



CHRISTINA: LOST SOULS

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MEMORY RISING

This place feels so unfamiliar
And yet I know it well
Spanish Doll - Poe

"Some friends," I mumbled to myself. The sounds from the club behind me were barely audible as I walked away from it. "I'm gonna kill 'em when I get my hands on those two."

I had been out with some of my friends and roommates from college, but when their boyfriends had shown up, they'd taken off, leaving me alone.

Across the street I could see five guys standing around their motorcycles. One of them noticed me looking at them and pointed me out to his friends. They all turned and immediately started in whistling and catcalling. I did my best to ignore them and kept walking down the street away from them.

I had let Gena dress me, and she had chosen some rather questionable clothes. 'All the better to help you get a man,' I could still hear her saying. I was pretty sure that the dangerous looking bikers were not the kind of man she had meant.

Behind me I could hear them start after me, still calling out. I knew I was severely outnumbered and I walked faster, trying to hide my fear. They started running after me and as I felt them get closer I decided that the only option I had was to make a stand. They thought they were just chasing down a helpless college chick, they had no idea I was mage.

I turned and used my powers to push the closest one back. I must have had more adrenaline going than I'd thought because he went sailing almost back to where the bikes were parked. That stopped the others short, all but the big Hispanic one.

Jesus, his eyes were glowing red! He stepped in front of the others, a smile playing on his lips. He started laughing, a deep rumbling laugh, and the hairs on the back of my neck stood on end at the sound. The laugh slowly died down to a low snarl before it faded.

"Looks like we got a live one, boys," he growled in a thick Mexican accent. As he stepped into the light his eyes stopped glowing and turned a dark shade of gray.

"I'll never let you touch me, you—"

I was going to say asshole, but then he smiled and I got a good look at his teeth. His canines were a lot longer than they were supposed to be, and sharp. He raised his hand and as I watched claws grew from his fingertips.

I'd seen enough; I turned and ran.

"Get her!" I heard that... thing say, and I could tell that the others were running after me. Somehow I was actually managing to outrun them. I turned into a construction yard and saw a chain link fence on the other side with a large hole in it. When I was almost to the fence, I glanced back to see how close my pursuers were.

When I saw that they were closing on me, I turned back to make my way through the fence only to run into someone standing in the opening. I landed hard on my back and looked up to see a tall black man standing over me.

He was wearing gray slacks with a dark brown leather jacket zipped all the way up to his chin. His head was shaved and he was wearing black sunglasses that hid his eyes, but my gaze was drawn to his mouth. He was smiling wide, and I could see that he had fangs too. He was looking at the guys who had been chasing me and I heard them come to a stop just beyond me when the black man hissed at them.

"Don't worry, muchacha," I heard a deep voice say from somewhere above me. "We can help."

I looked up and saw another man standing on a steel girder high off the ground. He was wearing black leather pants and a gray leather jacket. His hair was cut short and there was a pencil thin mustache above his lips. As I watched, he took a step off of the girder and floated lightly to the ground. He landed effortlessly next to me on his feet before turning to me.

"I am Zach DelaRocha," he said with a small bow. He held his arm out toward the black man who had yet to move. "This is my comrade, Archie."

At the mention of his name, Archie hissed again and took a step toward the three men and the monster that were still standing behind me.

Zach turned his attention to them as well. "And this dog is Russell, and his puppies."

"Fuck you, warlock!" Russell yelled at Zach.

"Not tonight, Russ," a new voice put in. "Me and you got business to finish first."

Everybody turned to look at the newcomer. He was about five foot nine inches, with flowing brown hair, dressed in jeans and open shirt with an old black leather jacket over top of it all.

"Back off, Luke," Russell barked. "This toy is mine."

"There will be another time," Luke told him. "You owe me right now. Zach, take your party and go, this is going to get messy." At the last, he bared fangs of his own and started advancing on Russell.

Zach held his hand out to me and instinctively I took it.

"Come," he ordered as he pulled me along with him, but Archie took a step closer to Russell. "Archie! Come! Now!" Zach yelled as he moved away taking me with him, and after a slight pause Archie followed.

I wondered how they could just leave that one to fight all of the others as the three of us continued running through the night. We came out of an alley onto one of the main streets I recognized. As we slowed down a dark blue car pulled up followed closely by a motorcycle. Zach pushed me behind him and Archie came to stand next to him, but before trouble could erupt the window of the car went down and my new friends relaxed a bit.

"Senior DelaRocha," the man in the car began. "You look a bit hurried this eve." The man appeared to be in his mid forties with an easygoing face, but I could tell from one glimpse into his eyes that he was a very intelligent man. He was wearing a light gray suit and coordinating tie. He looked like what a favorite uncle should look like, not that I had a favorite uncle.

I spared a glance back to the motorcycle and its rider. At first I thought he looked like Marcus, but it was just my mind playing tricks on me. I looked closer and he seemed to be about a decade younger than the man in the car. He had a very solemn face and his hair seemed to be holding it's style despite being on a bike, but I couldn't see his eyes because he was wearing very dark sunglasses. His long trench coat was only half-buttoned revealing the upper half of a suit and tie.

"You put a fright into me, old man," Zach said as his hand eased on mine.

"Oh?" the man murmured. "Have you reason to be frightened?"

Zach quickly told the man about the others back at the construction site. When he was finished the man leaned out of the car window and yelled back to the man on the motorcycle.

"Boy! Go see if Luke needs any help. It sounds like he's outnumbered."

The man nodded and said, "As you wish," before speeding off into the night.

My attention turned back to the man in the car when he spoke. "Well, now that that is taken care of, who is your friend here?" The man was looking right into my eyes and I felt like he was measuring me for something.

"This is Christina Strong, daughter of Father Roger Strong, from Helena." At first I wondered how he knew who I was, but that was forgotten when he said my father's name. The man in the car nodded as if it all meant something to him.

Zach stepped to the side so I could get a better view of the other man as he got out of his car. "Christina, this is Dougal Galloway. He is a friend of ours from out of town."

"How do you do, young lady?" Dougal asked as he held his hand out for mine.

I gave him my hand as I responded. "I'm good, now."

His handshake was firm yet friendly. "Are you sure about that?" he inquired. "I see great sadness in your eyes for one so young as you are."

At that I dropped my gaze from his, but he continued.

"How many loved ones have you lost, my child?"

The sadness that loomed inside of me manifested itself as sarcasm after what I'd been through tonight. "More than I'd care to remember."

My answer made Dougal laugh softly. "That could be arranged." He gave a small sigh before going on in a more serious tone. "The ones that have been taken from you are not the ones you mourn for now, but rather the one you have given up."

That one memory made me go weak at the knees with the mere thought of it, and I had to lean against Zach to keep from falling. He caught me easily and let me slide to the ground next to him. When I had enough control over my emotions to open my eyes, I saw that Dougal had crouched down next to me as well.

"I did not mean any painful memories, dear child," he soothed as he took my hand in his.

I shook my head at him. "No, it isn't your fault. It was my choice to make, and my pain to bear."

"I do not mean to interrupt," Zach said as he leaned down to me, "but we should be going. Those two boys won't be able to hold off Russell and his crew for long."

"I agree," Dougal said as he stood. "Can I give you all a lift somewhere?"

Zach answered for the three of us. "No thank you. We will escort Miss Strong back to her dorm and then come back to the Chantry. I do look forward to finishing our, er, discussion from last night."

I woke suddenly with the sunset, memories of the night I'd dreamed about filling my mind. I'd dreamed about the night that I'd met Zach before, but never this much of it. The memory of the man who had embraced me was unsettling, not to mention the knowledge that I'd met not only Luke Thomas that night, but my brother Cormac Brennan as well.

It was obvious to me that even years later I was still mourning Marcus, my high school sweetheart. Now I had to doubt that I'd ever gotten over his death at Malcolm's hands. Still, what Dougal said about the one I'd given up bothered me. What had he been talking about?

Jason Kline stirred beside me and I turned to cuddle into his side. He put his arms around me and held me close to him, and I could feel my soul melting into his. We'd been married less than a year, but it was still a thrill to wake up next to him every night and know I was his wife.

When I was in the shower getting ready for patrol, I thought about that night so many years ago. I'd met Dougal, the Tremere who would later turn me into what I was now, a vampire. I'd apparently met Cormac too, although I didn't think he remembered meeting me that night. If he had, he'd have said something.

Suddenly it hit me, memories of what had happened when Zach had taken me home.

"Look, I don't mean to sound ungrateful," I said softly, "but what the hell is going on? Who was that guy that tried to jump me?"

Zach spat out the open window before letting out a stream of Spanish curses while Archie growled loudly in the back seat.

"They are scum who will meet their end," Zach told me. "Soon if they are not careful."

"Is that guy going to be all right?" I asked. "Luke, wasn't that his name?"

"Just another Gangrel," he said dismissively, "but he is one of the more loyal ones."

Gangrel? Was that some street gang or something? Somehow I didn't think he'd tell me, and I really wasn't sure I wanted to know. "What about the other one? The one on the motorcycle?"

He shot me a hard look and when he spoke his voice was sour. "He is Dougal's childe, and that fact alone has kept me from his throat more than once. He is as tactless as he is deadly."

At the last word, Archie let out another growl low in his throat. I glanced back at him, but I couldn't see him very well in the darkness of the car. I tried to convince myself that they hadn't saved me from Russell just to hurt me themselves. Maybe if I kept them talking.

"And Dougal?"

"Ah, Dougal," he replied with a smile. His voice was warm, as if he were talking about the good old days. "He is an old one, nearly as old as myself. Too bad we can't talk him into staying in one place for too long, he would make a fine leader in some city."

I didn't think he meant mayor, even though the guy had looked the part from what I could tell. An old one? I didn't really understand that comment until I thought about it for a minute. I looked at Zach in the dim light of the car and knew that I was looking into the face of a vampire. I wanted to ask questions, but what the hell would I say? What's it like to drink blood? Are you planning on biting me any time soon?

I turned and looked out the window, more than confused about the entire sequence of events from the time I'd left the bar until now. It didn't seem like very long before we got to my dorm. Zach knew exactly what building to stop in front of, exactly what door.

I had so many questions to ask, but I thought it was probably best if I just went up to bed. Maybe in the morning I would have a little better perspective. I got out of the car but before I closed the door I leaned down and looked in at him one last time. "How did you know my name?" I asked softly.

Zach smiled kindly. "Your father is well known among my kind."

Well, that figured. Papa killed things that were supernatural, and vampires were definitely in that category. It didn't exactly answer the question, though. And how in hell had they known about the one I'd given up?

I tried to remember more about Zach, or Archie, or Dougal, but I came up blank. Later that evening I found Cormac in the chantry with Eliza Gentry, his ghoul and lover. When I asked him for a moment alone, she went over to sit with James Price, Cormac's childe. My brother stood looking questioningly at me, but it took me a minute to gather my courage.

"I had a dream last night that I think is a memory," I said finally. "I'd like to ask you about it."

"Oh? Do tell," he encouraged.

"Interestingly enough, you were in it," I told him. "So was Dougal and another Tremere."

That seemed to take him aback. "Oh?"

I nodded and looked away for a moment to get a handle on my emotions. Knowing that I'd met Dougal before my embrace wasn't much of a help to me if I couldn't remember a lot about him. I really hoped that Cormac remembered something about me.

"I was walking from a bar when some guy named Russell tried to attack me," I continued. "A man named Zach DelaRocha dropped out of nowhere with a guy named Archie. Do you know them?"

"Yes," he admitted easily. "Senior DelaRocha was a friend of Dougal's. Archie is his," he paused for a moment as if searching for the right word, "friend."

I frowned, not sure what that was supposed to mean. "Just when I thought they were going to fight Russell and his 'puppies', Luke showed up. I'm not sure he even saw me, but he told us to go." I looked away remembering how determined Luke had been to take on the Kindred and his crew.

"We started running away and when we hit the main road, a dark blue car was there and Dougal was in it. He told you to go help Luke, and somehow Zach knew my name." That was important, I knew it was. The Tremere clan had been watching me, had known who Papa was. I focused on my brother again. "Do you know anything about that? Do you remember that night?"

"You were known because of your father and his habits," he reminded me. "I remember most of that night. The fight went badly for us."

"What happened?"

"A Gangrel elder and his puppies against Luke and myself." He shook his head at the memory. "Bad situation."

"Luke went against an elder of his clan?" I asked with a frown. "I don't understand."

"Russell was bad news," Cormac told me. "He had been picking on Luke since before Dougal and I got to town. Russell wanted the clan to be more open, less like 'lap dogs' was his phrase. Luke knew his place, he knew the clan and the city would stand behind him if he went against Russell." He gave a little snort. "All he got was me."

"But the two of you made it through, obviously." They were still alive, at any rate.

"Discretion is the better part of valor," he quoted. "We fought for a time. It ended with Luke being knocked out and me dragging him out of there on my bike. Russell rode him for weeks after the night that he had needed a Tremere to save his ass. He rode him too far one night. We put an end to Russell and his puppies."

I shook my head and looked down so Cormac couldn't see the longing in my eyes for Luke. I still missed him, no matter how much I loved my husband. It wasn't as bad as it'd once been, but I knew I still had some time to go before I could break the partial blood bond that he had over me once and for all. I wondered how badly our separation was affecting him considering he was fully bonded to me. I hoped that, like mine, his bond had lessened over the last few months.

That wasn't something I should be thinking about. "Zach didn't seem to like you too much," I murmured, a little surprised at that. Cormac was a bit cold some times, but his icy exterior hid a warm heart. "Why?"

"Senior DelaRocha and I have disagreed on a great many things in the time we have known each other," he replied dryly. "I afforded him the respect due his age and the fact that he was one of Dougal's closest friends, but that was it. In return he held me in contempt for my 'violent' nature." He smiled a little. "Brenda reminds me a great deal of him, and he of her."

I shot him an amused look. Brenda wasn't real friendly with my brother, but she wasn't as bad as Zach had behaved. "He seemed to like Dougal well enough." He'd seemed to like me too. "Do you know where he is now?"

"Detroit," he said simply, as if it wasn't the most important thing I needed to hear in that instant. "Or he was last time I was there."

Although I'd hoped he'd known where Zach was, it still surprised me. Now that I knew where to look for him, maybe I could get some answers to questions I'd had to bury for seven years. "Oh?" I asked, trying for a nonchalant tone. "When were you there last?"

He thought about it for a moment, then said, "Three weeks before I met you. He will probably still be there, he had gotten himself appointed scourge."

Three weeks. That would have been early August, almost a year ago. I started to ask if he'd help me get a hold of Zach, but thought better of it because of the obvious animosity between them. I looked up at Cormac, searching his face for the truth I needed so badly. "Did you know who I was that night?"

"No," he said, shaking his head. "Zach was a bit of a ladies vamp, for all I knew you were one of his 'dates'. You were certainly dressed the part."

I glanced down my clothes, which weren't all that different from what I remembered wearing in my dream. I smiled up at him briefly before I got serious again. "Did you know anything about me before we met in Vegas?"

"No," he told me, and I believed him. "As I said, you were known for your father's habits, but Dougal embraced you with out my knowledge."

Sighing, I nodded and looked away. At least he'd tried to help, that was more than I'd gotten from most of my clan. "Thank you, Cormac. Obviously I don't remember what happened. I had hoped someone could answer the questions I have about my embrace."

"Only Dougal or Piston could tell you that," he said kindly.

I smiled sadly. "Neither of them are likely to, are they?" They'd both met final death years ago.

He took a tentative step closer to me. "I am truly sorry," he said earnestly. "I know how frustrating it can be getting your memory back one small piece at a time. But at least you didn't have to wait nineteen years for it to start returning."

How thoughtless of me to forget what he'd gone through. Dougal's blood had wiped his memory just as it had wiped mine, and Cormac had waited a lot longer for someone to jog his memory than I had. "I'm sorry, I know this must be hard for you too," I told him with a glance toward his ghoul. "How are things going?"

"Well," he assured me, following my gaze. "She is adjusting smoothly now, the house has helped a great deal."

I smiled. "Yeah, I'm sure it did. She probably feels a lot safer." Eliza had been very uncomfortable living in the Bathori Mansion with all of us.

"That and she has something to do besides watch me be dead for twelve hours," he said dryly.

"I can imagine it hasn't been easy for her to go from hunting all of us to living with us," I murmured. She had been a hunter for years, working with the very organization my father had once belonged to, the Inquisition.

"No, it hasn't," he agreed.

I slowly laid my hand on his arm, not quite sure if he'd allow the touch. "Look, we don't know each other that well and I know it was a shock to find out that we're related," I told him softly, "but I just wanted you to know that I'm glad we are."

He put his hand over mine and smiled. "Me too."

With the softness of his voice and the smile on his face, I could see why Eliza hadn't been able to resist him. On impulse I moved closer and hugged him. It felt really nice when he put his arms around me and returned the embrace.

My world felt complete that night. I had a brother close at hand to confide in, and another brother in Paris who was gradually helping me regain my memories. My sister Brenda Thompson was always close by if I needed anything, and of course Frasier O'Connell, my ghoul, tried to look after my every need.

Even with all those people to be grateful for, it went without saying that the star in my sky was Jason. We'd spent so long apart, it was still hard for me to believe that not only were we together, we were man and wife. I knew I would die if I ever lost him again.

When I rejoined him and he took my hand, I knew I would never let that happen.

INQUIRIES

A pawn in the game

That's all I am

Wasting Time - Kid Rock

I couldn't stop thinking about my dreams during the next few nights. I was busy enough, what with patrol and Brenda's wedding plans, but still at odd moments I'd remember Dougal's face in the street light, or the way Archie had growled.

There was no way for me to talk to Malcolm about what happened between us when I was mortal, not without me killing him, anyway, but perhaps I could talk to Zach. We were of the same clan after all, and he'd seemed to like me well enough. I just wasn't sure if I should call him out of the blue. Finally one night when Jason was off doing Gangrel things and O'Connell was busy elsewhere, I asked Micky for his opinion.

"You know that Antonio adopted me, and that I have very few memories before my embrace," I said, more than a little uncomfortable. "I had a dream recently that I think might pertain to the circumstances surrounding my embrace."

He looked at me expectantly, but didn't say anything so I went on.

"I dreamed about Dougal and a gentleman named Zach DelaRocha," I explained. "Cormac tells me this Tremere does exist, and is in fact living in Detroit. I-I'm not sure how to get a hold of him, but since no one else seems to have information about what happened when Dougal embraced me, I would like to ask Mr. DelaRocha some questions. I thought he might know something."

"That sounds like a good idea," he agreed.

"I'm not really sure how to go about doing it," I said softly, "who to call at the chantry. Should I just call and ask for him?"

"Well, the direct approach would be the simplest," he told me with a smile. "What could it really hurt?"

What could it hurt? This was the Tremere clan we were talking about. Piss the wrong person off and you might as well sit on a rooftop and wait for the sun to come up. "Well, I just don't want to step on anyone's toes," I said aloud. "I've only been to the Detroit chantry a couple of times, and I wasn't there very long either time. If that's what you think I should do, that's what I'll do."

I thanked him for his time and went out to my car. I found a quiet park to stop at and dialed the Detroit Chantry on my cell phone. A woman whose voice I didn't recognize answered and identified herself as Lori.

"Senior DelaRocha is... busy at the moment," she said formally when I asked for him. "Perhaps someone else might be of assistance?"

"No, actually it's a personal matter," I admitted. "Do you know when Senior DelaRocha will be available?"

"You could leave a number if ya want," she replied, losing her formality when she realized I wasn't anyone important. "I could have him call ya back when he's, ah, free."

"Thanks, Lori, I appreciate it," I told her. "This is Christina... Strong from Salem." I thought that leaving my maiden name would be better, he might recognize it and be more likely to call me back. I left my cell phone number and asked her to have him call at his convenience.

"I will," she promised.

We said our goodnights and I drove to Guilty Pleasures, where I was supposed to be keeping an eye on the Brujah. It was almost an hour later when my cell phone rang. Thankfully it was pretty quiet in the club, so it wasn't a problem hearing Zach's voice on the other end.

"Miss Strong?" he said with a light Spanish accent that reminded me of my sire, Antonio Moreno.

"Senior DelaRocha," I replied politely. "Thank you for calling me back."

"I am sorry I could not receive your call," he told me. "A situation came up here that needed my attention. What may I do for you?"

With a bit of luck, a lot. "I was hoping you could answer a few questions for me about some things that happened in Berkley about seven years ago," I said softly.

"I can but try."

"I know this is a bit strange," I admitted ruefully, "but I recently remembered meeting you there during an incident with a guy named Russell."

His voice lowered just a little, enough for me to know he hadn't liked Russell any more than Cormac had. "Yes, I remember Russell."

"Do you remember me?"

"Yes," he replied easily.

"Could you—I mean—did you—" I sighed; this was no way to handle the situation. I took the bull by the horns and said, "I don't remember much about my life before and I was hoping you knew something about what happened to me."

"As I said, I can only try to answer your questions, *niña*," he replied pleasantly, "but you must ask me them first."

That was fair enough. "Did we meet again after that night?"

"Yes, three or four more times, I believe."

"Under what circumstances?"

"How do you mean?"

"Well, did we run into each other on the street?" I asked him, trying very hard not to lose patience with him. "Did you approach me? Did I go looking for you?"

"We 'ran into' each other once," he told me. "The other times you were 'approached'." He'd paused a little before repeating my words, but he seemed honest enough.

"Was Dougal Galloway involved in those meetings?"

He paused for a moment. "The last one, yes."

So Zach had been involved with in my embrace. "Were you there when I was... changed?"

He didn't answer for a minute, then he sighed. "Not in the room, no, but I was in Vegas."

"Can you tell me what happened?" I hated how vulnerable my voice sounded, but it was important to me that I find out the truth about what had happened.

"In the room, no. Dougal was," he paused again before saying, "very quiet when he left town that night. I never saw you after that."

I sighed, wishing that I'd asked Cormac what had happened when he was embraced. I had no idea if Dougal was the type to force someone against their will. Had he done that to me? Was I a vampire because Dougal had forced it on me? The only way I could know was to ask.

"I guess what I'm asking is if you know whether or not I wanted things this way." That had sounded all wrong. "I have no reason to think I didn't, but I've always wondered."

"You mean, did you accept the 'gift' willingly?"

"Yes, that's what I'm asking."

"Yes, you accepted our gift willingly," he assured me.

"If that is the case," I said trying to fight my anger, "then why was I left in an alley to fend for myself?" They'd left me alone to find out what I was and an innocent woman had died because of it.

"We were assured that you would be taken care of by one of the city's clan members," he said smoothly. "After Dougal left the room, we headed back to LA. The city's clan took over your fate from us."

I knew he was telling the truth, but someone had abandoned me and I wanted to know who. "Who was the clan member that told you I'd be taken care of?" I asked in a hard voice.

"Meerlinda told Dougal you would be taken care of."

That put a damper on my righteous anger. Meerlinda was the highest ranking Tremere in North America. There was no way I could question her decision or her involvement in my embrace. Her very name had placed a very large brick wall in the path of my search to find out why I'd been left in the alley.

The only thing left for me to focus on was Dougal. "Do you know what Dougal was talking about when he said that I was mourning the one I gave away?"

"Not exactly," he replied, his voice lightening a bit when speaking of Cormac's sire. "The old man was notoriously vague like that."

"Did, ah, did he ever talk to you about me after that night?" I asked hesitantly.

"He told me that Antonio had adopted you as his own," he said softly. "Dougal seemed warmed by that fact."

"Antonio is a wonderful man," I said as affectionately as I could manage given my anger. "I will always be grateful to him for taking care of me." Dougal certainly hadn't cared enough to make sure I was all right. I ignored the fact that he'd visited Vegas nearly a year after my embrace. By then it had been much too late.

"As I said, it warmed Dougal to know you were being taken care of," Zach repeated. "He didn't like the thought of not being there for you, but it was the clan's wish to embrace you under the circumstances."

"Of course," I said in a dry voice. Deep inside I believed that it was lack of interest that had kept him from me more than following orders, but I wasn't about to say that. Zach seemed to like Dougal, and I didn't want word to get back to Cormac that I resented his sire, even if it were true.

"Do you have any idea why Meerlinda was involved with the 'gift' I was given?" I asked after a moment. I couldn't question Meerlinda directly, but maybe Zach knew something. "I mean, I was just a student from Berkley who knew how to do a little magic. From what I can remember, I wasn't even that good at it."

"You were better than you remember," he assured me. "And you were the Trimuritive's only remaining student, but my approaching you had nothing to do with that. Your freedom and well-being was to be your father's reward for stopping his activities."

"What? Wait a minute. What?" I'd known that stopping Papa was one of the reasons for my embrace, but had he known I'd been turned? He hadn't acted like he knew, but damn it he'd lied before, hadn't he? And what the hell was the Trimuritive? The word rang warning bells inside my mind, but I had no idea what the word meant.

"Yes?"

"What is the Trimuritive?" I asked, totally confused. "And what did my father have to do with this?"

"He was your mentor," Zach replied. "Your father was a hunter."

"My father was a hunter, why didn't you just kill him?" That's what most vampires did to hunters, anyway. "And the Trimuritive is a he? Are you talking about Malcolm?"

"We thought that by threatening your father with your life, he would cease his activities," he told me. "We were wrong, he called our bluff."

"You should have killed him," I insisted, my voice hard and cold. He deserved to die for trying to kill my brother Robert, not to mention killing my mother, my friend Lizzy and God only knew how many others.

"We embraced you instead," Zach reminded me. "He was finally persuaded to stop when we took the fight to him."

"And the Trimuritive? Was it Malcolm?" If I remembered right, Malcolm Robbins had been my mentor for years before Papa's righteous beliefs had killed his girlfriend. After we tried to save Lizzy and couldn't, Malcolm had hated me enough to kill my boyfriend.

"If that was your mentor's name, yes."

"Malcolm is the only mentor I can remember," I told him honestly. "What is the Trimuritive? Why was that so important?" If memory served, it had something to do with the power of three. Maybe it was connected to the Mother, Maiden, Crone deity of the Wiccans, but I couldn't be sure.

"The Trimuritive is believed to be the essence of Magic," he said simply.

It was something to look up in the chantry library, anyway. "If I was the last remaining student, why was I embraced in a way that would erase my memory?"

"For your potential, I think," he replied. "And we had hoped you knew where he had gone. He disappeared some years before."

They wanted to know where Malcolm went, so they erased my memory? Something didn't quite make sense here. "Did I know that the gift would take my memory, Senior DelaRocha?"

"Yes, Dougal told you it would erase your pain and loss."

I wondered what had been so bad in my life that I'd agreed to forget everything. "Has the Trimuritive been found?"

"Nothing definite."

That meant there was something. "What news is there of him?"

"No news, just reported possible sightings," he answered. "Why?"

"If this Trimuritive is Malcolm, I believe I saw him myself recently," I replied coolly. It hadn't been a welcome sighting by any means. "Where has he been seen?"

"In various locations around Europe and the former USSR. Where do you think you saw him?"

"Austria," I said simply, "at my wedding."

"Wedding?" For the first time he sounded surprised. "Who did you find to marry a vampire? And what did you marry?"

I laughed, remembering the ceremony with fondness. Stephen Brennan, Cormac's nephew, had married Jason and me at our friend Lena Stockton's holding in Austria. "A werewolf, Senior DelaRocha, believe it or not. And I married a vampire, a Gangrel named Jason Kline."

"Really?" I could hear the smile in his voice. "You will have to tell me that tale sometime. Kline, Kline," he mumbled to himself. "Wasn't he who you were looking for when you passed through here last? Talon's ghoul?"

Christ, not another one who knew Graves. "Yes, he is," I said aloud, wondering if Zach had known I was in Detroit at the time and chosen not to renew our acquaintance. "Luke Thomas helped me find him. You remember Luke, I'm sure."

"Luke Thomas," he murmured. "Ah yes, the boy who helped kill Russell. Last I heard he moved to Vegas as well, I am surprised you two never met up."

I gave a dry chuckle. "Actually, Luke and I have been friends for a number of years. He lived with me in Vegas." He'd gone home with me when Jason had refused to let me be with him and stayed until he realized I'd never get over the love of my life.

Zach laughed a little. "How is he doing these days? I am surprised he hasn't gotten himself killed yet."

"I, ah, I haven't seen him in a few months, but I'm sure he can take care of himself," I said reluctantly. Luke would find himself dead if he showed up in Salem before my year was up. As much as I wanted to see him, I really didn't want to see him. "He always seems to land on his feet."

"Did you two have a falling out?" Zach asked, sounding concerned.

"Of sorts." Luke was the last thing I wanted to talk about, so I changed the subject. "Look, I've kept you long enough, Senior DelaRocha. Thank you for answering my questions, you've been quite helpful. I'm sorry that I had to bother you with them, but you understand that I don't remember and there is no one else I could ask. I'm sure you've heard that Dougal has met final death."

"Yes, he was well liked and respected among those who knew him," he said pointedly. "One last thing, I have heard another of his childer is in Salem as well. Have you had the pleasure of meeting Cormac?"

Abruptly I remembered that Zach hadn't cared for Cormac much and somehow I didn't think his opinion had changed over the last seven years. "Yes, Cormac is here and I have had the *pleasure* of meeting him. I've found him quite... civilized."

"A leopard may change its spots, but it will still kill you if it gets hungry," he cautioned. "Be wary of him."

"I remember that you don't particularly like him, Senior," I said coolly, "but it is my brother you are talking about."

His voice hardened to match mine. "And I have known him much longer than you, child." Then his tone returned to normal. "Feel free to call me again if you wish to talk more. And you really must come tell me the story of your wedding someday." Once again I could hear the smile in his voice.

I chose to ignore his comment about Cormac. "I'd like that, senior. Perhaps we could get together if I'm ever in Detroit again. I could bring the wedding photographs and tell you all about it. And I'd like to hear more about our meetings in Berkley as well." I wanted to hear more about what they had said to convince me to accept the embrace.

He told me to call when I was ready to visit and we said our goodnights. I went back to watching the Brujah and brooding over things that Zach hadn't told me.

THE TRIMURITIVE

Things got turned 'round
Don't know where I started from
Damn - Matchbox Twenty

It took me almost a week of solid studying, reading and referencing to find much of anything on the Trimuritive in the chantry library. Most of it was vague references and hearsay, but I did find a few useful tidbits scattered among a dozen or so books.

It was never really defined anywhere, but it was always cross-referenced to the Power of the Three, the Mother, Maiden and Crone, the moon goddess of Wiccan folklore. Apparently it was supposed to be the same principal, but on a lower power scale. The Mother, Maiden and Crone were believed to be embodiments of the Goddess. The Trimuritive was said to be the essence of one of the Human mage arts, and each manifestation of the Trimuritive was believed to have to complete some task to fulfill a part of the destiny before the next manifestation could complete its task.

I found a few things on Hemeomancy too, but information on it was few and far between. It seems most mages regarded Hemeomancy as the ability vampires have to use their blood to power strength and generic powers like Dominate, Celerity and the like. They didn't seem to know about Thaumaturgy, the Tremere blood magic.

Spending so much time in the chantry library naturally brought questions to the minds of my fellow clan mates. Cormac, Eliza and James ran interference for me in the chantry when they could, while Jason and O'Connell covered what I was supposed to be doing on patrol.

I told anyone who asked that I'd come across information on a magical path I wanted to explore. It was almost the truth, although I knew that since the Trimuritive was tied to a human mage art, there was no way I could use it. Something about the embrace makes it impossible for Kindred to use that kind of magic.

Of course, I told my family the truth about what I was doing, that I was searching for answers about my old life. I didn't mention Malcolm or the certainty I had that he *was* the Trimuritive. I didn't tell them everything about the dream I'd had either, in the last few months it had become second nature for me to avoid any mention of Luke.

Micky did ask if I'd gotten a hold of Zach, and I told him that Senior DelaRocha had laid the fears I'd had to rest about my embrace being forced. He didn't ask anything more about the conversation, and I didn't offer.

Near the end of my research, Cormac asked me exactly what I was looking for. My brother never seemed to judge my actions, and I knew he wouldn't be hurt by the mention of Malcolm like Jason would have, so I told him everything.

I told him that Zach had mentioned the Trimuritive and that I suspected it was Malcolm. Cormac frowned at Zach's name, but he seemed to agree that my ex-mentor was a threat to the people I cared about, and understand my need to find him. What I didn't say was that I still felt I was to blame for Jason's embrace and Lena's kidnapping. I tried to stick to logic to explain my reasoning.

Cormac listened without comment when I told him of what Zach had said of our meetings in Berkeley and what little he had told me about my embrace in Las Vegas. I still didn't understand why they hadn't just killed my father, but I knew the clan had done what they'd felt was best.

"I just can't find anything definite about the Trimuritive here in the chantry," I complained in frustration.

"Do you remember what Tradition you were?" he asked me.

"Verbena," I replied.

"I know a Verbena mage here in town," he told me after a moment. "I think she may have a little more information on the subject, or at least a little more definite information. I will go down with you if you wish."

