



The Price to Pay

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Ultimatums

NOBODY SAID IT WAS EASY

NO ONE EVER SAID IT WOULD BE THIS HARD

COLDPLAY - THE SCIENTIST

"Have you made the decision not to return to the clan?" Antonio Moreno asked softly. "I do not mean to push, but these are questions I must ask since I am still responsible for you."

I had called him because I'd heard that Brenda Thompson-Brown's father had died, and I wanted to offer my condolences. After he assured me that she was as well as could be expected, I'd broken the news that I had no intention of trying to regain the memories I had lost, memories of my life before I'd come to Detroit. While I had assured him that I still had every intention of trying to rebuild the relationships I'd had before I lost my memory in Russia, or at least most of them, Antonio was not happy with my choice.

"I don't know," I reluctantly admitted. "I called Señor dela Rocha once hoping that he'd show me how to do something, but he said I'd have to move to the chantry before he would. I don't want to live in the chantry, Antonio." I wanted to stay with the Gangrel pack who had found me, taken me in, made me part of their family. "If that's what I have to do to remain Tremere, then I guess my answer is no, I'm not going back. If we can work something different out, then fine."

"Zach is right." His voice sounded sad and tired, almost as if I'd disappointed him by rejecting the Tremere. "You would be considered a neonate again if you were to return and would not be taught anything you cannot remember without making a formal pledge once again to the clan. You cannot fault him for upholding tradition and the secrets of the arts. If it were up to me I would say that it did not matter, but the Tremere Clan does not work like the Gangrel and that is something that you will have to remember." He hesitated a moment, then asked, "If it is your decision to not return then I am obligated to make them aware of your choice, unless this is something that you have already done?"

"No, I haven't talked to any Tremere, although I know they've been watching me." Every time I went out to a bar or club, even restaurants with my boys, they were there, watching me. "Are they—are they going to make me come back?"

"I do not know. Now that you have made a decision I will have to contact them and let the elders decide," he told me. "I have never known of a situation like this one so I do not know what to expect."

"I suppose I'll have to burn that bridge when I get there, won't I?" I asked dryly. I'd been burning a lot of bridges lately, trying to erase the remnants of Christina Kline that remained buried in the dark recesses of my mind. "I hope they won't hold you responsible for me not wanting to come back."

"The leaders of the clan are fickle at times but they have everyone's best interest at heart," he said carefully. "I cannot begin to guess what might befall me, but that is my cross to bear."

"I understand." I understood more than what he was saying. Kindred were responsible for the children they created, even the ones they simply adopted when no one else wanted them. Antonio had adopted Christina years ago, and just because I couldn't remember most of her life didn't make him any less responsible for me, at least in the Tremere Clan's eyes. "I'd like to thank you, Antonio, for everything you've done for me, especially before. I'm sorry for your sake that I can't be what I was."

"You can only be what you are, daughter." Again his voice sounded tired, even weary. "While I long for the days of the past, I look forward to those of the future. Be careful."

When the call was over I sat in the office for a long time, looking through the window into the shop area of the building and watching my friends working on a SUV, trying not to think about Antonio's warning.

Frasier O'Connell had been Christina's ghoul for a year before I'd woken on the streets of Detroit. The adjustment to living with the pack had been hard at first, but I hoped he was working through the issues he had with it. At first he'd made every effort to become my lover, but when I'd turned to Scott, Frasier had reluctantly backed off. Now he was dating a Toreador, and seemed happy enough, for the most part.

When I'd found myself in Detroit with no memories, I hadn't been alone. Petor Andrews had been with me from the beginning of my life here, loyal to me without question. Christina had ghouled him during her trip to Russia, though neither of us remembered the week she'd spent there. He had thrown himself into the security agency I'd started, and done his best to modify a fleet of vehicles for our use.

Strong Security Agency was finally taking off. We'd had several successful jobs, the money from which had gone into tools and supplies for Petor to work on our small fleet of vehicles. All three vehicles now had Kevlar under fames and reinforced tires, bullet proof glass, revved up engines and their own weapons caches. We even had enough parts left over to do some modification to my Mustang and a few of the other pack cars.

Finally I let my eyes fall on Scott Murphy and I felt a smile touch my lips. Though he didn't belong to me as the other two men did, he was just as important. Scott had helped to ease the transition of my living here in Detroit. If it hadn't been for him, I was fairly certain that I wouldn't still be here.

We were lovers, but we were friends too. Scott had never been real talkative, but I didn't really need someone to talk my ear off. I needed someone to accept me for who I was and he did that. We shared the same views and opinions when it came to safety, and security, and protecting the rest of the pack. I was fairly certain that Scott loved me, but I wasn't real sure how I felt about him. I was certain that I needed him, and I liked him a great deal, but that didn't necessarily mean I loved him.

I wasn't even sure why I questioned my feelings for Scott, except that a part of me still thought about Christina's husband from time to time. I knew that Jason Kline and I could never be together, that he would never accept me as I was, without Christina's memories, but in a very real way I missed him. Jason was one of the reasons I'd decided not to pursue regaining my memory. I didn't want to remember everything and hate myself because I'd pushed him away, chosen to stay with Scott rather than rebuild the marriage he'd shared with Christina.

Scott was the other reason I'd decided not to try and get my memory back, the main reason really. He'd asked me to forget about being Tremere, to just be happy being Gangrel, and I'd agreed. I knew he thought that if I remembered Christina's life and emotions, I'd go running back to Jason. As much as I wanted to believe I wouldn't do that, I honestly had no idea what would happen if I remembered her life. Rather than risk losing Scott, I'd turned my back on Christina's memories and never regretted my decision.

In my mind, Christina Kline had died somewhere in Russia saving her ex-mentor. He'd repaid her by wiping her mind to erase all the pain she'd experienced in her life, and sent her somewhere he thought she'd be safe. I knew now that he'd been right to leave me in Madelynn's path. I was happy with Scott, with the pack, and I wasn't about to look a gift horse in the mouth.

That wasn't to say I didn't want to know more about the magic I'd been told Christina had used with great skill. I had very little information on Thaumaturgy, but I did my best to practice what rituals I had been given, and what few skills I'd remembered. While it would be nice to have a

mentor, I could live without one. I'd figure out what I could for myself and let the Tremere go to hell for all I cared.

Antonio wasn't the only one who didn't understand my decision. Brenda was very upset, as I'd known she would be, and she made no pretense otherwise when I called her a few weeks later to see how she was doing.

"I just don't think I'd be happy if I got my memory back, not after everything that has happened," I tried to explain. "And I don't want to lose the relationships I have here in Detroit."

"But you're willing to give up what you had," she retorted. "That's obvious by the way you cast Jason aside."

"I made a choice, Brenda, one I know that I'll have to live with," I said calmly. "If I did get my memory back, don't you think I'd hate myself for breaking off with him?"

"You mean for kicking someone while they're down," she growled.

I shook my head though I knew she couldn't see me. I knew she was still hurting from her father's death, but that gave her no right to attack me. "I must have learned that from you."

"Then I guess I taught you well," she shot back. "He has no natural defenses to deal with what's going on between the two of you. You loved him. I don't care what you say now about Scott. You loved Jason. Down somewhere you still do."

I wasn't so sure about that, but there was no way to know now that it was over between us. "That may be but love doesn't always make it work."

"I know that better than anybody, but at least I let the sheets get cold before I brought in someone new."

Silence burned the line as I struggled to keep a hold on my temper. I hadn't told Brenda that I was sleeping with Scott, but I was betting that Jason had. They'd grown close since Christina's disappearance. "Not that I have to say this, but when I slept with Scott I didn't remember Jason," I told her, my voice as cold as ice. "Those sheets were brand fucking new. I'm not going to walk away from someone who doesn't care what my name is for someone who wants me to be someone I'm not."

"Jason was willing to try," she protested angrily. "We've all played by your rules and in the end we all lost anyhow. You've decided not to try."

"I would think that if I wasn't trying I wouldn't be on the phone with you right now," I pointed out, holding on to my calm by the skin of my teeth.

"When was the last time you talked on the phone to Jason?" she demanded. "I can deal with having you the way you are but I'm not your husband. I can build new memories with you but what about him?"

"Calling Jason would only hurt him," I told her honestly. "I think I've already hurt him enough. Look I didn't call to argue with you I just—I felt you deserved to know where I stand."

The conversation didn't last much longer. Like Antonio, she told me that the Tremere weren't going to let me just walk away from them, though she was a bit more straightforward in her warning. Unfortunately, there was nothing I could do but wait for them to make their move. It didn't take them long.

Early one evening in the middle of February I got a call from Madelynne. She told me that Zach had showed up at the bar with his Malkavian sidekick Archie and wanted to talk to me. She advised me against seeing him, but I was tired of seeing Tremere everywhere I turned.

Scott wouldn't let me go to the pub by myself and when we got there he sat down at the table with me across from Zach and his friend. I could see Madelynne not far away, close enough to overhear whatever we said.

After a few niceties, Zach got right to the point. "Are you ready to come back home or are you going to wait until we bring you back?"

By the tone of his voice, he must have believed that he was being reasonable, but I didn't see it that way. "I'm sorry, but I don't want to be a cookie cutter Tremere."

He continued to look at me levelly. "The countess and your sire have come to terms on your return to the clan."

I didn't like the sound of that, not at all. "What kind of terms?"

"You know I am the scourge of this city," he said, avoiding my question. "If you do not return of your own accord, it will be my job to bring you in. I'd much rather handle this peacefully, but you will come back, one way or the other."

I'd seen enough of Zach's power when we had fought the Sabbat together that I knew I didn't want it directed toward me, especially when I couldn't remember how to use the Thaumaturgy he'd wielded with such skill. I was fairly confident about my own fighting ability, and Scott's, but they wouldn't help much if Zach decided to pick us up using only the power of his magic. "What exactly would happen if I went back to the Tremere?" I asked carefully.

"You and your ghouls would return to the chantry," he replied evenly, "where you would be retrained on the art of being Tremere."

Retrained probably meant reprogrammed, and I didn't like the sounds of that either. "The chantry," I repeated. "Does that mean that we would live there, not here?"

"You would have no reason to live here."

"You want me to walk away from my friends, my life here," I said in a low voice. "I'm sorry, but I'm not going to do that."

"I'm sorry as well." He sounded as if he actually meant it. "Is that your final word on the subject?"

"It is," I replied firmly. "I'm not going back."

"I'll take my leave then." He stood, pausing only to look at me for a moment, his eyes and voice hard. "I'll be seeing you soon."

I watched them walk out the door and wondered how much time I had before he came back for me, and what exactly he'd do when he did.

"You're in trouble now," Madelynne said as she sat down with us in the chair that Zach had vacated.

"What was I supposed to do, go with them?" I asked, shaking my head. "I don't want to be another Brenda."

"But you'd get to wear nice clothes," Scott drawled.

Madelynne smiled. "Yeah, but could you be that much of a bitch?"

We talked for a little while about how to keep the Tremere from getting their hands on me, but we all knew there wasn't a lot I could do in the long run except leave town, and I didn't want to do that. Besides, short of going back to Salem I had no where to go.

Until we came up with something to get the Tremere off my ass, I planned on staying close to the pub. The boys would have to do the same, although I knew they wouldn't like it, especially Petor. He'd gotten used to spending a lot of time at the agency, but that would have to stop, for now. He did argue at first, but once it became clear that I wasn't just being paranoid, he agreed.

Looking for Solutions

I DIDN'T WANT THIS

CAN SOMEBODY HELP ME SEE?

NICKELBACK - BREATHE

Madelynne spent the next few weeks doing her best to find a solution to my problem. She believed that the only way she had a shot of protecting me was if she were to take over as Gangrel Primogen. Of course, that required getting Ralph out of the way, and finding support from what Gangrel she could, and from other clans in the city.

While she was friendly with several of her clan mates, all of them were loyal to the prince and not likely to take sides in her bid to become Primogen. They wouldn't help her outright, but they did agree to pass along any information that they came across. Logan even talked to Cassidy's ghouls in the hopes that they could keep Ralph and his people off our backs until this was settled.

The only other Gangrel in town that weren't solidly behind Ralph hung out with the Brujah Rabble. Michael led the group, even though he was Gangrel. Rumor had it he was a power player who looked and thought like a street hustler. Stretch was the only other Gangrel who ran with them, while Nova was highest ranking Brujah in the group.

Michael didn't turn Madelynne away, which was encouraging, but he said that he had to think about the situation before he made any decisions. He'd survived by staying off the big boys' radar, and backing Madelynne would put him square in their sights.

Madelynne also talked to her friend Jimi, a Brujah who owned a bar not too far away from Walker's Pub. While Jimi agreed to help where she could, she cautioned Madelynne that she would not put herself, or her ghouls, on the front lines of the war this would become.

Frasier had been dating a Toreador named Nancy, and one evening Madelynne asked him to bring her to the pub when he came in. They showed up a few hours after Frasier got out of work. My ghoul was freshly washed and shaven, and looked much more like a Tremere servant in the clothes Nancy had bought him than the Gangrel ghoul he usually resembled. I greeted her politely and suggested we take the conversation upstairs to the living area of the building.

Once we sat down, Madelynne began by telling Nancy about how the Tremere were insistent that I return to them. She explained that because Nancy was dating Frasier, my former clan might come to her and expect her to hand him over. I was more than relieved when she said that she would do no such thing. Nancy had actually heard that the Tremere wanted me back, although they hadn't stooped low enough to offer a price on my head just yet.

"If you hear that they are offering, would you let us know?" I asked.

"Certainly," she replied.

"I think we've taken up enough of your time," I said with a thankful smile. "Thank you for talking with us."

"I hope I've been helpful." She paused for a moment, as if choosing her words carefully. "When this crisis is over and your life is no longer in danger, I hope you will be more lenient with Frasier."

"I'm afraid Tina has a disability," Madelynne said softly.

"Thanks for sharing, Maddy," I murmured.

"I won't hurt him," Nancy told Madelynne. "And she can watch if she wants to."

It was perfectly clear that she wanted to feed from him. While I didn't like the idea, if she could help me stay out of the Tremere's clutches I would force myself to be flexible. "Perhaps something could be arranged."

She left soon after, taking Frasier with her and thanking Madelynnne for her warning of caution. Apparently Nancy had noticed the cars parked a few blocks down from the pub in either direction, watching every move I made.

"Is what we have going to be enough to fight them?" I asked Madelynnne once we were alone.

"I'd go to the Ventrue, but they'll ask for too much," she said grimly. "What we have is going to have to be enough."

From the look on her face, I could see that she didn't believe it would be. "And when it's not?"

"I'll get help elsewhere," she said after a moment, turning away. "Jac would get the job done, he doesn't like the Tremere, but he'd want too much from me."

"If you're sure." I wasn't, not really, but I didn't have much of anything to bargain with. Jac was the prince's childe, and he had more pull in the city than anyone we had talked to yet.

"You just like him because he doesn't like Brenda," she teased.

"He doesn't like the Tremere," I corrected her with a grin. "If I didn't have a boyfriend, I might think about going after him."

She laughed a little, but the laughter didn't last long. "I'll try Clarice," she said, referring to one of the two Brujah Primogen in the city. "She doesn't like the Tremere either, maybe she'll help." Unfortunately, Clarice didn't much care for any Gangrel, though in the end she did agree to send help, for a price.

Michael visited the pub a few nights later with the entirety of the Rabble in tow. It was clear that he would be interested in Madelynnne's proposal if she made it worth his while. When he learned of her intention to become Primogen, he offered to help us only if she made him her aide de camp should she gain the position.

Given that Michael and the rest of the Rabble could help us in a number of ways, everything from providing small arms to causing problems for both the Tremere and Ralph's people, Madelynnne agreed. While I would have thought she would want Logan to be her second in command, he didn't seem to want the job.

If Madelynnne didn't make Primogen, he wanted her protection from Ralph and whatever other enemies they made trying to help us. "You do realize that by siding with me, you've brought Ralph down as an enemy on you and yours," she pointed out.

He smiled grimly. "There's a reason we didn't stick with Ralph."

"Why did you leave," she asked, "if you don't mind my asking?"

"Of Holden's two childer, Ralph was the greater of the two evils," he replied, glancing at Logan. It was widely believed that Logan was the other childe. "When you seceded from the union with your pack, as it were, you left the way open for us to go too."

"Why didn't you come with us, just out of curiosity?"

"We weren't invited," he answered in a flat voice.

"There weren't invitations handed out," she said simply, "it's just the way it happened. There was no offense meant, it's an open door."

"There was no offense taken," he assured her. "I've done quite well for myself."

She nodded. "I need bodyguards for Tina. I'm not saying that she can't take care of herself, but I do believe that they'll try more than she'll be able to handle."

"I can take care of myself," I protested, speaking up for the first time.

"Not with the Tremere coming after you," she said sternly. "You can't counter what they could throw at you."

She did have a point, unfortunately. Though I could grow claws as well as any Gangrel, and move twice as fast as most Kindred I'd come into contact with, my clan disciplines were still a mess.

"You'll have bodyguards," Michael told her. "Clarice is sending her people." He did agree to cause what trouble he could for Ralph and the Tremere, and when he heard that one of my ghouls was dating Nancy, he suggested we talk to her for information on the Tremere.

"If you need something specialized for your vehicles," I offered, "let me know, Petor might be able to help you out."

"Honestly, we need a good mechanic," he replied.

I smiled. "He's that too." Petor was a wonder with anything mechanical. "I will let him know to expect you to come calling."

"Some of our boys will be bringing back a few presents for you," he said as he got to his feet. "To demonstrate how much of a nuisance they can be. I'll have them bring it to the back door."

Ten minutes later, a knock at the back door proved that Michael was as good as his word. I didn't open the door myself, but came when Madelynne called for me. Scott and I came downstairs to see her standing over two bloodied men lying on the ground.

As I got closer to her, I asked, "Is it my birthday?"

"The Rabble left a present for you," she said with a smile. "Here you go."

The men looked like they'd been beaten pretty badly, and only one of them was conscious. The Rabble had worked them over pretty well before leaving them for me, and I almost pitied them. The Tremere ghouls, not the Rabble.

"You know, I already have two ghouls," I murmured.

"But they're after you," she reminded me.

From the signs of their fading bruises, they'd be after me again very soon.

"I figured that since you are relearning your magic, you could practice on them," Madelynne continued.

While the thought had some merit, it probably wasn't a good idea. "Or we could just send them home with their tails between their legs."

"Which would be the safest thing to do," Scott added.

"Except they don't have any cars," Madelynne replied.

I shrugged. "So we call them a cab."

She looked at me in surprise. "Do you know where to send them?"

"I'm pretty sure they know where to go," I reminded her with a smile, before getting serious again. "There's no need to antagonize the Tremere any further than we have already. Give them

their ghouls back, give them their cars back. They're not in the condition they left them, but at least they get them back. Maybe they'll get the point not to leave people and cars lying around where Brujah can pick them up and toss them about."

I called a cab while Madelynne phoned a towing company to make arrangements for the cars to be taken to the nearest Tremere chantry. Thankfully, neither of the men put up a fight, in fact they seemed eager enough to be away from us.

