — CONCRETE BLONDE

I was sitting on the bed waiting for Mac to wake up when the sun went down. He must have seen the worry on my face because he immediately sat up and asked me what was wrong.

"I went shopping this afternoon," I told him. "I felt like I was being watched so I kept my eyes open, and I saw our friend Mr. Price following me."

He frowned. "I knew it was too good to be true. Did he follow you home?"

As if I'd be stupid enough to let that happen. "No, I called Jax and a couple of ghouls from the house kinda got in the way of him following me," I replied. "They tried to keep an eye on him, but they lost him. But we ended up having a cup of coffee together before that."

"You and James?" he asked. "Did you speak to him?"

Didn't I just say that? "Yeah, for a couple minutes. I think I made him trust me, but he's not gonna give up. He knows too much. He knows your name, Mac," I told him. "He knows I worked at St. Stephens, although I talked him out of believing that they kill vampires and werewolves there."

"Clever little shit isn't he?" he murmured. He reached for his cell phone, but it rang before he could dial.

It was Micky. He'd heard about Jimmy being back in town and Elvira wanted Mac to come to the chantry. Just Mac, Micky wanted me to see if I could find Jimmy and Mac was to catch up with me later.

When he got off the phone, Mac gave me a kiss and sent me to find the detective. It took me about half an hour, but I found him. He was at the Wharf Rat asking around for me and the house ghouls that had gotten in his way when he'd tried to follow me. I stayed back in the shadows and watched him until he finally got frustrated and left.

As I followed him out to the parking lot, my spider-sense started tingling. There were three vamps around, maybe four, and somehow I didn't think they were Tremere. I sped up and reached Jimmy just as he opened his car door. I caught him by surprise and shoved him over into the passenger seat.

"What the—"

"Give me the keys," I barked, holding my hand out. "We've got to get out of here."

Before he could give them to me, Rob hit the driver's window with a tire iron. I threw my arm up to shelter my face as glass showered me. Rob grabbed it and dragged me out of the car, throwing me up against the side of it as one of his friends pulled Jimmy out the other side.

"Hold still or die," Rob breathed in my ear.

Since he was holding a gun to my temple, I figured the best thing I could do was hold still. I'd never seen anything but vampires and werewolves live through a shot to the head, and I wasn't in a hurry to see if I could do it. Even if I did get away, that would leave Jimmy at their mercy, and I wasn't willing to do that.

One of the other vamps brought Jimmy around and threw him up against the car next to me. We were searched quickly, and stripped of our weapons and cell phones. Jimmy seemed

surprised when Rob took three stakes from me, but I didn't mention the knife in my boot that they'd missed.

"You'll be sorry you staked me, bitch," Rob hissed into my ear while he ran his hands across my body looking for weapons.

Like that scared me. "You'll be sorry you pulled this stunt, you bastard," I warned him coolly as his hands got a little too friendly. "You'll die tonight and I'll be happy to watch. Or do it myself, if you prefer."

He ignored me and cuffed my hands behind my back. He threw me in the back of a dark sedan where Jimmy was already waiting, also cuffed. I watched the two vamps in the front closely while I moved my hands a little in the restraints, hoping I could find a way to get loose without using blood to make me strong enough to break them.

The driver pulled out of the parking lot and headed south, driving through the dark streets toward the docks, Brujah territory. Two more vamps and a couple of ghouls followed in Jimmy's rental car, including Rob's puppy.

I kept testing the strength of the cuffs even after I figured out that there was no way I could slide them off my hands. I knew I'd have to rip them apart, which wouldn't help Jimmy much. Then I noticed that he was doing some squirming of his own. He was pretty resourceful; I hoped he was figuring his own way out of the cuffs.

A few minutes into the ride, one of the cell phones rang. I held my breath and prayed it wasn't Corrine calling to see what I was up to. Rob's friend answered.

Relief swept through me when I heard Mac's voice. "Who is this?" he demanded.

The driver grinned. "Who is this?"

Mac's voice got hard and I could almost see him go into 'Cormac mode'. "Who are you?"

"Hold on." The vamp held the phone out to Rob. "It's for her."

"Too bad she's tied up." They both laughed, and Rob put the phone to his ear. "*Jefe*, is that you?"

"Where are you?" Mac demanded, his voice hard.

To my surprise, Rob actually told him. "We're headed south on Lafayette. There's a house on the end of Belleau Road, *jefe*, just south of Forest River Park," he drawled. "If you want to see your sweet tasting *muchacha* alive again, you'll come alone. If we see anyone else, we'll kill them both, *comprede?*"

"Who is it?" Jimmy whispered.

I smiled reassuringly at him. "Cormac."

"Fine," I heard him reply just before the line went dead.

Rob turned to look at me. "Not very polite, your friend."

"You know he's going to kill you, don't you?" I asked, my voice as hard as Mac's had been.

"He can try," Rob grinned, showing the sharp points of his fangs.

"Jesus H. Christ," Jimmy gasped.

"When he shows up we'll teach him some manners," the vampire continued. "Then we'll make him watch while I drink my fill of you."

"He'll kill you where you stand," I told him softly, trying not to show how much his words frightened me. After knowing how sweet it was to be 'kissed' my Mac, I wasn't looking forward to feeling the kind of pain I'd felt the last time Rob had sunk his teeth into me.