There were still a lot of things about my Tremere brother that surprised me from time to time, and this was one of them. "That would be great," I said, trying to contain my excitement. "Do you think she'd mind? I mean, it's not like I'm part of the 'family' anymore."

"I have known Summer and her sisters since my embrace," he said with a fond smile. "They shouldn't mind."

Cormac and I went alone to The Four Seasons, the magic shop that Summer Walker and her sisters owned near downtown Salem. I felt a little leery going there; the only experience I'd had since my embrace with the Verbena hadn't been good, and Malcolm was the only mage I could remember from before. Still, I knew I couldn't judge all Verbena by Malcolm's actions, so I tried to keep an open mind.

"Is Summer familiar with vampires?" I asked Cormac on the way over.

"Summer knows what I am," he assured me.

The mage greeted my brother warmly when we entered the shop. He introduced us, calling her his friend, and me his friend and clansmate. When he explained that I had some questions about her Tradition, she led us into a back room.

"Thank you for taking the time to talk to me," I said sincerely.

"I am only too happy to help a friend of Mac's," she replied with a smile.

I explained that, like Cormac, I had lost my memory years ago but that lately I had regained some memories of being Verbena as a human. "I don't know how close your tradition is," I said softly, "but do you know of a man named Malcolm Robbins? He lived in Helena almost ten years ago."

She thought for a few moments, then shook her head. "The name is not familiar. Why?"

"I believe he was my mentor," I told her. "He disappeared some years ago and I'd like to find him. Are you familiar with the term Trimuritive?"

With that one word I had her undivided attention. "Yes, I am familiar with that term," she said tentatively.

"Do you know what it means?" I asked, trying not to watch her too intently.

"Yes," she admitted. "What do you know of it?"

I glanced at Cormac, not quite certain if I should tell her everything I knew.

He gave me an expectant look. "This is why we came here," he reminded me gently.

I turned back to Summer. "I don't know very much, I couldn't really find a definition for it," I explained. "It seems to be cross-referenced to the Power of Three, Mother, Maiden and Crone. Something along the same lines, but not as strong."

"It is the same idea," she confirmed. "There are three... aspects, good, evil, and neutral."

"I also found that each manifestation of the Trimuritive is believed to have to complete some task in order to fulfill a part of destiny before the next manifestation can complete its task," I continued.

"Yes." Just when I thought she wasn't going to say anything further, she added, "Each one must, 'make the way' for the next embodiment to come into our world."

"What do you mean?" I asked, a little confused. "How does it 'make the way'?"

"The texts don't really say," she told me. "It has to do with completing the tasks I suppose."

I had no reason not to believe her. "Does it say what kind of tasks it has to complete?"

"No, only that each must make way for the next," she replied, but it sounded to me like she knew more than she was saying.

Glancing at Cormac, I decided it probably wasn't a good idea to call her on it. "There was a reference that said the Trimuritive was believed to be the essence of one of the human mage arts. Do you know anything about that?"

"Yes," she told me. "Our art waxes and wanes with the Trimuritive's own life."

Just as the moon moved through its cycle. Perhaps that meant something. "At first I thought the Trimuritive was different aspects of the same person," I said slowly, "but now I'm not so sure. Do you think that the Trimuritive may be three different people, each of which has to 'make way', maybe die, for the next one to come into being? Like the phases of the moon make way for each other?"

"The Trimuritive is not one person," she confirmed, "it is three separate ones, but each one has the other two inside. 'All and none'."

That sounded vaguely familiar, but I couldn't place where I'd heard it before. "'All and none', What does that mean?"

"Each one is his own person, yet holds the other two as well."

That threw me a little. "Like a multiple personality?"

"I can not say for sure," she said softly. "I haven't met our current Trimuritive."

If she hadn't met him, there was probably nothing more she could tell me about it. I decided to take a different tact. "Do you know anything about Hemeomancy?"

She looked at me in surprise. "Blood Magic? Isn't that more your department?"

I smiled; Blood Magic was a specialty of the Tremere, and it had always come naturally to me. "I remember reading a book I'd found," I said aloud, "and Malcolm borrowed it from me. He was extremely interested in it, but I couldn't make heads or tails of it at the time."

"Was it one of 'our' books?" she asked meaningfully. "Or from another Tradition?"

The book had been Robert's, so it probably wasn't Verbena. "I believe it was a different Tradition. Ecstatics, perhaps."

Summer and Cormac looked at each other and said in unison, "Jules."

I glanced between them. "Who?"

"One of my Coven sisters," Summer explained, "in Houston. Cormac's sire was a good friend of ours, and we all hand in raising the 'boy'."

Cormac scowled good-naturedly at what must have been a familiar insult. She'd said the word quite fondly, and I tried not to smile as I wondered what it would have been like if I'd been 'raised' along side of him.

"Would she know any thing about Hemeomancy that might help?" I asked.

She stifled a giggle before answering. "Hemeomancy is a generic term. Hemeo means blood, mancy means magic. It could mean anything really."

As if I didn't know that. "But would it mean something specific to an Ecstatic?"

"As I said, it is a generic term," she replied. "It might mean something to one tradition, and something totally different to another. It would depend on whose book it was."

Since that wasn't getting me anywhere, I decided to take one more shot at finding out if Malcolm was the Trimuritive. "You said you haven't met the current Trimuritive. Do you know someone who has?"

"I know of several that have knowledge of him," she told me.

"Do you know where he is?" I asked hopefully. "Or who he is?"

"The first 'aspect' spent most of his life in Scotland," she said thoughtfully. "He was mostly a loner from what I was told. The second was spotted up and down the West Coast and a few states further in. We try not to interfere too much, let them find their own fate."

Cormac snorted disbelievingly and sneered at the word 'fate'.

"But I heard that we lost sight of him," Summer added, ignoring my brother's rude behavior.

"What states?" I asked intently, trying not to sound too demanding. "When?"

"California, Baja, Tijuana," she said, dropping her voice on the last city before she shrugged. "I am not sure what other states. I try to stay out of the politics and only hear about the major developments."

"Montana?"

"I don't recall hearing about Montana," she told me, "but as I said, I am not informed of every thing that happens. And the Trimuritive lives its life as a mortal. It is only through divination and a little luck we find them for certain."

What she said made sense and I nodded thoughtfully. "What has your art been like lately?"

She shot me a look that told me I'd asked a very personal question. "Why would you like to know?" Her voice was still polite, but a bit more reserved than it had been.

I shrugged trying to make light of my error. "You said your art waxes and wanes with the Trimuritive's life. I wasn't trying to pry, I'm sorry if I offended you."

"No, I should apologize," she replied, relaxing a little. "It is just that our art has been very weak of late, it has a lot of us on edge. The High Council assures us it is merely a flux in our power base, but it has been like this for several months now."

"Does that mean there is a problem with the Trimuritive?"

"I believe it is possible."

I didn't think there was any harm trying one last time. "But you don't know who or where he is?"

"No," she said softly. "There was a report of him in Italy almost three years ago. It coincided with a powerful chaotic flux in the art."

"Jesus," I breathed, rubbing a hand across my eyes. Jason had been captured in Italy almost three years ago. It couldn't be a coincidence, it just couldn't be.

After a minute I focused on Summer again. "Is there any way you can find out if there is still a Verbena named Malcolm Robbins out there somewhere? Or if he is the Trimuritive?"

"I suppose I could call some people, ask around a bit," she said reluctantly.

"I would appreciate that greatly," I told her. I thanked her for her time and gave her my cell phone number in case she heard anything.

Cormac and Summer exchanged small talk for a few minutes, then we left.

I spent the rest of the night thinking about the things that Summer had told me. I hoped she would learn something about Malcolm and call, but I couldn't be sure she would. Granted, Cormac trusted her, but when it came to her magic I thought she'd be more closed mouthed than anything, especially with a vampire she didn't know.

Falling asleep that night, I dreamed.

The room was filled with a soft flickering light. Malcolm had dozens of candles lit, he preferred reading by them to the harsh white light of the modern light bulb. As usual, he had them on every possible surface, even on the floor.

I was sitting in front of a wide bookcase filled to overflowing with books. He wasn't much for organization, but my mentor always managed to find what he was looking for. I had to search to find

things in his library, but it was usually worth it. Sometimes I found things much more interesting than what I'd been originally looking for.

Like now.

I'd found an old volume of Verbena lore tucked away out of sight behind some other books. As I looked through it, much of the contents were familiar to me. Then I found a section that looked like it had been read much more frequently than the rest of the book. As I read through the section, the text fascinated me. I turned and looked for my mentor.

He was sitting in a corner of the room, an incense burner on the floor in front of him. He'd been meditating, but then again he always said that if I had a question I should ask.

"Malcolm?" I called softly.

He stirred a little, then looked at me with a smile. "Find something interesting?"

"Yes," I replied, trying to conceal my excitement about what I'd found. Some of the things that fascinated me didn't interest him in the least, and some things he told me I wasn't ready for. "This book mentions the 'Trimuritive', have you heard of it?"

Something passed behind his eyes that I couldn't really identify. "It's a legend," he told me. "Nothing, really, an old superstition."

"It talks about the power of three," I murmured, looking down at the book. "It says it relates to the Maiden, Mother and Crone, but that it isn't as strong."

"Weren't you looking for something on the transmutation of metals?" he reminded me.

"Yeah, but this is interesting," I said softly, reading a passage in the tome. "The Trimuritive is embodied in the three. Each makes way for the next embodiment, each contains the other, all and none."

"It's just a legend," he told me firmly. "Nothing to concern yourself over."

I shot him a questioning look and found him watching me. "I didn't say I was concerned," I said defensively. "Just curious, this is interesting."

"So is the transmutation of metal," he replied with a smile. "Lead into Gold, remember?"

Gold didn't interest me as much as what I'd found, so I shrugged and turned back to the book. "The Trimuritive is the essence of—"

The book lifted out of my hands, cutting off my reading. It floated across the room while another book settled in my hands. I looked at Malcolm in surprise.

"The Trimuritive is not on your reading list today, Tina," he told me with a playful smile as he grabbed the book out of the air and put it down on the floor beside him. "Transmutation, remember?"

I laughed and opened the book in my hands. "Okay, transmutation." I made a mental note to ask him about the Trimuritive later and started reading.

DREAMS OF THE PAST

Do you remember how we were?

Do you remember summer days?

Loaded - Ricky Martin

I can't wait till next year, I thought to myself. Then I can take Drivers Ed and get my license. It wasn't really that far of a walk home, but I was still excited about driving. My thoughts were interrupted when a car pulled up behind me.

"Hey Chrissy," I heard from that direction.

I didn't have to turn around to know that it was Shane, the school bully. He was a year older than me, but was held back so the two of us were now in the same grade. I knew he liked me, but I'd turned him down every time he asked me out and lately he'd started being mean to my friends and me.

I decided to just ignore him and hope he went away, but he pulled the car up next to me. I shot a quick glance over and saw that the car was packed with him and his goons.

"You sure you don't want me to give you a ride?" he asked as he leaned over to the passenger side window. I could hear the others in his car making rude comments and laughing.

Somehow I managed to speak up. "No, I'll be all right." I hoped against hoped that he'd get the polite hint and leave me alone.

He didn't.

"Ahh, come on honey! I promise you'll like it!" There was a meaning beneath his words that I couldn't help but hear, and I didn't like it one bit.

I started walking faster, but he paced me with his car. I began to cross an intersection, but turned the corner instead hoping he wouldn't follow. He cut off an oncoming car to stay with me.

"Now that wasn't very nice. I am beginning to think you may not like me." Everyone in the car laughed loudly at his comment. Shane sped up and pulled into a driveway in front of me. Without turning the car off, he and his friends all piled out of the car. I tried to go around the car, but his friends stepped in my way no matter which way I went. I turned around to go back, but they'd surrounded me.

I got really scared when Shane stepped in close to me. I could smell the beer on his breath when he spoke. "I don't think you understand what I'm offering you, Chris. Being a preacher's daughter, I bet you're a heavenly piece of ass!" He knocked the books out of my hands for punctuation.

I tried to back away, but his friends were standing right there and wouldn't let me go. "Shane, don't do this." I pleaded. My voice sounded meek even to me, and it prompted a new round of laughter.

"You're right," he drawled. "I want to do this!" He closed the distance between us before I could react, grabbing my left hip with one hand and groping my chest with the other. He pulled me up hard against him and kissed me, trying to stick his tongue into my mouth.

Despite my struggles, he drove his tongue into my mouth, but I immediately bit down on it and tasted blood. Shane reeled back in surprise, but it quickly turned to anger.

"You bit me, you little bitch!" He lashed out with his hand and caught me across the side of the face, sending me spinning to the ground.

Before I could get back up, he was squatting over me and his friends were helping to hold me down. I fought the terror that rushed through me, frantically seeking some way to escape.

"Now you're going to find out how nice I can be." His hands were on the button of my jeans when I felt something snap inside of me.

"NO!" I screamed.

It took me a second to realize that no one was touching me anymore. When I finally opened my eyes, Shane was lying a good fifteen feet from me, flat on his back and bleeding from his nose. The others were scattered around as well, some of them already getting up. A couple were bleeding too, or shaking their heads as if trying to clear them.

As I sat there watching Shane slowly sit up with a dazed look on his face, I realized that the world was totally silent. Looking around, I could that see a few of the others were yelling, one was even crying, but I couldn't hear anything. Slowly I noticed that I could taste something bitter, and when I wiped my mouth my hand came away red with blood. Gradually it occurred to me that my nose was bleeding too.

Scared, I tried to stand. After a few tries I finally managed it. Shane was up to one knee and staring at me with a 'deer in the headlights' look in his eyes. I hastily picked up my books and started running for home, crying.

About halfway home my hearing returned so suddenly that it almost made me fall again, but I kept going. The side of my face throbbed from where Shane had hit me, and the pain made me cry all the harder.

When Papa got home I told him that I didn't feel well to avoid him seeing the bruise on my face, and he let me be in peace. I cried myself to sleep that night, and the day's event haunted my dreams.

Some how when I woke the next morning my bruised cheek looked as if nothing had ever happened to it. Was I like Robert? Could I do magic too? Those thoughts gave me a little more strength to face going to school.

Once there, I purposefully sought Shane out. When he saw me he practically backed into a locker. Seeing the look on his face just egged me on and I stepped up until I was as close as I wanted to get before speaking.

"If you ever try that again asshole, I'll blast the skin off your bones. If you tell anyone what I can do, I'll grow claws and cut your balls off. Understand?" He nodded vigorously and I continued, turning my face so that he could see what wasn't there where he had hit me. "As hard as you hit me, and not a mark." With that I turned and walked away.

As I continued through the halls I passed a couple that was dressed in black and leather. I'd seen them around before, but never paid them much mind. Today I took a closer look and as I walked by, the guy nodded his head to me as if in recognition. For some reason I kept glancing back at him as I walked on down the hall. Each time he looked back to meet my eyes and nodded. Before I turned a corner out of sight, they both looked up and smiled.

The months seemed to fly toward Brenda's wedding and the end of my blood bond to Luke. Ford made sure I was kept busy between my studies, patrolling, and Jason, of course. I spent as much time with him as I could without neglecting my duties.

I talked to Robert as often as I could, and many times after seeing or talking to him I dreamed of my mortal past. They didn't happen as often as I would have liked, but after so long of not remembering anything, even what little I was getting was a godsend. There were still a lot of gaps in my past, but at least I knew now that I'd been a mage, that I'd known love, friendship, and betrayal.

Sometimes my dreams came without a call to Robert, and I had to wonder what events had pulled those memories from the depths of my mind. Each dream gave me a part of my past back, a slice of my mortal life. Who was I to complain or even question why I had them? I was glad enough that they were there. It simply didn't occur to me that something or someone one was manipulating my dreams, my memories.

I was in a local park trying to use my magic to make rocks move. I had found one of my brother's books and was struggling to make sense of it. I hadn't had any luck so far, nothing in the book made sense to me. A lot of the instructions seemed to indicate that one need to be high to make it work, but to my knowledge Robert had never done drugs.

I was about to give up when I felt something strange. It was like a wave of force washed over me. It didn't hurt, but was definitely something I'd never felt before. When I turned around to look, I saw a girl from my school walking towards me with an odd smile on her face. I remembered that her name was Lizzy, the two of us had shared a class freshmen year. I looked around for her boyfriend, but he was nowhere to be seen. He'd graduated last year, but I still saw him around school sometimes picking her up or dropping her off.

I turned back to the book I'd been reading. Maybe she is just out for a walk. I thought to myself. I realized I was wrong when she sat down across from me, still smiling.

"Hello Christina. Do you remember me?" Up close her smile seemed even odder, but I didn't feel threatened by it, or her. Her voice had an almost melodic quality to it.

"Liz, right?" I said, and she laughs a little.

"Please, call me Lizzy. Just Liz sounds like an old ladies name." I noticed her eyes were twinkling a bit when she laughed. "We've been watching you ever since that day with Shane." She continued.

I felt my face flush at the mention of the school bully. "Who's we?" I asked.

"Malcolm and me." she replied almost matter of factually before getting serious. "Do you know what you are?"

"A witch?" I replied with more than a hint of sarcasm in my voice. Lizzy's outburst of laughter caught me off guard.

"I haven't heard us called that for at least thirty years!" she exclaimed.

I was surprised at the hint to her age and it made me all the more curious. "Thirty years? Just how old are you?" I asked, disbelief showing on my face. Lizzy sobered quickly.

"I am sixty two years old, and the term for what we are is Mage. We are made up of different traditions, and that," she pointed at Robert's book, "Is not your tradition."

Resolve settled into my mind. "Well then, what is my tradition?" I asked as I slowly closed the book.

Lizzy took a deep breath then paused. For a moment she looked like she was going to tell me, but then she just shook her head. "Let me introduce you to Malcolm, he can answer a hell of a lot more than me." She stood to lead the way, but I stayed where I was.

I crossed my arms over my chest and looked at her warily. "Let me get this straight, you are a mage, and your boyfriend is too? How are you two going to help me?"

"Malcolm first found me when I was your age," she explained. "He took me in and found someone to teach me to use my gifts. When I had learned all I could from my mentor, we set out on our own. Come on, he's waiting for us." She held her hand out to help me stand. I took it and when she pulled me to my feet we walked toward the park entrance.

"Wait." I stopped and turned to her. "You said that this wasn't my tradition." I held up Robert's book. "What tradition am I? What tradition is this from?"

Lizzy smiled at me. "You are Verbena, and that," she pointed to the book, "Is of my tradition. I am of the Cult of Ecstasy. Now can we go?"

A short time later I stepped through a portal that Lizzy had opened for us into a large loft apartment. There was a man waiting for us that I assume is Malcolm because Lizzy went to him and kissed him before putting her arm around his waist and turning to me.

"Christina, this is Malcolm. Malcolm, Christina." With the introductions out of the way, Malcolm took a few steps toward me and I felt a tingling sensation run across my body. I wasn't sure how I knew it is from him, but I did.

When the tingling subsided, he grinned. His voice was low when he spoke, but it wasn't harsh as I'd expected, it was very smooth. "You could be a great member of our kind. You have the power in you, I felt it. But you need to learn to control it, to harness it. Ride it, else it will ride you."

I could feel the power coming from him, but it was more comforting than suffocating. "Lizzy said you could answer my questions. Can you?" I asked, finally finding my voice.

Malcolm's grin turned into a smile. "Yes Tina, I can answer your questions. I can teach you all you need to know about our kind, about what you are feeling, about your gifts. Do you accept my offer to mentor you?"

I thought about it for a long moment. If I refused, who would teach me? Papa was too wrapped up in his work at the church, and besides, I didn't think he would like or understand what was going on. Lizzy had said that Robert's book was from her tradition and that I wasn't the same, so his books were of no use to me. I sighed deeply, knowing I had no other choice if I wanted to learn..

"Yes, I accept your offer to mentor me. When do we begin?"

Malcolm took another step toward me, holding out his hand. Lying in his palm was a small rock. "Right now. Use your mind to take this pebble from me."

When I woke I remembered that Malcolm had been pleased when, after some concentration, I was able to levitate the pebble from his hand. The dream reminded me of the time Antonio had taught me Movement of the Mind, and my first success with moving a cup toward him on a table. He'd been so proud, and I'd been so happy to please him.

I missed my sire, but it had been three years since we'd both lived in Vegas, so it wasn't that hard to deal with. He had visited several times during the last twelve months to see how his childer were faring in Salem, and of course there was always the mental link that he'd taught us, which helped the three of us to keep in touch.

Antonio did come to Salem for Brenda's wedding. It was a beautiful ceremony at Micky and Sarah's new house just south of town. Rafe had wanted a beach wedding and Brenda wanted to make him happy, so that's what he got.

I did my best not to cry during the ceremony because members of Rafe's mortal family were in attendance. It was strange to see Elvira and Ford speaking with his aunt and uncle, but everyone got along quite well.

Brenda and Rafe left an hour before dawn to fly to Vegas for their honeymoon. She wanted to visit her father who wasn't in the best of health. We all stood in the drive of Micky's house and threw birdseed at them as they walked to the limo.

Jason took my arm and led me to my car where O'Connell was waiting for us. We went back to the mansion and I fell asleep in my husband's arms, content with my life.

POWER SURGE

And all of the things I thought I knew
You turn it around
Amazed - Poe

"Focus Tina. You can do this."

Malcolm was leaning over me and there was a small potted plant in front of me that I was trying to affect. I'd been Malcolm's student for a little over a month now and he said I was progressing well, but I'd been trying to alter the plant all day with no luck.

"I give up!" I threw my hands up in disgust and turned to look at my mentor. "I am tired, my eyes are crossing from looking at that fern, and my butt hurts from sitting here all day. You said I am doing well, can't we just stop for the night?"

Malcolm regarded me for a moment or two then grinned and bowed his head. "Yes, Tina. We can stop."

I started to celebrate being let go when he continued. "Go home get some rest, come back in two days. I have something special planned." There was a familiar twinkle in his eyes that let me know he was happy when he spoke of the special plans.

"Something special? What is it?" I asked.

"You'll find out," he told me as he turned to leave the room.

I harassed him about it for another five minutes or so before finally gave up and went home to relax.

Lizzy greeted me at the door two days later with a hug. She led me to the bathroom where there was a large box sitting on the floor. "Put what's in there on, then come out." She turned and closed the door before I could question her.

Inside the box was a simple dress of a fabric so dark red that it almost looked black, with a small silver rope belt, the kind of dress I'd seen at the Renaissance Festival at the fairgrounds. I put the dress on easily enough, and I was surprised to find that it fit perfectly. As I was gathering my other clothes I noticed a small velvet pouch lying in the bottom of the box. When I picked it up I could tell that there was something delicate inside.

When I opened the pouch the beauty of the necklace inside stuck me speechless. I pulled it out carefully and studied the fine silver chain from which hung what I knew was the symbol of my Tradition. I put the chain on and it hung perfectly around my neck, like it was custom made for me.

Lizzy gave a low whistle when I stepped out of the bathroom. She was wearing a dress of similar design, a little tighter in some spots and a little lower cut than mine, made of a rich blue fabric and with the same silver rope belt. She was wearing a necklace with her Tradition symbol on it as well, and there was a dagger hanging on her belt.

"What is this all about?" I asked, smoothing the fabric of my dress over my hips.

Malcolm answered from behind me. "You are going to have your first seeking."

When I turned to him I was surprised by his appearance. I'd never seen him in anything but black and leather, but today he was dressed in loose pants that billowed around him, no shirt, and a long robe with ornate runes stitched into the cuffs and borders. The pants and robe were both of a red so close to blood that they seem to glow with their own light. His Tradition symbol hung from a large linked silver necklace and there was a large wavy bladed dagger hanging from a thick black rope belt.

Malcolm stepped close to me and held out his hands. Lying sideways across them was a sheathed dagger sitting on a piece of cloth that looked like an extra piece to my dress. He nodded to me. "It is yours. You will need it for further advancement."

I took it from him tentatively and my two companions smiled. "We must be getting on, there is much to do," Malcolm stated as he turned and, with a mere wave of his hand, opened a portal to a location I didn't recognize.

"Ow! Watch it Tina!" Malcolm yelled as the rock bounced off his shoulder.

I apologized despite nearly doubling over with laughter. Lizzy was already sitting on the ground, tears running from her eyes from laughing so hard. It was months after my first seeking, but I was still having problems controlling my power.

"You are supposed to send them back to my hand!"

Malcolm had been throwing things at me for the past hour, and for the most part I'd been returning them to his hand with my mind as he instructed. I had taken some blows at first, but then again I was blindfolded. I was supposed to be 'feeling' the space around me for the objects and Malcolm's hand. When I showed him that I could 'feel' and return smaller objects, Malcolm had moved up to larger rocks and balls and a few glass bulbs. When I was comfortable with returning them slowly, Malcolm had told me to try and send them faster.

The first ball I bounced off his head. The second, well, where that hit him had made Lizzy laugh all the harder. This last rock was the third.

"You have the power, but we need to work on your control," he chastised me. "All right! Stop laughing!" His voice was loud, but I could tell that he was trying hard not to start laughing too. "Haven't you ever seen a guy take one in the nuts before?"

At that I gave up and fell to the ground in laughter.

A few months later Malcolm and I were sitting around a design I had drawn on the floor with salt and sulfur, chanting. The room was filled with nearly a hundred candles in various sizes and lengths. Some produced barely any light while others were shooting their flame several inches in to the air. My dagger was held loosely in my left hand, extended to the heavens point upward. With my right hand I was drawing symbols in the air with a gnarled oak branch. Malcolm was moving in response to me, answering where appropriate, chanting in echo to me as I led the ritual for the first time.

The rest of my dream on that night two weeks after Brenda's wedding was a blur of events. All pertained to Malcolm, Lizzy and me, and all were happy or memorable in some way. Most of them had something to do with magic, and I wasn't able to focus on any one event for more than a few seconds. They seemed to follow a fairly chronological order that detailed my relationship with Malcolm and his lover.

I woke that night with a smile on my lips, remembering vividly the things I'd dreamed about. Things had been quiet with my sister and her new husband gone, but I'd enjoyed the time alone with my husband.

My seeking had gone well, if I was remembering correctly. I'd seen my avatar and gained power as Malcolm had expected me to do. In a way remembering the good in Malcolm made me feel a lot better about my mortal self. Knowing that he hadn't always been mean and vindictive told me that my judgment in allowing him to mentor me hadn't been totally off.

Many of my dreams during the last few weeks had been of Malcolm and Lizzy, and every one of them had brought positive memories of my old mentor to my mind. It became difficult for me to

think of him solely as the Lord Chaos who had abducted Jason years ago at sunrise in Italy, or the creature who had torn Lena from Mikael's arms.

It was strange to have so many good memories about Malcolm considering what had happened later to Lizzy and Marcus Thorpe. Those memories forced me to see Malcolm as he had been before Lizzy's death, before his turn to the dark side. I wasn't sure I liked the change, it's much easier to hate someone when all you can see is the evil they have done.

Even stranger than my change in attitude was the fact that I was remembering so much but hadn't seen or talked to Robert in weeks.

I checked my messages and to my amazement, there was one from Eliza Gentry.

"Chris...tina Kline," she said nervously. "This is Eliza, Ma-Cormac's ghoul. I got a call from Summer Walker down at Four Seasons, or rather Mac got a call from her, but it's 9:30 in the morning, and he's been dead asleep...." Her voice trailed off and she mumbled something I couldn't quite hear.

"Anyway, I don't understand what she was saying," she continued, "but she said it might be important to you that this morning there was a surge in the power. She said something about she'd never felt that much, and then it was gone, as if there wasn't any. She sounded really out of breath and, I don't know, scared, but I don't know if it means something to you or not."

The message concerned me for a number of reasons. The first was that Eliza found Summer's call disturbing enough to phone me and not wait for Cormac to get up. The second was the actual message itself, the news of the surge and loss of power. If the Verbena power really was tied to the Trimuritive, could something have happened to Malcolm? That was assuming he was the Trimuritive, which I believed was the case.

I called The Four Seasons, but the answering machine picked up. I left a message for Summer to call me, and made sure I left her my cell phone number, again. When I called Cormac, he was a little surprised that I asked for Eliza, but he hid it well.

"She's down getting herself some breakfast or supper or something," he told me. "I can get her if you need her."

"Could you?" I asked. "I have a question for her."

"Sure."

Because he sounded confused, I thought I'd better explain why I wanted to talk to his ghoul. "She left a message on my voice mail today, something about Summer and a surge in the power."

"She mentioned something to me about that. Hold on a second." It sounded like he was going down some stairs when he added, "Doesn't Brenda get home tomorrow?"

"Yeah, she does," I told him. "I'm sure she's had a wonderful time"

"Have you heard from her?"

"A couple of times," I replied. "She's on vacation."

"Knowing Brenda, she can't leave her work too far behind," he murmured.

"Plus she has to call and check up on me," I said with a smile, "as if I don't have enough people checking up on me."

I could hear Eliza in the background, and Mac asked me to wait a moment while he handed her the phone. She didn't seem too happy to talk to me, but then she never did. Of course she was a bit warmer than she had been a year ago, so maybe in time we could become friends.

"What exactly did Summer say?" I asked her.

"That early this morning there was a surge in their power, that it raised the roof," she told me. "There was a surge in the power and it was gone, like they'd never had it."

"All the power was gone?" This seemed too strange to be true, but then again I didn't know that much about mages anymore.

"She didn't get real specific."

"Did she mention if she was planning on going anywhere?" I didn't like the fact that no one had answered when I'd called the store.

"To bed," she said firmly. "She said it took a lot out of her when the power crashed. Do you know what the hell she's talking about?"

"Yeah, sort of," I replied. "Not really, but sort of. Thank you. May I talk to Cormac again?"

"What is it?" he asked a moment later.

"I tried calling The Four Seasons, and I didn't get an answer," I told him. "Maybe you could go check on her, make sure she's okay?"

"Yes, we can do that," he assured me.

"Not that I really know that anything is wrong," I added, "but it never hurts to check."

"Of course. Anything else?"

"Just if you talk to her, have her call me."

"I will."

I hung up the phone feeling like I was waiting for the other shoe to drop. It didn't take me very long to finish getting ready for the night. Jason, O'Connell and I went out to patrol, but I was more than a little distracted. A few hours later we met up with Cormac at the chantry.

"Spring was at the store when we stopped by, handling everything," he told me. "She said the others went off to one of their retreats."

"Did she say everything was okay?" I asked.

"Spring's a little flighty," he said with a smile. "According to her everything is peachy keen, but she was worried. Being the youngest, they don't tell her much."

"Well, I guess if you hear anything more, let me know," I told him. I wasn't much assured, but I'd done all I could to make sure she was all right.

My cell phone rang at quarter to five, and the caller ID displayed the name 'Walker'. I breathed a sigh of relief and answered the phone.

"Christina Kline?"

"Yes."

"This is Summer." She sounded tired, but at least she was well enough to talk.

"Hi, Summer. Is everything okay?"

"No," she told me simply. "What can I do for you?"

"I heard there were some problems this morning."

"Yeah." I heard her take a deep breath. "Do you remember how I told you that our powers have been weak lately and that it usually waxed and waned with the Trimuritive?"

"Yes."

"Well, this morning there was—I guess it would be yesterday morning," she murmured. "There was a huge flux in the power. It surged, and it was gone."

"The surge was gone or the power was gone?" The difference could mean everything.

"Both."

"That doesn't sound good," I said softly. For the entire tradition to lose its power like that something must have gone terribly wrong with the Trimuritive.

"No," she agreed.

"Any idea what happened?"

"Not a clue."

"Has anything like that ever happened before?" Maybe it was just a fluke.

"Not on that scale," she told me. "Not both ends of the spectrum."

I nodded to myself wishing there were something I could do for her, for all of them. "Well, I appreciate you letting me know."

"No problem."

"If there's anything I can do, not that I really think there is, but if there is...." I offered, feeling rather lame.

"Thank you for offering," she told me. "Goodnight."

"Goodnight."

I hung up and explained to Jason what was going on. He seemed sympathetic to the Verbena, but like me he didn't think there was anything we could do to help. I hadn't told him I thought Malcolm was the Trimuritive, I knew my ex-mentor was still a sore spot for him and I didn't want to pour salt in old wounds.

My mind was still whirling when the sun came up, and I had a restless day, filled with nightmares I didn't remember upon waking.

We picked Brenda and Rafe up at the airport early the next night, and she was full of stories about what they'd done in Vegas. I helped her unpack and the five of us went out to dinner. Well, Rafe and O'Connell ate, the rest of us just watched and pretended to sip wine.

It was nice having my sister back in town. The two of us had gotten quite close in the year that we'd lived with her. Even with my worries over Malcolm and the Trimuritive, I felt mostly at peace that night.

Too bad it wouldn't last.

FAERY TALE

And I know deep inside you need me
And no one else can make it right
Give Me Just One Night (Una Noche) - 98°

The next night we were all downstairs in the living room talking when I realized that I had a small tear in the shoulder of my shirt. I excused myself and went upstairs to change.

I walked into the room and closed the door behind me without realizing that I hadn't turned the light on first. As I reached for the switch, I heard a high pitched giggling that sounded for all the world like tinkling bells.