Right after Scott and Frasier dumped the Tremere ghouls in a cab most of the city's Brujah showed up. They parked their street rods and muscle cars in the parking lot and headed toward the front door. All of them were dressed roughly the same in leather, sunglasses and hats or do-rags.

Madelynne met them at the door and listened to their explanation of why they were here. Clarice had sent them all to meet me, and they were going to start guarding me in shifts, three a night. All seemed to be loyal to Clarice, and all seemed determined to follow her orders to the letter. The cavalry had arrived.

Information

KNOWLEDGE IS POWER.

FRANCIS BACON

Once the Brujah clan signed on to protect me, I had very little privacy. I was told that I couldn't leave the building before they arrived, and I wasn't to go anywhere after they left for the night. I didn't like the situation much, but Scott did. He had become very protective of me since dela Rocha's visit. He stayed with me whenever he could, and the few times he had to leave he did so with great reluctance. He didn't even go back to work until I got bodyguards, and even then I knew he hated to go.

Madelynn decided that she needed to visit Billy Dean, the other Brujah Primogen. Clarice had asked that the pack get rid of him in exchange for her help, but Madelynn wasn't so sure that was the right thing to do. I didn't know what she hoped to accomplish by playing one off the other, but I trusted her to make the right decisions.

In the mean time, I called Nancy to arrange another meeting. Her assistant answered her phone, and after assuring the woman that it wasn't urgent and leaving a message to have Nancy call me, I turned to Frasier. "She has an assistant?"

"She does have a job," he said, sounding almost offended. "She's an arts and entertainment critic."

"That explains a lot," I replied with a wry smile.

Fifteen minutes later Nancy called me back. "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"I was hoping that we could have a chance to get together and talk this evening," I told her. "I think we can come to an agreement on what we talked about before."

She sounded intrigued. "Where and what time?"

"Somewhere that I can take three heavily armed babysitters," I warned her.

"Madelynn assigned you members of the pack?" she asked in surprise.

"No, Clarice has," I replied. "She's been nice enough to help us out, which is why I would leave the choice of where we meet up to you."

We agreed to meet at the Zombie Zoo in half an hour, but not to go in as it was partly Tremere owned. I joined her in her car and the Brujah followed as her driver set a leisurely course through the neighborhood. I had left Frasier at home so that he wouldn't distract either of us from the conversation at hand.

"We need information in order to be effective in countering the Tremere," I told her once we had the polite small talk out of the way. "Any help you can give me would be appreciated."

"That could be some very condemning information," she said carefully. "Were you to have that information, it would be a serious breach of the Masquerade, and were it ever found out that I told you, the Tremere could come back on me. What's in it for me?"

"The Tremere won't find out about it unless they get their hands on me, because I'm not telling," I assured her. "We have spoken previously about your feeding from Frasier. If he's living in a chantry somewhere, that's not going to happen. I don't know what else you want that I can give you."

"Perhaps I could take advantage of your security business for... arm candy, shall we say," she replied thoughtfully. "There are people I'm trying to make jealous."

"I'm sure we can work something out," I agreed.

"I'm sure we can," she said with a smile. "I will of course take you up on the offer of Frasier."

I listened as she explained that the Tremere as a clan were partnered with the old blood Ventrue in the city, and some of the Toreador. While they didn't run their businesses directly, the Tremere had controlling interest or were financial backers for most of them. Key members of the clan were also involved with Prince Banking. The clan also contracted long term loans for and had financial interests in the young blood Ventrue businesses.

When I asked, she clarified that the old blood Ventrue consisted of the prince, his sire, the Primogen Raquel, and their ghouls. The prince's childer and grandchilder—Jac, Frick, Frack and Perry—and their ghouls were considered the new blood of the clan while the rest of the Ventrue, none of them the prince's blood and mostly under fifty years old or new to town, were considered the young bloods.

The Zombie Zoo was partially owned by Trevor Steel, another Tremere. Most, even in Kindred society, didn't know much about him. He was a shadow player who often recruited from the Zombie Zoo. He's was a business man with many less than legitimate assets, and he was also involved in the drug trade.

Many art museums and antique stores owned by the Toreador Clan were backed by the countess' sire, though Nancy didn't know his name. Nikki, another of the Tremere, backed many of the sex clubs owned by Mishaku and Cora, Toreador who had that market covered in the Detroit area.

Sheri Austin, the Toreador who owned the Sanctuary, was backed predominately by the countess herself, although the prince seemed to be involved in that as well. The fourth floor and the subbasement of the club were not open to anyone save the countess and the prince. While they didn't control the club, they obviously paid for the privilege of going there.

When she wasn't at the Sanctuary with the prince or other Primogen, the countess kept mostly to the Country Chantry, which was the main chantry for the Tremere in Detroit. Paige Ellen was always with the countess, acting more as her gofer than as an advisor.

Nancy didn't know much more about Zach than I already did. He was the Scourge of the city under the prince's command, and was nearly always seen with Archie, his Malkavian friend. The notes I'd had of Christina's dreams told me that she'd known him when she was mortal, and he'd told me himself he'd been instrumental in her embrace, though he hadn't actually been present during the deed.

Amy Owens was the City Chantry leader and she was open about being a power player, as was her childe. Amy was seen quite often throughout the city, mostly at businesses owned by Mishaku and Cora, much to the countess' dismay. The building the City Chantry was located in was half full of other businesses, all of which were owned by the Tremere Clan.

When Riley and 'the new girl' were seen in public it was usually at mortal owned coffee shops listening to poetry readings. Apparently they were trying to hold on to their humanity. Nancy didn't know much about them except that the girl was new, and that they could be a couple, though she wasn't sure.

The Detroit Free Press ran a column every Wednesday by a writer named Harry Hammer. He was a ninth generation Tremere, and any time the clan needed something covered up, he handled it. His

ghoul Lori was sometimes a contributing writer to his column. For some reason I found her name vaguely familiar, though I was sure I'd never met her.

Nancy knew Mary Margaret well, as she was quite a socialite. She could be found wherever the trendiest parties were, though Nancy didn't seem to think she'd be of much help to us. The last Tremere she knew about was Dunstan Bruce. He ran an expansive new age shop downtown and passed himself off as a witch, though in reality he was a recruiter.

By the time she'd talked herself out we'd passed an hour driving around the city. I thanked her for the information and she wished me luck with it. "I would of course like to meet with Frasier soon," she said as I reached for the door handle, "as a sign of good faith."

While I didn't like the idea of her feeding from my ghoul, it was part of the price I'd agreed to. "I'll have him check his schedule and call you this evening," I said with a forced smile.

Frasier seemed pleased with the arrangements I'd made, although he didn't really say much either way when I told him. He made a point to call her right away and they made a date for Saturday. He came home that night a quart low and very happy.

When I got back to the pub I found that Madelynne had learned a few things as well, and not just about the Tremere. It turned out that Ralph and Patrick had joined forces against the pack, and most likely with the Tremere as well. Ralph had also approached Michael, but the leader of the Rabble had turned him down.

Michael, as it turned out, knew a few things about the Tremere that Nancy didn't. He knew the location of both Channies, and a dozen Tremere, including a few that Frasier's girlfriend hadn't mentioned.

Jonathan McMichaels was the Country Chantry leader, and the countess' grandchilde. Missy, whom I'd seen before, was the clan enforcer, and was seen in the city nearly as often as Zach. Michael also knew that there was a Tremere on the Caine Security force, but he didn't know her name or her face.

As it turned out, Emily knew Mary Margaret as well. The Tremere was at all of the best parties, usually those thrown by Toreador. While they weren't friends, they did talk from time to time. Emily didn't like the woman much, mostly because she played herself off as weak and powerless, but in reality Mary Margaret could take care of herself. Emily seemed to think she could get information from Mary Margaret's favorite ghoul so Madelynne told her to give it a try.

Madelynne had asked Michael what he knew of Billy Dean and Clarice, but he'd known only what the Brujah in the Rabble knew. They didn't know why both Primogen left the group alone and they didn't really care. It didn't matter to them who the Primogen was, and Michael didn't either, but if he had to make a choice it would have been Billy Dean.

Clarissa was stronger than Billy Dean, both physically and powerfully, but no one knew if she were really that old or if she'd eaten her way up the food chain. She didn't have much to do with the Brujah unless something happens that they could serve her, then she bossed them around.

Billy Dean was much more akin to Michael's heart, more business oriented and had better long term goals. His sire was a blow hard who'd met a grisly end. No one knew if that fact had made Billy Dean gun shy but regardless of the reason he wasn't as demanding on the Brujah as Clarissa was.

Madelynne was pleased about her meeting with Billy Dean. He had told her that the Tremere actually outnumbered the Ventrue in the city, and had just as many ghouls. While the current prince

had done his best to restrict their numbers to what they were now, the old prince had apparently let things go.

Billy Dean wanted the Brujah on his side, he wanted Clarice out of the way so that he could be the only Brujah Primogen in the city. Once she was out of the way he hoped he could bring the clan around to his way of thinking, turn them from street thugs into businessmen. He didn't much care how Madelynne got the job done, but she'd agreed to do it for what protection he could give us.

She also met with one of the Ventrue about the new club she planned to open. She already had the property, but she needed some funding, and the permits necessary to make it what she wanted it to be. When she'd tried to talk to him about my situation, she was directed up the Ventrue food chain to Jac.

I woke a few nights later to find Scott standing by the bed, fully dressed and looking edgy. "The boys are here," he said grimly.

Some how I knew he wasn't talking about Frasier and Petor. "Cassidy's boys?" When he nodded, I asked, "Did they say what they wanted?"

"To talk to Madelynne," he said as I sat up, "but you might want to be there."

"I figured." It didn't take me long to get dressed but getting my weapons together took a little longer. Madelynne was already downstairs by the time we walked into the pub, and to my surprise both she and Logan were armed, which almost never happened in the pub.

"Cassidy is not allowed to voice his opinion on kindred politics," Alec was saying as we approached the back of the barroom, where they'd been talking.

"Isn't that all politically correct and nicely wrapped up," Madelynne murmured.

"But he'd like to rip Ralph's head off just as much as anyone else," the boy added.

"So theoretically he's not going to be able to support me, but..."

"What he might not chastise you for, he'll penalize Ralph for," Alec confirmed. "Or rather, have us penalize him."

"Ralph's been here many times before threatening my life," she replied, "I'm sure that this is only going to make things worse."

"Threats on lives are par for the course, when you're struggling for power," he pointed out.

"He's had his childer show up on my doorstep with guns shooting without the power struggle," she said harshly. "It's uncalled for."

He shrugged. "Until now you were just a stray dog from his pack."

"Never from his pack," she denied hotly.

"Maybe not you," he drawled, shooting a pointed look at Logan and Scott.

Logan was stone faced, but Alec's words drew a reaction from Scott. Unfortunately, I couldn't really tell what it was, only that he'd reacted.

"And who's gonna know when Ralph isn't playing fair, am I supposed to come tell?" Madelynne asked. "Is someone keeping score? Enlighten me; I'm not sure how this game is played."

"You might have thought to get a set of rules before you challenged him," Alec replied dryly.

She smiled. "There's written rules somewhere?"

"For the other clans," he said with a laugh. "Most of the other clans can change power without the old boss going away. The Gangrel can't, or they haven't as long as we've been here. Don't breach the Masquerade and don't die; those are pretty much the only rules the Gangrel care about. The Ventrue and other civilized clans would prefer the battle take place in a controlled environment. They understand that a Gangrel power struggle is a bloody and frothing affair; they just don't want it in the middle of a city park."

"And you're not allowed to help, huh?" she murmured.

"Officially, no," he agreed. "Unofficially we could end the game rather quickly."

"I could too," she replied, "but since we're playing by the rules."

"We could probably keep Ralph off your back long enough for you to deal with the other problems going on in your existence," he said with a pointed look in my direction.

"I've managed to secure a bit of help with that," she told him.

"We've heard that you've got Brujah riding with you now." He gave her a thoughtful look. "The way I hear it, you're spread pretty thin, owing allegiance to both Brujah Primogen, and various members of most other clans. If you ever actually do take over as Primogen, and manage to keep her alive, you're going to owe so many people so many things that you're going to have a hard time keeping your promises."

"I don't owe that many people," she retorted. "I'm not sure what the rumor is or what you may have heard, but sounds like it's overestimated."

"You struck deals with both Billy Dean and Clarice," he pointed out. "That's kind of a dangerous game to be playing. You've offered to take in Michael and his band of merry misfits, and already half approached the Ventrue."

"Assuming that Madelynne hasn't spread herself too thin," I put in, "what is it that you would require to help in your unofficial capacity?"

His cool look said he didn't think much of me. "What is it that you could offer us?"

"What do you want?" Madelynne demanded. "I need to know what you want before I can say whether I have it to offer, or if it's something I can obtain. Everyone has a price. I offered Michael and his group protection. You don't need that."

His laughter told us he agreed with her. "We'll see if we can think of something." With that they left to give the same warning to Ralph that they'd given to Madelynne.

Opening Valley

I GOT A HEART FULL OF PAIN HEAD FULL OF STRESS
HANDFUL OF ANGER HELD IN MY CHEST
LINKIN PARK - NOBODY'S LISTENING

Unfortunately, Cassidy's boys didn't have much success in keeping Ralph's people off our backs. A few nights after their visit I got a call around seven thirty from Petor. Before he could say a word I could hear gunfire in the background.

"What's going on and how many guns should I bring?" I demanded.

"Shit's hit the fan," he barked, "and all of them."

"Try to hold on until I can get there," I told him.

The sound of an automatic weapon in close proximity to the phone was my only answer. Praying he could take care of himself long enough for me to come to his rescue, I went looking for Scott or Logan. Unfortunately, neither of them were anywhere to be seen. A quick call to Scott told me he was outside working on his truck and that he would meet me at my car.

I'd filled my pockets with ammo and was just leaving my room when I met Madelynne in the hallway. I almost didn't see her at first, but when I realized she was there I paused. "I was going to talk to you before I left."

"You're not going anywhere right now," she warned me.

I shook my head. "I have to go, Petor—"

She didn't let me finish. "You have to wait until everything is ready."

"I'm ready, Scott's ready." I brushed past her. "I'm going."

She grabbed my arm and spun me around. "You need to stop and think what you're doing."

"I'm going to help Petor," I bit out.

"By yourself?" she accused.

"No, I've got Scott," I reminded her.

"So there are two of you," she replied harshly. "Petor's more than likely going to be down at this point."

I pulled away from her and took a step back. "Do not say things like that to me," I said in a low hard voice.

"You can't take on an unknown number of people," she said reasonably. "If you wait even five minutes, everyone will be here."

As much as I wanted to run off and save Petor, she was right. I would have a better chance with more people. "You've got five minutes."

She insisted I wait in her room and I reluctantly followed her through the doorway. Logan was standing near the dresser pulling on the rest of his clothes.

"I could be spending these five minutes getting more weapons," I pointed out as I averted my eyes.

"You got them all," Madelynne drawled.

"Just the ones from my room." When she didn't answer me, I sighed and called Frasier to make sure he was okay. He had no idea that anything was wrong and I didn't give him any clues that there was trouble. He was safe with Nancy, and I knew she'd do her best to keep it that way.

Less than five minutes later we entered the pub from the kitchen door. Thankfully, my Brujah bodyguards were just coming in, and Madelynne ordered them to come with us. We'd barely taken half a dozen steps across the room when Madelynne and Logan paused. Since they were standing in front of me, I had to stop as well.

"Someone else is here," Logan growled, adjusting his grip on the sawed off shotgun in his hand.

A thin woman with long dark hair stood from one of the booths and walked toward us. "I'm going to assume you're talking about me," she said in a softly accented voice.

"Didn't we see her at the prince's?" I asked softly.

"Yes," Madelynne agreed. "What do you want?"

Isa Quintinilla's eyes took in the weapons we were wearing and carrying before she answered. "I told Clarice I would stop by and lend assistance if needed"

"Assistance is needed," I assured her.

"It seems that her business is under fire," Madelynne explained.

"How many?" she asked.

Madelynne shrugged. "Don't know."

"Does it matter?" I demanded. "Petor's there, alone."

"Yes it does," the girl told me.

"He called, there was gunfire," I said simply, stepping around Madelynne and heading for the door. "I'm going."

They followed me out, Madelynne, Logan, Isa and the Brujah. Madelynne insisted on driving, which was probably a good idea. I wanted to make sure all of my weapons were loaded and ready to fire. Scott took the Desert Eagle I'd had tucked into the waist of my pants, but didn't seem to think he'd need the extra clips I tried to give him. I stuck them in the pocket of his shirt and looked out the back window to make sure the Brujah and Isa were still following us.

The gate blocking the drive into the agency was broken when we got there, and it looked as if the car responsible was now buried in the third garage door of the building, on top of the Lincoln we kept parked inside.

"You go in the back door," Madelynne ordered in my direction.

"Good luck with that," Scott scoffed.

"I'm gonna go in the side door," I told her.

"If it's the Tremere you have no way to counter the magic," she reminded me as I parked. "And they'll stop at nothing to get you."

I had to admit she was right and agreed to go in the back with Scott. Madelynne and Logan would go in the side door and try to make it to the office, where I believed Petor was holed up. The Brujah followed me as I ran toward the back of the building, as did Isa. I could hear the retort from a large hand gun inside the building, and it gave me hope that Petor was still standing.

It took me no time at all to get up the fire escape, and only a moment longer to get the door opened onto the balcony inside the building. I hugged the wall as I went in, but I couldn't see anyone at all on the first floor.

Scott and Isa moved past me toward the railing. As I was easing forward to join them, Scott shouted something I couldn't make out and jumped the railing. By the time I got to where I could see him, he was holding his own, fighting two vampires.

I could see Madelynn and Logan from where I stood, and Petor. I took a couple of shots at some of the intruders in the building before I was hit in the chest by a shotgun blast. Fortunately I was able to soak the shot, but my shirt was ruined. I followed Scott's lead and jumped the railing to land on the main floor just in time to see the woman Scott was fighting slash him across the stomach.

Some of the Brujah had followed me over the rail, and now we moved toward Scott to help him. The man he'd been fighting was hit by what looked like a high caliber weapon and fell to the ground. Claws bloomed on Scott's hand and the glimpse I got of his face told me he was in frenzy. I backed away, knowing that he wouldn't know friend from foe until he came out of it.

I found Petor in the office, injured but intact. Once I was sure he would be okay I headed back to the garage, anxious to see if Scott had calmed down so I could check the injuries I'd seen. He was nearly unconscious on the floor, lying next to the male vampire he'd almost killed. The woman was a pile of dust beneath them both.

"Bind him," Madelynn told Isa as Petor and I approached. "We're going on a road trip."

A dark tentacle snaked out from beneath a nearby car and wound itself around the bad guy. I kept a wary eye on it as I knelt next to Scott to check his wounds. There was enough blood to make me worried, and I did my best to clean him up without hurting him any more.

"We're taking him to Ralph," Madelynn told us, "dropping this on his doorstep."

"I have to keep an eye on the tentacle," Isa informed her. "Once he leaves my sight, the tentacle is gone."

"We stake him then," Madelynn said firmly.

I looked up in surprise. "Scott?"

"We're gonna stake him, pumpkin," she said, pointing at the vampire Isa was holding captive. "We're not going to hurt Scott."