He just grinned again with a flash of fangs before turning back to the road.

"What is he?" Jimmy breathed softly, stunned.

"You're not stupid, Jimmy," I whispered to him, keeping my eyes on Rob. "Figure it out."

It wasn't much longer before we pulled into a drive way just south of town that was right on the water. The house was run down, and there was what looked like a boathouse behind it. There were no lights on and no houses nearby, which made it a perfect killing spot for the Brujah. But for real now, it was not the place I wanted to die.

"Do you want to get out of this?" I breathed to Jimmy.

He looked at me in surprise and nodded.

"When they take us out, make a run for the boathouse," I whispered softly as the car rocked to a stop. "I'll be right behind you."

He nodded again just before the vamps pulled us from the car.

I don't think they were expecting any trouble from us, which was a good thing. I quickly boosted my strength and speed with Mac's blood and a heartbeat later broke the chain between the handcuffs. I punched Rob in the face and kicked at the ghoul who was right behind him. Then I spun and hit the vamp that'd been behind Jimmy. He went flying toward the house, stunned.

When I turned for the boathouse, Jimmy had already broken loose from his guard and was sprinting ahead. He pushed the door open and I saw that he had somehow managed to get his cuffs off. Just as I reached the boathouse, I felt a sharp pain in the small of my back. It threw me off my stride for a moment, and I stumbled through the doorway, almost falling.

Pain shot through me, but I ignored it, using blood to heal the wound as I threw my back against the door. It took more than I'd bargained for, and I hoped it didn't make me weak. If I hadn't had Mac's blood to use, I'd have been laying on the floor no good for anything but the next Brujah meal.

Jimmy had found the light switch and was already reaching for a nearby cabinet, but it was too heavy for him to move alone. I braced a foot against the door to keep it closed and reached over to help him. We got it in front of the door just as a heavy body slammed against it.

Damn, the Brujah were a little slow tonight. Or maybe they were just playing with us, we really had nowhere to go except into the water. I hoped Jimmy could swim.

An arm shot through the window on the side of the building, and Jimmy quickly picked up a large pipe to hit it with. I pushed another cabinet in front of the window and Jimmy braced it with the pipe he'd used.

We both looked to the back of the building where the entrance to the water should have been. It wasn't. Someone had filled in the boat launch with cement and boarded over the doors. The one good thing about it was that the Brujah weren't likely to get in that way. The bad thing was we weren't likely to get out of there without going through the Brujah.

GATHERING STRENGTH

YOU BETTER WATCH HOW YOU TALKING, AND WHERE YOU WALKING
OR YOU AND YOUR HOMIES MIGHT BE LINED IN CHALK
GANGSTA'S PARADISE - COOLIO

"Why did you try to help me?" Jimmy demanded, breathing hard and leaning on the cabinet we'd pushed against the door.

"Mac tried to tell you, Jimmy," I told him as I looked around for something we could use for weapons. "We're trying to make sure you don't get yourself killed."

The Brujah were yelling for us to let them in, but I ignored them. We were safe, for the moment.

"Cormac?" Jimmy asked. When I nodded, he looked at the cabinet we'd wedged against the window. "This isn't going to last for long."

I started clawing through a pile of discarded junk, searching for something wooden we could use for stakes. "It only has to last until Mac finds us."

"And just how in the hell is he going to do that?" Jimmy demanded.

"He will," I said firmly. Mac had already proved he could find me so I wasn't worried about that. Now, whether or not he found us before the Brujah got to us, that was another story.

"You're hurt," Jimmy exclaimed, grabbing my shoulder and trying to hold me still.

I almost pushed him away from me, but he was just trying to help so I stopped moving. "I'll be fine."

"Let me see," he insisted, pulling my shirt up to bare my back. I heard the bullet drop from my shirt to the ground. "What the hell?"

He tried to hold me still for a better look, but I brushed him off easily and turned back to the pile of junk I'd been looking through. "I told you, I'll be fine," I repeated firmly. The healing I'd done had pushed the bullet out of my flesh and the only thing I felt now was the pull of a fresh scar over the wound.

"You're not human," he whispered softly, backing away.

"No," I told him. I found a wooden chair in the rubble and smashed it on the ground. The Brujah were still outside, yelling and moving around the building. Every once in a while they hit the walls, but as crappy as the boathouse had looked, the walls held.

"Are they really vampires?" he asked as he watched me pick up the stake material from the wreckage of the chair.

"Most of them," I replied, pulling the knife from my boot. "Vampires really do exist, I know it's kind of hard to believe."

He smiled a little. "No, actually it explains a lot."

My smile was grim. "The others are ghouls. Human, but harder to take out." I ran the blade down the edge of the wood to sharpen it. It wasn't pretty, but it would work.

He nodded, studying me carefully. "What are you?"

"Oh, I'm a ghoul too," I said in a hard voice as I continued to make our weapons. I'd worry about the damn Masquerade if we lived through this. "What they don't know is that I'm only half human."

He seemed surprised at that, but caught the stake I tossed him almost instinctively.

"Through the heart, Jimmy," I instructed as I reached for another piece of wood. "Stick it in and leave it there. Ghoul or vampire, it'll stop them both." I hoped the prince wouldn't get

too pissed if we killed them without her permission, but we weren't gonna live if we didn't fight back. Besides, the vamps would survive the staking even if their ghouls didn't.