"Shh, she'll hear us," I heard whispered from across the room.

I turned on the switch to see what looked like a court jester in quarter paneled clothes with his back to me talking to the wall. He had fuzzy balls on his clothing, a tall multi-pointed hat, and a jester's staff that hung from his belt. He wasn't standing upright, but was bent over a little as if bending down to speak to a child

"Shh, she's coming," he whispered, "she'll hear us. I know. No she's not in here, be quiet."

What the hell was going on? "Ah, excuse me," I said softly.

"Knock knock," he told the wall, ignoring me. "What do you mean you heard this one? I haven't told the joke yet."

"Excuse me," I repeated a little louder.

"No, she's not talking to me," he told the wall.

"Yes, I am talking to you."

"Shh, she'll hear us," it whispered.

"I already did," I said impatiently.

The jester stepped toward the bed. "Is that you?"

"No," I said clearly, "that was me."

He started talking to the cabinet, so I walked up and tapped him on the shoulder. "Just a minute," he told me. He straightened slowly until he was only a few inches shorter than me, with his large hat towering above my head. When he turned, his green eyes sparkled in his puppy like face. "Hi!"

"Can I ask what you're doing in my room?"

"Talking with your walls," he replied.

I raised an eyebrow. "Did they have anything interesting to say?"

"Oh yes," he breathed, blushing and winking at me. "It told some interesting stories."

"Was there a reason you decided to come talk to my walls?" I demanded, suddenly short on patience with this intrusion into my room.

"Yes, um, no," he replied, putting a hand to his mouth thoughtfully. "It already heard the joke, um...."

"Is there some kinda point here?" I interrupted.

"Get on with it," I heard a strong deep voice say from behind me.

When I turned to look there was a very tall very muscularly built creature that looked quite a bit like the Incredible Hulk standing with his back against the door. He looked impatient, and was leaning on a large axe.

I tried not to let him intimidate me. "Did you come to talk to the walls too?"

"No," he growled.

"Somebody want to tell me why you are in my room before I call the boys and have you removed?" I demanded.

That didn't impress the hulk too much, he snorted in amusement.

Suddenly I heard a rustling from one of the corners I'd thought was empty. "Yesss," I heard something whisper. When I looked, I saw a vaguely female creature, with deathly pale skin wearing a cloak with a hood. Her hands were tucked inside her sleeves, and the bottom of the cloak spread around her feet. When she started to move forward it looked like she didn't walk, she floated.

One fairy I hadn't been too worried about. I wasn't keen on two of them in my room, but the addition of the third one was beginning to get on my nerves. I moved backward hoping nothing was behind me.

"Watch out!" the Jester cried to, as far as I could tell, the wall.

I kept moving until my back was against the wall and carefully put my hand on the gun at the small of my back. "Okay, what is going on here?" I demanded.

The jester walked over and tapped me on the arm. "That tickles it," he said seriously.

Ah, Christ, this was too much. "That's nice," I said dryly.

He gave me a hard look and walked away.

Still, to pacify the damned thing I moved away just far enough away from the wall that I wasn't touching it. "What is going on?" I asked again.

"We were sssent to bring you," the hooded one whispered. She spoke so softly that I had to heighten my senses just to hear her.

"Bring me where?"

"To our massster."

I didn't like the sounds of this. "And you're master would be...?"

"Lord Chaosss," she replied.

Of course, it only made sense. In Austria, Malcolm had sent Jason and me a gift through a faery, I should have known these three were his lackeys. Malcolm wanted me to help him. I wanted to laugh, but somehow I controlled myself. Did Malcolm really expect me to come running after all he'd done to me and mine?

"That's nice," I said dryly. "Go back and tell your master that I didn't want to come."

"You don't undersstand," she told me. "Our massster is in trouble."

"And I'm supposed to care?" I demanded.

"Yesss."

"Why?"

"Beacausse you are the only one who can help him," she urged softly.

"And I'm supposed to care?" I repeated.

The thing was I did care. If the dreams I'd had in the last few weeks were any indication, Malcolm and I had once been close, very close. He'd been my first mentor and one of my best friends for years. He'd taught me a lot about my craft, and if nothing else I owed him for that.

Besides, I've always been one for noble causes, haven't I? Of course, I also owed him for what had happened to Marcus, Jason and Lena, but I could deal with that once I found him, couldn't I?

"Our massster sssays he knowsss you from before," she said softly.

There was no use tipping my hand too soon, so I pretended ignorance. "From before...?"

"From before you became what you are," she replied.

"And what makes him think that I'd want to come help him?"

"He sssaid to plead with you," she told me. "You are the only one who can sssave his sssoul."

His soul. As if I cared about his soul after all he'd done to the people I loved. He'd killed Marcus, gotten Jason embraced, and abducted a pregnant Lena. Why should I care about his soul?

Because he'd been my friend and my mentor, that's why. Because he had taught me so much before things had gone to hell between us and he'd started hurting the people I'd loved. Once upon a time I'd loved Malcolm too.

Then there was the matter of the Verbena craft. Summer had said that the power was gone as if it had never existed. If Malcolm was the Trimuritive as I suspected, didn't I owe it to my old Tradition to try and solve the problem? Wasn't that a noble enough cause for me?

"And what is it I'm supposed to do to save his soul?" I asked softly.

"Go to him."

"Okay, well, let me just get my husband and my friend and I'll be right back." Jason wouldn't like helping Malcolm, but he'd do it if I explained everything to him. I'd only taken a step toward the door when the hissing one stopped me.

"No," she said urgently. "Jusst you."

I looked around at the other faeries, trying to figure out just how much of a fool they thought I was. The jester was telling a picture a knock-knock joke while the big one just stood by the door impatiently leaning on his axe.

Okay, this just sounded way too much like a trap. Still, I'd learned a few things in the eight years I'd been a vampire. I didn't like the idea of going alone, but then again there was that whole noble cause thing. "Okay, just me," I grudgingly relented. "But I still need to go tell them where I'm going."

"No one will know you were gone," the hooded faery told me.

"And how is he going to manage this one?" I demanded.

"Our massster hasss great power," she replied almost smugly.

"Oh, I just bet he does," I muttered. Power to fuck with my life once again.

"She said she'd go," the one with the axe said loudly. "Can we leave now?"

I nodded. "Let me just write a note." I wasn't buying her story that no one would know I was gone, and I wanted to make sure Jason didn't worry. Well, at least make sure that he knew where I was going.

"You have one minute," the hooded one said firmly as she pulled an hourglass out of her sleeve. She turned it and the sand started falling.

I pulled a piece of paper from a drawer and set it on the end table. With a pen in my hand it occurred to me that since I had less than one minute, it would be smarter for me to grab a few things instead. That way at least I'd have a chance to make it back to my husband. And who knew, maybe the fairy wasn't lying, maybe he would never even know I was gone.

I opened the drawer again and grabbed the cross Jason had given me years ago. If I took nothing else, I had to take that. Inside the cross were crystals I had spent many nights filling with blood for an emergency like this one.

Next to the bed was my aircraft aluminum briefcase. Inside were my laptop, some money, and extra rounds for my guns. There were other things I thought I might need, like a battery charger and extra batteries for my cell phone. That was on my hip, so I didn't have to look for it. I grabbed my ritual bag too, knowing that I'd probably need the supplies inside before this mess was over.

I had just opened the closet door when the hooded fairy spoke again.

"Your time isss up," it hissed.

"I'm just getting my jacket," I told it as I pulled the black leather from a hanger. As an afterthought I grabbed a backpack of clothing I kept packed in the bottom of the closet just in case

an emergency came up and I didn't have time to pack. When I turned around, we were not in Salem anymore.

The four of us were standing on a snow covered residential street that had seen better days. From the looks of the snow piled around their feet, they'd been there a while. A glance at the license plates on the cars parked nearby told me we were somewhere in Russia.

I didn't have good memories of the former USSR. The last time I'd been here Luke, Lena and I had been looking for Jason. In Moscow we'd discovered that the Verbena were a part of the conspiracy that had captured Jason and led to his embrace, a conspiracy that Malcolm had been the center of.

"Where are we?" I demanded.

"At the beginning of your journey," the hooded one replied cryptically.

"So where do we go from here?"

"Our massster is northwessst of Pechora."

"How do we get there?" I asked impatiently.

"It isss your quesst," she told me.

That meant I went it alone. No problem. "All right, so how do I get there?"

"It isss not my consssern," she replied coldly. "I wasss ssssimply to bring you here."

That freaking figured. Malcolm had me dropped in the middle of Russia with no car, no transportation and no friends and expected me to get to some out of the way town in the middle of nowhere, I was sure. It looked as if he was still sending me on seekings, didn't it?

"So what, your job is just to drop me off in the middle of nowhere and expecting me to find Pechora?" I demanded. I knew I didn't have a lot of time to find something tonight, daylight was only an hour or so away.

"Thiss wasss assss closse assss our massster could bring you," she told me. "He isss trapped and hisss powersss are weak."

Well, that totally negated her 'our master has great power' statement, but I'd been expecting her to say something along those lines. "Okay, got a car?"

"We have no need of your... technologiesss."

"That's what I thought," I muttered irritably.

The jester was busy making snow angels and throwing snowballs at the large one, who seemed to be more than a little pissed. Neither of them paid me any attention, and the hooded girl didn't seem inclined to be of any use to me whatsoever.

Well, if Malcolm's buddies weren't going to be of any help to me, I wasn't going to waste my time standing here talking to them. I shoved my ritual bag into the backpack and hoisted it onto my back before turning and heading for what I thought must be the direction of the main strip.

"Bye!" the jester called out, just before I heard one of them clap.

I spun around to look, but I knew they'd be gone. Of course they were, along with any sign that they'd ever been there. Even the snow angels had disappeared.

Damned faeries.

Walking down the street I realized that since dawn was probably only an hour or so away, nothing was likely to be open. I needed to find someplace to go to ground and a few blocks away I found a burned out shell of a house with the roof still intact. Amazingly enough I even found the bathroom still standing. There were no windows, and I was able to maneuver the door back into position. Not the nicest place to pass the day, but it would work. I'd slept in worse.

I tried to use the cell phone to call home, but I couldn't get a signal. The battery was low, but it wasn't dead. From the looks of the neighborhood, there probably wasn't much call for towers in the area.

As I waited for the sun to come up I mentally cursed myself for being stupid enough to go with Malcolm's cronies. Here I was somewhere in Russia with no way to get to where I needed to go. I had about eighty dollars in my pocket, and a couple of hundred more that I kept in my briefcase for emergencies. Of course, there were always credit cards.

I didn't need anyone to tell me I'd been a fool to fall for this soul-saving business. Malcolm was probably just trying to mess with my life again, I doubted he was in any real danger at all. Still, I had to find out, didn't I?

It was useless to wish I could remember more of my past, but I did. Robert lived a busy life and I'd been pretty restricted at the chantry the last year, so we hadn't been able to spend a lot of time together. I vowed that I'd find a way to spend more time with him when I got back to Salem. If I got back to Salem.

I closed my eyes, feeling dawn breaking on the horizon. As I drifted off, I heard Malcolm's voice loud and clear in my mind.

Thank you, Tina.

A RIDE TO MOSCOW

Maybe we can make a deal
Maybe together we can get somewhere
Fast Car - Tracy Chapman

When I woke the next night I could hear voices coming from the main room of the house. They were male, and spoke softly in Russian. I listened for a minute, but it sounded like there were only a couple of them so I cracked the door open to have a look.

Two men were sitting what used to be the living room passing a bottle back and forth. They looked like homeless people who had taken shelter from the cold. I didn't think they'd be a threat, and I couldn't spend all night in the bathroom, so I grabbed my things and opened the door.

They saw me right away of course, and immediately one of them fell backward and started praying. The other was apparently so shocked to see me that he dropped his bottle of vodka.

"I'm sorry," I said in Russian. "I didn't mean to startle you."

Neither of them were paying me much attention, so I tried again.

"Do you think you could help me?" I asked softly. "I'm trying to get to Pechora."

"Many miles west," the one who'd dropped the bottle told me hesitantly.

"Many miles." That freaking figured. Of what use is a quest without impossible odds, right? "So, where are we now? What city are we in?"

"Smolensk," he told me.

Like that helped. "So how far is Pechora?"

"Many days."

"Oh, yay," I murmured. "Is there an airport near here? A train station?"

"Airports in Moscow and St. Petersburg," he replied.

"And how far away are those?" I asked patiently.

"Three days to Moscow," he told me. "Four days to St. Petersburg."

I closed my eyes for a moment, trying to control my frustration. "Know anyone who has a car for sale?"

"Lady, I don't know anybody who has a car," he said firmly, apparently finding a little more of his courage.

If this was what I had to work with, I just had to deal with it. "Okay, which way is town?"

He pointed to his left while his friend continued praying.

I thanked him and left, all the while mentally cursing myself for those damned noble causes I always seemed to fall for.

Once I hit the main road I stopped and took a look around. I figured I was in a small lumber town by the trucks of lumber that drove by and the sight of the lumber mill at the other end of town. There was a grocery store, a bar and a doctor's office, but that was about it. The bar looked like a good place to start, so I walked in that direction. A couple of semi trucks lumbered by loaded down with large logs. To what looked like the east, the road ran out of town. To the west it ended at the lumber mill.

The minute I walked in the door of the bar I had the attention of everyone in the room. Pretty much everyone looked like a trucker, which wasn't that surprising. I walked over to where a fat and dirty man tended bar, silently cursing myself yet again.

"Excuse me sir," I called out politely, earning a strange look from the bartender. "I'm looking for a way to Pechora, do you know anyone who can help me?"

"I have a snowmobile you can buy," he smirked.

"I was hoping that one of these trucks was going in that direction," I told him.

He shrugged. "Probably."

"Do you know any of these drivers?" I asked.

"I know them all."

"Do you know if any of them are going to Pechora?"

"No one goes to Pechora," he said firmly. "These trucks go to the larger cities."

"Would you know of the best way for me to get to Pechora?"

"You got ruby slippers?" he asked, and the people sitting nearby laughed. "Magic carpet?"

"If I had a magic carpet, would I be asking?" I retorted.

"The trucks go to Moscow and St. Petersburg," he offered.

"Are those on the way to Pechora?"

"Pechora is many days from either," he told me.

"Do you have a phone--no, that wouldn't work right after sundown," I said, reminding myself of the time difference between Russia and Massachusetts. "Do you have a map of the area so I can see where we are? One I could buy or something?"

"Sure, they have them in their trucks."

That wasn't what I meant. "Do you have one here?"

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

When I asked him if he knew anyone with a vehicle for sale, he told me everything was for sale if I had enough money. I knew I didn't have a lot of cash on me, so I asked loudly if anyone would be willing to take me to Pechora.

"I can pay," I added. "American."

"How much American?" one of the men at the bar demanded. He seemed decent looking, with shoulder length light brown hair and honest eyes.

"Fifty dollars."

"Do you have fifty dollars?" he asked skeptically, clutching an empty glass in his hand.

I pulled a wad of money out of my pocket. "I have it."

"I'll take you, if you buy me a drink," he said.

I looked at the bartender. "Could you get this gentleman another drink?"

"I am Petor Andrews," he introduced himself, holding his hand out to me.

"Christina Kline," I replied, shaking his hand. His skin felt warm, but then again my hand was probably ice cold.

"What is in Pechora that you have to get to?" he asked as the bartender sat a shot glass on the bar in front of him.

"A friend of mine needs help." Well, friend was stretching things, but he used to be a friend.

"Well, I'll take you to Moscow," he assured me. "We'll leave in the morning."

"Actually, I'd like to leave tonight," I told him.

He shook his head. "No, nobody drives at night. Too risky."

"I really need to get to Pechora," I replied, meeting his eyes and exerting a little mental pressure, "and you want to help me get there as soon as possible."

"All right," he agreed pleasantly. "One more drink for the road."

I motioned for the bartender to give him another one, and the man drank it quickly.

"Let's go," he said, getting unsteadily to his feet.

Lovely, I'd hired a drunken driver.

"Now, if we can just find my truck," he said as we left the bar. He stumbled toward the lumber mill and I followed quickly, hoping he wouldn't fall.

It took us a few minutes, but we eventually found the truck. As I watched him fumble for the step and search for his key, it occurred to me that he really had drunk too much to drive safely. Since I wanted to make Moscow in one piece, there was only one thing I could do.

I caught his eye. "Let me drive the first few miles," I urged him, "until you sober up."

He smiled. "Maybe just out of town."

"Sure," I agreed, watching him slip a few times on his way around the truck. Hopefully he'd pass out and I'd be able to drive most of the night while he slept it off. If I could drive the truck, that was.

I got it started with relatively few problems and he gave me directions to get to the main road. He explained what roads led to Moscow and how to identify them in the dark.

"Why don't you just take a nap and I'll drive a while," I suggested.

"Oh, I'm fine," he assured me.

He was asleep by the end of the first mile.

I drove carefully on the icy roads, and eventually found a road map. Pechora was listed, but for some reason there were no airports on the map. I tried to call home a few times, but all I got was static. I made a mental note to change phone companies when I got home.

I let Petor sleep all night while I drove, letting various ideas on how to get to Pechora run through my mind. I knew I had to make Moscow, but once there I still needed someone to show me around, help me find a way to Pechora.

As much as I hated the idea, my best course of action seemed to be ghoul-ing Petor. He was Russian, first of all, and he knew the local laws and customs. His truck would be a good way to get to Pechora even if it was a slow one, especially if Malcolm were planning a trap. I didn't really think he'd be expecting me to arrive in a semi truck with a Russian driver.

I woke Petor a half-hour before dawn and set about dominating the hell out of him. "Don't wake me during the day," I began.

"Okay," he agreed with a grin. "I no wake you during the day."

"And please get me to Moscow as soon as possible," I added.

"But what if I need to, you know, pee?" he asked.

I smiled. "You can stop long enough for that."

"What in Moscow do you need to get to?"

"An airplane," I told him, "to get me to Pechora."

"There's no airport in Pechora," he replied firmly.

"There has to be a closer airport than Moscow," I answered.

"You are very smart," he said, looking around for his map.

"It's over here." I handed it to him, and he looked it over.

He suggested I fly to Novgorode, but that was still days away from Pechora. He seemed to think there were no airports in the smaller towns, but I knew that there would have to be, for management types to fly in and check on their companies.

"When I find Malcolm," I muttered in English, "I'm gonna kill him."

"Who's Malcolm?" Petor asked in the same language.

"An old friend," I replied.

"Then why you kill him?"

"Because apparently he's not that good of a friend," I said with a grimace.

"Is he in Moscow?"

"No, he's in Pechora," I told him.

"What's he doing in Pechora?" he asked.

"I have no clue." I sighed in frustration. "All I know is that I'm supposed to get to Pechora and help him do something or another. I'm just a sucker for noble causes. I should have stayed home."

"There may be one in Arkhangel'sk," he offered. "You could probably fly up and go from there."

"If I can get to Moscow, I can find a travel agent or something to help me find the best way there," I told him. "And how come you speak English if you're a truck driver in the middle of Russia?"

He smiled. "My father, he came over from America during the World War II."

That surprised me, but it explained his last name. About fifteen minutes before dawn I climbed into the sleeping compartment and got ready to do the Wake with Morning's Freshness ritual that would help me wake up if anything went wrong during the day.

"My religion requires that I do this before going to sleep," I told Petor as I prepared to burn the feathers.

"But you're wearing the Christian cross," he protested.

"That was a gift from my husband," I explained.

"Pretty damn good gift," he breathed.

The ritual didn't go very well, and it filled the interior of the truck with smoke.

"You keep burning stuff I'll have to charge you more," he warned me, rolling down the window.

A few minutes later the sun came up and I was gone.

SOMEONE TO COUNT ON

Well it's 3 a.m. I'm out here driving again
Through the wicked winding streets of my world
Hey Pretty - Poe

When I woke the next night the truck was still moving. Petor was singing 'Born in the USA' in Russian, but somehow the song lost something in the translation.

He told me we were two days out of Moscow, and instantly agreed when I offered to drive. He watched me try my phone and when I still couldn't get anything, he asked if I paid my bill.

"Yeah, I paid my bill," I assured him.

"Is your battery good?" he asked.

"It's fine. You wouldn't happen to have a cell phone, would you?"

"Nah, don't need one," he told me. "Who do I know?"

"I don't know," I said with a smile, "who do you know?"

That led into a discussion about his cousin Petrov. He talked for a while about his family, pulling out a cooler and eating while he talked. He offered some to me, but I turned it down. It was easier to say I was too nervous to eat than to explain the purging I'd have to do before the sun came up if I ate.

We talked while I drove and he eventually nodded off around two o'clock. I tried my phone a few more times during the night, but all I got was static. I hoped Jason wasn't too worried about me, but I knew he'd be frantic. So would O'Connell and Brenda for that matter. I had to do whatever I could to make it back to them as soon as possible. I spent the rest of the night trying to figure out exactly how to do that.

Once more I woke Petor a half-hour before dawn. After cautioning him not to wake me, I climbed into the back of the rig and went to sleep with the sunrise.

I dreamed again of candles and the circle of salt, of casting my first major ritual with Malcolm assisting me, acting in response to my directions. When I woke I could almost smell sulfur in the air, hear our chanting voices echo through the cab of the truck.

It took me a few moments to realize that the truck wasn't moving or running and but when I did, I was immediately concerned. I could hear breathing from the cab, slow and rhythmical, so I thought Petor must have been sleeping. I climbed into the passenger's seat and saw that he was curled up against the door with his coat over him like a blanket. There was another truck parked in front of us on the turn out, and the other driver was walking back from a porta-potty towards his truck.

I reached out to touch Petor's arm gently and called his name. He stirred immediately, and apologized for falling asleep.

"Oh, I-I was just taking a little nap," he told me, sitting up and taking a look around.

"You might want to start the truck up so that we can get some heat," I commented, seeing him shiver as he shrugged into his coat. "It's chilly in here."

"I'm sorry, I know you're in a hurry to get there," he said contritely as he started the truck, "but I just had to sleep."

"I understand, Petor," I replied, burying my impatience. He was only human after all, just because I could drive for twelve hours at a time without stopping didn't mean that he could. "Where are we?"

"Under a day away from Moscow," he told me. "We're making excellent time driving through the day and the night."

"We would be," I agreed. We could only go so fast with the roads as bad as they'd been. And I had to think that if Malcolm had been in a big hurry for me to get to Pechora, he would have found a way for his goons to get me closer.

"I'm sorry," he repeated. "As soon as it warms back up we'll get on the road."

I faked a need to use the bathroom and got out of the cab. I'd been cooped up in the truck for too many nights, and just walking across the frozen ground felt good. When I came out of the horrible smelling facility, Petor had pulled the truck closer and I climbed in. He pulled back onto the road and we were on our way again.

While Petor drove, I tried once more to get through to Jason, but all I got was static, again. With a frustrated sigh I hung my phone up and put it away.

"Who are you trying to get a hold of?" Petor asked.

"My husband," I said softly, looking out the window into the darkness. I knew Jason had to be going out of his mind wondering what had happened to me, O'Connell and Brenda too. I regretted coming on this wild goose chase to nowhere, but it was too late to turn back now.

"Where is your husband?"

"Back in America," I told him. It probably wasn't a good idea to tell him where I was from, but I couldn't see where it could hurt. "Salem."

"The witch trials," he exclaimed.

"Yes."

"Ah. What does he do there?"

"He's in security," I replied softly.

"What, in a bank, or the police?" he asked.

"Something like that," I said with a smile. "I guess you could call him a consultant."

"And you?"

"I'm in securities too."

"Ah, always nice when you can work with your loved ones," he replied. "Usually."

"Usually," I agreed. "It works rather well for us."

"How long have you been married?"

"A year," I told him with a smile.

We talked a little about Petor's life. He'd never settled down, but he'd had a fiancée once. He didn't tell me why it didn't work out. Petor had once owned a house, but now he lived out of his truck, staying in hotels or boarding houses at either end of his trip.

"Do you have any family?" he asked me.

"I have a sister and a brother that live in Salem," I told him, "and a brother in Paris."

"It must be nice to have family so close," he murmured.

"Yes it is," I said honestly. I enjoyed spending time with both Brenda and Cormac, although the two of them didn't exactly get along with each other. "What about your family? Does your dad still live in Russia?"

"My parents are both dead," he said sadly.

"I'm sorry."

"I was the baby of the family." He looked about thirty and he'd said that his father had been in WWII, so it made sense that he was the youngest.

"So you have brothers and sisters?"

"Two brothers and a sister," he told me. "One of my brothers is still in the military but I don't know where he is, they keep him busy. My sister is in St. Petersburg, she's married and I don't get along with her husband. My other brother is somewhere in Siberia, he works for some science team."

"So he's there by choice."

"Yes." He glanced over and smiled. "It's not that bad, every once in a while I get a message from him through the wire service, but I don't see him that much. I heard from him a lot more often when I was in the military."

"What did you do in the military?" I asked, interest. He wasn't married, wasn't close to his family, and used to be in the Russian Military. What more could one ask for in a guide? Or a ghoul. I pushed the thought out of my mind, hoping I would find some other way to get to Pechora.

"Motor pool."

I smiled. "Well, at least you can work on your truck if it breaks down."

"They recruited me because of my ability to fix anything with wheels and some things without," he explained. "But when the cold war ended, my group was disbanded. What else was there to do for an ex-Russian military motor poolist? Drive truck."

We talked about cars and engines and the military for a while, then Petor again asked what I was doing in Russia. He'd been a little out of it the night before, and I figured he'd probably forgotten that I'd already answered the question once.

"Looking for a friend of mine," I explained.

"Oh, is he lost?"

"I'm not sure," I replied. "He's stuck northwest of Pechora and he needs me to come get him out."

"He called you?"

"He sent some friends," I told him. Damned faeries.

"He a good friend, or...?"

"He used to be, a long time ago."

"Used to be?" Petor asked. "You haven't seen him in a while?"

"Well, we grew apart," I told him. "I haven't seen him in some time."

"What is he doing in Russia?"

"I don't know." I wished I knew. It would certainly make it easier for me to tell if this was a trap.

"Hmm. Undertake blind quests often?" he asked with a smile.

I grinned. "I seem to be a sucker for noble causes, I guess. I don't know."

"It's not always bad."

"I guess. At least I can help my friends when they get sucked into these things. That's a good thing." The bad thing was that it usually got me into trouble. "The sooner I can get to Pechora the sooner I can get him out of whatever mess he's in and the sooner I can get home."

"As I said, there's not much around Pechora," he reminded me. "Some villages in the area, but not very much."

"He must have found something interesting there," I murmured. He'd apparently found something that had blown out the Verbena magic. For the first time I wondered just how dangerous saving Malcolm's soul was going to be.

"How are you planning on getting from Moscow to there?"

"That's a good question," I said ruefully. "I was hoping I could maybe hire a plane to get closer or something, I don't know. If my phone worked, I could make some phone calls, but since my phone won't work...."

"Too much open country out here," he suggested.

"Yeah, out here in the middle of nowhere," I agreed.

"Mother Russia," he said fondly.

We talked for a long time while Petor drove. Sometime around midnight he asked me to drive so he could get some sleep. He crawled into the sleeping compartment and I took over.

I knew I needed someone I could count on, someone who knew the customs and pitfalls of Russia to help me get to Pechora. Petor seemed to fill those needs, but in order to get the help I needed, I'd probably have to ghoul him.

I didn't like the idea, but it didn't seem like I had much of a choice. Three feedings and he'd be mine to command, then I'd go home hopefully within a week or so and he'd never see me again. My biggest problem was trying to figure out how to do it.

There were other difficulties involved with it, of course. First of all I didn't know that much about Petor, for all I knew he'd lied and had a wife and ten kids depending on his paycheck. Second was the fact that he'd be blood bound to me, which I knew I could deal with. The question was would he be able to deal with it once I was gone.

Breaking a blood bond was not a fun thing, I knew that from experience. It didn't seem fair to use Petor then leave him high and dry when I was done with him. I finally decided to wait and see what happened. If an opportunity arose to begin the ghouling process, I'd take it, and him. I wasn't sure Elvira would agree to me having another ghoul, or Jason for that matter, but given the circumstances I didn't feel like I had any other choice.

I tried not to worry about how I'd get to Pechora, or what I'd do when I got there, but there was no help for it. If this wasn't some kind of a trap that Malcolm had planned for me, it might be more dangerous than I'd originally planned on in Pechora. Something had caused the surge Summer and her sisters had experienced, something that had burned out their skill as if it had never existed. Who was I to think I could do something to help?

When I roused Petor near sunrise, he told me that we'd be in Moscow when I woke up. I climbed into the sleeping compartment and tried my phone once more, but all I got was static. I fell asleep as the sun came up.

MOSCOW

I'm gonna have a drink, and walk around
I've got a lot to think about, oh yeah.
Bloodfetting (The Vampire Song) - Concrete Blonde

I was walking alone down a city street, dressed in what I'd gone to bed in. The city around me was clean and fairly modern. It resembled so many inner cities that I had known, but it was still unfamiliar. As I passed by an alley, a bright light streamed out, blinding me. I turned to walk into the light and the dream faded away.

Once again when I woke, the truck wasn't moving. There were some distant traffic noises, and the sound of nearby machinery. I peeked out of the sleeping compartment to see a note stuck to the dash that read, "Unloading shipment, wait," in Russian.

A glance around told me we were in a lumberyard with lots of wood piled everywhere. Since I wasn't sure if Petor was supposed to give rides to strangers, I stayed in the back sleeping compartment while I waited. I turned on a light and changed before packing everything up in the backpack. I tried to call home again, but the gods were against me.

Some forty-five minutes later I heard a knock on the window and the door opened.

"Are you awake?" Petor called softly.

"Yes," I replied.

I felt the truck move as he climbed the steps. "Are you decent?"

"Yeah," I told him. "I thought I should wait back here for you to come back, just in case I wasn't supposed to be in the truck."

"Ah. We caught the end of the crew anyway, they don't care much," he said as he started the semi.

I climbed into the passenger's seat. "I just didn't want to get you in trouble."

"Thank you," he said with a smile. "Well, we're in Moscow."

"Okay, so, do you know any travel agents," I asked him, "or the way to the airport, or something you could drop me at?"

"There is an airport, but the city doesn't look kindly on big rigs driving through," he told me. "I can try and get us a car."

"That would be helpful," I replied. "A taxi even, I have money."

"Taxis in Russia," he murmured, trying not to laugh.

I had to chuckle with him, remembering what it had been like three years ago when Luke, Lena and I had been looking for Jason. We'd had a hard time finding cabs no matter where we went.

"I will drive down through the switching yard," he told me. "We can catch a bus to the city." He carefully weaved his way through the parked trucks and the mill operations. It took about half an hour, but eventually he parked his rig along side a dozen other trucks.

Once he had it parked, he turned the engine off and started gathering his personal belongings. I pulled out the money we'd agreed upon, and he took it rather reluctantly.

"It is okay," he told me. "I have nothing to do actually, do you need a guide?"

"That would be appreciated." Someone who knew the city and its customs would go a long way toward getting me to Pechora.

"And if we're not going to be back for a while," he murmured to himself as he reached under the dash to pull out a hidden compartment. Lying inside was a handgun, which he put into his backpack.

He went into the sleeping compartment and found a small duffel bag that he filled with clothing and other articles. When we were done, we waited for the bus to come by, talking quietly about Moscow.

"There aren't too many places to rent cars from," he said when we had finally gotten on a bus heading toward the city. "We could probably—no I don't want to buy a car. A taxi would work. How long are you planning on staying in the city?"

"As long as it takes me to find a way to Pechora," I said firmly.

He nodded. "Well, where do you want to start?"

Start? I had no idea. "Any suggestions?"

"The airport probably won't charter anything there, I can tell you that now," he warned me.

"There are no airports in Pechora or anywhere nearby. You might be able to buy a small plane off of someone, if you can find one, but again there is nowhere to land out there."

"No fields or anything?" There had to be somewhere nearby that a plane could land.

"I'm sure there are simple spaces," he conceded.

I sighed and ran a hand through my dark hair. "I'm at a loss because other than driving a car there, which would take days, flying to me would be the best way in," I told him. "Even flying to an airport closer and getting a car there. If you have a better idea, I'd be more than happy to go with it."

"Let's go to the airport," he suggested. "We'll see if we can find someone with something for sale."

Then a simple fact occurred to me. "I can't fly a plane."

He glanced over at me. "It's been years but, motor pool."

"Don't you have a route that you need to stay on?" I asked, surprised at his offer. "I mean, I don't want to take you away from your job."

"What is job?" he asked with a shrug. "A way to spend time."

If he was going to offer, I wasn't going to argue. "Okay."

"I drive freelance," he added, smiling. "What are they going to do, fire me?"

I smiled back. "I can compensate you for your time."

We took a cab to the airport, which took a while because the airport was on south side of city. Petor inquired at a desk for any small airplanes that might be for sale, and the woman directed us to a bulletin board that hung from the wall. We went over to take a look, but it was slow going. Poorly done fliers overlapped each other, which made finding what we were looking for almost impossible.