With a nod, I sent Petor back into the office to fetch blood for Scott. I knew he'd need more than we had to heal his wounds, but at least it would give him a head start.

Isa sent the Brujah out to make sure that the area around the agency was clear. Madelynn asked Logan to bring her car to the door in front of the limo so she could put the bad guy in the trunk. As I bound Scott's wounds, they staked the intruder, but before they could get him moved, we heard one of the Brujah yelling that we had incoming.

Petor and I quickly lifted Scott into the back of the limo where he would be relatively safe while the others moved to the smashed garage door to see what was going on. I grabbed a couple of the larger guns from the weapons stash before joining them.

Handing Madelynn a mini Uzi, I looked out to see Logan standing at the opened driver's door of her car with his shotgun aimed at the dark sedans that were coming toward us. Isa moved up beside him with Desert Eagle in her hand.

When Logan started firing, Madelynne moved up to the passenger's side of the car and opened the door, using it as a shield as she too began firing. I moved up to the back of the car, using it as a shield between me and the new bad guys, and Petor joined me.

"You probably should go into the building," I told him. "Take care of Scott or something."

"Shut up," Madelynne called back. "He'll be fine."

Logan's first shot had bounced off the hood, but his second hit the front tire, forcing the car to skid to a stop. Missy climbed out, along with too many ghouls for my peace of mind. The ghouls had guns pulled, Missy did not.

Isa stepped forward, holding her gun pointed at the sky. "There's nothing for you here," she called. "Leave."

"Except for her," Missy answered, obviously having seen me despite my attempt to stay out of sight.

I gave Petor a stern look. "You are never leaving the pub without me again."

The only answer he gave me was to aim the gun in his hand toward our Tremere visitors.

"Stay here," I ordered as I moved up the side of the car to stand by Madelynne.

Logan had reloaded, and now he let both barrels go, hitting Missy in the chest and making her rock on her feet, but she didn't go down. A cloud of black surrounded the intruders, and I looked at Isa in surprise. I was stunned to see blood flowing from her eyes, mouth and nose, moving toward the black cloud. It looked painful and I was betting it had nothing to do with the shadows she'd woven.

"We need to get the fuck out of here," I told Madelynne as I hot footed it back into the agency, grabbing Petor's arm on the way.

"Grab the body," she ordered, getting into the car.

I would have followed her order had the body still been where we'd left it. Petor jumped into the front seat of the limo and hit the garage door opener on the visor. The Brujah followed me into the back of the limo, taking care not to land on Scott, who was too hurt to really know what was going on.

I could hear gunfire as we the engine roared to life, and caught a glimpse of Isa as we sped toward her. I opened the back door of the limo and she jumped inside, closing the door as we followed Madelynne and Logan away from the agency.

Pulling my phone from my pocket, I called Madelynne and let her know that our captive was gone.

"Where the hell did it go?" she demanded.

"I don't freaking know!" I snapped. "There was nothing there, not even a stake."

She was upset and confused, of course, but there was nothing either of us could do about it with the Tremere on our ass. "Go to the Sanctuary," she ordered. "There's no violence there, no weapons. They can't touch you there."

"No weapons, but what if they decide to use magic?" I demanded. "Did you see the blood?" I looked at Isa. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," she assured me as she reloaded her gun.

"We're going to the Sanctuary," Madelynne said firmly from the phone still on my ear.

Since I didn't have any other suggestions, I agreed, and rolled down the window between us and Petor to let him know.

"They're still following us," he told me. "You want us to loose them?"

"Do what you can," I replied tensely. Into the phone, I said, "Madelynne, they're probably going to follow me. We'll meet you there."

It took several long tense minutes for Petor to loose our assailants. I offered Isa blood from the limo's refrigerator, but she refused so I fed it to Scott instead.

"Can't you do what she did?" Isa asked me. "Aren't you one of them?"

I laughed softly. "No, and if I could do what she did, I really don't remember."

"Seems like a really great trick to try and learn," she pointed out.

"I would if someone would teach me," I told her. "Sometimes I can do things, and sometimes I can't, but since I've forgotten everything, I don't know what I can do."

She'd apparently heard the story, but didn't know much more than the basics. Before I could explain, her phone rang. It was the prince, and I did my best to listen to the conversation as I tended to Scott.

"I understand there was an... issue," the prince said.

"Yes, there was," she admitted. "Several Gangrel attacked Miss Andrews' agency, and once that was taken care of, Missy showed up."

"Yes, Giles told me of the Gangrel," he replied. "How is everyone doing?"

"Scott is hurt."

"Ralph sent someone strong enough to take out Scott?" he asked, surprised.

"I didn't quite see what happened," she told him. "We're heading toward the Sanctuary now."

I could hear him laugh. "Sheri will love that. I'm not going to tell you to continue your involvement, but I'm not going to tell you not to. Just know that I cannot lend any assistance."

"I understand," she replied. "I will do my best to make sure that Miss Andrews stays alive."

"If that's what you choose."

About the time she hung up Scott woke up, obviously in a great deal of pain. I gave him all the blood we had left in the limo, and he settled back against the seat, gritting his teeth every time Petor turned a corner or hit a bump.

"So that was the prince?" When she nodded, I asked, "Did he have anything to say about our situation?"

"Other than he can take no stand for or against anyone, no," she replied. "He didn't ask that I leave the situation though."

"You know," I said softly, "this may sound rude and maybe even ungrateful given the assistance that you've given us, but why are you here?"

"I'm here as a favor to Clarice," she told me.

"Oh." I wondered how long her help would last when she found out that Madelynne was working with Billy Dean. "Well, I appreciate your assistance. I'm sorry if you were injured in the situation."

"It's only blood, it can be regained," she said with a shrug. "I'm sorry that your friend was hurt. He's not much of a talker, but at least he can fight."

Scott could fight, normally, but right now he was vulnerable, and it was my fault. Suddenly I remembered the other vulnerable man in my life and pulled out my phone to call Frasier.

He answered on the second ring, sounding exasperated. "Something wrong?"

"You either need to get to the pub or the Sanctuary," I said quickly.

He caught my urgent tone. "Where do you want me to be?"

"You know, I would really like it if I can see you," I admitted. "The Sanctuary, and you can help us with Scott."

"What's wrong with Scott?" he demanded.

"He's hurt, he was clawed. You need to be really, really careful, because both Ralph and the Tremere sent people after us tonight." He assured me that he'd be fine, but I knew I'd worry about him until I could see for myself that he was safe.

Isa and I disagreed on whether or not Petor should drop me off at the door of the Sanctuary. While I had to agree it was a good idea, I couldn't leave Scott, not even when some of the Brujah offered to stay with him.

Once we were parked on the top of the parking garage next to Madelynne's car, I was able to talk to her about what we should do. She decided that Petor and I should go into the club while she and Logan took Scott back to the pub. Knowing that the Tremere weren't after any of them, I agreed but I didn't like it. I felt a little better after seeing that Scott was with it enough to help while Madelynne and Logan transferred him to her car.

Madelynne and I traded shirts because hers had less blood on it and I let Isa lead the way toward the Sanctuary while Petor and the Brujah followed. We had to check our weapons at the door, and I felt quite naked and vulnerable without them.

Isa cleared one of the bathrooms so that I could clean the blood from my face and hands. I stood there watching it run down the sink and wondered if I was doing the right thing. If I kept fighting the Tremere, someone was going to die, and I didn't know if I could live with that, but I didn't know if I could live with being Tremere either.

Frasier showed up not long after we found a table on the second floor, intact and with Nancy in tow. They sat down with us for a while, listening while Petor relayed what had happened at the agency. Petor seemed a bit nervous, but a couple of drinks took the edge off. He had a lot of ideas for improving security at the agency, most of which we couldn't afford, not yet.

I tried to get Isa to sit with us, but she was too busy playing bodyguard. The Brujah were alert, for a while, but then they got bored. I didn't much like sitting still either, so we went downstairs so they could play pool while I sat in at a corner table. Frasier took Nancy off to dance and continue their date.

Forty-five minutes after Madelynne and Logan had left, they returned to the Sanctuary. Madelynne tried to tell me that Scott was fine, but I had to hear it from Logan before I believed it.

"Howard's looking at the tapes from the agency," Logan told me while Madelynne went off to make some phone calls. "There's something on them, something dragging Christopher's body off."

I frowned. "Who's Christopher?"

"The Gangrel that Madelynne staked," he explained.

"So we knew the guys that attacked us?" I asked, surprised. I'd never heard of anyone in town named Christopher, and I surely didn't remember seeing any of our attackers before tonight.

"They were Scott's ghouls," Logan told me in a low voice, "from before. He thought they were dead when the power changed hands. They weren't."

"They just disappeared for ten years?" I demanded.

"Evidently." It was obvious that he knew more, but I knew when he got that closed look on his face that he wouldn't answer any of my questions.

Madelynne came back a little while later and told us that she'd let Michael know what had happened at the agency. She began questioning Isa about why she had shown up tonight. The girl explained that she was a friend of Clarice, and was helping us out as a favor to her.

"The prince has no problem with you being involved, since you work for him?" Madelynne asked.

"He apparently has no opinion either way," I told her.

"I see." I could tell that Madelynne was wondering why Isa was with us. Everyone knew she worked for the prince, though he usually claimed no knowledge of what she did for him. That she was Lasombra was obvious from the shadows she wielded with such skill, and it was rumored that she had once been of the Sabbat.

"What is your position with the prince?" Madelynne asked her.

"The prince has been kind enough to give me sanctuary within his city," she said simply. "Therefore I cultivate a friendship with him, and give him information."

"How come she gets sanctuary, and I get the Tremere on my ass?" I muttered.

"So what do you do gain sanctuary and friendship with him?" Madelynne inquired.

"I helped him out upon my initial arrival in the city," Isa answered. "I provide information that he may require. I serve as liaison to him on matters concerning Sabbat issues."

Strange how she hadn't helped us out when we'd had to take out the Sabbat pack that had come to town following Christina's family. The prince had claimed it was their fault the Sabbat had entered his city, and therefore it was their responsibility to take care of them. And ours, of course, because of Christina's ties to the people who came to 'save' me.

When Michael showed up a little while later, Madelynne and Logan went off with him and Nigel. Since she made it clear I wasn't to go with them, I decided to play pool with the Brujah. Isa stood to one side keeping a watch for any trouble, and though I was fairly sure nothing was going to happen in the Sanctuary, I was grateful that I didn't have to be the one watching in every direction.

Finally Madelynne and the others came back. To my surprise, Michael asked if there were any weapons we needed, and Petor spoke up immediately, putting in a request for a big gun to mount in the back of the SUV.

Around one o'clock Madelynne agreed that we could go back to the pub. Howard had cleaned up the security tape and Scott was apparently ornery. Frasier wanted to finish his date, and while I wasn't sure that it was a good idea, I reluctantly agreed with the condition that he had to be at the pub before dawn.

Isa and the Brujah rode with me and Petor in the limo back to the agency, where we picked up the vehicles we'd driven there. Of course we were followed when we left the building. Isa ordered us to drive ahead while she kept them occupied, and we managed to make it to the pub with no one on our tail.

Weapons

ALL THE THINGS ONE HAS FORGOTTEN SCREAM FOR HELP IN DREAMS.

ELIAS CANETTI

Once Isa caught up, Madelynne led the way upstairs. Isa didn't like the fact that the Brujah preferred to stay in the bar, but as I had no problem with it she reluctantly let her objections drop. I took Petor up to the bedroom I shared with Scott and he turned his back while I changed my shirt.

"I don't like this," I told him. "They're not going to stop until they get what they want, and it's putting everyone I care about in danger." I sat down on the edge of the bed. "Do you think I should just go back to them?"

"Do you remember what the Tremere are like?" he asked.

I shook my head. "I don't."

"Then why would you want to give this up?"

"To save lives," I told him. "Someone is going to get seriously hurt if this keeps up. Someone is going to die."

"If Madelynne ever becomes Primogen," he said reasonably, "from what I understand, they won't be able to touch you."

"If," I repeated. There was no guarantee that she could become Primogen, at least not as long as Ralph was around. We needed to find some way to take him out, but I was fresh out of ideas.

Scott was resting on one of the couches in the living room, looking a little better in a clean set of clothes. I sat down next to him and looked at the pictures Howard had printed from the security tapes.

The pictures showed five creatures, all three feet tall or shorter. They had tails and claws, and were bipedal. While they didn't look like any particular animal, they had animal like coloring, although all had thumbs opposite however many fingers they had. They had come from behind the SUV, picked up Christopher, and carried him out the side door.

"Those are gargoyles," I told Madelynne. They were the perfect weapons, thick skinned, able to stand absolutely still for days on end, and some of them even flew. Abruptly I looked at her in surprise. "How did I know that?"

"You mean the kind that is at the top of buildings?" When I nodded, she said, "What the hell?"

Isa was able to fill everyone in on the mundane background of gargoyles, how they were used on churches and other buildings during the middle ages to ward off evil spirits. It was a safe bet that these creatures were a bit more supernatural than that, and since I'd recognized them, they were probably henchmen of the Tremere.

"Maybe I should have said yes to Malcolm," I muttered. "I'd know how to fight them better."

"That was the choice you made," Madelynne reminded me. "He did give you a way to contact him, if you've changed your mind."

I shook my head. "There has to be a way around it without getting my memory back."

She showed one of the pictures to Logan. "Did you know about these?"

"No, but Michael's comment about the wicked witch's flying monkeys makes more sense now," he drawled.

"If you don't mind my asking," Isa said hesitantly, "What is the exact story here? Why do the Tremere want Tina so badly?"

Madelynne explained how she'd found me in the middle of the road with no memories. It had been obvious that Petor was from Russia, but none of us had any idea how I'd gotten to Detroit. She explained how Christina's family had come looking for her, and how I'd decided to remain with the pack.

At the end of the explanation, Isa looked at me. "So you play cat and mouse with a clan that wants you back."

"That's a recent development," I told her. "It's only lately that they've become determined to get me back. Apparently some guy in Vegas made a deal with the countess."

"Her sire made a deal," Madelynne added.

"He's not my sire," I said quickly. "Adopted sire, and that was before." To Isa, I said, "Apparently I lost my memory when I was embraced and he found me, helped me through learning what I was."

"She does have her ghouls with her," Madelynne pointed out, "and she is very protective of them."

"They're my responsibility," I reminded her.

"And mine are my responsibility," she agreed, "but I don't hover."

"I don't hover," I denied irritably. "Frasier's out on a date, right now."

"And Petor's so close you're one," Logan drawled.

"How did you lose your memory?" Isa asked before I could say anything more.

"Apparently an old friend did it this time to protect me."

"What is he protecting you from?"

I shook my head. "That's not real clear."

She still seemed confused. "So you play 'OK Corral' just to stay away from them?"

"This is the first night it's happened," I told her.

"What about tomorrow night?"

Madelynne spoke up, her voice calm and sure. "Then we deal with it tomorrow."

I couldn't be so sure. Tonight we'd faced Gangrel, and only one Tremere. Scott had gotten the worst of the fight, and he could have been killed. Hell, it was sheer luck that Petor hadn't been killed before we gotten to the agency.

"We're not going to force anyone to go somewhere they don't want to," she added. "She doesn't really fit in with that way of life."

"I understand that you don't want to be forced into it," Isa told me. "I'll do what I can to ensure your safety."

"I do appreciate the help," I assured her, "but I don't expect you to walk in front of a bullet for me."

"Where I come from, the only honor comes from fighting the fight," she replied, "and making sure that as many of your comrades come out with you as possible."

"I'd really like it if nobody died because of me," I said in a low voice.

"You know that's something that can't be guaranteed," Madelynne stated bluntly. "People will get hurt. Someone is going to die, you know that." I looked away, but that didn't stop her from speaking. "I'm not telling you anything that isn't true. We all know and understand this. We're not backing down because of it. And whether you're here or not, Ralph is still going to be coming after us."

"Yes, but the Tremere wouldn't be right there next to him would they?" I demanded.

"Maybe, maybe not," she replied calmly.

I looked down at Scott and knew that even if I wasn't there, Ralph still could have sent his cronies after the pack. He still would have been hurt. Even if I left now, right this minute, the pack would still be in danger.

Frasier showed up well before dawn. He told me he had no knowledge of gargoyles, or the magic that Missy had used against Isa. After he helped me get Scott up to bed, I sent both of my ghouls to get some rest.

Scott was asleep long before the sun rose in the sky, leaving me to lie next to him, watching him sleep. When dawn finally claimed me my rest was filled with restless dreams. I saw the people I cared about hurt over and over, by claw, bullet and fire. Scott, Frasier, Petor, even Jason and Brenda were stars in my nightmares. I dreamed of watching Cormac die, as I'd been told he had, with the claws of a demon in his chest. There were people I didn't recognize, an old man in a priest's collar torn to shreds by claws, a young dark haired man buried in a landslide. The last thing burning through my brain when I woke was the man I'd been told was Marcus, laying in a casket with his neck broken.

I woke alone, with an urgent need to check on everyone. Somehow I managed to calm myself long enough to get dressed. Scott was in the shower and when he got out I could see that he looked much better, though he was very hungry. I stifled the urge to mother him and went down to check on the boys. Petor and Frasier were downstairs in the pub drinking coffee, safe and sound and covered with grease and dirt.

"And what have you two been doing?" I demanded, knowing I wasn't going to like the answer.

"We fixed the warehouse," Petor answered calmly.

I closed my eyes for a moment and saw him again as he'd been in my dreams, lying on the ground covered with blood, his eyes open and empty. "Until this mess is over, don't leave until I wake up," I ordered both of them. "Ever."

"But the contractors aren't open at night," he protested.

"So you call and you have someone else there," I growled, "or it waits until this mess is over."

"Don't you think someone else would question all the blood stains and heavily armored vehicles?" he said reasonably. "I took Frasier with me, and Carissa."

"Until the mess is over, you're not to go anywhere without me," I ordered sternly.

"I don't know if we can hold it for twelve hours," Frasier drawled.

"This is not amusing," I said harshly. "This is not funny, this is not a joke."

"No it's not funny," Petor agreed, "but I know the condition the warehouse was left in."

I rounded on him furiously. "Do you remember what happened the last time you were at the warehouse without me?"

He didn't back down. "I took help."

"My orders stand," I barked. I walked away while I could, fighting the urge to check them over physically for injuries. It was a struggle too not to call Jason and see how he was doing. He wouldn't welcome my call, not when all I wanted was to make sure he was safe.

The Brujah rolled in right on schedule, with Isa not far behind. Madelynne told us that Michael was on his way with a selection of weapons we could buy from him. The Rabble came up the freight elevator to the second floor and began opening cases of weapons, laying them out on the table.

The living room was crowded with people. The whole pack was there, and all eight of the Rabble plus four of their ghouls. My Brujah bodyguards had come upstairs for the first time, and Isa stood next to Frasier and Petor on one side of the room.

Madelynne got everyone's attention, and began by reminding us about the attack on the agency the night before. "I am planning on taking over as Primogen of the Gangrel, but Michael will be my second in command."

Emily and Alex glanced at each other wonderingly, while Maggie and Howard seemed confused. Scott and Logan had heard this news before so they showed no reaction.