"What, they turn to dust?" he asked, looking down at the wood in his hand.

I smiled at the imagery wishing it were that easy. "No, but they don't move. Makes it easier to decapitate them later."

"What is Cormac? Is he a vampire?" He tested the weight of the stake, trying to figure out the best way to drive it home. "Do we stake him too when he shows up?"

In the blink of an eye I had him shoved up against the cabinet we'd put against the door, the knife blade against his throat. "He's a vampire all right," I said coldly, "but he's *my* vampire, and if you stake him, I'll cut your heart out, understand?"

"Yeah," he breathed.

I let him go and picked the stake I'd been sharpening back up. "Mac's on your side," I reminded him. "And he may be our only chance to get out of this. We take out only Brujah tonight, got it?"

He bent to pick up the stake he'd dropped. "Brujah?"

"The ones that took us." I shoved one stake down the back of my pants and picked up another to sharpen. "There may be other vampires coming that will help, so only take out the ones I say, do you understand?"

"No," he said wryly, "but I got it."

"Sorry about the rough stuff," I said awkwardly. "I'm just a little on edge."

"Don't worry about it," he replied calmly. "Do you think we can get out of here alive?"

I shrugged. "I could make it out if it was just me, but with you here?" The Brujah hit the side of the building hard enough to shake dirt from the rafters. "I hope Mac gets here soon."

"If he doesn't?" Jimmy asked anxiously.

"If he doesn't, I hope you learn quick." I quickly sharpened three more stakes, and handed him another one. It only took a minute to show him the best angle to hit a vampire with one, and he seemed to pick it up well. I hoped we didn't have to find out.

Jimmy offered to get my cuffs off the same way he'd removed his, by picking the locks. I let him, keeping alert so we wouldn't be surprised when the Brujah broke in. When, not if; we both knew it was just a matter of time.

"Can you swim?" I asked him when the second cuff had come off.

"Yeah, why?"

"If we they start coming in, we'll fight our way past them and head for the water," I told him. "Brujah are lazy, it might buy us some time." I could hear someone working at forcing the door open and I steeled myself for the upcoming fight.

Jimmy glanced at the door, then looked at me calmly, his expression resolute. "I'll distract them," he suggested. "You get out of here."

"No deal," I replied without looking at him. When he would have protested, I added, "I don't leave humans behind to deal with blood sucking fiends like the Brujah."

He laughed, a harsh brittle sound. "You only deal with *your* blood sucker."

"That's right," I said. Outside, I heard a motorcycle and felt another Kindred move into my vamp radar. "And speaking of my blood sucker, he's here now." I reached over and turned the light out.

"How do you know?" he demanded.

I smiled in the darkness. "I just do." I couldn't explain how I knew it was Mac out there without telling him exactly what I was, so I didn't even try.

FREE FOR ALL

SHOOT STRAIGHT, SHOOT TO KILL, YA
BLAME EACH OTHER, BLAME YOURSELVES
GOD IS A BULLET — CONCRETE BLONDE

"I'm going to move this cabinet away from the door," I told him softly. The ghouls had stopped trying to get in and half the vamps had moved away. "Be ready, Jimmy. The ones by the door are human. When they come in, help me take them out."

"How do you know they're human?" he whispered, his voice full of disbelief.

"They're not Kindred," I replied as I slid the cabinet to one side. I opened the door a crack and peeked out, but I couldn't see Mac anywhere.

"What's going on?" Jimmy whispered.

"I don't know," I told him, glancing over my shoulder. "They're freaking out. I don't see Mac, but I know he's here, I can feel him." I looked toward the house where I felt his vibes coming from, but there was no one there.

Rob was frantically looking around, yelling at the other vamps to search the area. It was just chaotic enough that I figured we could take out the ghouls and no one else would notice.

"Let's take care of these two," I whispered to Jimmy.

I opened the door slowly and reached for the one closest to the door. The second I grabbed Jasper and pulled him inside, Jimmy got the other one and did the same. I ran the knife across the first ones throat and blood shot out like a fountain. I dropped him to the ground where he clutched at the wound, but there was no way he could stem the flow. I turned on the light so I could help Jimmy.

He drove the stake he held through the chest of the other ghoul, missing the heart but puncturing a lung. I tossed him the knife and he plunged it into the guy's heart, killing him instantly.

Outside I heard the sound of two guns going off simultaneously. I hoped that Mac was all right, I felt one of the vamps fall off my radar, but I didn't think it was my lover.

The killing must have upset Jimmy because he looked a little shaken. "Are you okay?" I asked him as I took a gun from Jasper's waistband.

"Yeah," he replied, running a hand across his mouth. "You do this every night?"

"Only when the Brujah fuck up," I replied calmly. "Get his gun, let's finish this."

When Jimmy had picked up the other ghouls gun, we turned off the light and opened the door again just as another shot rang out.

I glanced around quickly to see that Mac had shot one of the remaining vampires. Two more were coming from the direction of the house, and together Jimmy and I raised our guns. We fired, but my shot went high, igniting the side of the house. Luckily, Jimmy was a better shot than me and he caught the other one square in the chest.

Before I could fire again, both Mac and Jimmy shot the last vamp from two different directions. In seconds he was also on the ground, burning. A moment later, Micky pulled in followed quickly by another car. He quickly took over the situation, sending his crew around to make sure the bad Brujah were totally dead and that there was no one else in the area.