Petor eventually found something and took the flier down. "This says there is one for sale that runs good with low miles," he told me. "It might actually work."

"As long as it flies well," I reminded him. "Let's go check it out."

"It's after eight o'clock," Petor reminded me. "They've gone home by now."

Living in a city that held so many Kindred must have spoiled me, I kept forgetting that not everyone lived at night. We found an ATM machine and I took out the equivalent to two hundred American dollars in rubles.

"Is there a hotel or anything that we can stay at?" I asked him as I tucked the money into my pocket.

"How classy you want?"

"I don't necessarily need classy," I told him, "but not a dive either."

"I have a place that I usually stay," he said, pointing toward the city.

"That's fine," I assured him. "Why don't we find a rental car? We'll be in town at least for the day, it will be better than relying on busses or a taxi."

I gave Petor the money to rent a car, and told him that we didn't need anything luxurious. I didn't want to call attention to myself, I just wanted to get out of town quietly and quickly. He came back with the keys to a Toyota. It wasn't pretty, but it ran well.

"Do you want to go eat or something?" I asked as he drove into Moscow.

"A hot meal would be nice," he agreed. "Beats a cold sandwich."

"I'll buy you dinner," I offered, "wherever you want to go."

"There is a restaurant near where we'll stay," he told me.

The restaurant was small and probably family owned. I told him to order whatever he wanted, and he did, all hot filling foods that he said he missed when he was on the road. I ordered a sandwich and a glass of water, not wanting to be throwing up half the morning to get rid of it. Actually I was surprised he hadn't asked about my eating habits by now, but I wasn't about to look a gift horse in the mouth.

When he was done eating, we went to the hotel he normally stayed at when he was in Moscow. I handed him some money and it didn't take long for him to check us both in. We ended up with adjoining rooms that shared a bath, which killed my idea of sleeping in the bathtub during the day. The hotel wasn't fancy, but it suited my needs.

Plus, there was a phone in my room. I dialed the operator, and she asked me for the number that I wanted to reach.

"What city is that?" she asked politely.

"Salem, Massachusetts." When she laughed, I stifled a moan. "Can't get through?"

"Not to America," she told me.

"How about Austria?" I asked.

"I think we can."

I gave her Lena's number and crossed my fingers. To my relief, the call actually got through. Granted, I only got her answering machine, but at least I could leave a message.

"I'm in Russia and can't get through to Jason," I said after identifying myself. "Could you call him and let him know I'm okay? I'll try calling again later."

It wasn't what I wanted, but it would have to do. I hoped Lena would be able to reach him and assure him I was still alive. Hopefully he wouldn't be coming after me.

Yeah, ri-ight. And pigs fly on a regular basis.

HIRED MUSCLE

Death ain't nothing but a heart beat away
I'm living life do or die, what can I say
Gangsta's Paradise - Coolio

Because it was only nine-thirty and I wasn't looking forward to spending the entire night alone, I knocked on the door of Petor's room. "Is there something you want to do?" I asked him. "Night life in the area? Bar? Movie?" Anything besides sitting in my room staring at the four walls all night.

"There are bars," he told me.

"I bet there are," I drawled with a smile. "Do you want to go out for a little while?"

"We could go to the bar," he suggested. "I could have a drink or two."

"Okay, let's go."

"There is one just down the block," he said with a grin.

The bar was less than reputable, but it didn't bother me. I'd been in far worse many times before. Of course the bartender recognized Petor, and we sat down at the bar to drink. Petor ordered vodka, so I asked for one too. The bar was busy, but not too crowded, and the noise levels weren't too loud for Petor and me to talk while we drank.

Around ten thirty a group of four men came in looking more thuggish than the rest of the crowd. They sat at a table near the door and studied the crowd quite intently before they caught sight of me. Once that happened, I noticed they stared quite openly in my direction. A look at their auras showed they were human, but little else of any use.

"Do you know who those men are?" I asked Petor, gesturing with a nod of my head toward their table.

He glanced in that direction and grimaced. "They are hired muscle. Probably just seeing a new face and want to cause trouble."

"Lovely," I murmured. I did not need more trouble than I'd had already.

I nursed a couple of drinks while Petor drank his share of vodka. I thought about following one of the women into the rest room for a quick bite to eat, but the guys near the door were watching me too closely and I didn't want to risk it.

Near midnight, I noticed that Petor seemed tired. "We should probably get going back to the hotel," I suggested softly. "Maybe in the morning you could go to the airport and make arrangements for the plane."

"Sure," he agreed with a grin.

I put some money down on the bar and we headed for the door. The men were still watching me, and this time when I looked at their auras, I saw that they were aggressive, excited and angry. I hoped we would make it back to the hotel without trouble, but I wasn't willing to bet on it.

As soon as we cleared the door, they were up and after us. I wanted to warn Petor, but they were too close. I dropped the hilt of my knife into the palm of my hand and reached into my jacket for the Glock under my arm as we walked toward the hotel.

We came up on an alley to my right just as I heard one of the guys behind us say "Now." Before I had a chance to do anything more than reach for my gun, they were on us. Two of them grabbed Petor and pulled him toward the alley. Either he was far more drunk than I'd realized or they'd surprised him because he didn't struggle.

When the other two grabbed for me, I lashed out with the knife at the one on my left and pointed my Glock at the other one who tried to grab my arm, but missed. He was holding a large gun in his other hand.

"Let him go!" I ordered in Russian.

They laughed at me.

The one on my left swung and hit me with the bat, but I didn't let that affect my aim as I pulled the trigger and hit the other one in the shoulder before he could bring his gun up to fire. From the corner of my eye I saw a glint of metal in the hands of one of the men who were pulling Petor into the alley, and with my luck I knew he was probably carrying a small submachine gun, the same as the guy I'd shot. I dove toward him, hoping to knock him off balance and make him drop his gun. I did manage to get him away from Petor, but somehow he kept his gun and his feet.

I wasn't so lucky, although I did keep hold of my gun. I landed on my stomach and when I tried to push back up to my feet, batboy hit me across the back. I didn't let it faze me as I continued upward to my knees. Petor punched the guy who still held him as I fired at the one I'd shot earlier. I missed by a mile.

The one Petor had punched threw him hard against the wall, then turned and pointed his gun at me. Both he and the one I'd already shot yelled for batboy to get out of the way, but he was too intent on taking me down.

When he came at me again, I grabbed his weapon and shoved my gun into his stomach. A quick pull of the trigger sent blood and gore everywhere. I guided his body down on top of me and twisted to fire at the one who had held Petor again. This time I didn't miss. He fell back against the wall and slowly slid toward the ground.

I looked for the man I'd knocked away from Petor, but apparently my bullet had gotten him too because he was on the ground. Before I could turn to aim again, the sound of gunfire rang through the alley and I felt the body above me shake with bullet impacts. Luckily, none of them hit me and I swung the gun around to fire at the one I'd shot with my first bullet. He went flying back, out of the game.

There was a three round burst from the remaining machine gun, and I felt a bullet cut into my leg. When I looked, Petor was tackling the last bad guy, bringing him to his knees. A final punch knocked him unconscious. Relieved, I sank my teeth into the corpse above me, hoping to get a little blood from the body. A little was all I could get, most of his blood was all over the alley and me.

I pushed the body away and looked around for Petor, who was sitting against the wall with a perplexed look on his face. His nose was split open and there was blood running down his face, too much blood.

"What are...?" he whispered as he passed out.

For a moment I thought he was dead, but then I realized that he was still breathing. He had a pulse, which was good, but he was definitely hurt. He looked like he'd hit a brick wall with his face, which he had. I picked up the guy laying next to him by the hair and bit into his neck. It didn't take long to fill up from his blood.

I turned back to Petor but I didn't like what I saw. He was too pale, and his breathing was too shallow. The gash that ran across the bridge of his nose that was entirely too deep for my liking. If I didn't do something, he was going to die and it would be my fault.

I picked up my knife from where I had dropped it to the ground earlier and carefully slit my wrist before holding the bleeding wound to his lips. "Drink," I whispered urgently. "Heal."

To my relief he managed to drink enough to make his color look much better. His breathing evened out and deepened, and I stopped worrying that he wouldn't make it through the night. I licked the wounds on my wrist closed and turned to fill up on the bodies and clean up my mess.

It only took a moment to shove the knife back into the sheath strapped to my wrist and put my gun away. I healed my wounds and filled up again on two of the other bodies. I took the trench coat

off one of them hoping it would cover the worst of the blood on me before I picked up a machine gun and used it to make sure all of the men were dead. At last I turned back to Petor.

He was awake and staring at me wide-eyed, although he seemed a little disoriented. Belatedly I realized that I had blood all over my face, and worse yet I hadn't retracted my fangs when I'd finished feeding. I did so now, but I knew it was much too little too late. He'd probably even seen me feed.

"What are you?" he asked warily.

I wiped some of the blood from my face and ignored the question. "We need to get out of here," I told him firmly. I didn't want to be there when the cops or someone else came looking to see what had made all the commotion.

He pushed against the wall to rise to his feet, but he was still a little out of it so I grabbed his arm and slung it around my shoulders. Thankfully he didn't try to fight me, and a few minutes later we were walking through the empty lobby of our hotel.

I helped him up to his room and started a pot of coffee before I went into my own room to change and wash the blood from my face and hands.

TIME FOR HONESTY

This is not the way I wanted things to be
I hope some day you'll understand
Come to Me - Ricky Martin

I dreaded going back Petor's room, but I knew I had to eventually. He'd seen me feed and probably had a good idea of what I was. I had to make sure my breach of the Masquerade wouldn't get me killed, and of course I needed him to get to Pechora, if he was still willing to help me.

He was sitting on the bed where I'd left him, but he had taken his jacket off. He looked more than a little confused, and he was touching the bridge of his nose probingly as if to assure himself that he wasn't injured. There was still a lot of blood on his face, but the wound itself had healed.

I brought him a cup of coffee then went for a washcloth so he could clean away some of the blood. He watched me move around the room and it made me feel self-conscious, but I took comfort in the fact that he wasn't trying to stake me.

"What just happened?" he asked when he'd cleaned most of the blood away.

"We got attacked by four bad guys," I reminded him. "We walked away from it."

"How?" he demanded.

I shrugged. "We were better than they were?"

"I was drunk," he reminded me.

I met his suspicious gaze evenly. "I wasn't."

"You had..." He made a gesture toward his mouth. "How?"

I tried to pretend ignorance. "I had what?"

"Fangs," he said, sounding very certain.

I smiled, taking care to show him that I didn't have fangs now. "Are you sure that's what you saw?"

"Are you a vampire?" he demanded, taking the direct route through my evasions.

He knew what I was, it was stupid for me to try and hide it. Actually, his knowing made things a lot easier for me. "Is this going to affect our relationship?"

"Are you going to try and eat me?" he countered.

"No." At least, not unless he agreed to it. It was probably going to be a long trip to Pechora.

After a moment he shrugged. "I've had worse bosses, bigger bloodsuckers."

I smiled. "I promise I'll keep my fangs to myself."

He was silent for a moment, watching my face. "So you are...?"

"Yeah."

"You—" He gestured toward his mouth and I knew he was referring to the fact that I had fed him my blood. "Am I?"

"No, no," I assured him quickly, sitting down on the foot of his bed. "You were hurt and you needed help, so I gave it to you."

He seemed a little relieved. "Okay."

"It doesn't change what you are, who you are, or anything else." Well, anything except the blood bond, but I didn't think it was a good time to mention that.

"But I feel better," he commented.

"You would," I reminded him, "you healed."

"No, I mean..." He was struggling for a word to describe the way he felt, and I knew that he probably wouldn't find it.

"You feel stronger," I suggested. Humans normally gained strength with Kindred blood inside of them.

"That too," he agreed.

"It's just a side effect of the blood," I told him softly. "It'll go away, eventually."

He looked at me intently. "What if I don't want it to?"

Christ, was this another O'Connell who with one taste of the blood was willing to give up his entire world for me? I shook my head, but I knew I owed Petor the truth. "Well, the blood will only last for so long before it dissipates and goes away."

"How long?"

"That depends," I answered. "Usually a unit of blood will stay in your system for a month if you don't use it for something."

"Is that what happened to..." He touched the bridge of his nose carefully as if he still expected it to be laid open.

"Yes, I gave you blood and you used it to heal yourself," I told him with what I hoped was a gentle smile. "I might have asked if you were conscious, but since you weren't, I just took it for granted that you'd want to heal that gash that was across your face. Sorry."

"Are there any other effects?"

"Well, obviously you're going to feel stronger for a while," I replied. "It's possible to use the blood to make yourself even stronger, or faster, or have more stamina, if you have the extra blood." I wanted to stop there, but I didn't feel right not being completely honest with him. "Um, ah, it also has the effect of making you one step blood bound to me, but it wears off."

"Blood bound," he repeated slowly.

"It's a side effect of the blood," I said quickly, trying to blow it off.

"What does it mean?"

It meant a hell of a lot more than I could explain, but then again he'd get over the bond I'd given him a hell of a lot easier than I'd gotten over mine to Luke. "It just means that you're more likely to listen to what I have to say."

He smiled. "You are paying me."

"See?" I said, relieved. "No big deal."

"What if you fed me more?" he asked softly.

More. Like O'Connell, Petor didn't quit, and he just had to ask the hard questions. "Well, um, you would have more blood in your system that you could use to make yourself stronger, faster, and so on," I told him hesitantly. "It would also be the second step toward the full blood bond. Why?"

"I was just wondering," he replied. "It seems you have a pretty interesting life."

"You could call it that," I reluctantly agreed.

"More interesting than driving a truck," he added tentatively.

I knew where this was going and I felt I had to try and discourage him. "More dangerous than driving a truck."

He only shrugged. "Like I said, more interesting. So does your husband know?"

"God, I hope so," I breathed with a smile as I thought of Jason, "'cause he's one too. He didn't used to be, but he is now."

"And you always were?" he asked, surprised.

"Ever since I can remember." Mostly, anyway. I'd gotten some of my pre-vampire memories back, but most of the time that felt like another life, things that had happened to someone else.

"Are there many like you?"

"There are enough," I told him honestly. "I don't know how many there are here, but in America there are plenty."

"Huh."

He was quiet for a long time, and I wasn't sure what more I could tell him. He already knew enough to get him killed in most Camarilla cities, but here in Moscow where I hadn't seen another vampire I didn't think it would be quite so dangerous. Still, what would he do with his new found knowledge?

"Are you okay?" I finally asked. "Are you feeling all right?"

"I'm still a little dazed," he admitted.

"Well, you were thrown quite forcefully up against the brick wall," I reminded him. Plus there was the whole 'vampires are real' thing I'd just hit him with.

"I seem to remember that," he said with a smile.

"You'll probably feel better after you get some sleep," I suggested.

"Okay."

I stood up and walked toward the bathroom door. "I'll give you what money I have in the morning," I told him. "I'd like to get the airplane situation under control as soon as possible. If what I give you isn't enough, we'll deal with it when I get up."

He nodded and I told him goodnight as I reached for the doorknob. His voice stopped me before I could turn it.

"When you go back, are you just going to leave me here?" he asked me softly, sounding more than a little lost.

I turned with my hand still on the knob. "Is that not what you want?"

"As I said, your life sounds a hell of a lot more interesting than mine," he replied.

I smiled. "That's what O'Connell said." Actually, O'Connell had been fascinated with the adventure he thought my life would give him. Well, I'd certainly shown him adventure, especially right after we'd arrived in Salem.

"Who's O'Connell?" Petor asked. "Is that your husband?"

"No, that would be Jason," I told him. "O'Connell is a, ah, he's um, he's an associate, an employee of mine. He's actually, well, he's my ghou." I had to say the word at some point if I was going to be completely honest with Petor.

He looked at me questioningly. "What is ghou?"

Knowing that explaining this would take a few minutes, I went back to sit down on his bed. "Well, okay. A ghou is someone who drinks a vampire's blood at least once a month to continue the blood bond and it enables the person to do certain things for the vampire, like take care of bills and daytime security, things like that. O'Connell does that for me."

"Is that what I am now?" he asked hesitantly.

"Well, at the moment," I admitted, "but once the blood wears off then it won't be that way."

"Oh," he said, sounding and looking disappointed, "you've already got one."

"Well you know," I replied, trying to make him feel better, "sometimes vampires have five or six." That perked him up. "Oh?"

"Yes." I couldn't help but smile at his change in demeanor. "It depends on the vampire."

"Is this O'Connell a good driver?" he asked.

"Actually we haven't quite taught O'Connell how to drive yet," I admitted with a laugh. When Petor looked at me questioningly, I added, "Long story, he's from an alternate reality. It's really weird."

"Like I said," he said slowly, "you're life's a lot more interesting than mine."

I laughed again at the probable truth of his words. "But he knows how to pack a good shell, and hey, that's a good thing."

"Cooking?"

"Ammunition." O'Connell liked weapons, all kinds of weapons.

"Oh, I thought you meant pasta shells," Petor murmured, "with ricotta cheese and sausage."

I spaced on the food talk, it had just never interested me. Sure, I'd learned how to eat it, but I didn't have any memories of enjoying it while I was alive, so why focus on it? The bland taste of the stuff was nothing compared to the full rich flavor of human blood. Of course, nothing compared to that, not even the blood of animals.

A few nights ago I'd contemplated ghoul-ing Petor, but that was before I knew him. Now that I did, I wasn't sure I could just leave him here with a craving for *Kindred vitae* that he wouldn't be able to fill. "Do you not want me to leave you here when I go back?"

"Everything I own is in my bag or parked at the lot," he told me simply.

"That didn't answer my question," I replied softly.

"If things don't work out there, you said this blood bond thing ends eventually," he said, looking down at his hands. "I would just drive over there, different roads."

"Different roads, different culture, different language," I warned him.

"I do speak American," he reminded me in English.

"I know," I replied feeling tired. How could I convey the danger and the risks involved with being part of my life? "You may not like working for a blood sucking fiend."

"As I said, I've worked for bigger blood suckers." He smiled a little. "There was a colonel in the army once."

"Well, why don't we think about it," I suggested. "It's a complete change in life style for you. We'll talk about it tomorrow night."

When he agreed, I went back to my room for the cash I had, knowing he'd need it for a down payment on the plane. He told me he'd take care of everything, and I went into the bathroom to wash the blood out of my hair.

After trying once more to get through to Jason, I spent an hour or so pacing the floor. Then I remembered that I could still get Jason a message, even though my phone wouldn't work. I sat down and wrote a quick note to let him know I'd be okay, then another to Brenda hoping that she would make sure he didn't come after me. At the last minute I decided to send letters to O'Connell and Cormac as well with instructions I wanted carried out if I didn't return.

When I knocked on the door of Petor's room an hour before dawn it was obvious he hadn't been sleeping. I gave him the letters and asked him to overnight them to Salem as soon as possible. After he promised he would, I went back to my room to wait for dawn.

MAFIA SHOOTOUT

Hear the silence about to break
Fear resistance when I'm awake
Awake - Godsmack

I rose with the sunset and didn't waste much time getting dressed for the night in dark jeans and a blue shirt. I had just put my knife inside its wrist sheath when I heard the small sounds of a lock being picked. I could also hear movement coming from Petor's room, but by the stealthy sounds, it wasn't Petor. I heightened my senses and heard someone outside the window of the room.

Actually there were two people in the hall by my door, and two outside the window. Whoever it was, this did not sound good. At least I didn't smell any blood or hear anything that could be Petor in pain.

Figuring the easiest way out was through the bathroom where I could only hear one person, I went for my ritual bag and my briefcase. The moment my hand fell on the case, the lock turned on the hallway door. A quick glance showed me that I'd forgotten to throw the barrel lock.

The door swung open just as a hand fell on the other side of the bathroom doorknob. I spun and fell back between the dresser and the corner of the room, using the dresser as cover from the machine gun I could see coming through the opening. The bathroom door opened away from me, so I knew I'd have a few more seconds before I had to deal with whoever was coming in from that direction.

"There she is," one of the men said as he squeezed the trigger of his large caliber machine gun. The man just behind him fired too, but luckily I had gotten behind the dresser before either of them were able to shoot me.

A split second later the bathroom door was kicked open and one of the windows smashed inward. I used blood to make myself faster and more agile as I fired my Glock at the doorway. I saw the standing one jerk with the impact just as a bullet from his friend's gun went deep into my shoulder. My body healed itself around the bullet, allowing me to ignore the wound.

I stuck my foot out to keep the bathroom door from opening completely while the intruder began turning toward me. Within seconds I would be in his range of fire and I knew I had to do something before he could shoot at me.

Antonio had taught me long ago how to move things with the power of my mind, and now I reached out to take his gun from his hands. He fought me, keeping a hold of the gun even as it moved in my direction. While he was unable to fire at me, I shot again toward the hall door and felt a jolt of satisfaction when I heard a body hit the ground.

From the window I heard gunfire and felt the sting of a bullet enter my upper chest. I hadn't been prepared for this one, and it hurt badly. I was glad I didn't have to breathe, because I wouldn't have been able to. Another gun fired from the same direction, but the aim was off and the bullets hit the guy who had come into the room from the bathroom. He fell to the ground, blood running from a half dozen wounds and staining the carpet.

Without the man's resistance, his gun flew across the air and with my mind I dropped it into my lap. Somewhere down the hall I heard the retort of a large caliber handgun and from the sounds of it another body hit the floor in the hallway. When I heard Petor call my name I felt relief sweep through me.

"Petor!" I answered loudly, hoping to warn him off. "There are four in here!"

The only answer was the sound of gunfire in the hallway.

I used blood to heal the wound in my chest and fired my handgun at the two men near the window. I hit one in the face and he fell backward, dead. I also shot the other guy, but apparently not well enough. He dropped to his knees and fired at me. Pain ripped through my abdomen.

The injury was the last straw. I concentrated on my anger and allowed it to focus my mind. Distantly I realized I heard the sound of gunfire in the hall and another person coming through the bathroom from Petor's room. I ignored everything else as I picked up the machine gun on my lap and threw it on full automatic to shoot a spread across the room. I missed the one who'd fallen to his knees, but hit the new bad guy who'd come in from the bathroom.

As the man by the window fired at me again and missed, I heard more gunfire from the hallway. Dropping the empty AK-74, I picked my Glock back up and shot the last remaining bad guy between the eyes.

I put my gun away and crawled over two the bodies near the bathroom door to sink my fangs into the flesh of first one then the other, healing as I fed. More gunfire from the hall caught my attention and I turned in time to see a man pointing what looked like a Desert Eagle at me. I rolled to the left and came up on my knees a little off balance.

Gunfire down the hall threw the man off and I reached for one of the fallen machine guns. A second later I fired, once again on full auto. Blood splattered everywhere and he fell back out of my sight, dead.

I waited for a long moment, listening to the sounds of blood dripping. Only one of the bad guys was still breathing. He had a sucking chest wound, but for now he was still alive.

"Petor?" I called softly.

"Down here," he answered from the hall. It sounded like he was near the stairway on the other side of his room.

I tossed the empty machine gun toward the bed and kicked the gun in the dying man's hand away from him. Pulling the other handgun from the small of my back, I poked my head out the door to see Petor coming my way holding what looked like a hand cannon.

Turning, I crouched next to only bad guy left alive. "Why are you here?" I demanded.

He gasped, struggling to breathe with a hole in his lung. "You are rival gang, come and spend money," he groaned.

I laughed dryly at the idea. "Who's your boss?" I barked.

"Dimitri."

"Where is he?"

"In his mansion," he whispered faintly.

"And that is where?" I was getting impatient; I knew there wasn't much time left for me to get answers from this guy before he died.

"Outside of town." He was getting weaker, but I didn't dare feed him blood to keep him around.

"Got an address?"

He chose that moment to die, so I suppose he didn't. I checked his wallet and found a wad of cash but no ID. I pocketed the money and turned to the one I'd shot last.

This one seemed to be dressed a little better, and he'd been wearing sunglasses. In his wallet I found more money, a driver's license, and a credit card, which told me that he must have been the leader of this little expedition. Too bad he was dead and I couldn't question him some more. I took his Desert Eagle and the extra clips he had, then raided the other bodies near the door for the extra clips they were carrying. I shoved the handgun into the waistband of my pants and picked up one of the AK-74s.

Petor had joined me by then, and agreed with me when I said we needed to get out of there. He hadn't been hit at all, and he didn't seem to notice the blood on my clothes. We grabbed our things and I handed most of mine to Petor with instructions to bring the car around. He took one of the machine guns with him, and what extra clips I hadn't already grabbed from the bodies.

I undid the straps on the bag O'Connell had designed for my ritual supplies and unrolled it on the bed. From near the bottom, I pulled out a hand grenade, then rerolled and tied the bag. There were too many bloodless bodies, and I didn't want the Russian Mafia to know exactly what I was. That they were after me was already bad enough.

When I thought Petor had been given enough time to get to the car, I slung the bag on my back and walked to the hallway. I jerked the pin out of the grenade and tossed it into the center of my room before sprinting down the hall. I used blood to give me speed and ran toward the stairs, then down them. The moment I hit the outside door, the grenade went off with a loud explosion that rocked the building.

Petor was waiting for me in the car, but across the street from the hotel I saw an old man with white hair watching me. He was Kindred, the first one I'd seen in Moscow. I nodded politely and he returned the salute without blinking, an odd smile on his face.

I got into the car and glanced at Petor. "Do you know him?" When he looked across the street and shook his head, I told him to go. The Kindred watched us drive out of sight.

"So how did it go with the plane?" I asked a few minutes later when the fire from the burning hotel was no longer in sight.

"It will be ready tomorrow," he replied.

"Morning, evening?" I needed to know how much time we had left in the city.

"When you wake up."

"Evening." That meant we needed somewhere to hold up for twenty-four hours. I hoped he knew of some other place we could stay, somewhere the Mafia wouldn't come looking for us.

"I got the plane for, well, free," he added hesitantly.

"What?" He couldn't have said what I thought he'd said, maybe I'd misheard him.

"I was-I was, ah," he stammered, then took a deep breath and started again. "The guy was not very cooperative and I got a little pissed off. When I said 'why don't you just give it to me free', he agreed."

I had to laugh, I mean full out, deep belly laugh. One drink of my blood and Petor had instinctively been able to use one of my clan's disciplines.

"What's so funny?" he demanded, glancing over at me.

It took me almost a minute to calm down enough to speak. "It's called Dominate," I explained, trying to contain my humor.

He shot me a strange look. "Isn't that one of those sex things I read about in America?"

"No," I said wryly, "that would be dominatrix, different thing."

"Are you...?" he murmured, hiding a smile.

"No," I said firmly. "No, this is a power that the blood has given you."

With the natural ability to use my blood like that, he could be perfect neonate material. How could I not agree to ghoulish this guy? I smiled to myself and changed the subject.

"So, did you hear there's a new gang of Russian Mafia in town?" I asked him wryly. "Apparently we're it."

"It does make sense I suppose," he murmured thoughtfully. "I mean, you've flashed some cash, and the four last night were probably under their employ."

I didn't remember flashing cash, but then again things were a lot different in this country than in America. "Yeah, well, where does one hide from the Russian Mafia?"

"One doesn't. America," he suggested quite seriously.

"It's either hide from them or go on the offensive," I told him, "and I'm not sure the two of us could take on them all."

"Probably not."

We needed some place to hold up for the day, and we needed to find it soon.

ALLEY ENCOUNTERS

Like a memory in motion
You were only passing through
Caroline - Concrete Blonde

I was just about to ask Petor if he knew a place we could stay until the next sundown when suddenly on my right I caught a glimpse of something out of the corner of my eye. I told Petor to stop and turned to look.

There it was, the alley I'd seen in my dreams a few nights ago. It was lined with brick buildings and resembled so many alleys that I had seen in my life, but still I'd only seen this particular alley in my dreams. I couldn't afford not to check it out. "Go back to that alley," I told Petor.

Without questioning me, he backed up far enough to pull down the alley, driving slowly. It was wide enough for the car to get through it with a little room to spare on either side, and it looked very long.

In my mind's eye I saw Malcolm step out of the shadows in front of the car, but of course Petor didn't see anything. My ex-mentor looked exactly as I remembered him, wearing all black clothing that was a little worse for wear. He had tattoos on his arms, and his face was smooth, young looking. His hair was dark and long, twisted into dreadlocks. He didn't appear to be solid, I could see right through him as he walked toward the car.

"Wait here," I told Petor as I got out of the car, wondering for a moment just what the hell I was doing. Malcolm wasn't really here, so there was no way I could hurt him. The thing was that I didn't remember much of my old magic, and I had no way of knowing if there was something he could do that would hurt me.

As if reading my mind, Malcolm took his hands from his pockets. When I started walking toward him, he stopped and waited. I left about five feet of space between us.

"Thank you for coming, Tina," he said softly in the voice I remembered so clearly from my dreams about him.

"I didn't really have a choice, did I?" I asked wryly. He'd probably given his faeries instructions to kidnap me if I hadn't gone willingly.

"I apologize for... everything," he told me sadly, making me want to believe him, to trust him. "There was no one else I could trust to undertake this."

I raised my eyebrows skeptically. "Did you drive everyone else away?" I knew I wasn't being nice, but damn it, Malcolm hadn't been nice to my friends or me in the last few years. In fact, he'd done his best to ruin every life he'd touched.

He had the grace to look sheepish. "Well, there weren't many others."

If he treated the rest of his friends the way he'd treated me and mine, it was no wonder. "So you couldn't spooky-boo my way to Pechora?"

"No," he said, slowly becoming a little more solid, more there in the alley. I could still see through him, but the area around him had broadened out a little more. It looked as if he was standing between two mirrors and I was looking out of one of them. His image reflected back and forth as far as I could see, giving the illusion that there were hundreds of Malcolms, thousands.

A part of me wanted to keep this as short as possible, but another part wanted to ask him why he'd turned to the dark side. I knew this wasn't the place to hear the answers to that question, because most likely I'd want to kill him afterwards. For that I needed more than just an image in an alley.

"What is it you need me to do?" I demanded.

"Rescue me," he replied, as if it were obvious.

I needed a little more information to go on than that. "From what?"

"I have been imprisoned by some... evil entity," he told me.

"Last time I knew, the definition of that was you, Malcolm," I said with a hard smile.

"Never me," he denied softly. When I shot him a look of disbelief, he added, "Lord Chaos."

I shifted impatiently on my feet at that. Why was he pretending he wasn't Lord Chaos? Next he'd try to tell me that he wasn't the one who'd had Jason embraced or taken Lena from her home.

"I don't have much time to explain it right now," he said impatiently. "This thing is eating my power."

"And everyone else's from what I understand," I replied dryly. Even though the Verbena were no longer my people, their loss of power worried me. I felt an obligation to see that they got it back, considering the fact that my mentor had been the cause of its loss.

"Yeah." He looked worried but still managed to smile. "You've been talking to people," he murmured. "You always were curious."

This wasn't the time for a walk down memory lane. I had to know what I was dealing with before I could handle the problem. "So how do I stop it?"

"I don't know if it can be stopped," he told me gravely. "It's feeding off me, and growing stronger."

"What does this have to do with the Trimuritive?"

He gave me a half smile. "Nothing and everything."

"Can you be more vague?" I growled irritably.

"Yes, I can."

"How can I help you if you don't give me any information?" I demanded impatiently. Knowledge was power, and Malcolm sure wasn't giving me much of it. "I mean, you drop me in the middle of nowhere with no way to get anywhere and you expect me to save your soul? From this Lord Chaos? Which, as far as I know, is you."

"No," he denied, "you can't save me from Chaos, he is my own demon to fight."

"He is a demon," I muttered, remembering what he'd done to Jason and Lena. "I'll have to agree with that."

"I need you to get me out of this trap," he told me. "I will be northwest of Pechora in four days. If you make it there before that you won't find me."

Fair enough. "Okay, and what am I supposed to do to help?"

"Find me."

"How is just finding you going to help?" I demanded. "My magic isn't what it used to be."

"You have different magic now," he reminded me.

"I knew that," I growled impatiently. Tremere Thaumaturgy was an entirely different breed of magic from that practiced by mortal mages.

"Magic may not help but you're still as smart as you ever were," he said with a smile. "Together we can beat them."

Together. From what I remembered, Malcolm and I had once accomplished a lot together, before he took a walk on the dark side. I couldn't think about that now or I wouldn't be able to bring myself to help him. "We can try," I agreed gently. No guarantees since I still had no idea what we'd be facing.

He held out his hand and I watched something take form in his palm. As it floated toward me, I realized it was a piece of old parchment, a little curled and crinkling on the edges. When I held it I

saw that it read "Anastasio's Old Time Lunar Carnival and Midnight Circus." Above those words was an evil looking face in the shape of a crescent moon. The letters were in the old English style, and there were no dates on the page.

I looked up at Malcolm in confusion to see him fading away. "What is this?" I asked before he could disappear.

"It's where I am," he replied, still fading.

"At least that's something," I murmured. It was the first real information he'd given me since the faeries had told me where he was. "I'll be there," I told him simply, my voice kind for the first time. I knew I had no choice but to help my old mentor, I owed him that much at least.