"It is part of the deal that he and I have struck," Madelynne explained. "He is helping us deal with the Tremere and Ralph, and in exchange he gets to be my second."

"How do you plan on taking out Ralph?" Alex asked.

"I've already been told I have to play by the rules," she reminded him, "which means I can't outright kill him."

"That means *you* can't," he replied dryly.

"Any volunteers?" I asked raising my hand. I wasn't the only one. Every man in the pack raised his hand, as well as most of the Rabble.

"Nothing was said about playing fair as long as no blood was spilled in the street," Madelynne continued. "Ralph already knows this. As you may or may not have known, we received a visit from Cassidy's boys. I believe they are on our side and willing to help somewhat. They dislike Ralph about as much as we do, and though they're not in much of a position to do anything about it, they're going to fuck with Ralph, whatever way they can, keep him occupied."

"Oh, my," Maggie breathed.

"All of you need to be very careful," she warned them. "Seems Ralph had a few more vampires than what we all thought. There were a few at the warehouse last night, and then the Tremere showed up. There's something I need everyone to see." She passed around the pictures of the gargoyles, and explained what we knew about them before turning to Michael. "If you're going to be my aide de camp, I'd like you here more often, to become more integrated with our group."

"You guys could come to our place," he suggested.

"That's true, we can take turns," she agreed. "What I'm saying is we need to become united. The more numbers we have, the better off we'll be. I don't want to be caught off guard like last time."

I threw a pointed look at the boys but they refused to look at me.

"Show me what you got," Madelynne said, walking toward where the weapons were set up in the kitchen.

Michael had found the gun Petor had wanted for the SUV. It was expensive, but I knew it would be worth every penny when we needed to use it. Frasier was like a kid in a candy store, handling the assault rifles and machine guns as if he'd been born with a firearm in his hand. He finally settled on a USAS12, while Petor wanted an MP-5 machine gun. Maggie didn't really want to have anything to do with the weapons, and Emily didn't necessarily want to deal with the Brujah, but in the end all of the pack members had a new gun.

"You might want to find a way to accelerate that Primogen thing," I heard Michael say as he looked at me. "It would make it a lot harder for the Tremere to come after someone under your protection when you're Primogen."

"That's my next step tonight," she told him. "Wanna go for a ride?"

I wanted to go with them, but when it became clear that Scott would not stay behind, and neither would my boys or the Brujah, I changed my mind. I knew that none of them wanted mothering, but the boys needed some sleep, and Scott needed to rest.

Power Plays and Complications

THERE'S NO REASON

THERE'S NO COMPROMISE

GODSMACK - STRAIGHT OUT OF LINE

Madelynne waited at the pub long enough to arrange a meeting with Frickland, a Ventrue who she hoped would get her in touch with Jac. They were getting ready to go when Maggie came running upstairs.

"Isa's outside with a lot of Tremere," the girl told us.

While I swore under my breath, Madelynne ordered me to stay put. She hit a switch in the kitchen that brought steel shutters down over the windows before taking Scott and Logan downstairs with her.

I paced nervously while I waited for them to come back. I knew Scott wasn't in any shape to fight, but took some comfort in knowing that Petor and Frasier were still where I knew they were safe. That comfort didn't last long. The sound of the shutters closing had woken them, and they came downstairs to find out what was going on at the same time Madelynne and the others returned to the room.

"They're gone," Madelynne said without preamble.

"What did they say?" I asked.

"What do you think they said?" she demanded irritably. "They want you back; they'll stop at nothing and go through whoever they have to do to get it."

I flinched, but I knew she was right. They weren't going to just walk away, not after making a deal with Antonio. I wished I knew what he'd given them to come after me. "Who was it?"

She shrugged. "Bunch of Tremere in nice black cars."

"You're leaving?" Isa asked Madelynne as she joined us. "May I have a word before you go?" When Madelynne agreed, Isa explained that the Brujah would be taking shifts on the outside of the building, and that she expected everyone to be equipped with communications devices by the end of the evening.

When she asked for members of the pack to help taking watch, Madelynne shook her head. "I can pretty much guarantee that only Alex will be of any use for that."

"Not even the ghouls?" Isa asked.

"None of the pack's ghouls are for protection," she pointed out. "Only Tina's are."

"They seem to know how to handle themselves," Isa replied. "If you plan to stay here with the pack, you are going to need someone protect to you during the day. Perhaps if Miss Andrews' ghouls take up part of that responsibility it would leave them out of night time activities and ease some of her...."

"Insanity?" Madelynne prompted. "Overbearingness?"

"I am not insane," I growled.

"Concerns," Isa corrected softly.

"You're not insane," Madelynne soothed, "but you are the overbearing mother."

Isa looked impatient. "Can you speak with your people and see who will participate with this so we can get a schedule down?"

"It will have to wait until later this evening," Madelynne sighed. "I have an appointment."

They agreed that Isa and the Brujah would establish the beginnings of the schedule. Isa had the idea that Madelynne should send those who could not protect themselves out of the city until she pointed out that it would be most of the pack.

"Your Gangrel pack cannot protect themselves?" Isa asked, obviously surprised.

"They can to a certain extent," Madelynne replied, "but we've never had a problem in the past, they've never had to protect themselves."

"Everything with Ralph has been low key," Logan put in. "This thing with the Tremere has acted as sort of a... well, it's given him a good excuse to come after us, more than just because he doesn't like us."

"Perhaps the time that you have now would be better spent getting them prepared for what seems to be the inevitable," Isa cautioned.

"They all know how to shoot a gun," he assured her.

"That's fine until you get hand to hand," she pointed out, "which as far as I know is something your clan is very well known for."

"I got time on my hands," I offered. "I could be teaching them while I'm sitting here."

"Then you have something to do tonight," Madelynne agreed. After ordering me not to leave the building, Madelynne took Logan and Michael and left for her meeting, leaving me to teach three Gangrel fighting skills.

I also had to argue with Petor about whether or not he could go to the agency. He wanted to install the gun we'd bought in the SUV. "That would require leaving," I pointed out. "No."

He made a frustrated noise. "What good's having it?"

I sighed and gave up. "Wait until the Rabble comes back and you can go over there with them." I hoped they'd be enough to fight off whatever the Tremere through at us next. I didn't have to wait long to find an answer to that question.

Five minute after Madelynne left, Isa got a call from one of the Brujah telling her we had company. She was headed downstairs in an instant, with Scott and I right on her heels. While she stopped at the bar to talk to Carissa, Scott and I headed for the door.

The moment we heard gunfire, Scott was gone. A glance behind me showed Petor and Frasier, standing there looking at me like they wanted me to let them out to play. I knew I couldn't stop them forever, and I knew that Scott and the others would need help. "Stay with Scott," I ordered. "Don't let him get hurt again, and don't you dare get hurt."

I didn't see much of the gunfight that followed, though I did step out from the building just far enough to get in a few shots at the bad guys. One of them got a lucky on a shot to my shoulder, but I was able to heal it easily. When the gunfire diminished, I walked to the corner of the building to see what had happened. Alex came with me to watch my back.

All of the intruders appeared to be dead or dying and their cargo van was shot full of holes. Some of the Brujah were getting to their feet, but it looked like everyone on our side was okay. At a yelled

order from Isa, Alex took my arm and pulled me back inside the building before I could see any more.

I paced nervously while we waited for someone to come in and tell us what had happened. Eventually some of the Brujah filed in, holding bundles of what looked like stuff looted from the bodies and carrying them into the bar's kitchen.

"What happened?" I demanded as they walked past. "Where are the boys? Where's Scott?"

"They're cleaning up," Isa told me from the doorway. Outside I could hear Scott's truck start. "It's probably best if you go upstairs."

"Is everyone all right?" I asked.

"Looked like it."

Before I could ask any more, she moved away to talk to the customers who were pretty nervous about having heard gunfire. I knew she'd be better able to dominate them into forgetting the incident than I would, since half the time I couldn't get the damn power to work. I went upstairs to change and go back to teaching Maggie and Emily how to fight.

It was almost an hour before the guys came back. Frasier was fine, and Scott no worse for wear, but I had to feed Petor before he could heal from a gunshot wound to his leg. I bit my tongue to stop from chastising all of them for putting themselves in danger. I knew they wouldn't appreciate my concern, and really, they were fine. Petor even held me to my word that he could leave when the Rabble came back, and Frasier went with them.

Over a dozen Brujah walked in with Madelynne and the others when they returned. She'd talked to Billy Dean, and he'd sent what Brujah we didn't already have to the pub as a show of good faith on their agreement. Carissa was nearly vibrating from the stress of having all the vampires in the bar, so Madelynne sent her downstairs and took over as bartender.

"You might be interested to know we had a little trouble while you were gone," I said as I moved to help her.

She looked at me in surprise. "What?"

"We had some trouble while you were gone," I repeated. "A street gang came by and decided to use us for target practice." I'd been surprised that they'd been mortal, but the prevailing theory was that Ralph had hired them to attack us.

"A street gang?" she repeated. "Did someone clean up the mess?"

"Yeah, Scott and the boys took care of it."

"Anyone get hurt?" she asked.

"Petor and myself, and a few of the Brujah, but everyone's okay," I assured her. "Everyone but the nine gang members currently residing at the bottom of the river."

"Did they belong to someone? Were they ghouls? From out of town?"

"Not as far as we can tell, but you know they showed up right after the Tremere," I pointed out. "We don't know if they sent them or Ralph did, or they just got a bug up their butts to use the pub for target practice. We took care of it, but I thought you should know." I watched the last of the mortal customers leave the bar. "Maybe we should take this to the agency, this is costing you business."

"It will be alright tonight," she assured me.

"What about tomorrow?"

"We'll deal with it," she said firmly. "Besides, I think your place got worse last night than mine did tonight."

"My place is fixed," I told her. "Petor and Frasier went over there during the day when I couldn't tell them no."

"Smart boys," she drawled with a smile.

I shook my head. "Don't encourage them."

"Don't hover," she shot back.

Since she refused to consider taking everyone to the agency, I went to mingle with the Brujah. I didn't know any of them very well, but they were risking their lives for me so I thought I should be friendly.

"Take Maggie," Madelynne suggested. "Find a nice boy for her to play with."

I looked at her in surprise. "They're Brujah."

She smiled. "You're Tremere, we let you play with us."

I returned her smile and did as she'd instructed. Maggie ended up having fun, instead of sitting in a corner, and I was able to take my mind off of my worries, for a little while at least.

Confidences

SO I'M GONNA BUY A GUN AND START A WAR
IF YOU CAN TELL ME SOMETHING WORTH FIGHTING FOR
COLDPLAY - A RUSH OF BLOOD TO THE HEAD

A half hour before dawn I finally talked Scott into going up to bed. He'd been quiet all night, and I knew he wasn't going to rest unless I went with him. He was taking his shirt off when I noticed him wince as the movement pulled on his wounds.

"You know, you really should have let someone else take care of the bodies." I busied myself with taking my own clothes off and told myself he didn't need me to tell him he shouldn't have attacked two vampires alone last night. Thinking of that reminded me of something I'd been meaning to ask him. "Why did you get so upset at seeing those two last night?"

He froze for a moment, not meeting my eyes. "I thought they were dead," he said in a voice almost too low to hear.

I didn't want to upset him, but I did want to know what was going on. "I take it you didn't embrace them?"

He gave a negative shake of his head without turning around.

"And you thought they were dead." He didn't answer me, but that was okay. I put the rest of my weapons in the nightstand and turned to take off my jewelry as I talked my way through the situation. "Ralph must have kept them hidden away all this time. I suppose he embraced them just so he'd be able to use them like he did last night, to piss you off bad enough that a lucky move from one of them could take you out. He knew how you'd react, didn't he?"

"I never trusted either of them," he replied simply. "Figures they turned."

I stopped and looked at him. "What else does he have that's going to make you go nuts like you did last night?"

"They were it."

"Are you sure about that? You're not exactly..." I hesitated for a moment before saying, "forthcoming on your life history. I'd like to know if I have to watch out for you to go off again."

"Are they both gone?"

I knew I had to tell him the truth, but I hoped it wouldn't upset him again. "You managed to take her out, and Madelynne staked the guy, but when we went to leave he was gone. Are you going to lose control if he shows up again?"

He shook his head again. "I know he still exists now."

"I don't suppose you want to talk about it." I didn't plan on getting upset if he didn't.

"Not really."

"You know, some women might feel insecure with a man who won't say anything about his past," I teased him softly. "Good thing I'm not like that. You'll talk when you're ready, I know that. And if you're never ready, that's okay too. I just-if there's something else that would piss you off like the two of them did last night, I'd like to know about it."

"They were it."

I realized suddenly that he hadn't looked at me since we'd gone into our room. In fact, he hadn't looked me in the eye all night. I threw my clothes in the hamper and walked to stand next to him at the window, looking up into his face. "Are you sure you're okay?"

"Yes." At last he looked me in the eye, and what I saw was a bit of a surprise. His eyes were no longer hazel, they were dark green, the brownish green of a dog's eye. It was the proof of his frenzy from last night, the mark of the beast that all Gangrel are known for.

Some woman might have been repulsed, both at the new look of his eyes and the fact that he was now one step closer to the animal some claimed the Gangrel really were. Some women might have turned away, or expressed sorrow at obvious loss of his humanity. I smiled and thanked whatever gods there were that I was not just some woman.

I moved closer and put my hand on the side of his face, looking up into his pretty new eyes. "I know I don't have to tell you to be careful, but I'm going to tell you that anyway. I don't want to see you get hurt."

He looked at me for a long moment, searching my face for something. Finally he lowered his lips to mine. I closed my eyes and leaned closer as we kissed, putting one hand on his hip and sliding the other around his neck. His arms went around my waist and the kiss deepened, becoming a thing of need rather than comfort.

When our bodies connected, he flinched away and I settled back on my heels. "You're hurt," I said as if he needed the reminder. My hands lingered on his skin, but I knew that anything more than kissing wasn't a good idea given the shape he was in. "There will be time enough for this in a couple of days when you're healed."

The disappointment in his eyes matched that in mine but he agreed with a nod and a soft chaste kiss. I was careful of his injuries when I lay beside him, cuddling as close as I could to the length of his body. The feel of his chest hair under my cheek was a familiar sensation, one that told me I was home. Even being close to him like this made all my troubles fade away.

As much as I knew it would save lives to hand myself over to the Tremere, Scott was the reason I couldn't bring myself to go. I still wasn't sure if what I felt for him was love, but I knew it was worth fighting for. I felt him relax beside me and closed my eyes, hoping that I would always have him beside me when the dawn came.

I wanted to spend some time working at the agency the next night, and so did Petor, though Frasier chose to go out with Nancy. Unfortunately, the Tremere didn't cooperate with my plans for the evening. When we got to the agency, Isa pointed out that there were several cars parked a few blocks down, and that it probably wasn't safe to stay.

"We have nine Brujah here," I pointed out, "you, me, Scott and Petor. You don't think we could handle any problems?"

"I don't need anyone else to be hurt or killed," she pointed out. "That's not what I'm about. It would be senseless for us to stay here and just wait for them to show up."

"They're going to show up no matter where we are," I said reasonably.

"At least being at the pub you have the premise of the Masquerade to keep them at bay," she replied.

"I don't know if they care about that," I said in a hard voice. "If they did, they wouldn't have sent a gang after us, daring us to break the Masquerade."

In the end I agreed not to stay long, though Petor was disappointed. Isa and Scott stayed with me while I walked through the building, inspecting the work that Petor and Frasier had done to repair the damages Ralph's people had caused. The gate to the property and the garage door were repaired, but there were still a lot of bullet holes, and the window into the office was gone.

"Why didn't you fix the glass?" I asked Petor.

"You haven't let me out of the house in two days," he replied irritably.

"Well, we'll most likely be spending the day here tomorrow, so you can fix it then." I told him. "You can have a glass company drop the glass off, I'm sure. We should go now."

"Can I stay here?" he asked.

"No."

"But you're coming back here," he reasoned. "Why don't I just stay here?"

"Because of the guys parked down the street," I told him firmly. "Get in the car."

To my relief he didn't argue any further. We went to the biker bar that was the Rabble hangout. Madelynne was to meet us there later, but as we were very early, it would be a while before she showed up.

Isa set up shifts with the Brujah, sounding so efficient at it that I asked her if she wanted a job at the agency. She turned me down politely, pointing out that she had her own tattoo shop and so didn't need a job.

We passed the time playing pool and darts, and getting to know both the Brujah and the Rabble. While they'd never pass for high society, most of them were decent enough once you got to know them.

When Madelynne arrived a few hours later, she asked for suggestions about how to take Ralph's power without killing him.

"How exactly do you think anyone can get Ralph out of the picture without killing him?" I asked.

"There has to be a way," she said slowly.

I shook my head. "No, I'm pretty sure he's gonna have to die."

"Possibly, but there has to be something," she insisted. "I don't want him dead right away, I want to take him out of power, and I want him to see me take his power."

"The only way you're going to keep him out of the picture is to kill him," Logan pointed out.

"I know, but I want to rub his face in the fact I'm taking his power," she told him.

"It stands to reason that if you have two sets of enemies," Isa put in, "you manipulate things so that they kill each other."

Logan smiled wryly. "Except the Gangrel are already working for the Tremere."

"Then you do something to undermine that trust." She sounded as if she'd played that game before, and won.

"That takes a lot more time than I want to put forth," Madelynne replied.

All of us knew we didn't have time to waste. The Tremere had decided they wanted me back in the clan fold, and they weren't going to wait long before making their next move.

Billy Dean ordered four of the Brujah to stay with me at the agency during the day. Thankfully we had already set up a sun proof area, so space wasn't a problem. Frasier didn't like staying at the agency, but Petor was thrilled that he finally got to stay home for a change.

Scott seemed a lot better when we woke after sundown, though he wasn't yet fully healed. Petor had replaced the window to the office during the day, but the bullet holes still needed patching. I spent a few hours interviewing receptionist candidates from a temporary agency and managed to find one not intimidated by either the bullet holes or the Brujah. She was to start the following Monday.

Saturday night found Frasier out with Nancy once more. I didn't like him being away so much, but I knew he'd be safer with her than he was with me. Petor wanted to stay at the agency and work, and I let him only because Isa talked some of the Brujah into staying with him.

Scott and I spent the early part of the night at Isa's tattoo parlor. She refused to leave my side, and I felt guilty that she was losing work because of my problems. Since I couldn't afford to pay her, the least I could do was sit in her parlor, watching her work.

She offered to give me a tattoo if I wanted, but I wasn't sure what I would want, if anything, so I told her I'd think about it. When she made the same offer to Scott, he laughed.

"I think I have enough body modifications already, thank you," he drawled.

It was nearly midnight when Frasier called me. "Why don't you get back to the pub?" he suggested. "There's someone with me that has a message for... everyone."

I didn't like the hesitant tone of his voice. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah," he assured me. "Petor will be on there too. I called him first."

"All right, be there soon as I can." I hung up the phone and tried very hard not to panic. My boys could take care of themselves, and Frasier had told me he was fine. "I have to get back to the pub," I told Isa and Scott as I dialed Madelynne's number to let her know what was going on.