Mac seemed to be untouched, and when he saw us come out of the boathouse, he walked toward us. I met him halfway and walked into his arms.

"Are you okay?" he asked, running his hand down my back and touching the blood on the back of my shirt.

"I'm fine," I told him. "You?"

"No problem."

"Eliza said you'd show," Jimmy said softly.

Mac straightened and I moved back so he could put his guns away. When he reached over and took the gun from Jimmy's hand and shoved it in his waistband, Jimmy and I both looked at him in surprise.

"As you didn't take my warning," Mac told him, "my boss would like a word with you."

Jimmy looked at me, but I just shrugged. What was I supposed to say? We had warned him, and if Elvira wanted to talk to him, it couldn't be good. Micky's presence seemed to intimidate him a little, and he finally agreed to follow us in his car when Micky said he'd follow.

I held tight to Mac as he drove toward the chantry. He was driving too fast for us to talk, but I felt safe just being that close to him. I was damned glad that neither of us had been hurt during that whole mess, but I had to wonder what was going to happen to Jimmy. Maybe they were planning on one of the big wigs dominating him into forgetting.

When we got to the chantry, one of the ghouls at the door told us Elvira was waiting in her study for us. Jimmy seemed a little overwhelmed by the house, and a little uneasy that Micky was still with us.

"What's going on?" he asked Mac.

"All will be explained," he replied softly, leading the way toward the study.

I caught up and leaned close to him. "What's going on?"

"He is to 'become'," Mac told me softly.

Become? They planned on turning him? Making him a vampire? I looked at Mac in shock, not sure what to think. How could they do that? Why would they do that? Why not just kill him?

Mac ignored my shock and kept walking toward the study. I kept pace, trying hard not to let Jimmy see my face.

Ford and Alden were with Elvira in the study. When Mac tapped on the door, she called for us to come in. Mac bowed respectfully, and I stepped to one side of the door, trying to stay beneath their notice.

Elvira motioned for the guys to move closer. "Young Cormac, I'm glad you were able to handle the Brujah with little problems," she said pleasantly. "Is this Mr. Price?"

"Yes, my prince," he replied.

She looked Jimmy over from head to toe, missing nothing, I'm sure. "Have you explained to him what will happen?"

"No, my prince," he told her. "Things were a bit hurried."

Elvira nodded and looked at Jimmy for a long moment. "You are very resourceful," she said softly. "A little too resourceful. You have found many things out that you were not meant to learn, and now we have to deal with your knowledge."

He moved a little restlessly. "What do you mean?"

"We have a law among us called the Masquerade," she explained. "If humans knew of our existence, we would be hunted to extinction. We cannot allow that to happen. Our only choice now is to kill you, or make you one of us."

That surprised him. "I would not tell anyone of what I have learned," he protested. "There is no need to kill me."

"Things have gone too far," she replied. "I'm afraid you have given us no choice in the matter. Once you are one of us, you will have no memories of your life as it is now. It is for the best, you will come to see that."

"This is bullshit," he exclaimed, turning to leave.

Micky stepped between him and the door, blocking his way. Jimmy looked at me, almost as if he thought I would help him. I looked at Mac helplessly, knowing there was nothing I could do. I looked down and moved in front of the door just in case Jimmy somehow got around Micky.

Mac stepped closer to James and looked into his eyes. "Calm down," he instructed.

Jimmy calmed, but said insistently, "You can't be serious about this."

"You wanted to know what was going on," he replied calmly.

"Yeah, well, knowing what's going on and turning into a vampire are two different things," Jimmy protested.

"I tried to warn you away James, but you didn't listen," Mac reminded him. "Now it is too late. When you wake next, you will be one of us. *Sleep.*"

Instantly Jimmy went limp. Mac caught him before he hit the ground and guided him into a nearby chair.

There was no way I could watch this, no way in hell. In the chantry I was a puppy, nothing more, but if I stayed in that room I knew I'd have to say or do something to stop this from happening. I knew better than to think I'd get away with it, so I quietly slid out the door.

A NEW TREMERE

I FEEL THE PAIN THAT WAS GIVEN
ON THAT SAD DAY OF LOSS
MY OWN PRISON - CREED

I paced the library outside of Elvira's study, trying very hard not to hear what was going on inside. If Elvira thought Jimmy wasn't going to remember anything after his embrace, that meant Mac was going to do the embracing. I didn't understand how he could do that to Jimmy, erase his life that way. Just thinking about it made me want to cry.

They were in there a long time. Several times I heard low chanting, but I didn't try to make out the words. So much of me wanted to break in and stop them, but there was nothing I could do for Jimmy. Elvira had said it herself, they either had to kill him or embrace him, and at least he'd have something of a life as a vampire.

A long time later, Mac opened the door. I stopped and looked at him, then past him at Jimmy, who was staring at me with hunger burning in his eyes. Abruptly I remembered the blood on my clothes, but before I could get real worried about defending myself, Mac stepped between us.

"This is Eliza," he said firmly. "She is my ghoul and my lover. She is mine. You will have blood soon enough." When Jimmy nodded, Mac turned to me. "We will be in my room upstairs, please go get some 'bags'."