"Thank you," he told me softly.

Behind me, Petor honked the horn and Malcolm started to fade. I buried my impatience at the interruption and glanced over my shoulder. To my surprise, there were four people standing behind the car. At first glance I thought they were Mafia types, but then I realized they were Kindred.

One of the men was the same Kindred I'd seen outside of our burning hotel. On one side of him was a dark eyed woman in a business suit, on the other, a Nosferatu that looked to be male. Behind them was a man who looked like a Jim Morrison wannabe with a frilly laced shirt. Both the woman and the Nosferatu held guns, but they were pointed at the ground. A dark sedan with smoked windows was parked across the mouth of the alley.

I turned back to Malcolm, and through him I could see three more Kindred, a male and female who were probably Gangrel, and a second male who looked Brujah. All three of them had guns pointed at me through Malcolm's fading form.

I didn't go for a weapon because I knew there was no way I could win against all of them. If I kept my head and minded my manners, maybe we could walk out of this alive. I turned my back on the guns pointed at me and walked toward the car.

"Stay in the car," I ordered as I moved past Petor. I walked up to the man I'd seen outside of the hotel and nodded respectfully.

"Who are you?" he asked in Russian.

"I'm Christina Kline, from America," I told him. "I'm just passing through here; I don't want to step on anyone's toes."

"I see you've met Dimitri's boys," he murmured, looking at my torn and bloody clothing.

"Unfortunately," I replied. "It wasn't exactly by choice."

"The Russian Mafia is still out of control," he said, sounding disgusted.

"At least there are a few less of them," I offered.

"Those numbers are inconsequential," he replied dismissively.

"May I ask who you are?" I said as respectfully as I knew how.

"Forgive me, where are my manners?" He took his hat off and smiled at me. "I am Vladimir Vanderhoof," he said in English. "I am the leader of this area's Gregori."

Prince of the city was my guess. I wondered why they hadn't shown themselves on my last visit to town. "I hope you will forgive me for not bringing myself to your attention," I told him, "but I hadn't planned on staying in Moscow this long." I hoped he wasn't too mad about me being in his city without presenting myself to him. That alone was grounds for him to destroy me where I stood.

He held out his hand to me. "Please, come with us to our haven."

I studied his face wondering if I trust him. I didn't know these Kindred, and I only had Vladimir's word that he was the prince here. Perhaps they just wanted to destroy me in a more private location.

"I'm sorry," he said when I didn't answer. "I didn't mean it that way. It's just that you are new and we haven't spoken to any outsider for over seventy-five years."

I glanced back at the Kindred behind me and sure enough they still had their guns pointed in my direction. "Do I really have a choice?" I asked softly, turning back to Vladimir.

He made a gesture toward the Kindred behind me, and another glance back showed them putting their guns away. In fact even the Nosferatu and the woman put their guns away. "I will not force you, you are not being held," Vladimir insisted. "I am asking a favor."

We could either try to find somewhere to hide from the Russian Mafia ourselves or go with the Gregori. It wasn't much of a contest; vampires generally know the best places to hide from humans. "What about my friend?"

"Mr. Andrews is more than welcome," Vladimir said with a smile.

I tried not to let my eyes narrow at that comment, but I did wonder how he knew Petor's name. "Shall we follow you then?"

"Agreed."

With a nod I turned and headed for the passenger side of the car. Not surprisingly, the three Kindred that had been in the alley were gone.

"Hi," I said cheerfully to Petor as I closed the door. I twisted to watch the others get into the vehicle behind us. "We're following them," I told Petor.

"Okay," he said slowly as he backed the car out of the alley. "What are they?"

"Um..." What was the word Vladimir had used? "Gregori?" From the look on Petor's face he recognized the term. "And that means what?"

"Well, until last night I thought they were a myth," he murmured. "They are what the locals call vampires."

"They would be vampires," I affirmed with a nod. "I'm thinking Nosferatu and a couple of Gangrel, a Brujah and a Toreador. Just follow them, we've been invited."

He followed the other car north and west by turns through the streets of Moscow. After studying the parchment Malcolm had given me in the dim light, I held it up for Petor to see. "Does this mean anything to you?"

"Elephant ears and cotton candy?" he asked with a smile.

I had to laugh. "Yeah, well this is where we're supposed to meet Malcolm in four days."

"In Pechora?" he replied, surprised.

"Northeast of Pechora," I corrected him. "I'm supposed to save him from the Crone, or Lord Chaos or something." Actually, that wasn't exactly what Malcolm had said. "No, wait, I'm supposed to save him from the circus, he's got to deal with Lord Chaos. I need a drink," I murmured to myself, running a hand across my eyes.

Petor took one of his hands from the wheel and held his wrist out to me. "Is that part of the job?"

If I hadn't been mostly full from the Mafia guys in my hotel room, I might have taken him up on it there and then. "Usually, but not right now," I told him with a smile. "I don't think you've had enough vodka to help me."

"There is some in the back," he replied softly, almost hopefully.

A part of me wished I could let him have it, but I knew better. That thought almost made me laugh. Apparently I hadn't known better than to follow a noble cause to Russia. I just hoped following these Kindred wouldn't get both Petor and me killed.

THE GREGORI

Strangers all around
With the fights down low
Any Time, Any Place - Janet Jackson

Petor followed the other car outside of town to what turned out to be a mini castle northwest of Moscow. As we went, I asked him what he had heard about the legends of the Gregori. He explained that God had created them first, but they had been cast out. One of them stayed behind and mated with Lilith, creating a race of Gregori. He didn't know much more than that.

The castle had two towers and a drawbridge that spanned a moat. The walls were high and looked a little intimidating, but I tried not to worry too much. Vladimir had invited us, and he'd seemed friendly enough. Still, it was best to be prepared just in case.

"Stay on your toes," I told Petor as he followed the other car over the drawbridge. "We don't know these people obviously, we don't know what to expect. Just follow my lead."

When we joined Vladimir and the woman, the Nosferatu had disappeared. Vladimir led us inside where a servant took our coats and bags. Our host asked Petor if he wanted something to eat, and after glancing at me for permission, Petor followed the servant into the depths of the castle.

"He's new," Vladimir commented with some surprise.

"Quite."

"Not fully bound yet," he added.

I raised my eyebrow at that. "Not yet," I agreed, wondering how he knew.

"We haven't had anyone new in twenty-five years," he murmured.

"Maybe you should bring some new blood in," I suggested.

"No, we can't," he said simply, sadness making the words echo throughout the room. At my questioning look, he added, "The Lupine pack has cursed us."

"How did they manage to do this?" I asked politely.

"Well," he began, indicating a larger lounge area for us to go into, "the werewolves and my people have an uneasy alliance. We were once more numerous than what you saw in the alley. When the Russian Mafia, Dimitri, came to power, he rose against us, coming in the daylight with the churches. We lost many people and fell back to an outpost in the country."

He explained that the werewolves questioned their actions and threatened them. They were caught between the rock that was the Lupines and the hard place that was the Russian Mafia. Dimitri eventually fought the werewolves as well, and they fought back. Eventually they struck an agreement together, and the two of them with the Gregori.

Now Dimitri controlled the city and the Lupines controlled the country. The Gregori stayed out of either business. But the werewolf shaman had worked with a mage to curse the remaining members of the Gregori. Everyone they tried to turn or bring into servitude went mad.

"That would make things difficult," I murmured sympathetically. "Did it affect your existing servants?"

"No, only the ones we brought in," he told me, "the servants we attempted to create."

Since Petor seemed reasonably sane, the curse must have been only to the blood of those in the area at the time it was done. "I'm sorry to hear about that," I said honestly. "It sounds horrible."

"It is."

"Any idea how to break the curse?" I asked.

"Go against the Lupines?" he asked, surprised I would even suggest such a thing. "It would be a slaughter."

"Quite." A single werewolf could tear apart a dozen vampires and come back for more.

Vladimir gave me a contemplative look I wasn't sure I liked. "You are not from here."

"No, I'm from America."

"You can create and be outside of the curse," he told me.

I knew I hadn't liked that look. "Theoretically."

"It would mean a great deal to us," he said hopefully.

Vladimir wanted me to break my clan's traditions and embrace without the blood of the seven to bind the child to the clan? I'd thought he might have been Tremere, but now I knew he wasn't. No Tremere would ask another to violate clan rules in such a manner.

"But we can discuss such affairs later," he added when I didn't say anything. "Tell me of yourself, of America, of your family, your husband."

I did as he asked, telling him about Jason and my family in Massachusetts. I tried not to get real detailed for two reasons. I didn't want to bore him, and I didn't want him to be able to come after me sometime in the future.

"I don't want to sound rude," I asked after a while, "but what clans are there among you?"

"We have been persecuted for so long that we do not recognize clan," he told me, "nor have we recognized them for some time. We are all as we are."

That made sense in a way. In that situation there would be no room for the normal prejudices and friction that existed in our society. The shared circumstances would bind the remaining Kindred together in a way that would transcend clan boundaries.

"Why are you going to Pechora?" Vladimir asked.

"I guess I'm just a fool for noble causes." I admitted with a wry smile.

"Oh?"

"A friend of mine needs help," I explained.

"Good friend?"

Why did everyone ask me that? "He used to be."

"But not anymore?"

"Not for some time," I told him. "When I was embraced I lost all memories of my mortal life, a consequence of my bloodline, so of course I didn't remember him."

"That is most unfortunate," he murmured.

"Yes," I agreed. "However he needs help and since it appears that I am the only one who can help him, I'm going to Pechora and the Anastasio's Old Time Lunar Carnival and Midnight Circus."

He frowned. "I've never heard of that."

I'd hoped he would have, but it didn't matter. "Me neither, but I'm on my way there so I can help save his soul."

Petor came back into to room looking full and carrying a glass of vodka. He was with someone I assumed was a ghoul, and she was carrying a tray of wine from which our host took two glasses.

"Be careful," he warned, handing me one of the glasses. "As I said the Lupines control the north lands."

"I will take care, as much as I am able," I assured him, "however I do need to help my friend."

"I understand. I wish I could help you more." He looked down at my clothes for a moment. "You'll need something a little warmer."

"We're working on that." At least we were when the Mafia wasn't trying to kill us.

"I have some clothes," he offered. "My lover was one of the number killed."

"I'm sorry to hear that," I murmured, remembering what it had been like to lose Marcus, and Jason when I'd thought he was dead.

"It is a pain I have yet to recover from," he admitted sadly.

We followed him through part of the castle that looked relatively unused to a room that had a fine covering of dust over everything. Vladimir opened a closet and its contents were on the line of Brenda's in the quality, variety and sheer number of things it contained.

"You are quite generous," I told him.

"Yes, I must get over her," he replied firmly. "She has been gone for quite some time and it's not like I'm going to wear them. Help yourself. I will leave someone here to help you fit these things. I will wait outside."

He motioned for one of the ghouls to stay in the room, while I asked Petor to stay and give me some advice as to what type of clothing I would need for our trip to Pechora. There were a lot of very nice things in the closet, and it took a few minutes for us to sort through them for more functional items.

Eventually Petor went into the hall so I could try on some of the items, and the ghoul found a set of suitcases in another storage room. We packed everything I'd chosen inside and rejoined the others in the hall where Petor and Vladimir were discussing vodka and brandy.

"Thank you once again for the use of the clothing," I said to Vladimir.

"It is no problem," he assured me with a measured look. "If you truly do desire compensation be paid, perhaps that matter we discussed earlier?"

The dark haired woman gave him a look I'd often seen Eliza give Cormac when he'd forgotten how to be tactful. I smiled sadly, missing the calm strength of my brother and wishing I could ask his opinion of what Vladimir asked of me. Surely Cormac would have known the best route for me to take.

"I do apologize," Vladimir said when I didn't respond. "You have your mission much on your mind. Perhaps when you have rescued your friend you would be so kind as to stop by so that we may discuss it." He looked at the girl, but she rolled her eyes, not satisfied with his attempt at tact. "Perhaps you'll also need somewhere closer to Pechora to fall back on. My other haven is in Kirov," he told me.

Petor nodded at the name, so I figured he knew where the town was.

"We could meet you there," Vladimir offered as he led the way back to the sitting room. "Perhaps if your rescue mission is not going well."

"Perhaps that would be a better idea," I agreed. "I'm not sure we'll come back through Moscow."

"It is hard to miss, my haven," he told me. "You will see it when you come into town."

We talked until around four o'clock, exchanging stories of life among our kind. Eventually Petor and I were shown to rooms across the hall from each other. I made sure that Vladimir knew Petor would have to leave during the day to take care of our travel plans, and our host arranged for one of his people to accompany him into Moscow.

I wanted to talk to Petor alone but there didn't seem to be an opportunity for me to do so without offending our hosts. We still had the matter of blood to discuss, but somehow I didn't think tonight's events had changed his mind.

Jason wouldn't be too happy to see another ghoul in our lives, but I knew this was something I needed to do. In order to get back to my husband as quickly as possible, I had to know I could depend on Petor. What better way to ensure that than with a blood bond?

It seemed a little cold hearted to me, but as Petor had pointed out, there was nothing in Russia for him. Even if things didn't work out between us, he could have a brand new start in America driving truck if that was what he wanted.

I wasn't as clear on whether or not I should embrace the man Vladimir wanted turned. I'd never turned anyone before, or seen it done, although I knew the mechanics of the act. Cormac had embraced James Price and everything had turned out well for them, at least so far. Still, he'd had permission if not orders to do so.

Tremere protocol demands that every childe embraced into the clan drink the blood of the council of seven. Normally a Regent is available to perform a ritual that made the blood available for the new clan member, but since I wasn't a Regent, I didn't know the ritual. Tremere who were embraced without the council's blood were systematically destroyed, as were their sires.

I didn't want to run the risk of being hunted down and killed, but it seemed unlikely that anyone from my clan would find out about any childe I might sire here in Russia. I'd never even heard of Kindred in the country before, even on my last trip here when Luke, Lena and I had been searching for Jason.

A half-hour before dawn I performed the ritual that would allow me to wake easily during the day if there was a problem, but nothing happened to rouse me while the sun was still in the sky. Once it was dark I got dressed and left the room to find a ghoul waiting to lead me to the banquet room.

There was a long table running through the middle of the room and Vladimir sat at its head. The other Kindred I'd seen last night were sitting at the table as well, and Petor was to one side talking to two servants.

Vladimir invited me to sit down at the table, and we exchanged morning pleasantries. "We will make for Kirov in a few days time," he told me. "We will be on the watch for you."

There seemed to be an air of excitement about the table, as if they were all anticipating my agreement to his proposal. I wondered what it must have been like for them, having no new blood among them for decades.

"Do you have a number I can reach you at?" I asked. He gave it to me and I wrote it down so I wouldn't forget it. "Thank you again for your hospitality and the clothing," I added. "I will think about your proposal and let you know my decision, but I would like to point out that it is likely anyone I embrace would forget his mortal life."

"You had mentioned that earlier," he reminded me. "It would be actually more of a blessing than anything."

"Depending on the subject, yes, it can be quite useful," I admitted. Personally I'd always hated not remembering my mortal life, but Zach had said I'd known what would happen, so there must have been a reason I'd wanted to forget everything.

"We have a subject we've been holding for questioning who has been no help at all," he added. "It is one of Dimitri's men."

Well, that just blew away every reason I had for refusing. Even though I'd never met Dimitri, I felt I owed him for the attack on my hotel room the night before. I would definitely be joining Vladimir in Kirov to embrace for the first time in my existence.

"We will discuss it when you finish rescuing your friend, of course," Vladimir told me.

I agreed without telling him of my decision. There was every possibility that I wouldn't survive this noble cause I was following, and I didn't want to raise his hopes only to have them dashed when-if I didn't show up.

BINDING

Don't belong to no one that's a shame
You could hide beside me maybe for a wife
Name - Goo Goo Dolls

When Petor and I got to the car, it was packed and ready to go. Petor seemed to have gained a suitcase as well as a gun. He was wearing a figure eight that held some sort of a semi-automatic weapon.

"How was your day?" I asked as we pulled out of the castle. "Go shopping?"

"Our host was most gracious," he told me. "They look like they have a whole lot of stuff and not many people to use it."

I nodded. "That's probably why they want me to embrace someone for them."

He glanced at me. "Make like you?"

"Uh-huh." I kept forgetting that I still had a lot to explain to him about Kindred life. "Yeah, they've been cursed and everyone they try to recruit becomes insane, and I don't think in a Malkavian way." At his confused look, I added, "The clans, there are clans within my society."

As he drove, I explained the clans to him, their flaws and organizations, or lack thereof. I told him that Jason was Gangrel, but that everyone else who was important to me was Tremere. I didn't mention Luke.

"What clan was Vladimir?" he asked when I was done.

"Good question," I murmured.

"You couldn't tell?"

"Well, he dressed like a Ventrue," I replied, "but he had Auspex like a Tremere, so it's hard telling. From what I can understand their clan lines have been lost along the way."

"Did you have a chance to think about taking me to America with you?" he asked as we approached the airport.

"I did," I told him. It had been heavy on my mind most of the night. "Did you?"

"Yes," he replied. "I talked for a while to one of the Gregori ghouls. I am still interested."

"What did you talk about?" I asked, curious.

"Things," he said vaguely.

That could mean anything. "What kind of 'things'?"

"She told me what it was like to have a master, what her duties were." He glanced at me and shrugged a little. "Things like that."

"Did she tell you how difficult it could be?" I said harshly. "How dangerous?"

"Yes." He didn't seem the least bit anxious.

"Did she explain how the blood bond makes you feel?" I demanded, remembering exactly what it had done to me. "How the person you're bonded to becomes the most important person in your life? More important than anything or anyone else?"

Once again he glanced over at me, his eyes calm and certain. "I told you before, I have no one else."

"At the risk of sounding a bit like my brother, may I be blunt?" When he nodded, I said as gently as I could, "You wouldn't be the most important thing in my life. My husband, my family and my clan will always take precedence. That's not to say I wouldn't take care of you and protect you, but you would always be just another employee to me, Petor. Can you live with that?"

He just grinned. "Like I said, I've worked for bigger blood suckers."

I could only shake my head and smile at his determination. "If you can deal with the blood bond and the fact that you will most probably never see your Mother Russia or your family again, who am I to say no?" I asked honestly. "It's not like I didn't warn you."

We fell silent as he drove into the airport. He followed one of the roads around toward an outlying area and parked near a darkened hanger. It took a few minutes for us to find the lights to illuminate the hanger.

The plane wasn't much to look at, and it was rather small. "Is this going to get us to Pechora?" I asked Petor.

He lifted a small satchel that was full of maps and started pulling them out. We went over several ways to get to our destination trying to find stopovers that we could fly to in one night, as there was no safety for me in the small plane during the day.

"Do you need protection?" he inquired softly. "Does the sun...?"

"Sunlight is bad," I told him, "but there is a ritual I can do."

"It's not going to make it on gas either," he replied.

"Well we have three nights to get northeast of Pechora," I reminded him. "If we need to fly during the day then we can come up with some kind of arrangements where I can be protected."

"I'll need to sleep," he said softly.

"Since I can't fly," I agreed.

It didn't take very long for us to get our things stashed on the plane, and the noises we made echoed through the hanger, reminding me that we were completely alone. Once we were done looking over our route one last time, I stopped and simply looked at Petor.

"Most vampires don't feed until the vessel is dead, Petor," I said in a low, serious voice when I had his full attention, "but we do need blood. If you're willing, we could feed each other tonight. Drinking my blood would be the second step toward bonding you to me, to making you my servant. Are you still game?"

The look on his face matched the tone of my voice and he nodded.

I searched his aura for anything that would tell me he wasn't ready for this, but it seemed that he was mostly curious. Oh, there was a little anxiety there, and a touch of fear, but he was calm too, and excited.

Slowly I reached for his hand. "Do you mind if I go first?"

When he gave me his hand wrist up I took it, dropping the fangs but keeping them out of his sight. I brought his wrist to my mouth and slowly sunk my teeth into his skin. I took my time drinking, both to enjoy the taste of fresh blood and to give him time to react if he was going to.

At first he was tense, but when the sensations hit him he started to relax. I relaxed too, and drank a unit of blood from him. When I was done I pulled my fangs out carefully and licked the wound shut, making sure he saw what I'd done. He had somewhat of a glazed look on his face, and he seemed very relaxed.

I smiled and eased his hand down. "Was it what you expected?"

"No," he replied. "Yes. I didn't know what to expect."

That was pretty typical of most humans. Legend usually states that the 'kiss' was painful, but I'd never hurt anyone during feeding, at least not accidentally. "Are you okay?"

"Yes. It was just a very new experience." He smiled and sighed deeply.

"Are you ready for the next step?" I asked. When he nodded, I lifted my wrist to my mouth and made a small wound that I offered to him. He took my arm and drank without hesitation.

The feelings swirling through me were a mere shadow of what he'd felt, but it was still pleasant. I waited until he'd taken as much blood from me as I'd fed from him, then told him softly that it was enough. Reluctantly he released my arm but he didn't protest.

I watched his eyes and his body language closely to make sure he was handling the blood well. Looking at his aura again I saw that he was still mostly calm, but the blood had stimulated him. "How do you feel?" I asked.

"Good."

Nodding, I relaxed again. "Okay, what now?"

He smiled and turned to indicate the plane. "We fly."

ON TO PECHORA

And all my doubts and fears
Kept me wondering

It Ain't Over Till It's Over - Lenny Kravitz

At our first stop in Kazan, Petor found a hotel of sorts for us to stay at, but we had to share a room. Since sleeping in uncomfortable places doesn't bother me, I insisted he take the bed. That night I dreamed that Jason was searching for me.

The next evening Petor fed a third time from me to complete the blood bond. He was eager to taste my vitae, but he didn't act like O'Connell normally did when feeding. My first ghoul had been attracted to me the first time he saw me, and the blood bond has only made things worse. He kept his distance only because I insisted upon it, but I knew that if anything ever happened to Jason, I'd have a willing lover. Petor didn't seem interested in that kind of relationship, and I was glad I didn't have to worry about that complication.

The next night we found an old woman who seemed to know something about the circus. She told me that it had appeared overnight in town when she was a small girl. Since she looked like she was nearing ancient status now, I knew it had to have been quite a long time ago. Unfortunately, she couldn't remember the name, or very much about the circus itself.

I thought about trying to manipulate her mind to try and bring more memories to the surface, but she was very old and I wasn't quite sure exactly how many of her faculties she had left. I didn't want to do something that would ruin what time she had left in this world, so I decided to leave it alone.

"Were there any disappearances or unusual deaths around the same time?" I asked her.

"It was too long ago to remember," she murmured, looking away.

Something she'd said hadn't quite made sense. "What do you mean 'appeared overnight'?"

"It wasn't there when night fell," she told me, "then 'poof' it was there when we woke up."

It sounded supernatural to me and I knew that it had to be the same circus Malcolm had told me about. My only concern was what kind of creatures ran it. It would be really nice to know what I had to fight in order to save Malcolm's soul.

Petor had refueled the plane while I slept and within a few hours of sundown we were headed for Perm. Once more we spent the hours in flight talking and I told him what I could remember of my mortal life, and of Malcolm. I wanted to make sure we were both prepared to handle whatever he decided to throw at us when we saved him. I also spent a lot of time telling Petor things about my family and how to deal with Kindred life. I wanted him to know what he was in for once we got home.

It was around three when the plane landed in Perm, so we had some time to kill before sunrise. We found a bed and breakfast to stay at, and I left Petor there while I walked through the streets of the sleeping town. I couldn't bear the thought of sitting in my room waiting while Jason worried and wondered where I was. I hoped my message had gotten to him.

Eventually I noticed that I could feel something at the edges of my mind. When I looked around for the cause, I heard the faint tinkling of bells and a light childish laughter. I searched until nearly dawn, but I never found the damned faery.

We decided to land as close to Pechora as we could get and still have enough gas in the plane to get back to Perm. We landed near Ukhta around two in the morning and walked the rest of the way into town. It didn't take long to persuade someone to sell us his car and after a brief stop for me to feed we were on our way.

I drove until nearly dawn while Petor napped, then I climbed into the trunk and let him take over. When I woke we were just outside of Pechora. He slept in the back seat while I drove through the country side northwest of town, but of course I didn't find a thing. No one in town had heard of the circus either, and I hoped it would turn up soon. I wanted nothing more than to get home and be with Jason again. Near dawn we found a boarding house to stay at and went to sleep.

The next night Petor was gone when I woke. No one at the house knew where he'd gone, and I have to admit I was a little worried. I told myself he was a big boy and could take care of himself, but it didn't help much. I hoped he hadn't found the circus and gotten into trouble without me.

While I waited, I dressed in black jeans and a dark shirt, fairly confident that they wouldn't be too western for the area. I checked over my weapons the way that O'Connell had taught me, making sure all my guns were clean, loaded and hidden where they wouldn't be obvious. I sat my leather jacket on the bed next to the rest of our packed belongings and waited.

When Petor showed up at seven thirty, I was pacing nervously.

"Some of the farmers were talking about something out of town," he explained, looking a little sheepish. "I think it's what we're looking for"

"Did you go check it out?" I asked.

"No I started driving that way," he told me, "but it was further out than—well, I realized how late it was when it got late."

I struggled to hold on to my patience. He'd been trying to help after all. "Okay then, we should go check it out."

Thankfully Petor had gotten something to eat on his way back to the boarding house. It didn't take long to load up the car and head out of town.

It was a long drive to the carnival, but at least it wasn't hard to find. There was quite a bit of traffic headed in that direction, and some coming back toward town. When we got to the site around ten thirty, we parked in a lot that had been set up in a field. From the car we could see the big top and many smaller tents, along with the Ferris wheel.

A large banner across the entrance proclaimed "Anastasio's Old Time Lunar Carnival and Midnight Circus". From what we could see and the sounds of the crowd, there were a lot of people visiting the carnival. Music floated out over the cars, and I was struck suddenly with a vision from my past.

I followed my father down the row of booths, holding a bag of cotton candy in one hand and a large stuffed rabbit in the other. He was walking slowly so that my short legs could keep up with him, glancing back and smiling at me every few minutes to make sure I was keeping close.

Carnival music floated on air filled with the scent of popcorn and hot dogs. There were people all around us, but I wasn't worried about getting lost. Men called out to Papa as we walked past, trying to tempt him into playing one of the carnival games.

When we got near the Ferris wheel, a woman was waiting for us. She smiled at my father and took his hand, blushing when he kissed her cheek. I ran to her and she scooped me up in her arms. I felt safe, as I always did when she held me.

My mother laughed at the candy on my face, and Papa pulled out a handkerchief to clean me off. He held the rabbit while Mama took my hand and we walked toward the car where Robert would be waiting for us.

I came back to reality with Petor snapping his fingers in front of my eyes.

"I'm sorry," I told him. As much as I craved learning more of my past, this wasn't the time or place to let myself be distracted.

A glance at Petor showed that his weapons weren't obvious. I quickly did a mental check of my own weapons. The Desert Eagle tucked into my belt was full of normal rounds. I'd use it first because that ammunition would cause the least amount of questions if we were caught. The small Walter PPK at my ankle was filled with iron bullets. They weren't cold iron, but I hoped they'd help if we came across faeries.

The Glock 17 in its shoulder holster held silver rounds, just the thing for a pissed off werewolf. At my back, the familiar weight of my Glock 22 was filled with phosphorous rounds. Hopefully I wouldn't have to use it because that particular type ammunition was difficult to explain. In my sleeve was the silver knife that would drop to my hand in a second if needed. My pockets were filled with extra clips.

The woman at the ticket booth looked like a stereotypical gypsy, complete with flowing clothes and gaudy jewelry. I tried to read her aura, but I was a bit too anxious to get anything from her. We paid for the tickets and entered the fairway.

THE MIDNIGHT CIRCUS

And although my eyes were open
They might just as well've been closed
A Whiter Shade of Pale - Sarah Brightman

The carnival was larger than I'd thought it would be. Straight ahead of us through the crowd and many smaller buildings and tents was the Big Top. To our left stretched rows upon rows of vendors hawking their wares. In the distance I could see the Ferris wheel and the tops of many other rides.

As we walked, I described Malcolm and his faery friends and told Petor to keep an eye out for them. "The one in the jester's costume is really annoying," I warned him as a group of clowns cavorted past us.

I tried another aura check on the clowns, but once again my nervousness got in the way. I told myself I had to calm down as we walked toward the Big Top. We knew there was a chance we were being watched, so we walked with no obvious purpose.

We passed by a signpost that had many fliers nailed to it. 'The Queen's Own Theatre and Puppet Show', one read. Others proclaimed the way to 'Arcadia', 'The Museum of Oddities' and 'The Renaissance Faire'. In bright red letters a small sign at the top of the post told of mature entertainment past the Big Top.

The sign for 'Xanadu's Mirror Palace' struck a chord in my memory. When Malcolm had appeared to me in Moscow, it had looked as if he'd been standing between two mirrors. I knew that was where we would find him.

Malcolm was a prisoner somewhere in this collection of tents and odd buildings. I had no idea who could have been a part of taking him captive, so I didn't want to be too obvious about searching him out.

We strode unhurried toward the Mirror Palace, once again trying not to look obvious. Petor got some refreshments from one of the food vendors as I watched a clown act nearby. There were many clown acts as we walked toward the Big Top, but I didn't see any signs of Malcolm or his cronies anywhere.

Every once in a while I felt a strange sensation at the back of my mind similar to what I felt when Robert was performing magic. I couldn't put my finger on where it was coming from, but something about it just didn't feel right.

I tried once for an aura reading on some of the people around us, and was surprised when I was momentarily blinded. I stopped and it passed in seconds, but it took a little longer for the stars to clear from the edges of my vision.

Petor and I wandered through the crowd, pretending to have a good time. We walked through some of the lesser attractions, some of them held in what looked like gypsy wagons. When we got near the Museum of Oddities, there was a barker outside calling to the crowd.

"Come see the fallen angel," he cried, "The half woman-half fish."

Some of what he was describing sounded like creatures from mythology. Given what I knew of the circus, I thought it was entirely possible they were real. We signed up for the next tour, and waited until there was a large enough group to go through.

A tall man with large eyes and wild hair introduced himself as Dr. Owl. He and his assistant, a forlorn looking man with a lion's face, would lead us through the museum.

We followed the group through a hallway with numerous pictures of the museum occupants on the walls, but nothing could have prepared us for what we saw once we got inside the museum itself. A circular area ringed by cages, cells and aquariums held a variety of creatures I'd never quite

believed existed. Dr Owl told us to take a look around, and the group split, roughly half of them going to the right and the rest going to the left including Petor and me.

The first cage we came to held a satyr, the top half of a man sitting on the hindquarters of a goat. I'd known they existed because a much larger one had shown up at my wedding to deliver Malcolm's gift to Jason and me. This one was looked very much like a captive in the cell that had three wooden sides and a small door on the back wall. Through the bars that made up the fourth wall, we watched him sitting quietly in a corner with his eyes closed.

Next was a large circular aquarium with a female mermaid in it. She didn't look very happy either, but she seemed more resigned than the satyr had. There were a few smaller goldfish in the water, but they looked more like decoration than food. Occasionally the mermaid rose to the surface of the water and took some grapes from a bowl that sat on a ledge.

Further down was a large birdcage that held giant vulture with a woman's head. The harpy looked very old, her wings were tattered and torn and it didn't look like she could fly anymore. Her feathers were dull and mottled, making it look like she'd been in the cage a long time.

Before we moved on, I glanced at Petor to see how he was faring. He looked dumbstruck from what he was seeing, but he read the plaques without asking any questions.

The rear of the museum had smaller displays, mostly photographs and jars of formaldehyde. There were some plaques that talked about nuclear testing in Kazakhstan and claimed that Olga, the harpy, was found there, along with a few of the things in jars. One held a one-eyed Cyclops baby, a couple held two headed goat fetuses, and the other items were too freaky for me to take a close look at. On the other side of the exit were pictures of what one would normally see in a freak show. There were photos of a giant man, a wolf boy, and many others.

The first real display we came to as we headed back toward the front of the museum was a large aquarium holding a rainforest recreation. Inside was a huge snake, its coils running around the inside too many times to count. Its head was raised and it looked out over the crowd with eyes that seemed to hold recognition and thought. I got the feeling that it was much more intelligent than I was.

"It's more intelligent than it appears to be," I whispered to Petor. At the same time I felt something familiar at the edges of my mind, a feeling that I often got when Brenda or Antonio were trying to communicate with me. I reached out with my mind, but all I got was a kind of mental white noise.

I took a step toward the next attraction, but when I realized Petor hadn't come with me I turned back. A glance around showed that Petor, like the rest of the people standing in front of the aquarium, seemed to be transfixed by the snake. They all seemed to have been caught by the snake's gaze, and I had to tug on Petor's sleeve to break the spell it had over him. Chagrined, he came with me to the next display.

A Sphinx was waiting for us. The human head seemed contented, and her lioness' body was stretched idly across the bottom of the cage. The woman was dark skinned, probably Egyptian. As we watched, her tail flicked, and she began grooming by licking her paws.