Petor was waiting upstairs with Madelynne, Logan and Michael when we got there. Madelynne quickly filled us in on her meeting with Jac. It seems that Jac had agreed to take out Ralph in exchange for her support when he made his own bid to become Primogen.

"Good," Scott growled. "About time he died."

"Then you have no problem with it?" she asked.

"It's a little bit late to be having second thoughts, isn't it?" I drawled. "You've already made the decision."

"Yes, it was my decision to make," she agreed, "but you all are part of it."

"The sooner we can get Ralph off your back, the sooner we can get the Tremere off mine," I muttered.

Madelynne looked at Isa. "What do you think?"

"I think you're making a lot of promises," she said softly, "and I hope you keep them."

A few minutes later Frasier and Nancy arrived, bringing with them a thin Oriental woman dressed in traditional Japanese clothing and carrying a katana. The woman stopped in the doorway and took off her shoes, giving me a moment to study her. To my surprise it was Joan, co-owner of the Zombie Zoo. The last time I'd seen her she'd been wearing modern clothing, and had come very close to threatening Scott. A look at her aura told me she was very calm.

I'd been standing near Scott's chair, and now Frasier came to stand beside me. He looked okay, if a little pale. Nancy looked as if there was nothing to worry about, but I didn't like the fact that Joan had a weapon.

"Joan," Madelynne greeted her. "What is it that you needed to speak with us about?"

The woman came forward and bowed ceremoniously. Her dress was very narrow, and the movement should have been awkward, but she made it look smooth as glass. "I bring a message from my sister," she told Madelynne.

"Who is your sister and what message are you bringing?" she asked.

"The Tremere have had a falling out with your Primogen," Joan replied calmly. "They have retained the services of my sister and her kind."

"I'm not familiar with your sister," Madelynne murmured. "Could you fill me in?"

"My sister has not been seen within the city for some time," she told us. "It was thought that she was dead. I am an honorable fair warning that my sister is coming," she added, looking at me, "to collect that which the Tremere desire."

"I am curious why you are giving us a warning," my friend said slowly. "Not that I mind, but she's your sister."

"Despite all of her flaws, she was trained in the same arts that I and my sire and hers before her were," she replied. "We are an honorable line. The honor, however, has stopped with her."

"How so?" Madelynne asked. "Because of the group that she is with?"

"Yes," she agreed. "She sells their services for...."

When she couldn't seem to think of the word, I gave it to her. "She's a mercenary."

"Quite."

"And how many other mercenaries does she employ?" I asked.

"There are seven like my sister," she told us. "Seven Kindred, and rumors of a great number of their followers."

I was sure she meant ghouls. "Define 'great number'." My voice shook a little, but when Scott took my hand I managed to bury the panic that threatened to overwhelm me at her answer, though I did sink down on the arm of his chair.

"Eighty."

"That's a lot," Madelynne murmured. "These Eighty-eight are coming to Detroit to take her back by any means necessary."

Joan nodded. "They know virtually no other way."

"Do you know what their instructions are exactly?" she asked.

"Retrieve her."

I spoke up. "What about the boys?"

She shook her head. "I do not know of their fate."

"That doesn't sound good," Madelynne murmured, "not at all."

"How did you come by this information?" Isa asked.

"They approached me," she replied. "I am her sister."

"Did you help her?" Madelynne near demanded.

"I used to," came the soft reply.

"Did you this time?"

"No," I interrupted. "That's why she's here, telling us about it."

Madelynne gave me a warning look. "That doesn't mean she didn't already tell her something."

"I have provided them with no information," Joan assured us.

"Well, I thank you for not giving away anything," Madelynne said after a moment. "I'm sure that was a hard thing to do given that it is your sister, even with her not being as honorable as she once was."

"When will they get here?" Isa asked.

"They will not move this night," she replied.

"Tomorrow then," I said softly. "Will they come during the day?"

Joan shook her head. "No, I do not believe so."

Both Madelynne and Isa looked at me, but it was Madelynne who spoke. "We need to hide you quickly."

"Before you make any further plans," Joan warned, "while I have not provided them with information, I have not announced that I will be standing against them." She bowed again and turned to move toward the door.

I wasn't sure what that meant. "Does that mean you're standing with them?"

She put her shoes on without answering, and left without another word.

"Well, that was interesting," Nancy drawled.

I looked at her in surprise. "You didn't know about what she had to say before you came here?"

"No," she answered calmly. "I was one of them that thought her sister was dead."

Madelynne turned to Isa. "I think we have some phone calls to make. I'm not sure I can afford any more favors."

"Yes," she agreed, taking out her phone. As she dialed, she said to me, "You still have a chance to make your own rules in this situation."

"What do you suggest I do," I demanded, "walk back into the arms of the Tremere?"

She didn't answer me, simply turned away and spoke into the phone in her hand. No one else said any thing either, in fact no one would even look at me. When Madelynne called Logan and Scott to her side, I knew I couldn't stay in the room any longer. I fled upstairs.

Defending My Life

THAT WASN'T ANY ACT OF GOD. THAT WAS AN ACT OF PURE HUMAN FUCKERY.

STEPHEN KING - THE STAND

Eight-eight. The number didn't mean much of anything by itself, but all I had to do was add one word and I was ready to run screaming. Eighty-eight mercenaries.

I wondered what it was about Christina Kline that the Tremere Clan was willing to send an army to retrieve her. She'd been embraced less than ten years ago, not long enough to work her way up into the hierarchy of the clan leadership. Though I'd been told she was talented in Thaumaturgy, surely there were others more gifted than she that remained loyal to the clan.

The only conclusion I could come to was that Antonio had bartered something very important to the countess in order to have his adopted child return to the clan of her embrace. Yet even then I couldn't understand what was so special about Christina that he would have paid such a high price to have her back.

I wondered too why Joan had come to warn us. I knew she didn't like Scott, and mostly likely she didn't like Logan or the other Gangrel either. Add the fact that her partner in the Zombie Zoo was a Tremere and it was even more unbelievable that she would take the trouble to give us warning of her sister's planned attack.

Maybe she resented the fact that Scott had been used by a higher power in the war against her clan, and she didn't want to see her clan used by the Tremere. Maybe Trevor didn't agree with the clan's decision to get me back at all costs, and he'd sent her to give warning. Maybe the Toreador Primogen had sent to her ensure the battle for my life was an honorable one.

Honor didn't mean much to me when I knew that someone was going to die trying to keep me safe. Yet the only alternative was to leave my friends and family, to walk away from Scott and the pack and try to become Christina again. I didn't know if I could do it.

I couldn't take the boys into the Tremere clan with me. None of them had trusted Petor, and I was sure he wouldn't be safe there. Given Frasier's behavior toward the clan, I didn't think he'd be safe either. And though I knew that Scott and the pack would keep them safe, I couldn't leave them behind. They needed me to take care of them. For that matter, so did Scott, and I knew that even if I could talk him into going with me the Tremere would never accept him in their ranks.

Staying meant watching others bleed, even die for me. Leaving meant killing the person I was and becoming the woman I was before I lost my memories.

My morbid thoughts were interrupted when Scott came into the room. He closed the door and came to sit next to me on the bed, comforting me with the simple knowledge of his presence.

"Where are the boys?" I asked.

"Warehouse," he replied softly.

It was probably the best place to settle in for the fight to come. The building was less public, for one, lowering the chances of a Masquerade breach. "What about everyone else?"

"I think they're still here."

"Are they going to go to the warehouse?" I hoped they were.

"I think everyone is."

I hesitated only a moment before asking the question that had been pounding through my mind. "Do you think we can beat them?"

"I think we have a good chance," he assured me.

I looked at him, searching his face for what I hoped would be the truth. "How many do you think we'll lose?"

His shrug told me that he too thought someone was going to die. I wondered if he thought I was worth it, or if he agreed with Isa. She seemed to think I should give myself up, walk away from everyone to protect them and damn the consequences to my soul.

"What is that going to help?" he demanded when I said nothing more.

"What will help?" I asked defensively.

"Knocking off this 'poor me' bullshit," he told me sharply, "getting your guns and helping out."

He was right and we both knew it. Falling apart wasn't going to help anyone and unless I planned on calling the Tremere, the best thing I could do would be to arm myself and do whatever I could to make sure everyone fighting for me would be as safe as possible.

It didn't take me long to grab the rest of the weapons I had stashed in the room, and all of the spare ammo. Once I had everything collected I put on my leather jacket and stood near the door looking at Scott calmly.

He stood up and walked over to my side. "Are you going to run away, or are you going to stay here?"

"The only place I intend on going is the agency," I said honestly.

"Well, wait for me," he said firmly. "I've got things I need to get ready."

I sat back down on the bed, but this time my thoughts were filled with plans of defense. The enemy would have eight, maybe nine vampires if Joan fought with them. Michael and the Rabble would stand with us, as would all of the pack, giving us sixteen kindred. If the remainder of the Brujah and Isa stood with us as well, it would put our numbers close to thirty, and that wasn't counting any of our ghouls.

We'd take a stand at the agency, of course. With so many vampires, the Masquerade would be nothing but a fancy idea in someone else's head, someone who wasn't fighting for their life. There had to be a way to barricade the gates, and all entrances into the building. We would put those skilled in hand to hand combat on the first floor, while those better suited to ranged weapons would be in the upper floors, or even on the roof, picking the enemy off as they approached. Ghouls would be easy enough to kill with gunfire, and though Kindred would be harder to stop, bullets would slow them down.

Petor had some explosives stashed, and with the help of several Brujah he rigged them to go off at a few places in the drive. Billy Dean provided cement barricades and commercial dumpsters to limit the avenues of approach to the building. Jimi sent her ghouls to help us prepare as well, though we knew they wouldn't stay for the assault.

"I want you to stay out of sight with your ghouls and two Brujah at all times," Madelynn told me as we were making final preparations.

I shook my head. "I don't like that plan. I don't want to be hidden away while everyone else takes the risks for me."

"Too bad," she barked. "If you're not going to be inside out of sight, you might as well wait by the front door for the Tremere to take you, because you're handing them over on a silver platter."

"Could you sit in the office and watch everyone else die for you?" I demanded.

"You could be up on maybe the third floor out of sight," she suggested, "or on the roof, out of sight."

"On the roof with a high powered rifle," Scott put in.

"The longer it takes them to find you, the more people they have to fight through, the less of a chance it's going to be that they'll actually get to you," Madelynne pointed out.

"The more people will die," I shot back.

"No one's going to die," she soothed. "You must think positive."

I was positive. I was positive that someone was going to die because of me. Of course that didn't mean that Madelynne was wrong. I did need to be as far away from the action as possible, which meant that Scott was right. The boys and I could do a lot of damage from the roof with high powered rifles.

"Does anyone have any police ties?" Isa asked.

Madelynne shook her head. "Not for this."

"Maybe you should let the prince know what's going to happen," I told Isa. "He might be able to keep the cops away."

"I called Giles yesterday," she replied.

"Did you tell him we were going to be at the agency?" When she shook her head, I added, "Then you should call him again."

Most of the Brujah decided to stand with us, though Clarice had ordered them to leave us to our own devices. Even Billy Dean himself came after sundown the next night, bringing more ammunition and a few rockets. Michael and the Rabble were there, of course, and many of their ghouls. By the time the Eighty-eights showed up we had thirty-five vampires and eleven ghouls armed and waiting for them.

The attack was a blur when I thought back on it later. My boys and I were on the roof with a couple of Brujah and three of their ghouls, picking off those we could as they flooded in through the gate. The bombs in the drive went off as they were meant to, but the problem was that there were just too damned many of the bad guys.

I caught sight of Isa fighting what looked like schoolgirl with ball and chain, but everyone else dear to me was inside the building and I had no idea what their fate was until much later. At some point the roof was breached, and we turned to fight off the invaders. While the others fought their own battles, I was singled out by a man in a black suit and mask holding two swords.

Shooting at the guy did no good as he deflected the bullets harmlessly with his swords. I waited while he advanced, trying to figure out the best way to stay beyond his reach. When he lunged at me I shot him, but his swords hit my back as I tried to roll away. He kept soaking the bullets I shot into him as if they meant nothing while slicing away at my gun hand. It wasn't long before it went flying.

I needed some distance between me and my opponent. From the number of bad guys on the roof, I knew I wouldn't get any help from the Brujah or my boys. Without letting myself think about it

I vaulted over the side of the building, landing on the concrete four floors below. I didn't wait to see if I was followed.

Sprinting away from the building, I felt claws extend from all ten of my fingers. They wouldn't give me the distance a sword would, but since I didn't have a sword and guns didn't seem to deter this guy, they'd have to do.

When the man closed the distance between us I was able to block most of the blow from his sword and claw him across the chest. Without waiting for him to come at me again, I attacked, tearing into his stomach. Sticky blood covered my hands, and poured down his pants to stain the cement beneath his feet. He lunged at me and this time I wasn't able to dodge the blow. I fell backward, impaled on his sword.

Right about there is when my memories start to get fuzzy. I have an impression that I grabbed the sword and pushed it into my body on my way to get to him. I vaguely remember tearing into his neck with my fangs, taking blood and flesh in the grip of the frenzy that had taken hold of me. Mostly I remember gagging when I woke up some time later, vomiting pieces of the vampire that I'd killed.

I learned later that Madelynne, Logan, Scott and Isa had also fought with vampires, and won. All were killed save Madelynne's opponent. Joan had saved that one's life, stopping Madelynne's fatal blow and telling her that the woman had done crimes against another that she must pay for.

At the end of the night, five Brujah were dead and five more lay in torpor from their wounds, including two of Michael's people. A great number of ghouls had died from their injuries. Of the pack, Howard and Petor had been hurt badly, but Alex was no where to be found.

Once all the wounds had been tended and the worst of the mess cleaned up and bodies carted off, nearly everyone left the warehouse. I helped Scott and Frasier sweep up broken glass and tried not to think about how my need for independence had cost Alex and many others their lives.

A Missing Paige

YOU CAME ALONG

AND TORE THIS WORLD OUT AROUND ME

NICKELBACK - WORE UP THIS MORNING

When I woke the next evening, Scott was sitting on the edge of the bed. While I was glad to see him safe and sound, I knew from his expression there were more problems ahead.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Tremere ghouls," he replied. "They're surrounding the warehouse."

I dressed quickly and followed him down to the observation room on the second floor. Sure enough, there were cars parked on every side of the warehouse, each with one or two people in them. From what Frasier told us they had been there a while. Reaching for the phone I put a quick call into the pub, but when Logan explained that Patrick was there causing trouble I knew we'd get no help from that end.

I looked at the monitors again and cursed softly. The front gate was still down and all the barriers that Billy Dean's people had placed through the lot were gone. As we watched a few more cars pulled up, these recognizably nicer than those that had been there a while. The cars parked relatively close to the warehouse, but no one got out right away.

"You can see who it is, or you can attack," Frasier told me when I asked for ideas.

"Attacking isn't a good idea," I told him, eyeing the number of cars. "We're outnumbered." Counting the Brujah who had stayed with us, the odds were two to one even before the final four cars pulled in. One of them was a stretch limousine, and I was betting the countess was in it.

As people started piling out of cars, I checked the weapons I'd hastily strapped on before coming downstairs. I didn't have shoes on, but damn it, I had three handguns and a knife. Not that I wanted to fight tonight. Petor was still unconscious and I didn't want to even try to move him until he came around.

Zach and Archie got out of the back seat of the car closest to the warehouse and went to stand by the back of the car along with the ghouls who had ridden with them. The doors of the third car opened and Missy got out, along with another ghoul. After a few minutes, Missy and Zach walked to the side of the limo and opened the door nearest the building.

I watched the countess get out, along with a man in a suit. Though I studied their images from every camera angle, I couldn't see a weapon on any of the vampires gathered in my parking lot. Not that they needed weapons, being Tremere they *were* weapons, but the fact that they were unarmed gave me a little hope.

"Well, we have them outgunned," I said as Missy and Zach flanked the countess who was walking toward the agency doors. "Should we go talk to them and see what they have to threaten us about, or hide here and wait for them to go away?"

Frasier snorted. "You're funny."

I nodded and stood. With a curt order at Frasier to stay in the office, I took Scott and my two Brujah bodyguards downstairs to greet our guests. I followed the Brujah outside to find all of the Tremere standing nearby looking in our direction. Scott was only a step behind me, our bare feet silent on the concrete.

It was immediately clear that something wasn't quite right. While normally the countess was arrogant, haughty even, tonight her body language was much more subdued. Zach and Missy were more on edge than usual, while every once in a while I saw Trevor grinning like a fool.

"What have you done with her?" The countess demanded, taking a step in my direction.

"With whom?" I asked carefully.

"My Paige," she replied, as if I should already know.

"I have done nothing with your Paige," I told her. "I have not seen her. I've actually been avoiding all of you."

"She's gone missing," she nearly growled, frustration heavy in her tone. "She's been taken."

"I assume you mean against her will," I said softly. "I suppose I have some sympathy for that, I'm sorry that she's been taken." If things had gone differently the night before, I too would have been a captive, and the woman in front of me my jailor.

"I can't imagine why she would willingly leave my presence," she replied curtly. "Perhaps one of your dogs knows about it." Her words were punctuated by a pointed look at Scott.

Scott obviously didn't like the accusation and started growling, which made Archie growl in return. Zach stepped between the two men, which seemed to settle Archie down.

I put a hand on Scott's arm to remind him we had to be careful and to my relief, he quieted too. "As I said, we haven't seen her, and the pack was here most of last night as I'm sure you know," I told her as calmly as I could. "Why would someone want to take your Paige?"

"I don't know," she replied, "but naturally I thought of you first."

I shook my head. "Perhaps it was the other group of Gangrel. I understand you had a recent falling out with them."

"Rafael would not be so smart, or foolish," she said sternly, "to do something like this."

My eyebrow shot up. "And you think I would be?"

"It is no secret how I feel about her," she shot back. "If I were you and were going to try and dissuade me, it is the action I would think of first"

I shrugged. "Apparently I'm not that smart either."

"But you are that foolish," she countered. "Or some of your kind is." Again she gave Scott a hard look.

I chose not to point out that she was including me in the same category as the Gangrel. "I'm not saying that the pack had anything to do with your Paige's disappearance," I said carefully, "but if we were to help find her, would that gain us anything?"

She gave me a considering look. "What would you ask for?"

"Gee, maybe for you to leave me the hell alone?" I replied dryly.

"I cannot do that," she said softly.

"Because you made a deal," I shot back.

"Because you belong with us," she told me.

My chin lifted in what I'm sure looked like a stubborn movement. "I belong where I am."

"So you know nothing of her disappearance?" she asked.

"Not yet."

The countess seemed sad as she studied my face. Finally she turned toward the limo and without a word, they all followed. Everyone returned to the cars they'd gotten out of and within minutes they were pulling away from the agency.

Scott and I left Frasier to look after Petor while we went to the pub to help Logan and Madelynne deal with Patrick. We were too late, as it turns out. Ralph and several of his cronies had joined Patrick, and egged Madelynne into a frenzy before Logan and the others had kicked them out.

Logan told us the tale in the parking lot, and repeated it for Isa when she joined us. Once inside we saw that the pub was a mess, with upended tables and broken chairs. Obviously Ralph and his people hadn't left peacefully.