He kissed me on the forehead, and I looked at him sadly, wondering once again how he could have wiped Jimmy's life away so easily. I glanced at the new vampire and nodded before I turned and left without a word.

"Doesn't she like me?" Jimmy asked as I walked away.

"You will come to understand Eliza better in time," Mac replied softly.

Didn't I like him? Hell, I'd liked him well enough when he was human. I hated that they'd felt the need to do this to him especially without his consent. It felt too much like losing Mac all over again, even though I didn't know Jimmy very well.

I went downstairs to the 'blood bank' where the supply was kept. I'd never asked where they got so much blood, but now I had to wonder. I grabbed a bag and filled it with blood packs and went up to Mac's room there at the chantry.

Micky stopped me in the foyer and asked me where my car was. When I told him, he said that he'd send someone to get it right away. Jimmy's car had already been returned to the rental company, and someone was headed for the bed and breakfast he was staying at for his things. He also told me that the room next to Mac's was being prepared for James.

When I got to the door of his room, I couldn't bring myself to just walk in. I knocked, and Mac opened the door, taking the bag from me.

"Micky said they're getting the room next door ready for James," I said quietly. "Someone is getting his things right now."

"Where is your car at luv?" he asked softly.

"They're bringing it, I was fol—" I stopped in mid sentence, not sure what Mac planned on telling James about what had happened tonight. "—was at the Warf Rat when the Brujah showed up."

"When they get it here, would you go get me some of my things?" he asked. "I will have to spend the next few days here. You will not be required to stay though, but I would like you to."

I shot a glance at Jimmy, not sure if I wanted to be around to see him this way. Still, he wasn't likely to turn human again was he? I had to get used to it sooner or later. It looked like my guess had been right and Mac had embraced him, so James was probably going to be with us for quite some time.

"I'll stay," I told Mac. "What do you need?"

He gave me a list of things while James sat quietly watching me with hunger in his eyes. After a few minutes, Mac gave me a quick kiss and suggested I leave them alone, which I was more than happy to do.

Sam was at the door of the chantry, and he told me I could use one of the chantry cars to go get the stuff Mac had asked for. It didn't take very long to pack a few bags. I took the time to eat something, and call Corrine to let her know we'd be staying at the Chantry for a couple of days.

When I got back from the house, Mac was busy explaining things to James. As I put our clothes away, I listened to them. From the sounds of things Mac had gotten through the Masquerade and moved on to the clan systems.

The new Tremere seemed to catch on to the information pretty quickly, but he seemed a little confused about everything. Of course Mac was very patient with him, assuring him that everything would come in time.

I tried to stay in the background out of their attention, but James kept staring at me and it made me nervous. Mac noticed and took me aside.

"As long as we're at the chantry," he said softly, "why don't you get a few extra days of testing out of the way? The physical stuff."

The relief I felt was almost overwhelming. I didn't think I could stay in this room and listen to them for nights on end. "Sure," I told him a little too enthusiastically. "Whatever you want."

"Blow off some steam," he suggested, kissing me softly.

"Can I 'spar' with Lydia?" I asked. That would blow off some steam big time.

"That is something I think I should be there for," he said, tensing up a little. "And Lord Radek."

I smiled. "I wouldn't hurt her, not permanently." She could heal, her master's blood was a hell of a lot stronger than mine.

He gave me a knowing grin. "Goodbye."

"Goodbye." I leaned up for another kiss before I left.

Zora was more than happy to have the extra time with me at her beck and call. She seemed to sense my frustration and told me to take a half an hour or so to warm up, so I did. It was pretty intense, and by the time I was done I was covered in sweat but I felt much better.

When I looked up Ford was standing in the doorway watching me.

"Quite impressive," he murmured, walking toward me.

I glanced around, but Zora was gone and we were alone. I bowed a little in his direction, but didn't say anything.

"Can I assume you are not happy with the events of this evening?" he asked, watching me closely.

With a shrug, I looked away. "It is not my place to question what happened," I replied respectfully, reaching for a towel to wipe the sweat from my face.

"That is true," he said with a smile, "however it does not answer my question."

I shrugged again, not sure what he wanted me to say. "My feelings don't matter. They will not interfere with my duties."

"I can see that Cormac has indeed been good for you, my dear," he said smugly. "You seem to have lost your hatred for Kindred and reconciled yourself to life among us. I understand that he allowed you to slay your mother."

Irritation shot through me at that, I didn't like to be reminded that the bitch I'd killed had given birth to me. "He did."

"Perhaps that also helped alleviate some of your aggression toward Kindred?"

"Perhaps," I replied, running the towel across the back of my neck.

"I hope that this incident will not rekindle that aggression," he added.

I looked at him in surprise. "Why would it? The Masquerade has been upheld," I reminded him. "The Brujah were dealt with. There is nothing more to say."

"You sound like any other Tremere ghoul," he drawled, coming closer to me. "Has being with Cormac turned you into a well trained dog?"

I glanced up at him, unable to hide the anger in my eyes. "He is my master," I said coolly. "I follow his wishes as I agreed to do."

"You subjugate yourself to him," he murmured. "Do you do so because of love, or the bond he has over you?"

"Does it matter, my lord?" I asked calmly. "Love, blood or contract, I follow my master's orders. No matter how I feel about what happened tonight, I stood by and did not try to stop it from happening."