In last cage was an honest to goodness angel. The young woman looked perfectly normal except for hair the color of dusky twilight, dark eyes lit with a strange fire, and blue and red feathered wings coming out of her back. She was very relaxed, and sat on a stool reading an ancient scroll.

I glanced around the museum to see that some of the group was talking with Dr. Owl and Leon. I heightened my hearing to listen, but they were simply discussing where they'd found the mermaid. I saw that no one was near the satyr's cage, so I headed that way with Petor following.

He had his eyes open this time, and was looking out at the people milling around the other displays. His eyes passed over me lightly, then came back to rest on my face almost in surprise. I

thought he'd probably figured out what I was; for those who can tell the difference I'm quite sure that vampires stand out in a crowd of mortals.

"Do you know Malcolm?" I asked in Russian. When he didn't seem to understand, I repeated the question in English but there was no response. I tried Latin for the hell of it, and his eyes lit up with recognition, most likely from the language. When he shook his head no, I thanked him.

I wanted to say that I'd help him escape, but I just couldn't do it. Unfortunately, I wasn't here to free these creatures. As much as I longed to find a way to open their cages, I knew that act would alert those who held Malcolm captive. I knew I couldn't take that chance now, but perhaps after I helped Malcolm I could come back. If I survived, of course.

"I'm sorry," I whispered in Latin as I turned to go.

He watched me move away, his eyes unreadable.

Dr. Owl directed everyone toward the exit, and we came out near the arcade and Cobas Progressive Clown Show. A clown with sandwich board walked back and forth advertising the show that was about to start, but I was getting impatient.

We headed in the direction of Xanadu's Mirror Palace, but we had to fight our way through the crowds going into the Big Top. Once Petor and I got through the worst of it, I stopped and looked back at the large tent. There was a strange feeling coming from it, a constant pulse that pulled at my senses.

I reached for an aura reading and was immediately blinded. In that instant I saw every shade, every hue that I'd ever seen in an aura all at once. I stumbled back, unsteady on my feet at the almost physical hit I'd taken. I bumped into someone, but I couldn't see them. Abruptly I realized that my eyes were closed.

Mumbling an apology to the person I'd bumped into, I gathered my courage and opened my eyes. My vision was still swimming, but I could see even though I still felt a little dazed. Petor was standing close to me, concern written all over his face. For the first time I realized how unfair this was to him, expecting him to face things even O'Connell, who'd been with me for a year, hadn't seen.

I smiled in an attempt to make him feel better. "That was really weird."

"What happened?" he asked.

I didn't know if I could explain it, so I didn't even try. "Remind me that I don't want to look at auras here," I told him. "I get blinded."

He smiled. "Don't look at auras here."

That made me laugh, and it broke the tension I'd felt building. I did my best to explain what I'd seen to him. "I don't know if we should go into the big top or head for the mirror palace. Any suggestions?"

"It's your mission," he replied with a shrug.

I nodded. "Let's just head back to the Mirror Palace."

"Okay."

He took my arm to guide me and I was glad for it because I was still a little unsteady on my feet. We took almost a direct route to the Palace, still trying to look like we were meandering, but not stopping to look at anything.

Within minutes we were standing before the large baroque façade whose sign read 'Xanadu's Mirror Palace, Hall of Reflections and Mirror Maze'. There were a few novelty mirrors outside, but nothing unusual. We couldn't see the exit from in front of the building, so I assumed it was in the rear. Petor paid for our tickets and we headed in.

REFLECTIONS OF THE PAST

It's too late to ask for forgiveness
For the things that I have done
Dyin' Ain't Much of a Livin' - Jon Bon Jovi

"Stick close, Petor," I whispered as we entered the Mirror Palace. The minute we crossed the threshold something started tugging at the back of my mind, something to do with my memory. I couldn't pinpoint what it was, I couldn't remember anything new, but there was something on the edges of my mind I just couldn't reach.

I took Petor's hand and though he looked at me in surprise, he didn't argue. "I don't want us to get separated in here," I explained softly.

I'd read once that the best way to get through a maze was to place one hand on a wall and follow it around. While it was true that you'd go through a lot of dead ends, eventually you would make it through the maze. It seemed like the best idea.

There was a hallway of mirrors that lead to the maze itself. Many of them were the typical mirrors; some made your reflection tall, some made it fat, and some distorted your reflection beyond recognition. Most of these mirrors lined the walls, but a few were hung at odd angles from the ceiling.

About halfway down the hall I saw a strange image in the corner of my eye. I turned to look, then stood and stared. Reflected in the mirror was a hideous creature my exact height wearing my clothing. Standing next to the figure was one corresponding to Petor. It actually looked quite a bit like him, but the image was much uglier.

"Do you see that?" I asked Petor.

"I thought it was just a trick of the light," he whispered, stunned.

"I don't think so," I replied. The reflections were mirroring our movements exactly. Somehow the glass showed the truth of what we were, me a vampire, and Petor a ghoul. "We need to be very careful in here."

As I watched, a couple passed behind us in the mirror. The man looked normal, but the woman he was with looked like a werewolf. When I turned my head to look, she seemed normal.

"Interesting," I murmured. "I wish we had one of these at home." It would have proved useful on more than one occasion.

As we moved toward the end of the hall and the maze that awaited us, I caught a glimpse of another strange image in one of the other mirrors. In the glass I saw a little boy standing among some trees. He was about eight years old, with dark hair and green eyes. I didn't realize it at first, but as I watched him watch me I saw that the boy was Robert, my brother.

Somewhere in the distance I heard my mother call Robert's name. He turned away and the mirror began to cloud over, soon becoming opaque. I reached out carefully and touched the mirror. After a moment's resistance, my hand sank into the glass. Petor gasped, and I pulled my hand out quickly.

"What is going on?" Petor whispered.

"Did you see the boy?" I demanded softly. "Did you hear the voice?"

He shook his head, still staring in wonder at the glass. We stood and watched while the fog cleared from the mirror, eventually returning to the simple reflection one would expect. When I reached out to touch it again, the surface was hard and cool.

"Like I said, we have to be careful," I told him. Perhaps keeping one hand on the mirrors wasn't a good idea after all.

He nodded and we turned to continue down the hall.

In front of us was a mirror hanging from the ceiling at a forty-five degree angle. I could feel something strange coming from the mirror, so I stopped to take a closer look.

In the mirror I could see Marcus sitting on a blanket in the Helena park I'd dreamed about before. The gift I remembered him giving me that day was wrapped beside him, and he was looking at me expectantly. He held his hand out toward me, and it took an extreme effort of will not to lift my hand and reach for his. Tears filled my eyes and I had to blink them away.

"Petor, what do you see there?" I whispered urgently.

"It's cracked," he replied.

It made sense that he couldn't see what I saw. This was an image designed to cause me pain and, unfortunately, it was working. "I hate Malcolm," I hissed.

I tried to lead Petor past the mirror, but as we drew even with it, Marcus reached for me. I stopped and barely refrained from stretching my hand out to him, but I couldn't stop myself from whispering his name.

"I'm here, Tina," he answered with an easy smile.

As much as I wanted to go to him, to warn him about the future, I knew it wouldn't do any good. I had to stay focused; I couldn't allow myself to be sidetracked by these visions that were playing tricks with my mind. I had to save Malcolm and get home to Jason before he decided to come after me.

I looked back up at the mirror with tears in my eyes. "I'm sorry, Marcus," I whispered as I turned away.

From the corner of my eye I saw the mirror crack and its surface once more reflect Petor and I as we stood beneath it.

"Did I mention I hated these things?" I murmured as the crack grew across the mirror. Soon another crack began and stretched toward the first.

Without thinking I tried to look at the mirror's aura. Once again I was blinded by every color, every shade I'd ever seen in an aura. This time I was knocked on my ass, and because there wasn't time to let go of Petor's hand he went down with me.

"I thought you were going to remind me not to do that," I muttered.

He shot me an amused look as he climbed to his feet. "Next time tell me when you're going to do that."

"Did I mention I hated Malcolm?" I growled as I got to my feet.

The cracks grew in the mirror until they crossed near the center of the glass. When the cracking finally stopped there was a clear but not quite symmetrical 'X' in the center of the mirror.

I could almost hear Malcolm laughing at me as I took Petor's hand again. "Let's go."

As we walked the length of the Hall of Mirrors, I kept my eyes on the entry to the maze. It was hard, but I managed to ignore both my brother's voice and Lizzy's calling out to me by focusing solely on completing my noble cause and getting home to Jason.

At the entrance to the maze I could see that it was laid out in a circular fashion. The pulsing at my memory was back, like an itch in my mind. I went right, running my hand lightly along the glass. A few of them felt like they would give way like the ones in the hall did, but I ignored them and continued on.

We hit a lot of dead ends and after a while some of them started looking familiar. When I finally started going left, we hit a good string of luck and ended up behind the Mirror Palace back to square one.

Once we cleared the exit, we heard a beckoning call announcing the Midnight Big Top Show starting in five minutes. I was feeling extremely frustrated at not finding Malcolm in the mirror maze,

so I suggested we check it out. If nothing else, it would give me a chance to think about where to look next.

No one seemed to be following us as we headed for the Big Top. It was large and dingy looking, with mimes and other actors moving through the crowd around it. We bought our tickets and sat down just as the lights went out.

The music reached a peak and the crowd went crazy as the spotlight hit the middle of the center ring illuminating the ringmaster. He was dressed in a black tuxedo complete with tails, a top hat and cane.

"Ladies and gentlemen, children of all ages," he called out to the crows. "Welcome to Anastasio's Old Time Lunar Carnival and Midnight Circus." He doffed his hat to the drum roll, and a flock of doves were released over the crows. "I am Devin Cavendish, and this is the Big Top Show."

We heard gates opening and four horsemen entered the arena. The ringmaster introduced them as the Equestro Family, and they began doing acrobatics on horseback. Their show included a mounted archery display where one of them shot flaming arrows into the audience that disappeared before they landed.

As I looked out over the crowd, I could feel Kindred somewhere among the sea of mortals. I couldn't tell how many, or where they were, but they were there. The magic that seemed to permeate the entire circus played havoc with my Kindred senses.

An elephant show complete with trainers, clowns and acrobats came next, followed by the high wire act. To my surprise, one of the performers had a tail. When I pointed the Bastet out to Petor, he seemed stunned.

"You're getting quite an introduction to the world of darkness tonight," I told him.

The acrobats were quite nimble, and after all of them had landed on the ground Russian music rang out through the Big Top. Men in tall hats and red coats came out and performed what looked like a traditional Cossack dance.

The Tigers of Borneo and Arctic Wolves act was pretty typical from what I could see. The animals leaped through rings of fire, held their trainers' heads in their mouths, that type of thing. Some of the wolves were very large, almost mutated, but they didn't do anything unusual. After the rousing applause that signaled the end of their act, the lights went out again making the audience gasp.

When the lights came back up there was a man in the middle of the ring. Like the ringmaster, he wore a black tuxedo and top hat, but he looked very sinister. In an instant I could tell he was Kindred. He introduced himself as Kalibreze, the carnival's magician.

He performed what would have seemed an astounding magical act if I hadn't known what he was. He made his assistants float and disappear, pulled rabbits out of his hat, a dove from his coat, and the ring trick. Some of what he did seemed like Thaumaturgy; the levitation, making rain appear over one section of the crowd.

His movements were fluid and graceful, but I thought I caught him using Celerity more than once. He must have used Obfuscate or something like it when he made his assistants disappear. From the way the crowd reacted to him, he was also using Presence. I could feel its pull, but it didn't affect me as much as it did those around me.

When he was done, the ringmaster appeared again. "And finally, the part you've all been waiting for," he called out. "The Bishop's Family Clown Review."

The clowns did a good show, but some of their jokes seemed rather tasteless. Once they filed out of the ring, Cavendish reappeared and thanked the audience for attending. He encouraged everyone to visit many of the other attractions, including the gambling house that he owned and operated. He bid us good night, and the house lights came up.

I hadn't seen anything that led me to believe that Malcolm was anywhere but the Mirror Palace. It was worth another try, so Petor and I went back.

The ticket taker recognized us. "Taking another shot, eh?" he said as we handed him our tickets.

When we cleared the entry, the tugging at my memory was back. I tried to ignore it as we walked down the hall of mirrors, and I made a point to study all of the mirrors I'd bypassed before. There was nothing unusual in any of them. Even the one I'd seen Marcus in, the one that had cracked the last time we'd gone through, looked normal.

Then we reached the last mirror before the maze. I stopped in surprise when I saw Lizzy standing in it staring out at me. Behind her I saw quite clearly the living room of Malcolm's old apartment. Petor glanced at me in surprise when I stopped, and I could tell from his reaction that he didn't see anything in the mirror.

Lizzy watched me as I stepped closer to the mirror, but she didn't seem to see Petor, who had moved with me. I stopped a foot or so from the mirror and reached out to touch the glass. To my surprise I felt only minor resistance where the surface should have been before my fingers sank into the image. Petor squeezed my hand tighter the further my fingers went.

"Lizzy," I whispered.

She smiled at me. "Of course."

"Where's Malcolm?" I asked urgently.

"I thought he was with you."

I shook my head. "Not today."

"But I just left you," she protested. She didn't seem to see Petor standing next to me.

"Petor, what do you see?" I whispered to him.

"The mirror is clouded," he told me. "Your hand is going through it."

I pulled my hand back. "Does your hand go through?"

Very hesitantly he reached out but his fingers stopped against where the glass should have been. He pushed a little harder and the frame bowed a bit, but the image didn't change and his hand didn't go past the surface.

I looked back at Lizzy. "I need to find Malcolm."

"He's at the warehouse with you and Marcus," she said as if reminding me of something I should have known.

"Warehouse?" I asked, confused. "Okay, what warehouse?"

Then I remembered. The last time the four of us were together, we'd been in a loft at a warehouse just out of town using up the last of the film in my camera. Lizzy hadn't been feeling well and had gone home to rest. She was wearing the same clothes she'd been wearing that day. I was filled with a sudden urgency that had nothing to do with saving Malcolm's soul.

"Lizzy, you have to leave," I told her firmly. "You have to leave right now."

She tipped her head quizzically. "But why?"

"Because you'll be hurt if you don't," I told her. I let go of Petor and stepped closer, reaching through the mirror and holding my hand out to her. "Take my hand."

She made no move to obey. "Why?"

"You have to leave now," I said impatiently.

"Why?"

I didn't want to tell her the truth, that Papa's friends were coming to kill her. "It's important," I stated evasively. "Trust me."

She just shook her head. "You know Malcolm's warded the house."

"Trust me," I repeated urgently.

Behind her I heard something from the direction of the kitchen. She apparently heard it too for she turned to look.

"Lizzy you have to get out of there right now," I demanded.

"Buy why?"

When she turned to look at me, I caught her eye and tried to bend her to my will "*Take my hand.*" I commanded.

"There's no need to get bitchy about it," she replied coolly, somehow immune my power. "Why didn't you bring Malcolm with you?"

Christ. I really didn't want to tell her the truth, but it looked like I had to. "Lizzy if you don't leave right now you're going to die."

She looked at me with a peaceful expression on her face and her reply stunned me. "I'm already dead."

As I stared at her, speechless, we heard more sounds of breaking glass from the kitchen. She turned and walked toward the sound, resigned to her fate.

"No!" I cried. "Lizzy, don't!"

She ignored me and kept walking.

I stepped back and turned away from the mirror but I just couldn't bring myself to walk away. I listened to the sounds of a struggle, the sounds of men's voices and finally the explosion that echoed through the hallway. I bit back my tears and finally turned to see that that glass had turned dark. Slowly I reached out to touch its dark surface, only to find that it was solid, and very hot.

Was I forever doomed to sit by helplessly as my loved ones met horrible fates? Marcus had died and Lizzy had died and I'd lived with the guilt of their lives on my conscience. I hadn't been able to help Jason in Italy when Malcolm had taken him captive at the monastery. Luke had almost died in Nashville right before my eyes after a gunfight with the local Brujah.

How could Malcolm have so much faith that I could save him? It seemed to me that the only one I'd ever been able to help was my self. With bitter thoughts echoing in my mind, I took Petor's hand and led him into the maze of mirrors.

I decided to go left instead of right this time, and it seemed like the first turn we took led us to the exit. Searching the Mirror Palace was getting us nowhere and I couldn't face another trip through the Hall of Mirrors so soon after seeing Lizzy.

In the dim light behind the Mirror Palace I clung to Petor's hand and fought back bitter tears of frustration and rage.

FINDING MALCOLM

Starting from zero

Got nothing to lose

Fast Car - Tracy Chapman

When I finally composed myself, I suggested we take a look around the carnival hoping that something would show us the way to get to Malcolm. There were many attractions in the carnival, everything from Bludo the Clown in Clown Alley to Gringo's Theatre and Puppet show. There was Freak City, which looked like a show version of the Museum of Oddities, and Fortuna's Wheel, the gambling house the ringmaster had talked about. There was even a small building with a sign above the door that read Desires Fulfilled in red letters. 'Have Your Heart's Dream', it declared to those who passed by.

I was tempted to go into Desires Fulfilled until I saw the sign for the Mystic's Tent. I left Petor standing by a sign that advertising fortunes read while I went inside alone.

It was quite dim inside the tent, but a tall blond man sat behind a small round table that held a single candle to light the room.

"Welcome," the man told me, his voice rich with a German accent. "I am Herr Fiddler."

"Good evening," I replied hesitantly as I wondered what I'd hoped to find in this place.

"What can I do for you?"

What indeed. "Well the name on the tent sounds very interesting," I told him. "What exactly occurs in here?"

"I can tell your future," he claimed confidently.

I wasn't so certain. "Can you?"

"Yes I can, for a fee."

"How much is your fee?"

"Depends on what you want to know," he said with a smile.

"Shouldn't you know what I want to know?" I asked skeptically.

He looked disappointed. "Ah, there's one in every crowd."

"That would be me," I agreed. Brenda was always telling me I was too skeptical, too suspicious of nearly everyone and everything. "You don't know what the fee will be until you find out what I want?"

"Until you ask your question. What do you want to know?"

"I'm looking for something and I'd like to know where I can find it," I told him.

"Sit down," he invited. When I'd taken a seat, he said, "What are you looking for?"

"Do I have to be that specific?" I didn't want to run the risk that this man was a part of whoever had captured Malcolm. "Can't you just tell me where it is?"

He smiled patiently. "I need something to focus on."

His words made sense, but I was still unconvinced. Still, it was worth a try. "A friend."

Herr Fiddler took out a deck of Tarot cards and shuffled them for a moment before laying three out on the table before him, chanting softly in a language I didn't recognize. "Your friend is close," he said after a moment.

"How close?" I asked.

"I see him over you," he replied, "like a dark cloud. He was a teacher to you."

Teacher, mentor, friend and enemy. Which was the real Malcolm? Memories of the magic we'd shared flashed through my mind. "He was," I agreed softly. Of course for a long time he'd been a dark cloud hanging over my life.

"He's at the center of something," Herr Fiddler continued.

"The center of what?" I asked, my voice just short of demanding.

"His prison."

"What is his prison?"

"Of his own making," the mystic said cryptically.

"Can you be a little bit more specific?" I was getting impatient, but trying not to let it show.

"I cannot."

I knew from my own experience that magic didn't always give you exact details. "What direction is he in? How close?"

"He is very close to you," he replied, "yet you cannot see him with your eyes."

"How can I see him?" I was getting tired of his riddles.

"With your mind," he told me.

"Where can I start looking?"

He smiled again. "Inside yourself."

I suppose he could have been a bit vaguer if he'd tried, but he had given me an idea.

"That is all I see," he concluded, scooping up his cards and returning them to the deck.

"What do I owe you?"

"What is it worth to you?" he countered.

If his reading helped me find Malcolm, it was worth more than I owned. I didn't want to let him know how important finding my friend was, so I simply gave him the equivalent of twenty dollars in rubles.

When I walked out of the tent, Petor looked at me expectantly. "We need to find a quiet place," I told him. "I need to meditate for a little while, it may help me pinpoint Malcolm's location."

"What about the Renaissance Faire?" he suggested.

I agreed and we headed in that direction. When we walked through the gates of the faire, it was like walking into medieval England, complete with a wooded area to our right. It was quieter here off the carnival's fairway, and I led him into the trees.

Sitting down at the base of a tree, I closed my eyes. I trusted Petor to keep watch and concentrated on Malcolm. After a moment the silence was broken by laughter. It sounded suspiciously like that of the Jester who had come into my room at the mansion.

When I opened my eyes, I could see something moving from tree to tree in the darkness. I couldn't tell if it was Malcolm's friend or not.

"If you want me to find Malcolm," I called out softly, "you have to tell me what way to go."

There was no response, but now I could see that there were two figures dancing gaily through the trees. If they weren't going to help me, I knew I'd be better off ignoring them. I closed my eyes and tried again.

I wasn't sure exactly what I was doing, but I did my best to focus on Malcolm and the memories I had of him. I replayed in my mind all of the memories I had of my mentor, freely bringing his image to my mind's eye. After a few minutes I realized I could feel him and when I focused further, I could tell he was somewhere back in the carnival.

Moving quickly to my feet, I started back toward the Big Top with Petor following closely behind. Within a few minutes we were standing once more before Xanadu's Mirror Palace.

"Okay, well, I guess we're going back in," I told Petor. "The third time's a charm, right?"

"So they say," he agreed softly.

I did my best to focus on the feel of Malcolm in my mind while Petor paid for our tickets. To my relief, none of the mirrors in the hall reflected anything other than our images as we walked through, no visions or voices tried to delay me. I was grateful for that, but still I dreaded entering the labyrinth of glass.

Once we hit the maze I took Petor's hand again and closed my eyes as I led him inside. Once more Petor followed my lead into the maze while I closed my eyes but this time I concentrated on the feel of Malcolm in my mind. I held my right hand out in front of me, but let my instinct lead the way. Quite a few times I felt glass against my fingertips as we walked for what felt like an eternity through the maze. After walking for ages, I sensed the sides of the labyrinth fall away as we stepped into an open space.

As soon as I opened my eyes I knew we had reached the center of the maze. The room was circular, its walls lined with mirrors. Onyx frames with interlocking snake designs carved in the stone adorned every mirror along the edge of the room. A chill damp wind blew across our skin, bringing goose bumps to Petor's arms.

In the middle of the room stood three mirrors, their sides touching to form a triangle. They were very different yet none of them showed a reflection. The surfaces of all three were completely dark and empty. I walked closer for a better look at them.

The first mirror was the largest, its frame ornately carved from onyx. I stood before it for a long minute, and gazed into the inky blackness that held no reflection. Wincing in anticipation of being knocked on my ass, I opened myself to the auras of the mirrors. To my surprise, I was not injured in any way. As I looked into the darkness, an image swam to the surface. I could barely make out the sign for the Ferris wheel before it disappeared. When I reached out to touch the surface, my hand went through where the glass should have been.

The second mirror's frame was very plain, but still made of onyx. It was smaller than the first mirror but, as with the first mirror, there was no reflection to be seen. Once again I opened myself to its aura and after a time I saw the image of a wooden stake swimming in the blackness. As before, the vision dissipated quickly, and as before when I tried to touch the surface my hand sank into the mirror.

I walked around to the third mirror. This one's frame was more complicated than the second, but not as ornate as the first. Once again I looked for its aura and in the darkness and to my surprise I saw the Verbena Tradition symbol lurking there. After it faded away, I tested the surface of the mirror to find that, as with the others, my hand disappeared into the inky blackness.

Unlike the mirrors in the hall, Petor's hand also sank into the darkness of all three mirrors when I asked him to try. I stood back and looked at them broodingly. I could feel Malcolm in the room like a tangible presence. He was close, very close. I felt like if I reached out I could touch him.

"Malcolm is at the center of a prison of his own making," I murmured to myself. "I feel him most strongly here, we can't break the mirrors, so either we go into one of them or go ride the Ferris wheel."

"Ferris wheel?" Petor asked, confused.

"In one of the mirrors I saw the Ferris wheel sign," I explained.

"What does that have to do with your friend?"

"Could be nothing," I drawled, trying for a light tone. "He could be at the Ferris wheel. He could be at Disney World."

I stared at the mirrors for a long time before making my decision. At last I turned to Petor. "Okay, I know I'm going to regret this, but let's go into the mirror."

"Which one?" he asked, looking at the mirrors.

"I saw the Verbena symbol in this one," I told him, pointing to the smallest mirror.

Still I found myself hesitating. It wasn't that I didn't want to save Malcolm's soul, that was what we'd come here for after all. What made me hesitate was what would happen once we freed him. The memories I had of the mentor of my youth were good ones, but my more recent memories were the ones that haunted me. Those memories wanted me to leave Malcolm to his fate; they whispered that he was only getting what he deserved.

I pushed those thoughts away and took Petor's hand once more. I drew the Desert Eagle and led the way into the smallest mirror without allowing myself any further hesitation.

The darkness swallowed us whole.

THE CENTER OF THE MAZE

And there she meets the faces
She sees in her heart and mind
Tomorrow, Wendy - Concrete Blonde

Petor and I walked hand in hand through the inky blackness. I tried using the night vision Luke had shown me, but nothing could penetrate the total absence of light. Eventually a light source presented itself ahead of us, growing as we walked toward it until I had to return my vision to normal or risk being blinded yet again.

The lights shone on a set of three mirrors standing at angles to each other like those in a dressing room. As we moved closer, I could see that they stood in the middle of what once been Malcolm's living room in Helena. The room was a charred ruin, and I could smell the smoke and ash the murderous explosion had left behind.

I moved closer to the mirrors, careful to stay just out of arms reach. I could feel Malcolm's presence all around me but he was no where to be seen. Very softly I called out his name.

"I'm here," he replied.

A figure appeared in the mirror straight ahead of me, Malcolm Robbins, my mentor and my friend. His eyes were soft and blue, full of life and concern.

"And here," came a voice to my left.

In the second mirror was an image of Malcolm as he had come to the holding at my wedding. His hair was longer, grayer than the Malcolm I remembered from Helena, his face more lined. His image was also not as strong as the one in the center mirror.

"And here," added a deep gravely voice from my right.

The mirror to my right held a pale image of the Malcolm that still haunted my nightmares. His hair was gray and wild, and there was an 'X' branded in the middle of his forehead. This was the Malcolm that had stabbed me one night in Helena, had stolen Jason from me and arranged his forced embrace, had kidnapped Lena from her home and held her in Ramadan, had tormented me with dreams the day before my wedding. This Malcolm I would gladly kill if given half a chance.

I turned to the image of my mentor. "Where's here?"

"Wherever we are," he replied calmly.

"How do I get you out?" I asked him.

"I don't know. This place is draining my power."

"Well, you're just a shit load of help, aren't you?" I demanded irritably. "You drag me into this place to help you and I have no idea how...." Christ, for all of this I could have stayed home with my husband and family.

"I'm sorry," he told me. "You were the only one I could think of."

As I watched, my mentor's face faded. From my right I saw the third figure's face came into focus.

"You owe me," the evil Malcolm growled.

I didn't so much as hesitate before lifting the Desert Eagle and firing at the 'X' carved in his forehead. He lifted a hand and the bullet stopped just short of touching the glass before falling powerlessly to the floor.

"I owe you for a lot of things," I replied coldly, "and I can't repay you if I can't get you out."

"You owe me for the death of Lizzy," he shot back, hatred dripping from his words.

When was he going to get this? "I didn't kill Lizzy."

"No, but your father did," he reminded me.

"So I'm damned for the sins of my father?"

"Aren't we all?" His harsh black eyes bored into mine.

"I'd like to think not," I told him. "Do you have any idea how we can get you out?"

"You're the big fucking vampire," he hissed, his dark eyes burning so intently that it hurt for me to look into them for long. "Figure something out." With that his face faded once more.

I glanced over my shoulder at Petor. "Did I mention I hated him?"

Before he could reply, I heard a drawing of breath to my left. I turned to see that the second Malcolm had come to the fore.

"Forgive him," he pleaded. "He is uncontrollable, even more so in this place."

"I've got a good way to control him," I drawled.

"To kill one would be to kill us all," he warned me, his voice rich with a Scottish brogue. His image in the glass had become stronger as he spoke. This Malcolm's eyes were a soft gray, so pale there was almost no color to them.

All and none, Summer had told me. Abruptly I remembered her saying that the first aspect of the Trimuritive had spent his life in Scotland. Perhaps these three men were not all Malcolm. Maybe what I was looking at was the Verbena Trimuritive. It seemed more important than ever to free them from their prison.

I lifted the gun and shot once more, but not at the man in the glass. I aimed over his shoulder, but the bullet ricocheted and came back to hit me in the leg before I could move out of the way. I hissed at the pain while Lord Chaos crowed with laughter.

The second Malcolm faded and once more my mentor's face became clear. He seemed concerned that I'd shot myself, even though it hadn't really hurt and I was able to heal it without much effort or thought.

"You cannot free us with your guns, Tina," my mentor said sadly.

I'd already figured that one out, but it didn't hurt to have confirmation. I walked to one side of the mirrors and as soon as I passed the edge, they disappeared. I could still see Petor, and we were still standing in the remains of Malcolm's apartment, but there were no mirrors in the center of the room until I returned passed the edge once more.

I walked closer to the mirrors and touched the center one. The glass was solid and so cold that it shocked my hand. I felt like a failure. Sure, I'd found Malcolm, but I simply had no idea how to get him out.

I threw up my hands in frustration. "I have no idea," I told him. "Got any kind of concept on what can be done here?"

"This place is a construct of powerful magic," he reminded me.

"And...?" I prompted.

"It will take equal power to disband it," he explained, "even for the briefest of moments."

"And you think I'm strong enough to break it?" If he did, he had a hell of a lot more faith in me than I had in myself.

"You might be."

"But you don't know how," I murmured.

"There is a power in this place, a power of your kind," he told me softly. "Seek it and you may be powerful enough to undo that which holds us."

I reached out and placed my hand on the center mirror, ignoring the cold that seeped into my skin and radiated up my arm. "Malcolm, you have to tell me what's going on," I pleaded. "You three

are the Trimuritive aren't you? All this time I thought—" I stopped and glanced at the mirror to my right. All this time I'd thought that he was Malcolm, an older, more bitter man than my mentor, but Malcolm nonetheless. I'd never been so glad to be so wrong.

Malcolm put his hand over mine on his side of the glass, a small smile playing on his lips. "You always were a smart one Tina." He almost sounded proud of me. "Though Chaos is and always has been a part of us, he acts of his own independence. I was powerless to stop him."

It hit me that he was using the word Chaos as a proper noun. Cormac had always called him 'Lord Chaos' so that didn't really surprise me. Malcolm had also referred to Chaos as being part of 'us', which I took to mean the Trimuritive, but said that he had acted on his own. That meant the Trimuritive was tied together in a way I didn't quite understand or remember, but they were capable of acting individually.

"I'd be more than happy to stop him permanently," I said in a low voice that was almost a growl as I glanced at the bastard. Chaos had done more things to hurt the ones I loved than I cared to remember. It wouldn't bother me in the slightest to take him out.

From the corner of my eye I saw Malcolm shook his head slowly. "If it *were* possible to kill one of us, it would also kill the other two."

That figured. There was always something to stop me from taking my revenge. I shook my head and brought my attention back to my mentor. "Tell me what happened, please. How did you get here?"

He laughed softly. "Tina, can we talk about this after we've figured out how to get us out of here?"

How was I supposed to even know how to begin? "I was hoping that knowing how you got in there would help me find a way to get you out," I explained patiently.

"Chaos was in control when it happened," he told me. "He sensed the level of power in this place and sought it out."

Chaos again. It seemed to me the other two would be much better off if I killed him, not to mention that everyone else in the world would be safer as well. "That fucking figures. Then what happened?"

"We came to investigate and got trapped in here," he replied.

"What, you just walked into the carnival and 'whoosh' ended up in a mirror?" I asked in disbelief.

"It took a few more days than that," he said seriously, "but yes."

Obviously he wasn't going to be specific. I wasn't sure how I was supposed to get him, well, them, out if I didn't know how they got in, but I had to start somewhere.

I glanced around the ruins of Malcolm's apartment for a moment before telling Petor to help me clear a space around the mirrors. Once we had an area I thought was large enough cleared, I took several candles from my ritual bag and set them around the mirrors in a circle. Petor lit them while I went to stand in front of my mentor.

Taking the knife from my sleeve, I made a shallow cut across the palm of my left hand. I replaced the knife in its sheath, then set about drawing two symbols on the mirror that held the Trimuritive. Near the top of the mirror I drew the Verbena Tradition symbol, an elongated triangle set on its side. Toward the center of the glass, I drew the square within a circle and the triangle that was the Tremere Clan symbol. I hoped that the symbols and the blood would help focus our power.

I sat down cross-legged in front of the mirrors and cleared my mind of all distractions. Feeling my own power took little concentration, but it didn't take long to feel the suffocating power of the circus surround me. I could feel Malcolm's power here too, but it was faint, too faint for me to draw on. I

could feel power in Petor too, but the small pulse of his life force was like a tiny blip compared to the rest of the power in that place.