"Looks like you had more fun than we did with the Tremere," I told Logan. I explained to him what the countess had been after, but he didn't seem to think we'd be able to find Paige if the Tremere couldn't.

Madelynne was still shaken when we went upstairs, but when she came back from hunting with Logan she seemed much better. Scott, Isa and I went hunting as well, and we went by the agency so I could feed Petor. The boys came with us back to the pub just in case more trouble showed up, but the rest of the night passed quietly, or as quietly as it could with five Brujah hanging around a Gangrel pack.

Petor and Frasier went to work at the agency for a while, and I made sure that Petor would call the temp agency to push back the start date of our office girl. It wouldn't do to have her come to work with bullet holes all over the office. She might think it wasn't safe to work for us.

The next evening passed without much incident. The boys worked at the agency cleaning it up, while Scott and I spent some time at Isa's parlor. She still insisted on protecting me, even though I knew she had better things to do, and if we didn't go to her shop, she wouldn't make any money.

I woke up on the third night after the attack to someone pounding on the door of our apartment. Scott was already in the shower and hadn't heard the commotion. I put a robe on quickly, placing a small pistol in the pocket before going to the door and looking through the peephole. It was one of the Frenchman's ghouls.

He stepped into the doorframe when I opened the door. "You need to make your way over to the bar," he ordered.

"Okay, is there a problem?" I asked cautiously.

"Not yet." He stepped into the room and closed the door behind him. "No weapons," he instructed as I started for the bedroom. "You are to come unarmed."

I nodded and went to let Scott know what was required of us. We both dressed quickly and within ten minutes we were on our way to the pub, followed by the escort the prince had provided for us.

We weren't the only ones given a command invitation by the Frenchman. Cassidy's boys were at the pub when we got there, and it looked as if the prince's security personnel had closed the bar since the 'Open' sign was off and there were no mortals inside. Michael, Nigel and Isa showed up shortly after Scott and me, and of course Madelynne and the rest of the pack were already there.

The Frenchman's security personnel were very much in evidence, stationed all around the room between everyone gathered and the exits. Four of them had come in with me, and two with Isa, and

there were an additional two people for every one of the pack. Michael and Nigel had come in with five between them.

"What's going on?" I asked of no one in particular.

"They only want to say it once," Madelynne told me.

We sat in tense silence until one of Cassidy's boys turned to another one and said, "They're here."

The door opened and Giles walked through, looking rather flustered. Mickey Valentine, the Ventrue enforcer, followed him in, carrying two Tommy Guns. The very sight of him made Madelynne uncomfortable. Zach was next through the door wearing a suit and looking much more Venture than Tremere. The Prince came in next, followed closely by Cassidy and Casilde, with Jac trailing behind.

We all got to our feet while they took up position. The prince stood in the middle with his guards on either side. Zach and Mickey flanked the guards, and Giles stood in front of their ranks while Jac stayed slightly behind the prince.

After a moment or two of posturing, the Prince spoke. "I'm gonna cut right through the bullshit." He looked directly at Madelynne. "Rafael was murdered last night. I think you did it. Until I can prove otherwise, you're under house arrest."

Madelynne seemed very calm as she took a step forward. "I understand why you would accuse me, and I can't say that it saddens me that he is gone, but I did not kill him."

"Then who?" he demanded.

"I do not know," she admitted. "I was here all night cleaning up messes."

"Yes," he drawled. "I heard that Rafael and his people were in here."

"They were," she agreed.

"That's all the motive I would think you'd need," he replied.

"I never left all night last night," she told him. "As I said I was here cleaning."

"Fortunately I have some people that are going to investigate this," he said firmly. "I have faith in the countess to get to the bottom of it."

"I think the countess may have ulterior motives for determining the outcome of her investigation," I put in before I could think better of it.

The prince turned a cold eye in my direction. "The countess is doing her servitude to the city in this instance," he said in a hard voice, "and nothing personal shall come between that. Understood?" When I nodded, he turned back to Madelynne. "How do you explain your eyes?"

At that everyone turned to look at her, in fact she turned to look into the mirror behind the bar. Even in the dim light we could all see clearly that her eyes had changed color, and the shape of her pupil was no longer that of a human. Her eyes were now green, and shaped like that of a cat.

Madelynne turned back to the prince and explained to him that she had frenzied when Ralph and the others had visited the pub two nights ago.

"You didn't become impassioned and take him out?" He demanded.

"No, I took out my back room though," she replied calmly. "If you'd like to see it, it's still not straightened up. I was told to play by the rules and I have."

"That remains to be seen," he barked.

I opened my mouth to say something, but Scott put his hand on my arm and squeezed hard enough to hurt. I looked at him in surprise, but he didn't let up until he saw that I was going to keep quiet.

"As I said, you are under house arrest," the Prince told her before glancing at the others gathered. "The rest of you, I wouldn't go very far."

"Aside from the obvious dislike between us, was there anything else that pointed to me or one of mine?" Madelynnne inquired.

"It is well known what you desire to be," he told her. "With him gone I dare say you would have no resistance."

I looked at Cassidy for his reaction, but as far as I could see he didn't have one. Giles was fidgeting, and Casilde's tail was twitching, but other than that no one moved.

"Any questions?" the prince asked.

I had questions, lots of them. I glanced at Madelynnne to see if she thought I should ask them, but it was Scott who answered my unspoken question. His fingers dug into my arm until I could have sworn the bone was broken. I bit my lip to stop from crying out in pain and busied myself trying to pull his fingers out of my flesh.

When no one spoke up, the Prince turned and headed for the door. Everyone followed him, of course, Jac being in the rear. He turned in the doorway and shot a grin toward Madelynnne, a grin that faded as he turned to walk out.

Scott finally let go of my arm a moment before Madelynnne turned her anger on me.

"What is your problem?"

"I had questions," I replied, trying to rub the pain out of my arm. "You really think that the countess isn't going to find some way to blame this on us?"

She sighed, knowing I was right. "That's not the point."

"What about the rest of the clan?" I demanded. "Are they dead too? Are they still around?"

"We weren't allowed to play twenty questions," she told me coolly, watching me rub my arm. "You should be thanking Scott for stopping you because you could have gotten someone hurt or in trouble," Madelynnne told me. "There are other ways to find the answers to your questions."

Most of the security force had filed out of the bar by now, except for Cassidy's boys, who were on their way out, and a few ghouls wearing street clothes that sat down at one of the tables.

"Maybe you should ask the boys what happened to the rest of Ralph's people before they leave," I suggested to Madelynnne.

"We'll find out," she assured me.

"I'm still curious as to whether they found the countess' Paige," I added.

"Why don't you go ask?" she shot back.

Alec turned as they reached the door. "No, they haven't found Paige, and the rest of Ralph's people are being restrained."

"Is there any other evidence that points to me?" Madelynnne asked.

"Honestly there isn't any other evidence needed," he told her. None of the boys seemed to much care whether Madelynnne had killed Ralph or not.

"What am I supposed to do now?" Madelynne asked a few minutes later when we were all upstairs.

"Wait for the countess to figure out we didn't do it and blame it on us anyway?" I asked dryly.

That might have sparked another argument, but it was interrupted when my phone rang. It was Frasier. "Why haven't you called us yet?" he demanded. "What's wrong? Did you bump your head?"

"No, but I did hurt my arm, does that count?" I asked dryly. I explained the situation to him, and told him that they needed to be careful. He didn't seem to think that Ralph's people would come after either him or Petor, but I didn't want either of them taking chances.

Judgments

FEAR NOT FOR THE FUTURE, WEEP NOT FOR THE PAST.

PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY

The next week passed quietly. I was finally able to orient the girl from the temp agency, and she didn't even ask about the remainders of the clean up at the warehouse.

There was always two of the prince's security force at the pub keeping an eye on Madelynn. They rotated the shift, and stayed out of the way for the most part. She made sure they were fed and always let them know when she was going upstairs, and they didn't cause any trouble. They even tipped.

Billy Dean seemed to think that the worst of my problems were over and so asked the Brujah to scale back their involvement in my protection. Most night I had just one to keep me company, and Isa of course. There always seemed to be one at the bar as well.

Word came down that all of Ralph's people had been taken out, both Kindred and Kine. Judging by the way it happened, it had been heavy gunfire the same night Ralph had been killed. The rumors changed after a few days so we weren't quite sure if the whole clan was wiped out, but either way none of them were left in the city.

The Tuesday after Madelynn's house arrest we got word that Paige had been returned to the countess. No one seemed to know where she had been, but everyone was certain she was back. Two days later we were summoned to meet with the Prince.

Later that evening we were standing in the conclave room in front of the prince. Mickey was present once again, as were Giles and Cassidy's boys. The countess was seated to the Prince's right with Zach and Paige standing nearby. Jac was seated to the prince's left.

Madelynn was instructed to sit, and she did so. Giles invited the rest of us to sit as well, but there were politics to play. Michael stood slightly behind and to the left of Madelynn, while Logan took up an identical place to her right. Seeing their position, I was ready to stand next to Michael when I realized that Scott planned on staying beside me. I settled for standing near Logan with enough room for Scott to stand between us, which he did.

The prince continued to wait until we were sure he was actually waiting for someone. A few minutes later Billy Dean came in and sat next to the countess, who didn't seem happy to see him. Clarice's absence was almost a tangible thing.

Once the Toreador Primogen came in he went to stand behind Jac. He waited there for a long moment until Jac got the point and moved down a seat. Paul greeted the prince almost formally before taking the seat that Jac had vacated.

Finally the prince sat up and looked at Madelynn. "I never thought you would make it this long being good. It seems you found some control."

"I was told I was under house arrest," she reminded him. "I did what I was told."

"Well, after interviewing Kindred of the city, very few people had anything ill to say of you or your people," he announced. "The two most pronounced defendants of your virtue were, unsurprisingly, Billy Dean, whom I understand you have struck a partnership, business or otherwise it does not concern me, and my own dear Jac."

Jac's face was carefully blank under the scrutiny of the Frenchman's heavy gaze.

"Jac's interests are self involved," the prince continued, "but that's your problem. The countess and her people have spent an exhaustive amount of time going over the evidence, performing their tasks, doing what they need to do." He looked to the countess and nodded.

She stood and took a step toward the table. She began speaking, shooting glances between the prince and Jac. "After performing tests, we were unable to prove conclusively who the culprit was, or wasn't." At that point she was looking at Jac, who smirked. Interestingly enough Paige cringed. "Therefore it is my judgment that Miss Walker was not responsible for Rafael or his followers' demise."

I realized then that Paige had been staring at Jac during the entire meeting. It was obvious that she was frightened of him, and her fear made me think I knew exactly where Paige had been and why the countess couldn't find her.

There were several minutes of silence after the countess sat back down. Finally the prince spoke again.

"The Gangrel will go without a representative for one month in order to allow those interested in the seat to step forward," he proclaimed. "I assume you will be the first to announce your intent."

"Yes," Madelynne agreed.

"So noted." The prince looked first at Logan, then at Michael as if he expected one of them to announce their intention of trying for the Primogen seat. When neither of them reacted at all, he dismissed everyone by saying that Madelynne was no longer under house arrest.

Paul stopped Madelynne before she could leave and brought in Joan, who was dressed as a geisha girl, wearing one katana and holding another. The Toreador Primogen gave a pretty speech about how he'd been dishonored by his progeny and gave the katana Joan had been carrying to Madelynne alone with a request that she forgive him for the dishonor of not controlling his childer.

"I feel there is nothing to forgive," she said simply. "It was a decision they made on their own."

"She has been... dealt with," he told her before going back to his seat.

After a final assurance that she held no grudge against him, Madelynne took the katana and we exited the conclave room. Isa remained behind for a few minutes, but caught up to us at the elevator.

"Problems?" I asked softly.

"Not at all," she denied.

There was some speculation during our quiet celebrating at the Sanctuary as to whether or not another Gangrel might step up and try for the spot Madelynne wanted. It was generally agreed that Cassidy would find being Primogen a step down in the city's politics, and no one else would likely want the position. Michael did suggest that Patrick might try for it just to cause problems, but Madelynne didn't seem to like my suggestion of killing him off to stop him from doing so.

Concerns

I HAVE SEEN WHAT POWER DOES, AND I HAVE SEEN WHAT POWER COSTS. THE ONE IS NEVER EQUAL TO THE OTHER.

BABYLON 5: EPIPHANIES

In the weeks that followed, Alex's absence was felt by all of us in the pack, though some of us showed our grief more than others. Logan obviously mourned our lost pack mate though he didn't have much time to grieve. He was ever mindful of what we all hoped would be Madelynne's rise to Primogen, and he tried to take on as much of her normal work load as he could, especially when it concerned the new club she was opening.

Emily seemed to be taking Alex's death the hardest. She kept to herself most of the time, even though I tried to get her to spend time with us at the agency. I noticed that whenever Nancy called, stopped by, or was even mentioned, Emily either started growling or left the room. This was so different than her usual behavior that I made a point to ask her about it. She became very defensive that I finally had to drop the subject.

Howard didn't come around much for a week or so after Alex's death. When he did show up he simply said he was working on something, but wouldn't say what it was. Though more quiet than usual, he was soon back to his nightly visits at the pub.

Maggie and Alex had been very close, and she was very upset about his death. She spent a lot of time fretting over Petor, and even when he had healed she continued to hang around. While I was pretty sure that nothing intimate had happened between them, I knew that she needed someone to take Alex's place in her life. She treated Petor more like an older brother than the close friend Alex had been to her, but their relationship seemed to ease her grief. In any case, Petor didn't seem to mind her being around.

Though it seemed to take forever for Petor to recuperate from the wounds he'd received the night of the attack, I knew it wasn't much longer than a week. I made sure that he took it easy, and Scott took up what tasks he could while Petor was laid up.

Frasier helped out at the agency when and where he could, but he too was very quiet. He claimed he was simply processing everything when I asked, but he didn't seem to notice Emily's animosity toward his girlfriend. He did make a point to tease Petor about his injuries, and about Maggie, who was never far from Petor's side.

Michael spent a lot of time with Madelynne, talking by themselves or with Logan and Nigel. Stretch and the Rabble Brujah became familiar figures at the pub, and many nights the pack joined them at their normal hang out. Some of their ghouls had experience in construction or vehicle repair, and so agreed to help us at the agency in exchange for beer and pizza. Even the other Brujah who had fought with us stopped by from time to time to help or just hang out.

The fact that most people believed that the danger was passed didn't seem to stop Isa from coming around nearly every night. She said that she was simply keeping her word, and I couldn't argue. I didn't think the Tremere would just give up now.

Scott didn't seem to think so either. He was still around nearly every night and didn't seem to be worried about his job, even though he missed more time than he worked. I can't really say that he was quieter than before since he'd never said much to begin with.

There was something though, something I didn't notice for a couple of weeks and when I did it was glaringly obvious. It had happened after Madelynne had talked to everyone about who would

fulfill what positions in the clan when she took office. There was a tension between Scott and Logan, tension you couldn't see when the entire pack was together, but it was clear when they were with just Madelynne and me, or right after the two of them had talked alone.

It was so out of the ordinary that I had to ask him about it one night when we were alone. "Is there was a problem with Logan?"

He shook his head and looked away.

"Then what is the problem?"

Now he looked me in the eye. "No problem."

"But there is something," I prompted.

His eyes fell. "Yeah."

I knew he didn't like to talk about, well, anything, but I had to know. "What is it?"

He shook his head again. Just when I thought he wasn't going to say any more, he spoke softly. "We've been here before. When Holden was in charge."

"You mean with you being the enforcer?" When he nodded, I continued. "I think I've got some idea of what Holden was like, if Ralph was any indication, but I seriously doubt Madelynne would ask you to do the things Holden did. Not that I know what those were."

"Holden didn't ask us to do those things at first," he told me. "And by the end, he wasn't 'asking' anymore."

I hesitated a moment, weighing the words he was saying and more than a few that he wasn't. "You know Madelynne pretty well; do you think she's going to change like Holden did?"

"Power corrupts," he said in a very low voice.

He was right, it could and did. I didn't know Madelynne as well as he did, and I sure as hell hadn't known Holden or what he'd been like before he took power. None of that mattered, of course. What mattered was taking care of what was bothering him. "We'll just have to make sure that doesn't happen. I don't exactly know what it was Holden made the two of you do, but I would never stand by and watch anything like that happen again."

I meant every word of what I'd said. I knew Scott was big and strong, and that normally he protected everyone else, but he needed protecting too, even from Madelynne or Logan.

Madelynne hadn't included me in her announcements of clan positions. I focused on what needed to be done at the warehouse and tried not to be disappointed at being left out. Honestly, I wasn't Gangrel, and I never would be. Though Madelynne and the other accepted me, I knew there would always be something that held me apart from them, and never was it more clear than in the weeks after Alex died.

A few nights after talking with Scott about his concerns I managed to find Madelynne alone. She was doing some paperwork and seemed distracted when I started talking to her, but I knew I couldn't walk away without saying something.

"Have you noticed a little..." I wasn't sure how to put it, really, so I settled for, "tension lately?"

She looked up at last. "Yeah, given all that has happened in the last week it's expected."

"So, you're not worried about it?"

She shrugged. "I think that we all need time to get past what has happened, don't you?"

"I suppose that's true," I agreed slowly. "I just hope that everything that's happened doesn't interfere with Scott and Logan's relationship."

"What has Scott told you?" she asked, giving me her full attention.

"Yes, because he's so talkative," I murmured.

She laughed. "Then he hasn't said anything?"

"He said very little," I replied honestly. "He has some concerns."

"About me becoming like Holden, right?" she said before I could continue.

I was relieved that I didn't have to spell it out. "Yeah, that's what it boils down to."

"Logan and I had the same conversation earlier and I assured him that I would never become what Holden was," she told me. "I think that Scott has known me long enough that he can trust me to not be like that."

"Which is exactly what I told him," I assured her. "However, whatever Holden had him do really bothers him, even now. If he wasn't the macho type I'd say that he is afraid of being forced to do those types of things again."

Her face became very serious, making me believe she knew some of the things that the men had been forced to do. "It will never come to that."

"I never really thought that it would." I paused again, gathering my thoughts. "If you need something done that you even think would bother Scott, give it to me, not him. I know I'm not Gangrel, but I'd do anything you'd ask me to."

"And how do you think that would make him feel if I asked you to do something that he should be doing or thinks that he should do?" she asked reasonably.

"I'm talking about stuff that he wouldn't want to do," I told her. "Things that would remind him too much of what Holden made him do."

"If it comes to that then I will ask Michael and his group to deal with it," she said with a shake of her head. "Not you, Scott or Logan."

It wasn't the first time she'd outright rejected one of my suggestions in the last few weeks. While she probably didn't mean anything personal by it, I had a hard time not doing so. "I understand."

She leaned forward. "Do you?"

I shrugged. "You know it really doesn't matter if I do it or Michael's group does it, as long as Scott never has to."

"I can't guarantee that he will never have to do something that he doesn't like or agree with," she said firmly. "It's something that we all have to do once in a while, but I will never be like Holden. I can't keep Scott in a bubble, protected from all the bad things out there. He's a big boy and will make choices and decisions on his own and neither one of us can stop him. I for one am not going to even try."