That statement echoed through my mind long after Ford was satisfied I wasn't going to go back to hating Kindred. I'd known when Mac had told Jimmy that his boss wanted to see him that it couldn't be good for the human. I'd known when we walked into the study that they were going to embrace him. I'd known and I hadn't done a single thing to stop it.

I'd walked out of that room and left him to be killed, to be changed into one of them. It didn't sit well on my conscience, but there was nothing I could do about it. If I'd interfered, Jimmy wouldn't have been the only one to die. I knew without a doubt that if I'd tried to stop them, neither Mac nor I would have walked out of that room, and they would have found someone else to embrace Mr. Price.

I went up to the room hours later, but I didn't want to just waltz in if they were busy talking about things I didn't want to know about so I listened at the door for a minute.

"Why can't I remember anything before tonight?" I heard James ask.

"You have amnesia," Mac explained. "It is a side effect of my blood."

"Who was I before?"

"A detective."

"Did I have someone like Eliza?" he asked.

I closed my eyes and leaned my forehead against the doorframe.

"Perhaps once," Mac replied. "Before I knew you."

"How long have you known me?"

"Not very long."

"Will I ever remember what was before?"

I wanted to cry for him, for the loss of his life, his humanity. I couldn't listen any longer. I turned and fled down the hall. It wasn't very hard for me to avoid seeing anyone else, and I made my way out the back of the house onto the beach.

The water was cold when I stripped off my shoes, rolled up my pants and walked into the surf. It felt good to me, a solid sensation I could identify with. It grounded me and I needed to be grounded.

What had happened tonight was too close to what had happened in Baltimore for comfort. Yeah, Mac had told me he'd agreed to the embrace, but if the vamps hadn't attacked he never would have had a reason to agree. Jimmy hadn't even been given the chance to refuse, Mac had just put him to sleep then ended his life.

Jimmy Price may not have had a good life, but at least he'd had a life. He'd gotten too close to something he shouldn't have and now everything he was before was gone, erased like it had never existed.

As bad as my life had been at times, I would hate to have it taken from me like that. To never remember the good times with Mac in Baltimore, or with Corrine in Bar Harbor would be horrible. For years I'd used those memories to carry me through the tough spots. Knowing that Jimmy didn't have anything like that to fall back on now was devastating.

I guess it wouldn't have hit me so hard if it wasn't so similar to what had happened to Mac. And there was nothing I could do about it anyway, this was just something I had to live with. I dried my tears and my feet and went back into the house.

I spent most of the next few nights with Zora doing testing. Most of it was the physical, but some of it was the intellectual stuff I hated. She seemed to pick up a little better on when my temper was about to break and let me alternate beating things with the IQ testing, which helped. It also helped knowing that I didn't have to be around the new vamp that Mac was busy training.

SETTLING DUST

"OH YOU WERE A VAMPIRE
AND I MAY NEVER SEE THE LIGHT"
CONCRETE BLONDE — BLOODLETTING (THE VAMPIRE SONG)

After a few nights, we moved back home. I had gone out and found a bed and a dresser for Mac's new child, but I figured I'd let him add the finishing touches if he wanted to. Beside, even being in his room gave me the creeps.

Mac thought it best that he start training James right away, which I thought was great until I found out that he expected me to learn right along with him. The new vamp didn't know Latin either, so at least I wasn't the only one in the house who was language impaired.

I didn't like the thought of spending that much time with James, but Mac seemed surprised when I said something about being uncomfortable around him.

"Has he done something to make you feel that way?" he asked.

I shifted uneasily. "No."

"Then why do you feel uncomfortable?" He really looked like he didn't understand.

"I don't know how to explain it," I said after a moment. "I just do. It's like I keep expecting him to be who he was before." You know, with a heartbeat and a body temperature above seventy-two.

"Give him time to adjust to what he is and who he was may well yet reemerge," Mac suggested.

I raised my eyebrows at that. "Did you?" When Mac had found me a few months ago, he'd had the personality of a .357 Magnum. Cold and deadly.

"Eventually."

"Does he even care that he—" I stopped myself from saying something that would hurt my lover's feelings. "I guess it doesn't matter."

"What?"

"Well, there's no one to help him get his memory back, is there?" I asked emotionlessly. "So it doesn't matter if losing it bothers him."

"He will come to terms with losing it in time," Mac assured me. "I did."

"It didn't bother you?"

"At first it was difficult," he admitted, "but it is hard to miss what you don't remember. Over time it just becomes a small void in the back of your mind. You find other things to fill your life."

"Yeah." Things like Nina, and Aurora, and Summer. He'd moved on with his life and I'd been stuck longing for something I'd thought I could never have again; Mac.

He raised an eyebrow curiously. "What?"

What could I say? That I was still jealous of the time those women had spent with him over the last twenty years? That I wished I could wave a magic wand and make it so that he'd remembered me all those years? It wouldn't solve anything, so it was better to say, "Nothing."

"What were you going to say?" he demanded.

No way was I going to tell him any of that stuff. "I'm sure that blood magic is pretty engrossing, literally," I said softly, trying to joke with him. He didn't even smile, so I knew it was time to change the subject. "So what's on the agenda tonight? More Latin?"

"Yes," he replied in a very dry voice.

"Shouldn't we get started then?"

"Yes," he repeated, the same as before.