Focusing on the prison that held the Trimuritive was more difficult than I can describe. Trying to draw on that power was almost too much for me. I could feel it pulling at me, sucking at my energy. The prison that held him wanted me too, but I refused to let it take me. It took all the strength I had not to let it pull my power into the vortex that held Malcolm.

I drew my own power back a little and opened my eyes to see if anything I'd done had helped. I looked first to my mentor, but his image was faded. A quick glance at Chaos showed that his was too. As I turned to look at the older version of Malcolm, he began to speak.

"You do not have enough power to do this," he told me softly. "You must seek out the power of your kind in this place, and add it to your own. Then you may be able to help us free ourselves. But our power is limited and holding this place open for you is draining us. Go now and start your search, before you too are trapped in this prison." With that ominous warning, he started to fade away.

'My kind'. The only Kindred I'd seen here had been the magician in the Big Top Show, and I wasn't sure he could do anything to help me. "What am I suppose to do, diablerize him?" I demanded angrily.

"He is not of your kind," he answered before fading away.

I understood quickly that the vampire I'd seen was not Tremere, but there was one of my clan somewhere in the carnival. I knew exactly how to seek him out, but I couldn't do it from here.

With a sigh I released the energy I'd been holding, careful not to let the carnival's power pull me in when I let the last of it go. I looked at my mentor for a moment, saddened by my failure to free him. Without a word I got up and collected the candles and repacked them in my ritual bag. I slung the pack over my shoulder and glanced once more at the faded images in the mirrors before turning to Petor.

"We need to go back to the Renaissance Faire," I told him. "I have another ritual to perform." I'd carried out the Rite of Introduction before we'd landed in Perm, but perhaps that had been too far away to reach here. Of course the Circus hadn't been here then, so that might explain the lack of response.

I could feel the room starting to close on itself as I took Petor's hand and headed for the door of Malcolm's ruined apartment. We walked through the threshold and found ourselves back in the round chamber that we had come from.

It had seemed like we'd been with Malcolm only minutes, but when we stepped out of the mirror I could tell that dawn was only an hour or so away. The ritual I wanted to perform took half an hour, so I knew I wouldn't have time to do that and the other things I wanted to do before the sun rose. The ritual would have to wait.

Petor and I talked about it on our way out of the Mirror Palace. After resting for a while in the car, he would scout out the carnival while I slept. He agreed to keep an eye out for anything strange, well, stranger than we'd seen, anyway. When the sun went down, he'd be waiting for me.

We moved the car to the back of the lot, and made a bed for me in the trunk. I made sure he had enough money to eat and check things out then crawled into it. Petor covered me with a blanket and closed the lid, leaving me cradled in darkness with only thoughts of my failure to keep me company.

LOOKING FOR MY KIND

Maybe I'll be strong enough

I don't know where to start

Kissing a Fool - George Michael's

Petor must have been waiting by the car when the sun went down because he opened the trunk shortly after I woke. I climbed out and took a moment to brush my hair while I asked him what he'd found during the day.

He told me that he'd walked through the carnival for several hours, but hadn't seen anything he thought was unusual for the Midnight Circus. He hadn't noticed anyone following him around, and he hadn't gone to any of the shows while I slept. He also said that most of the 'mature' entertainment was closed during the day.

After once again checking our weapons and making sure that he'd gotten something to eat during the day, we headed back into the circus. We went right to the Renaissance Faire section of the grounds, and I was able to find someone to feed from before we found a secluded area well out of the way where I could set up for the ritual I wanted to perform.

The Rite of Introduction was something I'd learned after returning from a fruitless search for Jason a few years ago. During the search I'd been lost in Italy then captured by werewolves with no way to contact anyone. I'd vowed then never to let that happen again and when I'd returned to Las Vegas the Rite of Introduction was one of the first things I'd learned.

I took the steps necessary for the rite and sat down to concentrate. The ritual required sending a message out which would be received by any Tremere in the area.

I am Christina Joanne Kline of the House and Clan Tremere, childe of Antonio Miquel Santiago Moreno, I called out in my mind. I have come to this area with my companion on a noble cause and find myself in need of aid.

After a brief pause, I received a reply. *I am Mordblund Lightsbane, childe of Grimgroth. How may I be of service to you?*

The name sounded like something from the Middle Ages, in fact the last name particularly sounded more like a title than a surname. I did recognize the name of his sire; Grimgroth had replaced Gotatrix on the inner circle when the latter had left to join the Sabbat. He was in charge of Western Europe and Australia, and it was rumored that he'd been seen with Gotatrix even after his defection from the Camarilla.

Greetings, Mordblund Lightsbane, childe of Grimgroth, I replied with all the respect due to an elder of my clan. A member of the Verbena Tradition has been trapped in the Midnight Circus. His capture has stolen the magic of his people. I am trying to release him, but I am not strong enough alone. He has told me that to free him I must seek out the power of my kind and add it to my own. If I fail, I fear the magic of the Verbena may be forever lost. I humbly ask your aid in freeing him.

I knew I could be telling him too much, especially if he was in on whatever had happened to Malcolm, but I didn't really have any other choice. I didn't really know what had to be done to free the Trimuritive, and trusting Mordblund was my only hope.

I too am trapped within this infernal being, he told me. Perhaps if you free me as well, we could come to an... arrangement.

*Perhaps if we work together I can free you then free the Verbena, I agreed. Where are you?
Xanadu's Mirror Palace.*

I should have known. I mean really, I should have known, I'd felt the power pulling at me when I'd tried to free Malcolm. But if I was strong enough to resist, why hadn't Mordblund? Could he help me free the Trimuritive? If he couldn't, we'd all be trapped, but what other choice did I have?

How do I find you? I asked.

I am trapped in the center, he replied, as I have been for some time.

I believe I have been to the center of the mirror maze, but I did not see you there. How will I find you? I asked.

You must look with your mind, childe, and you will find me.

Of course, that was the way I'd found Malcolm. *I will do my best to find you and free you, I promised. Then together we must free the Verbena.*

Together. There was no response from the other Tremere, I could feel that the connection had closed and I was glad he was gone from my mind. Logically I knew the only way I could add Mordblund's power to my own was to diablerize him, to drain him until I absorbed his life force into myself. How could I do that to an elder of my clan? If any other Tremere ever learned of it I would be destroyed immediately. But how could I live with the knowledge that I hadn't done everything I could to restore the Verbena magic?

The Verbena Tradition had once been my own. There was no way I could walk away from their plight and not do my damndest to see that their power was restored. The fact that one of my clan was trapped was just another reason for me to try.

Slowly I opened my eyes and took a long look at the night. The stars were bright, and the moon was full, shining down on us like a beacon of hope. The thought ran through my mind that it could be the last time I looked on the moon, the last time I felt the breeze on my face.

Freeing Malcolm was more dangerous than anything I'd ever done before. If the power that held the Trimuritive was strong enough to trap an elder of my clan, what hope did I have to succeed in setting them free? But even if I knew I would fail, I still had to try.

At last I looked at Petor, standing guard nearby. I called his name softly, and he came over to crouch before me. "When I agreed to take you with me, I didn't realize how dangerous this would be for both of us. I have to tell you that there is every chance that I will meet final death or be sucked into the mirrors. There is no need for you to risk yourself, Petor. If you'd like I can give you all the money that I have and you can leave now, go back to your old life."

He thought for a long moment before replying. "No, I agreed to go with you no matter what."

"Once we get to the center of the maze there will be no turning back," I reminded him. "You must be sure."

He drew a deep breath and let it out slowly. "I am sure."

I searched for his aura in the dim light of the parking lot, and was more than happy to see that he really was certain. That wasn't to say that he was unafraid, but he was calm enough that I had to believe he had every intention of staying with me.

Just before I would have looked away I saw something else in his aura, something I hadn't expected. They were barely visible, but mixed in with his aura were faint sparkles. The only time I'd ever seen those sparkles had been when someone was doing magic.

"Petor, did anything strange happen to you today?" I asked, trying to be nonchalant about the question.

He frowned and looked down at me. "What? No, why?"

"Do you feel strange now?"

"Define 'strange'," he said with a slight smirk.

"Something that would cause you to have sparkles in your aura," I told him with a shrug. "I don't know, strange, different than normal."

"What do you mean?" he asked, looking worried. "Sparkles? What does it mean?"

There was no way to say it except just to say it. "Magic."

"What?" he breathed, sounding almost panicked. "Is someone using it on me?"

"Well, unless you know how to do magic," I drawled, "it must have come from somewhere else. Did you buy anything from the carnival today?"

"Some food, drink," he admitted. He thought for a moment, then added, "I played a few games."

"Did you win anything?" Maybe the magic was on something he was carrying.

He looked down sheepishly and pulled a stuffed polar bear out of his coat pocket. There didn't seem to be an aura of any type on the toy, but when I looked back at Petor, the sparkles were clearer than before. He was also confused now, but that was to be expected.

A quick glance around showed that there was no one nearby, but I knew from my own experience that a magic user didn't necessarily have to be within sight of their target. I had no way to know if Petor had suddenly awakened, or if someone was using magic on him, and I didn't need him freaking out on me, so I tried to blow it off.

"It isn't important," I said firmly. "We have to go back to the Mirror Palace."

He nodded. "Sure, whatever you say, boss."

I smiled, but it was a grim smile. As I gathered the things I'd used in the ritual, I told myself that I'd have to watch Petor very carefully. If someone was using magic on him, there was no telling what he would do, and I couldn't afford not to be cautious. As the saying goes, you're not paranoid if they really are after you.

As we walked toward Xanadu's Mirror Palace, I remembered the tugging I'd felt when we'd entered the place last night. It was almost as if the house had been trying to awaken me, which was impossible because, well, because a vampire is dead and can never be awakened. It was possible however, that Petor had been awakened.

When we reached the palace we saw the same ticket taker that had been stationed there the night before. When he gave us a strange look, I shrugged and took Petor's hand. "We like the maze," I drawled, trying to allay whatever suspicions he had about us. I doubt it worked, his gaze followed us into the Palace.

Once again I felt the tugging at the back of my mind when we entered the Hall of Mirrors. I glanced at Petor, but his face was unreadable. Did he feel it too? Was the house flexing his magical muscles the same way it was mine?

Only one vision came to me in the hall of mirrors, but that one was bad enough. I saw the mountain in Helena where Papa had tried to kill my brother so many years ago. I watched as my father and his friends pitted themselves against Robert, and the mountain came crumbling down to bury him.

The only consolation I had as I watched the vision was that Robert hadn't really died that day on Mt. Helena. He had managed to open a gateway that had taken him and his girlfriend far from the machinations of my father and far from me, the sister who had adored him.

I turned away from my memories of the past and glanced at Petor. "When you won at the games, were you surprised?" I asked. I was trying to find out if the magic that I'd seen had been coming from him or from someone else, but his answer didn't help me narrow it down.

"Not really," he replied. "You get good pretty at darts being in a bar as much as I am."

As much as I wanted to get to the bottom of the sparkles in his aura, now wasn't the time. I concentrated on finding Lightsbane. It took a little while to get through, but we finally found ourselves in the center of the maze.

The three mirrors in the middle of the room looked at first glance to be exactly the same however two of the images had changed. I couldn't see anything when I looked in the tallest mirror, and when I looked into the smallest, I saw my mentor's face.

I knew that going into the last mirror would lead me to Malcolm, and I was pretty sure that the middle mirror, the one showing a wooden stake, would take me to Mordblund. What I didn't know was what we would find when we went through it, or what I would do.

The older version of Malcolm had told me that I had to find the other of my kind and add it to my own. Mordblund was an elder, stronger than me. There was every chance he would win the battle to come. I had to make sure I was the one who walked away.

I took Petor's hand and we walked through the mirror's surface into darkness.

DESCENT INTO DARKNESS

I see a stairway so I follow it down
Into the belly of a whale where my secrets echo all around
Hey Pretty - Poe

We walked through absolute darkness for several minutes before we found ourselves deep inside a mountain. Stretching downward before us was a stairway carved out of the stone. There were torches every fifty feet or so, and it looked as if the passage went on forever. We started down, passing seven torches before we reached the bottom of the stairs and an entrance to another cave.

The doorway was a black void, and no light from the torches reached past the archway. Even the beam from the flashlight I carried in my ritual bag was swallowed by the darkness. Still, there was no other place for us to go. I drew the Desert Eagle and handed the flashlight to Petor, then took his hand and led him into the unknown.

We passed into a large cave fairly well lit by torches set along the walls. Thirty feet from us in the center of the cave was a slab of stone roughly waist high. Lying on top of the slab was a man, staked through the heart, each hand, and each foot. His body was splayed out on the rock, his fingers and toes only inches from the edge.

Greetings, Christina Joanne Kline, a voice my head drawled. I see you've made it.

"Greetings, Mordblund Lightsbane," I said aloud as I walked closer to the slab. I noticed that the ends of the stakes were blunted as if a hammer had driven them in. "How did this happen?"

Apothos tricked me, he replied.

"Who is Apothos?" I continued to answer verbally, hoping that would limit Mordblund's access to my mind.

She is of the carnival.

I'd already figured that much out. "And how did she trick you?" I moved a little closer, trying to gather the courage to do what I knew must be done.

She is very powerful.

"What type of power does she have?" I asked, hoping to divert his attention from my approach. "She must be strong to have subdued you."

Yes she is.

"Is she a mage?" I hoped there would be no resistance from her once we'd gotten the Trimuritive out. If we got them out.

She is something else, he replied cryptically.

When I was about twenty feet away from the slab, I felt a sharp pain flash across my cheek. I raised my hand to cover the wound, but blood began to ooze from between my fingers and float through the air toward Mordblund.

"Why do you do this?" I demanded as I healed the wound to stop the flow of blood.

I've been down here so long, he murmured in my mind. I'm hungry.

"So you steal would from me?"

You are the first thing I've seen down here in years.

As if that made it right. When Petor gasped, I glanced over to see that a gash had opened on his cheek. The blood was flowing toward Mordblund, and it occurred to me that I hadn't shown Petor how to heal, or given him extra blood to do so.

"I came here to help you and you are hurting us?" I growled, thoroughly infuriated with my clan mate.

You are helping me, he replied.

My patience was gone and I was done playing games. As I moved toward the slab another cut opened on my cheek, then another. I healed the wounds and used my blood to become stronger, but every step I took toward the staked Tremere opened another wound on my face and hands. It was like running through a barbed wire fence, but I didn't let it stop me. I moved faster, calling on my blood for strength, speed and healing. By the time I reached the slab I had lost two units of blood and used a whole lot more.

I was tired of fighting, tired of being in the damned circus, tired of being away from my husband, tired of worrying about what would happen if I couldn't free the Trimuritive. I healed myself again and leaned over to bite into his wrist. Drawing on the Kindred's blood, I made myself even stronger yet.

The taste of his blood was rich, intoxicating. I couldn't remember ever feeding from anything so exhilarating. Mordblund's vitae made all other blood seem weak and lifeless.

Even as I drank, I felt more wounds open on my face and hands. My attack must have taken him aback because I was able to heal again before he could take any more blood from me. I, however, was able to take quite a bit of blood from him before he recovered enough to try again.

Mordblund redoubled his efforts to feed from me, and for a time I thought I wouldn't be able to drain him before he first drained me. My determination paid off in the end, and when the last of his blood entered my body, the real struggle began.

Diablerizing another Kindred is not an easy thing to do. I'd done it once before, in the urgency of trying to heal an injury that might have killed me if Jason had not been there to save me. It took time and Mordblund fought me, but I was relentless and eventually I felt his essence enter my being. As his body disintegrated on the stone slab I fell to my knees, nearly overwhelmed by the emotions running through me.

The technical effects of diablerie are well documented and very cut and dried. There is a rush of power that compares to nothing else in the universe. If one is able to diablerize a Kindred of a lower generation than oneself, one lowers generation, becomes closer to Caine, the father of all vampires. With that lowering comes the ability to hold more blood inside one's body, to use one's blood more quickly, more effectively. Stating the technical effects in no way describes the way I felt kneeling there beside the stone slab in the center of the Mirror Palace.

I had to fight to stay conscious, but what was worse was the knowledge that I was a razor's edge away from frenzy as I felt the beast rear his monstrous head deep within me. Emotions swirled through me in a whirlwind, elation and rage, ecstasy and agony. I sank to my knees and redoubled my efforts to stay in control. If I let the beast take over Petor would die, his only crime being that he had followed me into the depths of hell.

After what felt like an eternity I was finally able to gain control of the beast and force it back down into the pit of my soul. Slowly I rose to my feet and I wiped the blood from my mouth. I still felt the fire of Mordblund's vitae running through me, but my will was firmly my own.

Remembering Petor's injury I went to him and fed him several units of blood, explaining how he could heal himself as he drank.

"You okay?" I asked when I had licked my wrist closed and the wound on his face had faded to a pink scar.

"What the hell was that?" he demanded softly.

"That was a vampire." At his dry look, I added, "Did you guess that one? He was able to use Thaumaturgy to try and take our blood from us. I couldn't let that happen, so I killed him."

Petor still seemed a bit confused, but now wasn't the time to explain. Keeping a hold on my emotions had been a close thing, and I hadn't even warned Petor about the danger of my losing control.

I walked over to the slab and pulled on the stake that had been driven through Mordblund's heart. It was embedded in the stone so deeply that it took a great deal of strength to pull it out. Fortunately I was still sufficiently pumped from my encounter with Mordblund that I was able to free it from the stone.

Just as I was handing the stake to Petor, the torches started to go out. As one Petor and I headed for the entrance to the cave and fled upward with the torches going out behind us. We barely made it to the top before the last torch went out.

I kept my balance easily, but Petor stumbled a bit as we came out of the mirror. Behind us, the mirror's surface cracked, spider webbed lines splintering our images. Petor was panting so I gave him time to catch his breath. I made a mental note to show him how to use my blood to make himself stronger when we got out of this. If we got out of this.

Once Petor had recovered himself I went to him and took his hand. Without speaking I drank from his wrist. His blood was warm and full of life, but the taste paled in comparison to that which I'd drank from my clan mate. I hoped it would help me do whatever needed to be done to save Malcolm.

We went into the third mirror, into the blackness that so totally consumed the light. After a few minutes we found ourselves not in Malcolm's apartment, but standing in the hall outside the door to it. Cautiously I touched the wood that seemed scorched, but was cool under my fingers. It was also locked. It took me two tries to kick it in.

The inside of the apartment looked the same as it had the last time we were here, the burned furnishings giving it almost a surreal look with the three mirrors standing gleaming in the middle of the room. The symbols I'd drawn in blood the night before were gone as if they'd never existed.

"Stay on alert," I whispered to Petor. "I'm not sure exactly what's going to happen."

He nodded and pulled his gun.

"If things start heading south," I continued gravely, "get out of here."

When he didn't answer me, I glanced up to find a determined look on his face.

"I'm serious," I insisted.

"We'll see," he replied.

I shook my head, wondering why I had to pick ghouls with minds of their own. O'Connell often did what he felt was best for my safety, so at least the two of them would have that in common.

When we walked into the apartment, the mirrors were blank. I moved closer and saw only my own reflection in the glass.

"Malcolm?" I called softly.

Images began to swirl behind the glass and when it cleared, Malcolm's face was prominent in the center mirror.

"I have sought out the other of my kind here and taken his power," I told him gravely.

"Good."

"Well, we'll find out if it's good or not when I get back to Salem and get in trouble for diablerizing a clan elder," I said dryly, "but that's beside the point."

"I'm sorry," he replied sincerely. "If there was anything I could do to help I would, but...." He tapped the glass and it bowed just enough for me to see it move.

"What do I have to do now?" I asked.

"Don't you have some idea?"

"I have one," I admitted. "I hope it works."

The ritual wasn't as easy as I hoped it would be. I cut my wrist and painted the Verbena and Tremere symbols on the glass as before, then began drawing the intricate designs that would, I believed, break the Trimuritive free from their prison.

Each member of the Trimuritive worked on the mirrors as well, drawing their own symbols and speaking in soft voices. It felt good to know they were helping to break the spell and it allowed me to better able to focus on my task.

At last, the mirrors gave way and all three of them fell through toward me. I fell under their weight, but when I struggled to push them off of me, I realized that only Malcolm remained.

"It worked?" I asked needlessly.

He was having difficulty catching his breath, but he managed to gasp, "Looks like it."

"And where are the other two?" I demanded.

"They are with me," he assured me.

All in one. They really were all a different aspect of the same individual. Malcolm held both the elder Malcolm and Chaos inside of him, each of them having the ability to take control of the mortal body. My mentor hadn't lied when he'd said that if I killed Chaos I would kill them all.

Above us the mirrors cracked loudly, ominously.

"If this is anything like the last one," I told Malcolm urgently, "we need to get out of here."

I rolled to my feet and helped Malcolm stand. He seemed weak, as if the ritual had drained him. I gestured for Petor to help me and, reluctantly, he did. Between us we supported Malcolm as we left the apartment and walked out of the mirror into the center of the maze.

Malcolm would have fallen when we left the mirror, but Petor and I were able to catch him. I glanced back at the mirror to see that it had broken the same as the mirror that had led to the Tremere elder.

I tried to sit my mentor down, but he protested. "We need to get out of here, this place is not safe," he warned us.

"Gee, whatever gave you that idea?" I asked sarcastically. At his reproachful look, I slung his arm around my neck. "If you're okay, then let's get out of here."

I snuggled into Malcolm's side even though every nerve in my body screamed out not to trust him. He seemed to realize what my plan was to get him out, and he did his best to help me pretend we were lovers out for a casual stroll through the carnival.

"Do you need something to eat?" I asked as Petor followed us out of the Mirror Palace.

"I am *so* hungry," he admitted softly.

I was hungry myself after the ritual, but there was no need to mention that fact. If we escaped there would be time enough for me to find sustenance later. I told Petor to go ahead of us and purchase food for both of them.

As we passed the Museum of Oddities, I glanced regretfully toward the building. I wished that there was some way we could free the creatures inside, but I knew that any delay now could cause Malcolm's recapture. I didn't like leaving them there, but I couldn't risk it.

By the time we reached the gate Petor had rejoined us and had his arms full of food. The gypsy woman studied us closely as we walked past her, but I did my best to ignore her gaze. We made it to the car without any problems, and I settled Malcolm into the back seat with some food. I climbed in beside him and Petor drove away from the carnival toward Pechora.

ANSWERS

I'm sorry now and I don't now how
To get it back to good
Back 2 Good - Matchbox Twenty

Malcolm ate slowly at first, almost as if he didn't remember what it was like to eat. Once he got a taste of the food, he wolfed it down as if he hadn't eaten in weeks. Wondering how long he'd been captive in the mirror house I waited impatiently for him to be done. I wanted to demand answers from him, but I knew my questions could wait until he was finished.

He ate all the food Petor had bought for him, and some of what my ghoul was eating as well. When he was finally done, he leaned back against the seat and closed his eyes. It would probably have done him good to rest a while, but my patience was at an end.

"You wanna tell me what's going on?" I demanded, making no pretense at politeness.

"What would you like to know?" he asked wearily.

"Everything." I had so many questions that I didn't know which ones to ask first.

"Where should I begin?"

"Oh, gee," I drawled, my voice harsh, "maybe the point where there were three of you when you came out of the mirror and now there's only one?"

"You know we are the Trimuritive," he said softly.

"If I could remember what that meant," I bit out, "it would be helpful."

"We are the essence of Verbena magic," he began.

"Knew that," I interrupted impatiently.

He raised his head and shot me a surprised look, but I didn't flinch. I didn't have any tolerance left for verbal swordplay, I wanted straight answers.

"What else do you know?" He asked.

"You're the essence of Verbena magic," I replied irritably. "You're the current Trimuritive. Good, bad, neutral. Kinda like the moon in that the Verbena magic waxes and wanes based on what you're doing. I remember finding something in a book and you trying to divert my attention from it."

"Yes," he murmured, laying his head back against the seat again. "I was in denial about my destiny."

"Do you wanna fill in the blanks?" I prompted.

"When Lizzy died, I lost control and Chaos took over," he said simply.

"That would be the whole stabbing thing," I shot back.

"Yes."

"And Marcus," I added, my voice low and hard.

He closed his eyes as if the memory caused him pain. "Yes," he said with a sad sigh. "It was many years before I came out of my depression. By then Chaos had grown too strong for me to control and at that point the Crone would not help me. It wasn't until Chaos started being evil for the sake of evil itself that the Crone agreed to help me."

For a moment I didn't understand why he was calling Chaos by two different names, but then I realized that the older Malcolm, the one whose eyes were nearly clear, was who he was calling Crone.

"But I was not strong enough to keep control," he continued, "so the Crone took over."

"So which one of you was in Italy in the monastery?" I demanded. I wanted to know which one to hold responsible for Jason's disappearance.

"We were all there," he said patiently.

I understood that, but it wasn't exactly what I wanted to know. "Which one was in control?"

"Chaos."

I'd suspected as much. "And Austria?"

"The first time or the second time?"

"Either," I growled. "Both."

"The Crone."

"Both times?"

"The first time," he replied.

And here I'd thought Chaos was the only evil one of the trio. "Why?"

He closed his eyes again and I could feel the magic building in the air around him so strongly that I could almost see it. As I watched, his face changed from that of my mentor to the older face of the Crone.

The second of the Trimuritive sat up in the seat, looking much stronger than Malcolm had just a moment before. He looked at me with those almost colorless eyes, and there was no expression on his face.

"Why?" I repeated harshly.

"To fulfill our destiny."

That wasn't anywhere near good enough. "Your destiny is for me to kill you because you piss me off?" I bit out.

"I was born in Scotland," he told me. "I lived a hundred and fifty years in seclusion, studying the art. When my destiny came calling, she found me. We had a child." He looked away and sadness crossed his face. "The child was born, I died. That child was raised in the world without the knowledge of magic. She took a husband and mothered Malcolm. Lizzy was Malcolm's connection, his destiny."

It was a good tale, but he still wasn't answering my questions. "Which doesn't explain why you took Lena."

"Patience, child," he chastised me.

I bit my tongue on a hot reply and struggled to keep my cool.

"The morning in the loft," he continued, "when Elizabeth did not feel well...."

Realization dawned and the anger died a quick death within me. I closed my eyes and let my head fall back against the window in despair. Lizzy had been pregnant, that was why Malcolm had lost it so thoroughly. I ran a hand across my eyes and did my best not to let the tears that burned behind my lids fall.

"Yes," he confirmed, sadly. "She had told Malcolm only the night before."

Jesus, I hadn't expected that. I'd intended to apologize for Lizzy's death, but this revelation made it impossible. How could an apology even begin to make up for the loss of Malcolm's child? It couldn't, not ever. When Papa had killed Lizzy and the baby, he had set a course of events into action that he could never have imagined.

I'd been putting off dealing with my father, but now I knew I could delay no longer. I would have to stop in Salem to let Jason know I was all right, but immediately thereafter I intended to go to San Francisco. Father Robert Strong had to die, and I would be the one to do it. I'd send Malcolm his head and hope that gruesome gift would help ease the hatred in Chaos' black heart.

"As Malcolm said, he lost control," the Crone continued. "He felt that he had failed and withdrew. Chaos took over in his rage." He stopped and gave me a calm, even look. "The taking of Father Kline

had nothing to do with you. Chaos was seeking an alliance with his master, the one known as Graves. Father Kline was just to be taken and held, but when it was discovered that you were still alive—”

I glanced down at my dead body given only a semblance of life by the magic of my Kindred blood. “Well, not quite,” I murmured dryly.

“Details,” he said dismissively. “Chaos decided to exact more revenge. Eventually Malcolm and I were able to garner control of this being from Chaos and sought a way to make amends for the loss of Elizabeth. The signs pointed to Lady Stockton.”

I pushed down the rage that rose inside at the reminder of just how Chaos’ revenge had played out on my family and friends. “How does kidnapping a pregnant woman make amends?” I demanded.

“To raise the child as Malcolm’s own,” he replied, as if it was completely logical.

“Isn’t that Lena’s job?” I said dryly. She was, after all, Christopher’s mother.

“So that he would father what would become Chaos,” he explained.

“Did you ever think about getting a girlfriend,” I demanded, forgetting Lizzy in my anger, “having your own baby?”

“It’s not that easy,” the Crone protested. “He did that once, and Elizabeth was killed.”

“That still gives you no excuse to take someone else’s child,” I said angrily. Lena could have died in Ramadan, and I didn’t even want to think about what the loss of her child would have done to my friend.

“We are the essence of magic, little one,” he reminded me, as if that made a difference.

“Does that give you license to do whatever you please?” I growled. “There are boundaries, Crone. Some things shouldn’t be done just because you want them.”

“If we hadn’t, the essence would have died and with it the magic,” he insisted.

“You don’t have Lena’s baby now,” I said softly.

“No.”

“The essence didn’t die,” I retorted.

“It has grown weak,” he explained. “We haven’t much time.”

“So what, you plan on another kidnapping attempt?” I asked incredulously.

He looked away. “We are... seeking a way to make further amends.”

“And how do you plan on going about that?” I couldn’t keep the dangerous note out of my voice no matter how I tried to hide it.

“Seeking,” he repeated. “We have not found an answer yet.”

“I don’t mean to interrupt,” Petor said politely yet urgently, “but we’re being followed.”

In the moonlight I could see a large gypsy wagon pulled by four horses following us. The driver sat hunched over the reins, dressed all in black. To my amazement not only were they catching up with us, they were gaining. Petor sped up, trying to keep distance between them and us.

I looked back at the Crone. “Now’s the time for spooky-boo.”

He shook his head. “I—we haven’t the power.”

Wonderful, I thought to myself. *Just fucking ducky*. I’d left my husband and traveled thousands of miles to this God forsaken country, driven and flown for days through the empty countryside, survived not one but two gunfights, diablerized a clan elder, and tested the limits of my magic for the Trimuritive. Now he was free and he still wouldn’t lift a damned finger to help me. Given everything that had happened since I’d left Salem, I truly should have expected as much.

I pulled my ritual bag from the floor and unrolled it on the front seat. I removed one of my two remaining grenades from its place and rolled down the side window. Tossing it toward the road behind us, I concentrated on levitating it toward the carriage but apparently I hadn't been focused. The grenade went off harmlessly beside the road.

"Well, that didn't work," I muttered, angry at my lack of concentration.

I only had one more chance to get it right. I took out the last grenade and tossed it toward the wagon. This time I was able to control its movements and it exploded near the yoke between the driver and his horses, spewing fire everywhere.

Unfortunately once the smoke cleared, the wagon was still coming after us. Granted, everything was on fire including the horses, but it continued on just the same.

I shook my head and whispered the words of the ritual Mordblund had tried to use on me. From the feel of the magic inside of me, it should have pulled blood from the driver toward us, but nothing happened.

"No blood, and it doesn't blow up," I murmured irritably, turning to the Crone. "Got any ideas?"

He didn't reply, just closed his eyes and fell into a meditative mode for a moment. "Lord Bull, to me," he said clearly.

Immediately there was a loud sound from above us, and two large indentations appeared in the roof of the car.

"This is going to help?" I demanded anxiously, staring at the indents in surprise.

The Crone looked up, then back at the wagon. I looked back as well and saw the satyr that had come to my wedding standing in the road behind blocking our pursuers. He was holding a huge hammer, and it was only now after seeing the smaller satyr at the carnival that I could appreciate his size. In Austria, this one had stood as tall as Stephen had been in Crinos form, at least nine feet tall. He looked every inch of those nine feet now.

The satyr gripped and re-gripped the handle of the hammer as he waited. The wagon swerved to avoid him and he hit the side of it with a crash even we in the car could hear. The wagon began to flake apart, but it kept coming.

Petor pushed the car to greater speeds as the satyr jumped over the wagon to once again stand in its path. This time when it swerved to go around him, the satyr moved too. He hit the horses with the hammer, and the air was filled with a cloud of smoke that hid them from view.

"Petor, keep going," I urged, still searching for signs of our pursuers, but they never reappeared.

When I felt again the rise of magic in the air, I turned back to see that Malcolm had rejoined me, looking just as tired as he had a few minutes ago. It seemed that the Crone had taken his energy with him when he'd left.

"So where were we?" I asked, unsympathetic to my mentor's weariness.

The question seemed to confuse him. "What do you mean?"

"In the explanation," I prompted.

"What more would you like me to explain?" he replied in a tired voice.

"I just want to make sure there's not going to be any more kidnapping," I said dryly.

The fact that he didn't answer me told me that the Trimuritive did indeed intend to steal another child from its parents.

"Have you ever thought about adoption?" I demanded.

"There is a ritual that must be performed when the child is born," he explained.

"And there are women who will make adoption arrangements while they are pregnant," I reminded him.

"It's not that simple," he protested.

"It's not that hard," I shot back.

He shook his head. "We can't just pick any child."

I mentally counted to twenty in an effort to control my temper. From what they'd told me, they needed another child to continue the Trimuritive and therefore the Verbena magic. How could I hope to convince him he was wrong?

"But Christopher is safe from you?" I asked after a moment.

"Yes." He sighed and shot a glance behind us. "Do you have an escape route beyond Pechora?"