"I'm not asking you to protect him from the bad things out there," I told her, "just don't make him be one of them."

"We all already are."

"I think you know better than I do what I mean," I said impatiently. "You know more of what things were like when Holden ran the show."

"That is true." She sat back in her chair, playing with her pencil. "I won't force Scott or anyone for that matter to do anything, but that doesn't mean that I won't have to ask once in a while for things to be done. Honestly I can't see things like what happened in the past coming up again."

"Then it won't be a problem."

"No, it won't." She hesitated a moment, then laid her pencil down on the table. "What else did he say?"

"Getting that much was like pulling teeth," I muttered.

"I'm sure that it was. You can tell him what we talked about," she suggested, "just to reassure him of things and where I stand."

I shook my head. "I'm afraid the only thing that will assure Scott that you won't turn out like Holden is you not turning out like Holden. It's not that he doesn't trust you; it's more that he's been burned before by someone he once trusted."

"Haven't we all?"

I shook my head. "Like I remember."

"You've gotten some memories back," she reminded me. "Surely you have to know something of the relationships that you had with them. You were her once, as much as you don't remember or even want it to be, but the memories are there buried."

"Sometimes I feel like that's true," I said softly, "sometimes I just feel like I was born the night you found me and everything I remember of Christina's life, none of that was real."

"But it was," she insisted.

"So they keep telling me," I muttered. Louder, I said, "I know that it was real, but it isn't real now. I don't feel like I could have ever been that person. I don't want to believe that I could've been like that."

"It's the same way with me when I was with Patrick," she agreed, "the same with Logan and Scott when they were with Holden. We've all just moved on with our lives and are in a different place now. You just have the luxury of having forgotten all the things you've done."

"Sometimes it makes it easier I guess," I said sadly, "but it makes it harder too."

"I'm sure that it does." She reached across the table and covered my hand with her own. "Best thing that you can do is forget the past as best you can and work on your future."

I smiled wryly. "And that works well in theory. In practice I need to get the Tremere off my ass."

"We're working on that," she said, letting go of my hand and picking up her pencil. "It just might take some time."

"In the meantime I don't want anyone else to get killed because of me," I told her seriously.

"I don't plan on letting anyone else getting hurt." I could see the tension moving back into her body. "Besides I think the Tremere will leave you alone for a bit."

"I doubt they'll give up," I warned her.

"No, but I think that it will be a while before they attack again."

"Or they may attack now when we're not expecting them." I hesitated a moment, then told her what I'd only told Scott before now. "Somebody's been following me, someone new."

I told her of the figure on a motorcycle that had been waiting for me outside of the agency one of the few times I left there alone. Whoever it was had been too far for me to see clearly, even after I'd enhanced my vision with Auspex. By the time I'd gotten in my car and tried to go after them, they were long gone.

"They've been following me for a couple of weeks now," I added, "since the Tremere backed off." I gave her a brief description person, but honestly from what little I'd seen it could have been anyone, male or female. I hadn't even gotten a good look at the motorcycle or seen the face because the visor on the helmet had been down.

"Have you ever got a look at the license plate?" she asked. When I shook my head, she added, "Have they ever been around here?"

"I don't know." I admitted. "I think they have, but I didn't notice them until the other night and I haven't seen them since. I wasn't paying much attention until I saw them at the agency."

"Do you think this person may be Tremere or working for them?"

"I doubt it, they're too subtle for that," I told her. "Besides the Tremere have been coming in pairs and this one was alone."

"Next time try to use that Auspex to get a better look," she suggested.

"I did," I told her, "it just didn't help much. I hope to get a closer look at them next time, maybe figure out if they're friend or foe."

"Did this person seem... hostile?"

I thought about it for a moment. "Not really. I didn't see any weapons, and they didn't attack. When I got ready to leave they took off before I could get out of the gate."

She hesitated, then said, "Could it be Jason?"

I frowned, thinking about that possibility for the first time. "I don't know, I guess it could have been, but why would he just watch like that? Why wouldn't he call me, or show up here?"

"Because of Scott," she pointed out, "because of everything that's been going on around here. I don't know why guys do the things they do."

"He swore he wouldn't come to Detroit as long as I was still seeing Scott," I reminded her. "Since I'm still seeing him, I doubt it was Jason."

She shook her head. "You don't know that for sure. You really don't know anything about this person, so it could be him."

I didn't want to believe that Jason would come to town and not contact me. Then again, I honestly didn't think he would come to Detroit, not after swearing he wouldn't as long as I was seeing Scott. I told myself I had to do whatever I had to next time to find out for sure.

Official Presentation

ALL THOSE WORDS THAT HURT YOU
MORE THAN YOU WOULD LET IT SHOW
SUGAR RAY - FALLS APART

A month after Ralph's death the entire Gangrel clan was called to the prince's office. Isa was present in her official role as his advisor and I went because no one told me not to. Casilde was in her usual position opposite Cassidy, and Giles was there as well, flitting about the edges of the room.

The rest of the people gathered were all of the Gangrel in the city, with two exceptions. It was no surprise that neither Patrick nor Anne would support Madelynne. In fact, he might have made a bid to be Primogen himself, had not Michael and the Rabble... dissuaded him.

All of the pack stood firmly behind Madelynne, of course. Michael and his people swore their allegiance to Madelynne, including all six of his Brujah, which surprised no one. Though Sampson swore to 'not make witness against' Madelynne, he asked to be left out of Kindred Politics, for now.

No one expected Cassidy to join the Gangrel who swore allegiance to Madelynne. His position as the prince's right hand man made him more powerful than nearly anyone in the city, so none of us were about to argue with him. He did, however, pledge the aid of his boys should Madelynne need them. Another Gangrel under his protection also refrained from swearing to her, though no one could seem to remember that Kindred's name. Bekah, due to her position in Caine Securities, was not required to pledge her support to the new Primogen.

While everyone was gathered, the prince announced those who would fill official roles within the Gangrel clan. The prince appointed Barkley as his whip to the clan. Though he still swore his allegiance to Madelynne, Barkley could not be looked at as part of the clan; rather he remained a part of Cassidy's crew. Michael would be Madelynne's second, as they had agreed upon. Logan was to be the clan whip, making sure that all in the clan knew what Madelynne needed them to know and giving instructions, when necessary. Scott was appointed the clan enforcer though we all hoped his tasks would tend toward protecting the pack more than enforcing the Primogen's wishes.

When the prince would have included me as a secondary enforcer, Madelynne corrected him. It seemed that she wanted me to have no position within the clan, at least not formally. Madelynne told me later that it was to keep me out of trouble, to protect me, but at the time I was devastated by her open rejection, though I tried not to show it.

Once those who would swear their allegiance to Madelynne did so, myself included, the prince stood. "Madelynne and her officers will come with me for the presentation to the Primogen Council," he announced. Those who'd been named followed him and Madelynne out along with Cassidy, Isa and Casilde. They all returned twenty minutes later looking none the worse for wear.

It would take more than one elevator to carry us all to the ground, and as Scott stuck to my side he made sure I was in the first elevator with Madelynne and her other officers. Once we were on the sidewalk waiting for the others, Madelynne turned to me.

"I don't want you to take it personally, that I didn't want you named as enforcer with Scott," she told me. "I just don't want the entire Kindred society to know about anything you do for the clan right now. I want to keep your activities low key, given what's going on with the Tremere." She hesitated a moment, then added, "I hope you understands that this in no way affects our friendship or your position within the pack."

There had been many things over the last few weeks that she had done to make me believe she no longer thought of me as part of the pack. I wasn't sure if it had happened when Alex was killed, or if it was something that had happened afterward, but the fact remained that she did not look upon me in the same light that she had before.

I looked back toward the Renaissance Center for a moment. I didn't want her to see in my eyes that I didn't really feel like she considered me a member of the pack anymore. "The Tremere might not see it that way. They might think you're not as interested in keeping me now that I've gotten Alex killed and you're the Primogen."

"You will still be by my side for all that I do," she promised. "You just won't have an 'official' position, Tina. I'm sure that there will come a time when you are asked to do something, but I would rather have it kept a secret and not have you as the poster child for the clan enforcer."

"No, I get why you don't want me to be public," I replied coolly, meeting her eyes, "but they might not." An official position would show everyone that I was accepted as Gangrel by Madelynne and the others. By denying me a position, she left me wide open for the Tremere to try and claim me.

"Not putting you in any sort of position within the clan does not mean that you are weak or that we are uninterested in you," she insisted. "There are other Gangrel who are not in any position either. It doesn't mean that we think that it was your fault that Alex was killed, it doesn't mean that we don't want you in our pack, all it means is that I chose Scott as my clan enforcer, nothing more."

Her irritation only fired my own. "Look, don't tell me, tell the Tremere. I told you I get it."

"There is nothing for me to tell them," she growled. "Our pack and clan business is none of their business at all. You are and always will be part of our pack whether you hold a position or not."

Just as I was drawing breath to reply, I caught sight of a familiar figure from the corner of my eye. The biker was back, watching me from a block away where they were sitting on their motorcycle. "Shit, there they are."

"Who?" Madelynne demanded, following the direction of my gaze.

"The biker I told you about," I explained. "Over there." A car passed between me and the biker, and when it was gone, so was my stalker.

No one else seemed to have seen it. I began cursing as the rest of our group joined us. Madelynne grabbed my arm and pulled me toward the parking garage where our cars waited. Again I was included in the car with Madelynne and her officers only because Scott saw to it. We headed back to the pub where we would change for the party the prince was holding in Madelynne's honor.

Madelynne admitted on the ride that she had seen the biker, but not gotten a good look at whoever it was. "Could be anyone watching you for any number of reasons."

"Yeah, well, I have enough people watching me," I muttered.

"Maybe they are watching all of us and we just haven't noticed yet," she suggested, looking at the others in the car. "Have you noticed anyone around lately that we haven't seen before?"

"Just the warlo—" Logan stopped for a moment, glancing at me, before finishing, "Tremere Ghouls."

I smiled at him, not offended at all. "You don't have to change what you say for me. I'm not one of them, not anymore." My smile faded quickly. "This seems to be a new player, and we need to find out who it is."

"Then we all need to be on the look out for our mystery biker," Madelynne agreed. She asked me to give everyone a description of the person, but it wasn't much help.

"You just described half of our ghouls," Michael said with a laugh.

Unfortunately, it was all we had to go on, and there was nothing we could do to find out who it was until they showed up again.

Two hours later we were pulling into the drive at the prince's mansion. Though not all of the Gangrel had wanted to dress up for the occasion, we'd managed to find something for everyone to wear, including suits for Michael's Brujah.

A red carpet stretched from the door of the mansion to the drive, where cars were pausing to let out their Kindred passengers. As we climbed out of the limo we were met by several of the prince's security staff wearing tuxes and checking for weapons. As we'd come unarmed, we were cleared quickly. We stepped to one side to wait for the rest of the pack, who were in the SUV that Frasier was driving. Petor had driven the limo.

Zach, Mary Margaret and Archie were waiting near the porch. When they saw us, they headed in our direction led by Mary Margaret. Behind them I saw Missy step out of the foyer and onto the porch. Something about her demeanor was vaguely threatening. She seemed a little taken aback when Stretch and the other Brujah Rabble stepped between her and the rest of the Tremere. Barkley, Sampson and his girlfriend Delilah stood off to one side, watching the proceedings cautiously.

Mary Margaret and Zach greeted our group formally, and once the pleasantries were out of the way, she spoke directly to Madelynne. "The countess has asked a favor of you this evening."

"What is that?" she asked.

"She wishes House and Clan Tremere to enter the party... whole."

Madelynne shrugged. "So go in."

"The countess is not here yet, she is waiting," she said, looking at me, "for the rest."

"That choice is Tina's not mine," Madelynne replied smoothly. "She'll enter with who she pleases."

"Very well." The woman walked around Madelynne as if she had ceased to exist and came to stand in front of me. "Then the countess' request falls to you, Miss Andrews."

"While I appreciate that you all still think of me as a member of the family," I said carefully, trying not to offend her, "I would prefer to enter with the Gangrel."

"The countess has requested we strongly urge you to do this one favor for her," she replied firmly.

"We'll enter together, as one," Madelynne suggested.

Mary Margaret didn't even blink at her words.

"The countess and her clan are welcome to enter with the Gangrel, if she so chooses," I said politely.

"The clans do not enter together," she told me. "They are announced."

I hesitated a moment, not quite sure what to do. I glanced at Scott to see his reaction, but he was watching Archie. I looked toward Madelynne, but before I could get a good look at her face, Mary Margaret spoke again.

"Madelynne has deferred her power and the choice of this matter to you."

This was a decision I had to make, and at least this time they couldn't say Madelynne had made it for me. Not that it was a hard decision. If I gave into the countess now, she'd be able to say I'd accepted the Tremere as my clan. "Please give my apologies to the countess," I said politely. "I will be entering with my family."

Her cold eyes looked at me for a very long moment. "As you wish," she said finally, before turning and rejoining Missy to one side of the porch. Zach and Archie followed without a backward glance.

"I'm sure that will have consequences," I murmured to myself as we joined the rest of the Gangrel on the porch. Billy Dean was sitting opposite the Tremere and he stood as we approached.

He greeted Madelynne with a kiss on the cheek then welcomed everyone else pleasantly. "I figured Missy was up to something when I saw her lurking about," he told Madelynne.

"She wanted the Tremere clan to enter whole," she replied.

"That is not surprising," he said with a glance in my direction. "The countess is very formal, especially when it suits her needs."

"I left the decision to Tina. It's her choice who she entered with."

He met my eye with a serious look. "You realize that will not sit well."

"Yeah, I'm sure she won't be real happy," I drawled.

"That's putting it mildly." He turned and smiled at Madelynne. "Well, you all are holding the line up."

"We'll see you inside," she told him.

As we entered the ballroom, a major domo announced, "I present to you clan Gangrel under the leadership of Madelynne Walker." We paused slightly behind Madelynne at the top of the stairs, then followed her down into the fray.

The Nosferatu, Toreador and Ventrue clans had already been announced, and were standing or sitting around the room. The prince and his bodyguards had not arrived, and neither had Isa.

Clan Malkav was announced behind us. I turned to smile at Delilah and saw that one of her clan mates was wearing a southern belle ensemble, complete with bustle, gloves and an umbrella.

The Brujah entered shortly afterward. Billy Dean and Clarice stood side by side at their head, but they were obviously not together. They split soon after their clan was announced, and all of them moved into the room in their usual cliques, although Clarice sat alone.

We followed Madelynne as she moved through the crowd to network. Howard ended up sitting with the Rabble at one of the long tables where most of the Brujah were sitting. Maggie looked lost until Madelynne asked Michael to stand as her date for the evening. He agreed, and when he went to talk to her she latched on to his proffered arm. It took her a few minutes to relax, but in the end she was able to enjoy herself.

We had moved further into the room by now, and some of the Gangrel had moved off. Emily was talking to a well handsome well dressed Ventrue who was standing in a group of several more of that clan's members.

I was not surprised when Nancy approached. After some pleasantries she managed to find a way to ask if Frasier had driven us to the party. With a smile, I admitted that he had. I couldn't say I

knew Nancy well enough to like her, but at least she seemed to like Frasier, and from what I could tell the feeling was mutual.

Madelynne had just finished speaking with Jac when I saw Isa walking toward us. I smiled and greeted her as she approached.

"How's it going?" she asked with a smile.

"I've pissed the Tremere off already," I said dryly.

"You know it's really not conducive to, you know...."

"Living another day?" I asked. When she agreed, I said, "I just didn't want to walk in with the Tremere and they didn't like that I didn't want to walk in with them."

"I guess that's the problem of having clan in the city," she warned me.

"I'm not claiming them"

"They're trying to claim you," Michael put in.

"We're trying to avoid that, aren't we?" I asked.

"It seems like they'd make a better...." Isa let her words trail off.

"That's the Tremere for you," I told her. "Which is why I'm in here with the Gangrel and not out there with them."

It wasn't too much later that the Tremere were announced. The countess stood in front of the crowd and the rest of them spread out behind her like they'd practiced it a thousand times. It was the first time I'd seen the entire clan gathered, and suddenly I was glad the Eighty-eights had attacked instead of the Detroit Tremere.

"How come they get so many people and we don't?" Madelynne asked irritably.

"Probably because you had half the clan murdered," Michael suggested.

"It looks vaguely reminiscent of a marching band maneuver at half time," Isa said with a smile.

"And I would have messed up the choreography," I added softly.

"That would have been half the fun," Michael laughed.

"Good point." Across the room I could see the countess marking my position in the crowd. Knowing it was too late to hide, I set about ignoring her and every other Tremere in attendance.

They moved down the stairs and spread out, leaving only the chantry leaders and Paige standing near the countess and her elderly escort, who had offered her his arm.

"Look, the wicked witch of the west has a date," Madelynne drawled.

"He looks about forty years her senior," Michael pointed out.

"So? What better way to get in than sleeping with the Primogen?" she asked. Beside her, Logan smiled.

"That's Gerard," Michael told us. "He's her sire. He doesn't get out much, half the time he's in torpor."

Isa decided that she would like to find a drink, and Scott and I went with her. "So what did the Tremere say to you, exactly?" she asked as we walked toward the refreshment table.

"They were told to 'strongly advise' me to enter with the Tremere so they could make an entrance as a 'whole' clan," I replied in a low voice.

She glanced toward the nearest Tremere who, while not avidly watching me walk by, had definitely taken note. "Who talked to you?"

"Mary Margaret."

"I don't think I know her very well," she said with a frown.

"I don't think you're missing much," I replied dryly. Of all the Tremere, that one reminded me the most of Brenda as she had been on her first visit to Detroit.

Isa looked over at where the countess was standing with her sire. "They're not going to give up on you, are they?"

"No, no I don't think so," I agreed. "I wish I knew what it would take to get them to give up."

From her sideways glance I knew she was thinking something, but now wasn't the time to ask what. There were ears everywhere, and too many of them were Tremere. I noticed that most of them seemed to be keeping an eye on me, although none of them were being obvious about it.

Madelynne continued to canvas the room while we were away, but eventually we caught up to her. Isa watched her talk to various people for a while, but once we were relatively alone, she asked how Madelynne stood with the Toreador.

"Good, we're friends," Madelynne said dryly. "Remember, Paul gave me the sword of the one who tried to hack us down?"

"That's one clan you don't owe and isn't out to get us anymore," I added.

"What do you intend to do about Clarice?" Isa asked.

Madelynne looked across the room to where the woman in question was still sitting alone. "That remains to be seen."

I studied Isa's face. "Is she really mad at you because you didn't make the Brujah go away when the Toreador attacked?"

She cleared her throat. "Let's just say that any friendship that Clarice and I may have shared no longer exists."

Madelynne was quite interested to hear about the change.

"I believe that her attempt at friendship weren't altogether truthful anyhow," Isa explained, "so it's probably just as well."

"You don't think she was being open and honest with you about why she wanted to be friends?" Madelynne asked.

"No," Isa said firmly. "She has no honor."

"Then what was she trying to gain by befriending you?"