I looked at him expectantly until he went off to get James for our lesson. I hated not telling him what I was really thinking, but what good would it do? I had no right to feel jealous of the people he'd known and gotten close to before he remembered me. It didn't matter that I hadn't looked at anyone twice in the time I thought he was dead. It wasn't like he'd had a serious relationship with any of them, but even if he had who could blame him? He hadn't even known I existed.

And that was another sore spot with me, another thing I had no right to feel resentment over. As much as I'd wanted to forget about Mac and move on with my life, his memory had stayed in my heart making it impossible for me to. Logically I knew he hadn't had a choice to forget me any more than Jimmy had been given one.

Honestly it was better if I could just get past my jealousy and resentment without dragging it all out in the open. Eventually it had to work itself out and go away. Didn't it?

A few nights later Mac decided it was time to work on James' Disciplines. I figured it would be a good time for me to find something else to do, but Mac made me sit in on it. I watched him walk James through the basics of Thaumaturgy, only half listening.

The new vamp tasted blood from a vial Mac had pulled out, and was able to tell his sire quite a few things about the person it had come from, things like how much blood was left in the person, and that he or she had been a ghoul.

"Your turn, Eliza," Mac said.

That caught my attention. I thought I was just there to watch, not participate. "Why?"

He gave me a stern look. "Because I said so."

I didn't like the sound of that, but since Mac had warned me to 'play nice' when his child was around, I didn't have a choice. I rolled my eyes and tasted the blood while Mac and James watched and waited.

The taste was disgusting, but nothing I couldn't handle. I'd tasted blood lots of times in my life, mostly my own, but Mac's too. The amazing thing was that as soon as the blood hit my tongue, I knew things about who it had come from. I stared at Mac in surprise for a long moment before I told him what I knew.

He looked pleased. "Well done, both of you!"

Damn, that made me feel like a well-trained puppy. I would have said something, but James was right there so I figured I'd wait until later. I rolled my eyes and started playing with a stake absently. Sometimes it helps when I'm nervous to keep my hands occupied.

Why was I nervous? Kate had told me years ago that it was possible for me to develop thaumaturgical skills, but I'd never wanted to. I figured I had enough shit to deal with just being faster and strong than normal people, not to mention my ability to see auras or make people do what I wanted them to. Pulling blood magic seemed too close to being a vampire for my liking, but here I was doing it like I'd done it all my life.

Mac explained exactly what James and I had done, and what we could learn from Kindred blood if we concentrated well on the 'taste'. I could see where it might come in handy, but it wasn't something I looked forward to using often.

Then Mac started talking about something called Blood Rage. He said that it was possible to make a Kindred use their blood without their knowledge or consent, and explained how to do it. James soaked up every word, and when Mac told him to try it on him, he did.

A few minutes later he let his hand fall, his face filled with disappointment. Apparently, it hadn't worked.

"It will come in time, James," Mac assured him gently. "Eliza, your turn."

Why in hell did I have to play this game? Okay, maybe I had been able to do the whole 'Taste of Blood' thing, but that didn't mean I wanted to try something I didn't think I could ever use.

I was about to protest, when I saw the resolution on Mac's face. I sighed and concentrated a moment before reaching out and touching his arm. Something stirred inside me, something rising that ran through my body, but Mac didn't seem to be affected.

"We'll try again later," he told me with a smile. "Let's move on to Auspex."

He explained to James how to clear your mind, and again I didn't pay much attention. The new vamp must have done well because it didn't take very long for Mac to turn to me. When he called my name I called on my vampire blood to enhance my senses. I'd been doing this one for years, and I was able to do it now without hesitation.

Mac walked James through the next level of Auspex, reading auras. Being fresh out of the coffin so to speak, I wasn't surprised that he couldn't do it. I could and did, naming off the colors of Mac's aura easily, smiling at the blue that swirled there telling me he loved me.

To my surprise Mac then pulled out a couple of old fashioned coins and handed them to me. "Tell me what you see," he instructed.

I looked down at them. "Ahh... coins?"

"Close your eyes and relax," he told me, folding my hand around them. "Now tell me what you see in your mind."

Oh, he wanted to know what I could 'see' using Auspex. I'd seen him do it before, get visions from touching something, but I'd never tried to do it myself. I closed my eyes obediently and concentrated for a long minute, but I didn't get any visions. "I don't see anything," I told him.

"Hmm. Very well. Look at James," he told me, then turned to his childe. "Look at Eliza, make eye contact. Concentrate and tell her to do something."

James seemed confused. "Like what?"

"Sleep," Mac suggested.

He shrugged, then looked at me, obviously concentrating. "*Sleep.*"

"Concentrate," Mac coached.

I didn't like being the subject of James' lesson in Dominate, but I didn't try to fight it. But for real now, all I felt was bored.

"Hmm," Mac murmured.

"Maybe he's not trying hard enough," I suggested.

"Maybe," Mac agreed. "Try again."

He walked James through the whole thing once more, and James got a look of intense concentration on his face.

"*Sleep,*" he told me.

Once again I didn't feel the need to nap.

"Hmm," Mac said again. He put a finger under my chin and turned my head to face him. "*Sleep.*"

This was getting boring enough that I wished one of them would get it right. I raised my eyebrows at my lover. "Maybe *you're* not trying."