"There's a plane in Ukhta," I told him, glad enough change the subject, for now.

"How far will that get us?" he asked.

"To another town where we can refuel." I too looked behind us, then at the road ahead. "I have a stop to make in Kirov," I said thoughtfully, remembering Vladimir and his request.

"The circus will not give me up so easily," Malcolm said softly.

I brought my attention back to the here and now. "What do you suggest?"

"I'm just warning you," he replied softly, laying his head back against the seat and closing his eyes once more.

"I have friends in Kirov," I said thoughtfully, remembering the Gregori. "Maybe they can help us."

For a moment I was tempted to let the past rest, but there was one more question burning inside me that needed an answer.

"Malcolm." When he looked at me, I almost lost my nerve, but I had to know the truth. "Chaos told me that Marcus would have died anyway from what Papa did to him. What did he mean?"

"You would have to ask Chaos what he meant by it," he told me, closing his eyes again. "He had shut us out of the consciousness."

"I'm not going to ask Chaos a damn thing," I told him before I could stop myself. Hatred burned inside of me and I had to push it down once more. There was nothing I could do about Chaos without killing the entire Trimuritive, and I wasn't quite willing to do that, not yet anyway.

Malcolm looked a little better now, but not much. I decided to leave him to his rest and climbed into the front seat beside Petor, pulling my ritual bag onto my lap.

"Can you read English?" I asked him softly. I had something to tell him that I didn't want Malcolm to overhear, and my Russian writing skills were still a bit rusty.

He looked at me in surprise. "Yes."

"How are you doing?" I asked him as I took paper and a pencil from the bag I held.

He shot me an amused look. "It's been an interesting day."

"Night," I corrected automatically. I paused for a moment to search for Petor's aura, and sure enough the sparkles were still there. They were focused almost exclusively on his hands and feet, and I assumed he was using magic to help the car along without even realizing it.

I glanced back at Malcolm to make sure that he wasn't the source of the magic, but the sparkles surrounding him were very different from those around Petor. Malcolm's aura was a bit pale too, not as pale as Petor's but I knew that sometime in the past he had gotten a hold of Kindred blood as the Crone had once told me in Austria.

"Are you feeling okay?" I asked Petor.

"Yeah," he said slowly, turning to look at me.

It was no use wishing I had the memories to know how to test Petor's magical ability. When we got back to Salem I would talk to Cormac about finding someone who could help us figure out what had happened to Petor. Right now I had to concentrate on getting us home.

I looked down to write a quick note to warn him that we still needed to be very careful about Chaos coming to the fore. I didn't want either of us to be surprised if the evil portion of the Trimuritive came forth. Petor read the note, then glanced in the rear view mirror at our passenger and nodded.

We stopped for a little while in Pechora so everyone could get something to eat, including me. I took over driving while Petor slept, hoping the rest would be enough for him to be able to drive through the next day. We headed for Ukhta, and I drove until just before dawn when I pulled over and woke Petor up. He walked to the back of the car with me, and I was glad to have a moment alone with him.

"Don't trust him," I said firmly.

"You're gonna leave me alone with him?" he asked.

"You wanna climb in the trunk with me?"

He smiled. "I thought I was just here for business."

I shook my head and smiled back.

"I'll be fine," he assured me.

"I don't really have any other choice," I told him apologetically. "I don't like it any more than you do."

"You can lock him in the trunk with you," he suggested. When I glanced toward the car without replying, he added, "It was a joke. I'll be fine, get in the trunk."

I nodded and got into the trunk. Petor laid a blanket over me and closed the hood, leaving me once more in darkness.

By feel alone I took out my cell phone and tried once more to get a hold of someone, anyone in Salem. I would have welcomed help from Jason and O'Connell now that I'd gotten Malcolm out, but I couldn't get through to anyone. Then the sun came up and I was gone.

FLIGHT TO KIROV

You need a little fuck
But you know you won't get any
Its Only Money - Concrete Blonde

When I woke up the next night, the car was still moving. In fact, it seemed to be travelling at a dangerously high rate of speed. "Petor?" I yelled through the seat.

"We're being chased," came the reply.

A second later an arrow pierced the trunk near my face. I broke it off and looked out the hole it had made to see a horseman following with a bow and arrow. It was the archer from the horse show at the big top, and from what little I could see through the hole he wasn't alone.

I fired one shot with the Desert Eagle through the arrow hole to make it bigger, then pulled my Glock 22 and fired through the opening toward the horsemen. I was hoping the phosphorous would deter them from following, but my first shot missed.

Another look out the hole convinced me that the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse were following us. There was one riding a pale horse and holding a scythe that I took to be Death. Another, Famine, was on a sickly gray horse and held a spear. A third that I thought must be War was wearing armor, carrying a large sword, and riding a black horse. The last was the one I'd fired at, riding a brown horse and firing arrows from his bow. For the life of me I couldn't remember what he represented.

When I missed again after firing through the hole, I knew I had to try something different. I turned myself around in the trunk until I could kick against the back seat, and it only took a minute to get it out of my way. I climbed through into the back of the passenger compartment and laid the seat back in place.

"How long have they been following us?" I demanded of Petor, who was driving.

"About an hour," he replied tersely.

"How long have they been firing arrows?" I turned to see that there were arrows lying on and stuck into various parts of the car.

"Quite a while," he murmured, concentrating on driving.

I looked at Malcolm. "No ideas this time?"

"No," he admitted, glancing up at the large dents in the roof. "I don't know how much more the car can take of my summonings."

"Well if they catch up to us it will be a moot point, won't it?" I barked.

"Yes," he agreed calmly.

I checked the clip in my Glock 22 to see how many rounds I had left. "How far are we from Ukhta?" I asked Petor.

"About a half hour," he gritted out. The road was far from smooth, and I didn't know how he was keeping the car on it, unless he was using magic again.

"We need to lose them before then or they'll get us on the way to the plane," I told them. I turned to look out the back window and murmured to myself, "I'm out of grenades. It would be nice if I knew that handy dandy fire path, but that's not an issue here."

Just watching them follow us wasn't helping, I had to do something. I opened the window closest to me and fired again toward the archer. My shot hit the horse, and it burst into flame. Incredibly, while it dropped back a good ways, it still kept coming.

"Okay, what the hell are these things?" I muttered as I aimed for the next horse.

"They are the Horsemen of the Apocalypse," Malcolm told me.

I ignored him and shot at the white horse that Death was riding on. It went down, and I didn't see it get back up. The other two riders spurred their horses on, and they quickly caught up with the car. I shot at the gray horse, but while I did see blood and gore splash out from the other side of him, the phosphorous didn't ignite. It kept coming, but dropped back a little.

Quickly I went to the other side of the car, but before I could get the window down, the long sword of War pierced the roof, and the tip embedded in the seat. Reaching down I grabbed the AK-74 that was lying on top of an open bag on the floor and switched it to full auto. Shots echoed through the car as I emptied the clip into the roof.

From the sounds above me, I'd hit the guy, but apparently not badly enough to get him off the roof. I kicked at the sword trying to throw him off balance, but the only thing I did was hurt myself. Touching the sword sent a shock of pain up my leg that I knew would take a long damn time to heal, even for me.

While I reloaded the AK-74, War managed to get his hand on the side of the car above the side window. I kicked the glass away and climbed out, carefully wedging my feet between the seats and the side of the car so I wouldn't fall out.

Once I was sitting on the window frame, War swung at me with his fist but missed. I unloaded the AK-74 on him, and he finally let go of the sword. He rolled off the car and into the road behind us as I climbed back into the back seat.

It was surprisingly easy for me to avoid the sword that was still hanging from the ceiling as I moved to the other side of the car. I didn't want to touch it again; I couldn't afford to be hurt any more than I already was.

"You know, help would be appreciated," I bit out as I took out the smaller Glock under my left arm.

Petor sputtered that he was driving, but I hadn't been talking to him. I handed the gun over the seat to Malcolm, who turned and looked at me disdainfully.

I met his gaze unwaveringly. "Okay, does this mean you want to go back to the circus?" I demanded harshly.

"You're doing quite well," he replied calmly.

"Oh, yeah," I drawled. "Uh-huh. That's why my foot hurts."

He looked down at the gun in confusion, but I had no sympathy for him. My brother Cormac had told me more than once that one can never depend completely on magic, and I knew from experience that he was right. Malcolm had to get with the program or go back to his prison.

"Point at the bad guy and pull the trigger. Roll the window down first," I suggested dryly. "And squeeze the trigger, don't just yank on it."

He rolled the window down and fired at the horse, but missed. I fired myself and hit it, fire exploding close enough to the car that I had to turn my face away from the heat. The horse fell back, and soon we were alone on the road once more.

I sighed and lay back against the door, relief flooding through me. If we could just get to the plane, there was a good chance we would be able to get away. I took the time to reload the pistol in my hand before replacing it at my back. I reloaded the gun I'd given Malcolm too before putting it away. It took a few minutes to find another clip for the AK-74, but soon it was loaded and ready to go.

We found the plane right where we'd left it, and Petor got it into the air with no problems. I'd admired his skill with planes before, but now it was even more remarkable. I told myself that as soon as we returned to Salem I'd find someone to show him how to hone his magical skills.

It took us half the night to fly to the next town, and Petor and I both knew we wouldn't make it to the next stop before sunrise. Staying there was a risk, one we had no choice but to take. We found a boarding house with enough rooms for all of us. Once Malcolm was settled in, I left Petor with him and went out to hunt.

I'd found an easy enough target and took two units of blood from him, but to my surprise it didn't fill me up. I'd forgotten that when I'd lowered my generation I'd increased the amount of blood my body would hold. I spent a little time looking for someone else to feed from, but there weren't any good opportunities without risking exposure.

I went back to the hotel and stood in the doorway of Malcolm's room watching him sleep. In rest he looked so young, so much like I remembered from Helena. I remembered how much in love he and Lizzy had been, how happy. I hated that my father had caused her death, but I couldn't bring myself to feel guilt over it. No matter what Chaos had said, I hadn't killed Lizzy, or her child.

Thinking about that time in my life naturally led to thoughts about Marcus. I couldn't help but wonder what would have happened if Chaos hadn't killed him. Would I have gone off to college after all or would I have stayed in Helena with my lover? Would we have gotten married, maybe had children together? Or would I have gone to college like Papa wanted me to and lost touch with my first love? If Marcus had lived would I have accepted the dark gift from Dougal?

Malcolm stirred a little and I walked over to sit on the edge of the bed. He opened his eyes and smiled sleepily.

"How do you feel?" I whispered.

"A little better," he replied softly.

I didn't want to push him, but maybe I could protect him better if I had more information.

"Malcolm, do you have any idea why they want you back so badly?" I asked gently.

"Power," he murmured.

"What were they using it for?"

"Who knows," he told me, closing his eyes. "Evil." His breathing soon told me he was sleeping once more.

I looked sadly down at the face of the man who at one time had been my closest friend, and at another my greatest enemy. He had taught me so much about magic and friendship, pain and hate. Without him I might never have known the potential my Awakening had given me, or thrown it away to become Kindred. Without him Marcus would still be alive, and Jason would still be human.

"Evil is relative," I whispered into the silent room.

THE CASTLE

I'm haunted by the promises I've made
And others I have broken
Haunted - Poe

The next night in the early morning hours, we found ourselves flying over Kirov. Vladimir had been right, his haven was very obvious. We didn't have to ask to know that the castle on a tall hill overlooking the town was his home. Petor landed as close as he could, and once we had gathered our belongings from the plane we trekked up the hill to the castle gates where the Gangrel was waiting for us.

He led us into the great hall where Vladimir stood by the fireplace. The older man came over and greeted us, shaking Malcolm's hand when I introduced them before turning back to me.

"My people tell me you are being followed," he said gravely.

"We ran into some problems when we picked up Malcolm," I explained.

"Things did not go smoothly?"

"Not hardly." At least we'd gotten out of the circus, but now I had to make sure that we got away from them entirely. "Any idea what it is that is following us?"

"Not exactly," he told me, sounding a bit worried. "My people have reported a few different things."

"Such as?"

"There are horsemen," he began.

"I thought we took care of them," I muttered.

"And several wolves."

Those would be the huge wolves we'd seen at the Big Top. I wasn't looking forward to dealing with them or anything else that Vladimir described.

Most of the other Kindred I'd seen in Moscow were in the hall too, along with many of their ghouls. One of them brought in food for Malcolm and Petor, and we talked for a while about what had happened at the carnival and the pursuers we had encountered on the way to Kirov.

"Have you thought more about the matter we discussed?" Vladimir asked when the conversation had turned to other subjects.

"Yes, I did think about it," I replied, looking at Malcolm.

I'd already made the choice to agree, but I had to be sure I could deal with the consequences for the rest of my existence. I would never be able to claim the childe as my own and if the clan ever found out about him we would both be destroyed. Yet if I refused I wasn't sure that Vladimir would help us hold off our pursuers.

Malcolm met my eyes as if he knew what I was thinking. He didn't seem concerned though, he looked as if he knew I'd choose to protect him. He was right, of course. I hadn't come this far to save the Verbena magic only to hesitate now.

"And?" Vladimir prompted.

"It's not too much to ask," I said softly, looking back at my host. "Perhaps we should take care of that before our pursuers catch up."

He smiled and stood, gesturing for me to precede him out of the room.

I turned to my friends. "If you will excuse me gentlemen, I have a task to perform."

Petor seemed a little intrigued but Malcolm just smiled knowingly. I turned away and walked out of the room away from the satisfaction in his eyes. The woman, the Nosferatu and the Gangrel followed us into the hall.

Vladimir led us down several stairways into a dungeon that had been modernized. Electric lights shown on stainless steel doors that lined the hallway we went down, and we stopped before one of them. A window in the door showed a human inside. He saw us through the glass and seemed a bit apprehensive to find us looking in at him.

"Does he know what is to become of him?" I asked softly.

"No," Vladimir replied.

I wondered if the man would put up a fight. "Do you anticipate problems?"

"We have had him captive for quite some time," my host reminded me. "What little strength he has left has gone into keeping his secrets. He should not be that much of a problem."

It wasn't that I didn't think I could overcome my soon-to-be-child, I just didn't want to have to. "What have you tried by way of getting the secrets out of him?"

"Physical torture, obviously," he told me. Even from here I could see bruises on the man's face. "Dominate, coercion, threats."

I glanced at Vladimir in surprise. "Dominate hasn't worked?"

"No."

Since I'd hoped to use Dominate to get the man to relax, I was more than a little disappointed. Still, there was no sense in delaying things. "I've never done this before," I admitted softly, "but I know the basic idea. If you'll let me in I'll take care of it."

The Gangrel opened the door for me and once I went through it he locked me inside. The sound of the door closing echoed through the room.

The man stood, trying his best to look aggressive even though he must have been aching from his last beating. I searched for his aura, but it didn't tell me anything I hadn't already guessed. He moved until his back was against the wall, and I knew in that moment he would fight me. Slowly I walked a little closer, using blood to make myself stronger and faster in preparation for our battle.

"There's no reason to be afraid," I said softly in Russian, hoping to calm him down.

He glared at me. "Bullshit."

"You don't really have a choice here," I reminded him sadly. I hated knowing that he didn't, that I would embrace him without asking what he wanted, but I told myself not to be stupid. This man's life was a small price to pay to have Vladimir and his friends keep our pursuers at bay until we could escape. The Trimuritive was far more important than a forced embrace this man would never remember anyway. "Do you know what we are?"

"Scum," he spit out.

"More specifically," I drawled.

"Fucking scum?"

I didn't have the patience to play games with him. I let my fangs drop and gave him a cold smile. He was shocked, of course, and he gasped. Before he could react any further, I moved in quite literally for the kill.

He struggled, as I'd known he would. It took me a moment to get a good enough hold on him to bite into his neck, but inevitably my fangs sank into his flesh. His blood was warm, but bitter with the taste of his fear. To my surprise, he continued to fight me, but there was no hope for him, or me.

When his struggles became weak and I felt his heartbeat slow, I lowered him to the ground, still drinking from his neck. I drank until his heart stopped beating before I licked the wound closed and bit open a vein in my wrist. I let the blood drip into his mouth, and after a moment I felt his lips

clamp on my skin like a leech. He drank until I finally pulled away from him and he fell back onto the floor, shaking.

With tears in my eyes I watched as his body completed the transition to death. He would never remember that I'd forced him, never remember his childhood, his family, his loyalties, or his friends. How could I leave him among Kindred who would never understand what that was like?

My childe sat up with a gasp just as the door opened behind me.

"Are you all right?" I asked gently.

He looked up at me, then at the others who had come into the room. It was obvious that he had no idea what was going on, confusion was written across his face and burned from his eyes.

I glanced back at the others. "I'm sure he's hungry."

The Kindred I'd thought was Gangrel came over with several blood bags. He gave two of them to me, then handed the rest to my childe. When the woman would have told him how to feed, I waved her away and showed him myself.

With all my heart I wanted to take him back to Salem with me, to show him the benefits of life as a Kindred of the House and Clan Tremere. I wanted to take him before Elvira and see that he partook from the blood of the Council of Seven, but I knew that if I did bring my childe to Salem we would both be killed without hesitation or remorse.

I spoke with the new Kindred for several minutes, answering his questions and making sure he was okay. Eventually I realized that if I didn't leave him now, I would never be able to leave him. When I stood and stepped back, the woman took over. With a heavy heart I watched as she led him away. I felt as if a part of my soul went with my childe whose name I didn't even know.

"Thank you," Vladimir said softly.

I had to force myself to turn and face my host. "It was the least I could do."

He nodded. "Your friend seems rather... unwell."

"He is a mage and has been put through some rather extreme things," I explained, glad to turn my mind to other things. I had to concentrate on the important things now, protecting Malcolm and returning to my family. "He tells me he needs quintessence and I have no idea how to find it."

"I don't believe I can provide that," he said thoughtfully, "but I may be able to help if he is willing."

"You would have to ask him." I could see no reason for him to refuse, but Malcolm had done many things over the past few years that I couldn't even pretend to understand.

Vladimir gestured toward the stairs and we walked upward side by side.

"You'll take care of the childe and make sure he's okay?" I asked as we climbed.

"Yes."

"If there are any problems, please be sure to call me." I knew I was sounding like a mother hen, but I couldn't stop myself.

"What powers are natural to your line?" my host asked. "I'd like to know what to look for."

"Auspex, Dominate, Thaumaturgy," I replied.

He looked a little confused. "Thaumaturgy?"

"Blood Magic." I couldn't believe he'd never heard of it.

"I don't believe we have anyone that knows that," he said softly. "The others are widely known."

I offered to leave what reference material I had with me for my childe, and Vladimir agreed. I knew that the clan would never approve, but then again they would never approve of his embrace. Either action would lead me to final death so I felt I was risking nothing.

A few moments later we rejoined the others in the hall. Vladimir approached Malcolm and offered to try his healing skills, which the mage accepted. I followed the two of them into a smaller sitting room, and stood near the door. I didn't want to intrude, but then again I didn't know how far I could trust Malcolm, or our host.

My mentor sat in a chair, and Vladimir moved to stand before him. As I watched, a third eye opened on the Kindred's forehead and I had to turn away to hide my revulsion and control the fury that rose within me.

Vladimir was Salubri! It took all I had to stand still and not tear him apart with my bare hands. Members of the Tremere and Salubri clans have always warred with one another. Standing orders from the Council of Seven are to kill any Salubri on sight, but I'd broken so many of my clan's laws already, what was one more?

My host had helped me more than once, and I'd already turned the care of my childe over to him. Now I had to depend on him for shelter against the creatures the circus had sent after us. Killing him would serve no purpose, and it would only hinder our escape from Russia.

Of course, I could always report his location to the Council once I returned home, but that probably wasn't a good idea. They would certainly find out that I'd sired a childe here, and I would die for it. I could not reveal the secret of the Salubri's location to my clan nor could I harm him and hope to get Malcolm out of Russia.

When I turned back to face them, Malcolm looked much better. He had more color in his face, and he seemed to have more energy. Thankfully, Vladimir's third eye was closed.

LOSING EVERYTHING

Shine on friend, goodnight

Why then the darkening of the fight?

Darkening of the Light - Concrete Blonde

We spent most of the rest of the night talking with the Kindred and their ghouls. It would have been pleasant if I hadn't been worried about our pursuers finding us, or Chaos coming to the fore. I still wasn't clear on what triggered the change of personalities in Malcolm, but I couldn't guarantee what I would do if I saw Chaos again.

I retired to my room about an hour before dawn for a little privacy. I'd been cleaning my guns and had them laid out on the bed when Malcolm knocked on the door. When I let him in, he glanced at my weapons but didn't mention them. Instead, he walked toward the window and looked out at the moonlit countryside. I walked toward him but stopped when I saw the grave look on his face. I waited silently and after a few minutes he turned back to me.

"I know you may not agree with what I have done," he began softly, "but it is what we need to do to continue our magic. But the Crone did not tell you the whole story, Tina."

That didn't surprise me. I bit back the sarcastic comment on the tip of my tongue and waited for him to continue. He did so hesitantly, as if he knew he had something to tell me but didn't want to, or didn't know how say it.

"We did the seeking and have found a suitable child," he admitted at last, "one that has already been born and has had the ritual performed."

I hoped they would be able to obtain the child without kidnapping anyone. Malcolm had said that they needed a child for the Trimuritive and the Verbena magic to continue, but I wasn't about to let them run around abducting people. "And that would be?"

His eyes met mine for the first time. "Yours."

"Okay, I have amnesia," I said harshly, not wanting to believe him for a moment. Chaos had taken every opportunity to hurt me since Lizzy had died, but I didn't understand why Malcolm would say something that he knew would hurt me after all I had done to save him. "I don't remember having a child."

"Before your embrace," he told me, his voice deadly serious. "You had a child and gave it up."

A child, my child. *The one you gave away*, Dougal's voice echoed through my mind. My legs slowly lost all feeling and I sank to the floor. I knew in that instant that he was telling the truth, even if I couldn't remember the child. I felt the cold tracks of tears falling on my cheeks.

For a brief instant I wondered who the father had been, if it had been Marcus' child I'd given up. I wanted to ask Malcolm if he knew, but I let the question die on my lips. I didn't really want to know. There had been a reason I'd agreed to Dougal's dark gift, a reason I hadn't wanted to remember the child.

Malcolm crouched beside me, sadness in every line of his face, every movement he made. "I'm sorry, I knew the truth would hurt you, but...."

I wiped the blood tears from my face. "Where is it?"

"I don't know," he replied. "I only know what I've been able to gather from your memories."

"I don't have any," I growled. I wasn't surprised to realize that I no longer wanted to regain the memories of my mortal life. For the first time I understood why I had agreed to forget everything and embrace the darkness Dougal had offered me.

"Yes, you do," he insisted. "They're just buried. You gave him up for adoption and that was the last you knew of him."

Him. My child was a boy, living somewhere in the light of the world, and I prayed that he was happy and healthy. "You want my child to deal with that... thing?" I demanded.

"It would be your child that would raise him," my mentor admitted.

"There are no other options?" There had to be something else they could do to revive their magic and that of the Verbena.

"The fates are fickle, Tina," he reminded me. "You've been present in the foiling of both of the other attempts. They've somehow decided that your child is the only one that can save us."

I couldn't believe he was trying to blame this on me. There was no way I would take that burden, no way in hell. I hadn't killed Lizzy, and God knew I would have stopped it if I could have. Hell, I'd have given my life for hers if that would have brought my friend back. And I couldn't have let Chaos take Christopher either, Lena wouldn't have survived without her son.

"And what happens if it doesn't?" I asked softly.

"We die," he said simply.

"And with you the Verbena magic?"

"Yes."

There was no way I could let Chaos destroy my son's life the way he had destroyed the lives of so many others I had cared about. I'd stopped him before, and in that moment I vowed before God to stop him again. I refused to condemn my son to a lifetime with the evil that was Chaos without doing my best to prevent it, even if it cost the Verbena their magic and led me to final death. I refused to stand by while he destroyed yet another person that I was responsible for.

I looked to where my weapons were laid out on bed. If my legs could have supported me, I would have walked to the bed, picked one of them up and done my best to kill Malcolm, my mentor, my friend. I knew I would do anything to protect my child, no matter what the cost to myself or the Verbena.

I knew their magic depended on the power of the Trimuritive, but I had walked away from my old Tradition before. Respect for their magic had played a large part in bringing me to Russia, but it was nothing compared to the safety of my son. I had to stop him, there was no other alternative in my mind.

Eventually Malcolm stood and left me to my turbulent thoughts. I tried to think of a way to find the boy before the Trimurative could. Jason would know a way, or perhaps Robert might have some ideas. There had to be a way to find my son before Malcolm did, there simply had to be.

Once I'd recovered enough to stand, I found my phone and tried again to reach Salem, but it was no use. Slowly I finished cleaning my guns and sat on the edge of the bed, searching my mind for a way to bar Malcolm from getting to my child.

Later I went to find Petor and spent several minutes filling him in on what Malcolm had told me. He seemed a little hesitant about going up against the Trimuritive, but he agreed to help me. I also told him about the childe that I'd sired in the dungeons, although I knew that he already had an idea of what I'd done.

As we talked I silently wondered what kind of a price Petor would have to pay for helping me. Would Chaos try and kill him too, as he'd tried to kill everyone else I cared for? Belatedly I remembered the sparkles I'd seen in Petor's aura.

"How do you feel?" I asked him.

He sighed impatiently. I'd asked him that more than once on our journey to Kirov, and I knew that I had to tell him what I thought was going on. Knowledge was power and I had no right to keep his Awakening from him.

"I believe that something happened to you when we went inside the Mirror Palace," I admitted.

"Like?"

"Well, it's a type of awakening," I said hesitantly.

"A type of awakening?" he repeated.

"It's basically an Awakening, okay?" I ran a hand through my hair and looked away. "God, I don't know how to explain this."

"Explain this?" he asked, looking very confused.

"Well you know that Malcolm is a mage," I began.

"So you've said."

"Yes, well, I believe that you are also," I admitted.

"Really?" From the tone of his voice I couldn't tell if he was excited or confused. "I thought I was a ghoul."

"Apparently you can be both," I said with a smile. "I'm not really sure, I don't remember what's involved, but when we get back to Salem we'll find someone who can teach you."

He smiled trustingly. "Okay."

Looking back on it I wish he hadn't trusted me so blindly. That last night in Russia I'd wanted so badly to believe that I could handle getting Malcolm out of Russia and find my son before the Trimuritive could get their hands on him. I thought that I could find some way for us to evade our pursuers and get us back to Salem where I belonged. I wanted to believe it so much that Petor actually believed I could do it.

Turns out we were both wrong, dead wrong.

Dougal Galloway opened the door and motioned for me to enter first. It was a charming motel room, really lovely. The canopied four-poster bed that sat against the far wall was covered with a beautiful lace coverlet. Candles were burning on the fireplace mantle and on a table to my left. The windows were open letting the warm night air drift gently into the room.

A thin willowy man stood near the fireplace waiting impatiently for us. Something about his eyes told me I shouldn't trust him even though I knew that Dougal did. I hadn't liked the idea that Piston would be here tonight, but at least I'd known about his presence before we arrived.

"Come, child," the vampire who would soon take my life said softly. His face was kind, and he reminded me quite a bit of my mother's younger brother, Joshua. "Sit down."

I sat on the edge of the bed, wondering for the first time if I was doing the right thing. Becoming a vampire meant giving up so many things, the least of which were sunlight and the love of my father. Then I remembered all that I had already lost, everything that I had given away, and resolution burned strong in my mind. I wanted nothing more than to forget my past.

Dougal sat beside me and took my hand. "I know you're nervous," he said gently, his voice easing my apprehension. "You have no reason to be. Once this is done you will have no memory of what has happened here tonight."

"I know," I replied, my voice hardly above a whisper.

I looked down at the bracelets on my wrist that my brother had given to me so long ago. One was an ID bracelet that had my name etched beautifully into its surface. The other was a charm bracelet that had once belonged to my mother. The bracelets were the only reminders I had left of the brother I had missed every minute of every day since his death at our father's hands.

"You are sure you want to do this?" He asked not unkindly. "Your past will die here in this room and you will never regain your memories."

I was grateful that he was giving me the opportunity to back out, but I knew that wasn't what I wanted. I met his questioning gaze with no reservations in my mind. "I am sure, Dougal. I have so many things I want to forget."

"Then let us begin," he said with a gentle smile.

He put his hands on my shoulders and slowly laid me back on the bed. I closed my eyes and focused one last time on the power Malcolm had once taught me to draw upon, savoring its feel within me. I released it as Dougal leaned closer and sank his teeth into my throat.

I'd expected pain, but I was surprised by the serenity that swept through me. It had been a long time since I'd felt any kind of peace, a long time since I'd felt safe in the arms of a man. Marcus had once made me feel that way, but no one else ever had.

Ruthlessly I closed the memory of my first lover out of my mind. Marcus was dead, Malcolm had killed him in revenge for his own lover's death. Marcus, Malcolm and Lizzy were only a few of the things I never wanted to think about again.

Dougal drained the blood from my body and my heart began to slow its pace. He'd explained what this would be like, but actually feeling myself die was much different than hearing how it would happen. I found it difficult to breathe but refused to fight for breath. I clenched my fists on the lace coverlet so that I couldn't try and push my murderer away, reminding myself that I had asked for this. It was far too late to turn back now.

As the last breath left my body, I said goodbye to the light and welcomed the darkness that closed in on me.

That night, the last I would have as Christina Kline, I woke to a pounding on the door. I reached for the gun beneath my pillow even as I heard Petor's voice.

"Christina, are you awake yet?" he demanded through the door.

"Yeah, what's going on?" Before I could throw back the sheets and sit up, he was in the room.

That night he was wearing black pants and a dark sweatshirt. The figure eight he'd been wearing was strapped on, and in the holster under his left arm was the hand cannon he'd been carrying.

"They're here," he stated without preamble.

I didn't have to ask whom he was talking about. "All of them?"

"A shit load of them." He glanced over his shoulder toward the hall. "Malcolm says get ready for a fight."

"I'll be right there," I assured him as he left the room.

It took only a few moments to put on dark clothing and arm myself for the coming battle. A shoulder strap held one of my Glocks beneath my left arm, while the other went in a sheath in the small of my back. The smaller H&K and its holster buckled easily on my right ankle. I shoved the Desert Eagle I'd picked up in Moscow down the front of my pants. The knife sheath and blade that I'd had custom made strapped onto my right forearm.

I was filling my pockets with spare clips for my guns when Malcolm tapped on the door. He entered with a look on his face that told me he didn't believe we were going to win this one. I prayed he was wrong.

Death or being imprisoned in the carnival were the only things I feared that night. It never occurred to me that anything worse could happen, but perhaps it should have. Maybe if it had I would have been prepared for what happened, but I'll never know for certain.

"Can you get us out of here?" I asked him tensely.

"I don't know." He glanced toward the window, then turned to look at me. "Do you want to resign your comrades to facing them without us?"

I didn't like the idea, especially since my childe was still somewhere in the castle, but if I had to I would. Returning to Jason and saving my son from Chaos had to take precedence over the people who had helped me, even over my own childe. "If we're not here, why would they continue to attack?"

"Until they find out if we're here or not," he conceded.

I had a feeling the creatures wouldn't need to see us leave in order to know that we were gone. They'd found some means to track us from Ukhta, probably something magical, but then again I could have been wrong. God knows I've been wrong about so many things, why not that one too? "Maybe if they see us go?"

"I don't know," he repeated.

He sighed deeply and looked broodingly down at the floor for a long moment. Just as I was about to ask him what was wrong, he met my eye once more.

"Thank you for coming and getting me." His voice was low and heavy with both gratitude and regret. "I didn't fully expect you to do it after... everything. Thank you."

I smiled sadly, knowing that I hadn't been too sure of it myself, but this Malcolm, this kind and gentle Malcolm I remembered from my youth, had earned my respect and trust a long time ago. As much as I intended to stop him from hurting my child, I vowed I wouldn't let the creatures outside of the castle take him back to the circus without killing me first.

When Malcolm laid his hands on my shoulders and looked down at me it didn't occur to me that I should be afraid. Hell, I thought he still needed me to get him out of Russia. I couldn't have been more wrong; the reality was that I should have been terrified, not of the creatures that waited outside, but of Malcolm, my mentor, my friend.

A movement behind him caught my attention and I glanced over his shoulder. Petor, my faithful servant, walked through the doorway looking ready for battle. I was sorry to have brought him here and put him in so much danger, and I knew that I would do my best to protect him with my life.

Another man came into the room and I gasped when I saw his face. Incredibly it was Marcus Thorpe, somehow alive and here in Kirov with us. I didn't understand, Chaos had told me he'd killed Marcus years ago. How could he be here now? Was this some sort of trick?

I was turning back to Malcolm to demand an explanation when I felt the magic build and saw his face transform into the terrible visage of Chaos. He leaned forward and I had barely managed to extend claws on my left hand when he kissed my forehead and pain swept through my body. A blinding white light filled my world and the last thought that ran through my conscious mind was, *Jason, I'm sorry.*