He just grinned. "You're just full of surprises."

"What do you mean?" I demanded, frowning.

"Nothing." He glanced at his watch. "Shall we take a look around the city?"

I had to admit that sounded better than sitting here playing mind games that didn't work.

"Okay. Just make sure he doesn't bite anything." James hadn't been out in population yet, and it wouldn't be good if he couldn't control himself around humans.

When Mac shot me a hard look, I apologized. It wasn't James' fault that he was a vamp now, there was no need for me to take it out on him.

SETTLING DOWN

James picked up the patrolling part of our lives pretty quickly. At first he had a hard time dealing with humans, but once he got used to controlling his hunger, things went pretty well. Mac was right, James' personality started reasserting itself over the next few weeks. It got easier for me to deal with him, although I can't say I ever got comfortable.

Mac's childe was nothing if not intelligent. He'd known since his embrace that I didn't want to be alone with him, so he pretty much stayed out of my way. We studied what Mac taught us and patrolled together, but we were never alone.

Almost never.

One night Mac went off to call his sister and James and I were left alone in the Library. He'd told us to practice Latin together, which wasn't something I enjoyed to begin with. Before he'd embraced James, Mac had come up with some interesting techniques to get me interested in the language, but strip studying wasn't a three-person deal.

Both James and I were uncomfortable to be left alone. After a few minutes of awkward silence, he opened a large Latin dictionary and leafed through it. Once he found what he was searching for, he looked up at me and said something in Latin while pushing the dictionary across the table to me.

"Why don't you like me?" he'd said.

I looked up at him in surprise once I'd found the translation. He gestured toward the book and I knew he wanted me to play along. With a shrug, I started turning pages until I found what I was looking for. For the next few minutes we conversed in Latin, passing the dictionary back and forth. It was awkward, but it worked.

"I don't not like you, James," I replied.

"You're a bad liar, Eliza," he said with a sad smile. "Did I do something bad to you before I 'became'?"

"No," I assured him. "You've never done anything to hurt me. And it's not that I don't like you, I just don't like what happened to you."

"That I'm Kindred?" he asked with a puzzled frown. "But Cormac is Kindred. The same thing happened to him that happened to me."

I wanted to cry, but I smiled sadly instead. "I know."

"Then why?"

There was no way to explain it to him without going into details about what had happened the night he was embraced. I didn't know how much Mac had told James, or how much he wanted him to know, but I didn't want to spill the beans if Mac wanted them left in the can.

"I've always had a hard time dealing with Kindred, James," I said softly. "Until a few months ago I hated every one of them. It's still hard for me to adjust sometimes."

He nodded once he got the translation, then sat staring at the dictionary for a long moment. "Did you know me before?"

"I did."

"Did you like me before?"

The expression on his face when he asked that pulled at my heart. Okay, he wasn't human, but the guy still had feelings, didn't he? Mac and I were with him most of the time, we were the ones he should be able to depend on, and here I was giving him the cold shoulder. He was Mac's childe, didn't that in some ways make him my son?

Damn, that made me want to laugh. We finally had our two point five kids, didn't we?

"Yes, I liked you, Jimmy," I said in English, reaching out to touch his hand. "I haven't been fair to you, I'm sorry. Can we start over?"

He nearly jumped when I touched him, and looked down at where my warm fingers lay on his cold flesh.

What free time we had before the night Jimmy was embraced was now filled with training. Mac insisted that part of testing I'd agreed to included seeing how much I could pick up on the Tremere disciplines. With two of us learning Latin it seemed to sink in a little better for me.

Thaumaturgy was high on the list of things Mac wanted to teach us. It still amazed me that I actually had the ability to manipulate blood like that, but I got used to it after a while. The rituals were sometimes long and complicated, and I had a hard time picking them up, but Jimmy caught on quickly.

Mac tried a couple of times to use Dominate on me, but he seemed pleased when nothing worked. He told me I had iron will and that it was likely that no vampire would ever make me do something I didn't want to. Damn, I could have told him that if he'd only asked.

He kept me involved in everything he was teaching Jimmy. Not that I really wanted to learn it all, but it was good to spend so much time with my lover. He even made sure we had time alone together so I wouldn't feel shut out by his relationship with his child.

For real now, I still felt like an outsider. I wasn't Kindred, would never be Kindred if the fates were kind, and there were some things he was teaching Jimmy that I just didn't need to know, like how much blood could be taken from a human before it was dangerous for them.

Jimmy had the same ability Mac did to remember pretty much everything he learned. He picked things up quickly too, so after a few weeks Mac lightened up the training load. He was pleased with Jimmy's progress, but he kept telling me I needed to concentrate better.

What Mac didn't understand was that just being with him made it hard for me to concentrate.

Jett247: not for a while, the Bar Harbor thing would be about the next biggie. and you can gloss that.

slaysvamps107: I can? Don't you want to meet the Wrights? Would you take Jimmy?

Jett247: yes we would be taking Jimmy, didn't you get my e-mail? We would let him kinda take the fore front to see what he remembers about being a PI.

slaysvamps107: Oh, yeah. So you give him the computer and he comes up with the name of the people at the number, how long they've lived there, the previous addresses for them, etc. The guy is a private eye, has his own firm that opened in Bar Harbor six years ago.

Jett247: have James look for ties from any and all of Kate's aliases.