"I'm not quite sure what she hoped to gain," she admitted. "Maybe she hoped to get some influence with the prince, which wouldn't have happened. Perhaps she saw away to keep Tina away from the Tremere and cultivate a closer relationship with you. It wouldn't be the first time that I've been used for what I can do."

Madelynne smiled. "And what can you do?"

"Did you see the shadows?" I asked dryly.

Logan grinned too. "Did you miss the Lasombra?"

I was getting ready to speak again when a voice from behind made my whole body freeze.

"Good evening, Miss Andrews," the countess drawled.

I felt the muscles in my face flinch and took the time to clear it before turning with a polite smile. "Good evening, countess."

"I was rather disappointed to hear you would not honor my simple request," she told me.

"As I said to Mary Margaret, I apologize," I said carefully, "however I felt that I had to enter with my family."

She smiled. "But we could be your family as well if you would but give us a chance."

"I'm afraid I value my free will a bit too much for that," I told her.

She looked genuinely hurt. "Do you think us that boorish, that... uncouth?"

"I think that you are a tightly knit clan that value your close ties above all else," I replied.

"And how is that any different than the pack?"

I shook my head. "The pack values their individuality as well as their closeness."

"As well as your individuality, I assume," she murmured.

"They allow me to be who I am," I agreed. "Who I would like to be."

"If you truly think so," she said coolly.

"If I did not, I would not be with them," I replied confidently.

"If you say." Obviously she didn't believe me.

I bit my tongue to stop a cutting comment from shooting out. There was enough animosity between the Tremere and myself, I didn't need to make it worse.

After a few moments of uncomfortable silence, the countess said, "Good evening then, we shall speak again."

"I'm sure we will," I replied evenly. "Good evening." When she walked away I turned back to the others and didn't bother to hide my grimace. "That could have gone worse. I'm not quite sure how, but it could have."

"They could have taken you and left everyone else dead where they stand," Isa suggested.

"Okay, well, I suppose that's true," I murmured, wondering if Isa had actually done that to someone while she'd been with the Sabbat.

Thankfully, the rest of the night was fairly uneventful. While the Tremere continued to keep an eye on me, there was nothing they could do to me here, under the watchful eye of the prince. I knew they wouldn't give up, but I didn't think they'd be so obvious as to hire mercenaries again.

Unfortunately, I was right.

Checkmate

NOTHING IN LIFE IS SET IN STONE

THERE'S NOTHING THAT CAN'T BE TURNED AROUND

GARBAGE - ANDROGYNY

On the night of Madelynne's first official meeting with the conclave, I got a call from her while she was on her way back to the pub. "I need you to meet me at the bar right away, upstairs," she said without preamble.

"Okay," I said slowly. "Alone?"

"Bring your ghouls, no one else," she added. "I got a couple more calls to make, I'll see you there." She hung up before I could ask any more questions.

I looked at Petor. "Call Frasier, Madelynne wants us at the pub, now."

He nodded and I went into the office to let our receptionist know we would be leaving. Unfortunately Frasier wasn't answering his phone, so I sent him a text message. He didn't call back until we were pulling into the parking lot of the pub, and he had to yell to be heard over the pounding music in the background. After apologizing for interrupting his date, I told him to get to the pub as soon as he could.

Logan was pacing upstairs in the living room, alone. He turned to the door expectantly when we entered, and seemed a little disappointed when he saw it was just Petor and me.

"What's going on?" I asked.

"Hoping you could tell me," he replied.

"No idea," I told him. "Where's everyone else?"

"Who else did she call?"

"I guess I assumed she called the whole pack in." I wondered what the problem was.

Madelynne and Michael arrived only minutes later. He walked toward the seating area while she made her way toward the stairs.

"What's wrong?" Logan asked before I could.

"I'm gonna go change first," she said on her way to the third floor. Logan trailed after, leaving Michael with Petor and me.

"What's going on?" I asked Michael.

He shook his head. "I think I'm gonna let Madelynne tell ya."

It was my turn to pace nervously until she came downstairs a few minutes later dressed in jeans and a tee shirt with Logan right behind her. "Where's Frasier?" she demanded.

"On his way," I replied.

She looked annoyed. "We wait then."

"Why do we need to wait?" I asked impatiently.

"Because I said we're going to wait until everyone gets here," she all but growled.

"Who's everyone?"

"At least Frasier," she replied.

I tried to wait, really I did, but I just couldn't. "It's the Tremere, isn't it? They're pulling something."

"Aren't they always?" she said wryly.

"What angle are they coming from this time?"

"We'll talk about it when Frasier gets here; I'm not going to—"

She was interrupted when my phone rang. Frasier was dropping Nancy off, and would be at the pub as soon as he could. Five tense minutes of unanswered questions later, we heard Scott's truck pull into the parking lot. He came upstairs and stopped in the doorway, covered in grease and grime and shop dirt.

I went to stand next to him, hoping that the proximity would help calm my nerves. At his questioning look, I said, "Don't look at me; she won't start until Frasier gets here."

"I'm waiting for Frasier," she said when his eyes turned to her.

"How long is he gonna be?" he nearly growled.

"A few minutes," she replied.

"I'm taking a shower."

I very nearly followed him upstairs, but I didn't want to take the chance that Madelynne would say anything about what was going on while I was gone. He came back just minutes after Frasier arrived, and we all waited for Madelynne to speak.

"There's a meeting tomorrow night with the countess, the prince, Tina and myself to decide where Tina will spend her time," she announced gravely. "The countess wants her for equal time that she has spent with us."

The strength ran out of my legs and I found myself sitting on one of the couches with Scott holding my hand. Mercenaries I could fight; when it came to Kindred politics I was helpless.

"Which would mean she would get Tina and her ghouls to live and breathe as Tremere for six months," she continued.

"Who's making this decision?" I asked in a low voice.

"Well, that's what the meeting is for," she told me. "The countess and I went back and forth a couple of times this evening. The prince settled it by saying we would meet tomorrow at eight. Either he will make the decision or we'll have to make a mutual agreement somehow. It seems the countess thinks that... well, we differ as to why we believe you are here."

"How many times do I have to say no to them?"

"Well, I'm not real sure," she said tensely. "I did explain that you were here of your own accord, and that you were free to come and go as you pleased. She didn't come out and say that we were forcing you, but she made it sound like you were my pet. She more than implied that your relationship with Scott didn't really happen on its own, that we encouraged it."

A look at Scott's face showed no reaction, thankfully. Even if Scott was the type to take that kind of direction, neither Madelynne nor Logan was the kind to give it, but I'd been wrong before.

"I did tell her otherwise," Madelynn continued. "Like I said, the conversation went round and round. The prince said that we both had valid points, and that the decision would be made tomorrow night."

"I already made my decision," I said firmly.

"I said that," she assured me. "All she wants is equal time. You've had time to live with us. At the end of the six months you'd be able to make your own decision as to where you can stay permanently."

I shook my head and clutched Scott's hand. "They had Christina for eight years. I've got time left here."

"Then I guess you're gonna have to explain that to her, because I tried, but there's that whole memory thing and..." She sighed. I could see the tension in her face and knew that the situation bothered her nearly as much as it did me. "It was a mess. Don't expect to stay with us. I'm not sure that the prince won't step in and make the decision for us. I don't know what I can say to keep you with us."

"You've done all you can and I appreciate that," I said softly. She'd tried, the whole pack had tried. We'd put so much hope in her becoming Primogen, believing that her new status would protect me. It wasn't her fault we'd been wrong.

"I'm sorry, I don't like being the bearer of bad news," she told us, "but I wanted to let everyone know what was going on."

Silence filled the room. All I could think about was being away from the pack, from my friends. The Tremere would take me, change me into something I didn't want to be. With their abilities and their blood bonds, anything could happen in six months.

"If they make us go with them," I asked softly, almost afraid to say the words, "are you gonna let us come back?"

"I don't know," she said, earning a hard look from Scott. "I don't see why not, but things will be different."

"In what way?" I whispered.

"There may be trust issues."

I felt the words sink into my brain, echoing there with the worries I already had about what the Tremere would do to me.

"I don't know what the terms are or if there will be any," she continued. "I don't know if you'll be allowed to visit us or even see us during that time. I don't know what they're going to do to you in that time. There are a lot of 'what if's. You'll always be welcome here but I can't guarantee that you'll hold the same position that you have now."

"I don't care about position." I hated the desperation in my voice, but there it was. "I care about belonging."

"Fair enough I suppose." It was obvious that the situation bothered her. "I hope you understand that I have to look out for the whole group, not just you."

As much as I didn't like it, she was right. She would be a fool to accept me back without question. Six months in the hands of the Tremere could change me into their enemy, and she couldn't take the chance that my return would cause harm to the people she protected.

Finally the silence got to me and I knew I couldn't stay. It was bad enough that I was going to have to leave them; I didn't want the remainder of my time here to be shadowed by the unspoken accusation of what I would be like when the Tremere were done with me.

I don't remember what I said to Scott, or what words were spoken as we left, but leave we did, alone. I sat silently in the middle of the bench seat of Scott's truck, holding his hand while he drove through the city with no obvious destination in mind. I kept wondering if we'd ever get the chance to do this again, or if this was the last time we'd ever be alone.

"We can make the Kentucky border by sunup," he offered, breaking the silence.

I looked at him in surprise. I wanted to say yes, I really did. "I can't ask you to leave the pack," I said instead. "They need you."

"You need me more." His eyes were certain as he glanced over at me.

In that moment I was sure for the first time that I loved him. It might not have been the epic love that Brenda swore Christina and Jason had shared, but to me it was more true, more right. I loved him.

"I want to say yes," I whispered in the wake of that revelation.

He glanced at my face. "So why aren't you?"

I thought of what it would be like to live with the Tremere, what they would do to me for the months I'd managed to avoid them. I thought of what the time would be like without the man next to me, and let my heart speak. "Yes."

The moment I said the word, doubts started crowding in. Running away would mean leaving the boys behind. While it was possible they could meet up with us, it was likely that the Tremere or even the Frenchman would capture or kill them before we could reunite.

Panic filled me and I started crying helplessly, hopelessly. Scott pulled into an empty parking lot and held me while I cried myself out. When I eventually calmed down, he agreed that the Prince wouldn't simply let us go, not now. If we left we'd be hunted down, and even Madelynne would be in a good deal of trouble for not making us stay.

As much as we wanted to stay together, we knew we couldn't do it at the expense of the pack. In the end we went home to our apartment and prepared for the worst.

Intervention

OUT OF THE STEW POT AND INTO THE FIRE.

FROM DUSK 'TIL DAWN

The next evening I spent some time looking over the clothing that Jason had sent me from Salem. I'd left most of it in the back of the closet thinking that I'd never wear it, but now I needed something suitable for meeting the prince. I finally settled on a pink bodice with a matching striped skirt and hoped it would do.

I called the boys, but they weren't much interested in going with us to the meeting, since they most likely wouldn't be allowed in for the important stuff anyway. Scott and I met Madelynne and Logan at the pub, and together we went to the Renaissance Center.

We were escorted to the elevator by one of Giles' ghouls and taken to the floor the conclave room was on. Scott and Logan joined Michael in the waiting room, where Paige, Zach and Archie were already waiting for the countess. A few minutes later we walked off the elevator on the top floor of the tower into the waiting room here where the countess was sitting peacefully and Giles was pacing.

"Now that you're all here," Giles said with a smile, "I will let the prince know." He disappeared around a corner, leaving the three of us alone.

Madelynne sat down across the room from the countess while I remained standing and studiously avoided looking at the Tremere Primogen. A few minutes later Giles came out of the double doors leading to the prince's office and invited us in.

The prince was seated at a large desk flanked by Cassidy and Casilde. Three chairs stood in front of him, and he gestured for us to sit down. When we had done so, he thanked us all for coming and for being on time. He paused for a moment, then looked to the countess. "I will hear the arguments again."

"On behalf of The House and Clan Tremere," she said formally, "we request an equal share of Miss Andrews' time. She has been with the Gangrel clan for six months. We feel she should spend that much time with us to ensure her decision is well made." She looked at Madelynne in an indication that she was done speaking, for the moment.

"The choice should be Tina's whether she lives with them or not," Madelynne pointed out. "She's stated numerous times that she doesn't want to go back. To make her do so would be forcing her to do something she doesn't want to do."

"In order for Miss Andrews to go back somewhere, she must have been there in the first place," she replied logically. "She has never been with us, only with you, and your clan."

"Previous to coming to us, she was a member of your clan," Madelynne said calmly. "Granted, she does not have memory of that, but technically she is Tremere. Her clan mates in her previous city came here to retrieve her. She chose to remain here and start a new life."

"It is true that her clan mates came to the city to reclaim her," she agreed, "but so did her Gangrel husband. Both clans in Salem gave up their right to her. If she is so staunch about being with the Gangrel, why didn't she return with Mr. Kline?"

"Returning with Mr. Kline would have put her back with the Tremere where she didn't want to be," came the rebuttal. "Tina and her husband did not see eye to eye on several things. She simply asked him to remain here where they could rebuild their relationship and he chose to leave. I do not believe he liked our city."

The countess shook her head. "I do not see how you can say that her deciding not to return to the Salem Tremere is different than her deciding not to return to the Salem Gangrel. They are one and the same. If the Salem Gangrel were so much different than the Gangrel of our city, who's to say that the Salem Tremere are not different than we are?"

"I never said that we were all the same," she denied.

"But you have implied it upon numerous occasions that we are the same," the countess argued. "She chose not to go back to the Salem Tremere; therefore she should not have to go with the Detroit Tremere."

"Tina has told me on several occasions that she does not want to go back to the Tremere at all, Salem or Detroit," Madelynne said firmly. "She's happy with the Gangrel clan, it's there she chooses to stay."

"I do not argue that she is not happy," she answered. "I simply wonder if she would be happier with the clan with the same blood running through their veins."

"You have a point, but I'm not sure your clan would allow her the same freedoms and liberties that ours does," Madelynne countered. "Tina does not wish to conform to a certain way of life, of being told what she can and cannot do, or how. I believe she wishes to live her life in her own way without direction from anyone"

"Hah!" For the first time, the countess seemed pleased. "You mean to imply that you have never directed her to do anything?"

"I directed her to come this evening," she admitted.

"And nothing before that?"

I'd had enough. "I believe the point Madelynne is trying to make is that I want to choose whose direction I take."

"Would it not be a more educated decision if you knew what direction I was going to give you?" she asked in what I'm sure she thought was a reasonable tone. "What freedoms and amenities has Ms. Walker allowed you that she fears you will not be granted with our clan?"

"I don't know what Madelynne is afraid of," I replied, glancing at my friend, "but I'm fairly certain you won't let me live where I want to, with whom I want to."

"Eventually, yes," she countered.

"And in the mean time, my relationships with the people I love are left to deteriorate," I shot back.

She tilted her head a little. "How so?"

"Absence does not make the heart grow fonder."

"Who would you be absent from?" she asked.

How could the woman be so dense? "My friends. My lover."

"And who is to say that we would keep you from them?"

"Who's to say that you wouldn't?" Madelynne interrupted.

"Who's to say that we would?" the countess repeated.

I answered her with one word. "Zach."

"Señor déla Rocha?"

I nodded. "I asked him about Thaumaturgy, and he said I could learn only if I returned to the clan fold and lost all ties with the Gangrel."

"That is not a true statement, mostly because he is not in this room," she said firmly. "While it is true we would wish you to stay at the chantry for the first month or so to ensure that you are serious about giving us our equal time, and indeed, the six months I am requesting, yes, you would be kept from your friends as they have kept you from us—"

I couldn't let her continue. "They have kept me from no one."

"I beg to differ," she replied coolly. "You've been under our own Prince's protection for the last two months."

I looked at the prince in surprise, but he met my gaze with a level look that told me nothing. I turned back to the countess. "Had I chose to seek out a Tremere, I could have done so."

"But you have been told lies about our clan by misinformed friends of yours," she protested

"I haven't told any lies," Madelynne denied.

"You have," she retorted, "by saying that she would have to stay away from her friends."

"But you just said that was true," I pointed out.

"No, I didn't," she denied. "You were not allowed to see us for six months; we have been kept away by the threat of violence, by your friends and by the prince. Therefore you would have to stay away from them for the same amount of time."

Before anyone could say anything else, the prince's voice rung out through the room. "Enough."

We all turned to look at him, silent for now.

"Victoria," he said more softly, "Madelynne, give us time."

As one the women rose and headed for the door, leaving me sitting alone before the prince and his bodyguards. The Primogen hadn't quite made it to the door when the prince instructed Cassidy and Casilde to ensure the women remained amicable.

It was long moments after I heard the doors close behind them before the prince did anything more than look at me. He sighed deeply. "What do you really want?"

"I want the Tremere to leave me alone," I answered quickly.

"Aren't you curious about that side of your life?"

If I was, I didn't plan on telling him. "Honestly, from what I can tell, Christina wasn't real happy there. Why would it be any different for me?"

"Because this isn't Salem," he replied. "I know the reputation they have in Salem; I know the reputation they once had. I was an acquaintance of the former prince—" He stopped as if catching himself. "You don't remember her, or the stories."

I shook my head no. "Antonio told me a little about her."

"Beth was the worst of your kind," he told me. "Elvira attempts to do well, although I believe she is a little too wrapped in the remainder of her mortal emotions. But I can assure you that given time the countess will not hold you to a mold."

I couldn't agree. "She wants to take me away from the only people who accept me for who I am."

"That's not true."

My eyebrow went up. It wouldn't do to call the prince a liar, but I couldn't agree with him. "No?"

"If the countess wants you this bad and is willing to give even such a short amount of time and then your free choice," he pointed out, "don't you think they value you for what you are, for what you could be?"

"For *what* I am not *who* I am," I said softly. "There is a difference."

"Well, deny it or not, you are Tremere," he countered. "The blood of Dougal Galloway runs in your veins."

The Tremere had proved that months ago when the countess had performed the Blood Walk. "I can't deny that, but I'm happy where I am."

"The countess has a fair point. How do you know you wouldn't be happier with her?"

"How can I be happy away from the people I care about?" I asked. "I know it's not forever, but still... how do I know that they're not going to brain wash me?"

He seemed to think about that concern for a moment. "Would my word be enough?" When I didn't answer right away, he added, "You may answer freely."

"From what I can see, you are a good prince, a fair prince," I said carefully. "If you gave your word, I could accept that."

He nodded with a grin and then chuckled. "And the real answer?"

"I trust you," I said simply. "I don't trust them."

He nodded more enthusiastically, as if he liked this answer better than my first one. "What other guarantees or precautions would you have in effect before agreeing to any amount of time with the Tremere?"

"I understand that they want me to live with them, to be one of them, but I think she's asking too much to think I would stay away from the pack for that long," I said after a moment. "Honestly, Madelynne has never kept me from anyone I wanted to see. Why should the countess get to?"

"And who would you want to see?"

"The pack is my family now," I reminded him.

"But one could argue that has developed over the six months you have spent with them," he said reasonably, "and that time with the Tremere would yield the same conclusion."

I smiled wryly. "I don't think I'd be sleeping with Zach any time, well, ever."

"So then just Mr. Murphy?"

"If I only get one," I said reluctantly. "I'd rather have more than one."

"You realize I could never talk the countess into allowing him to stay with you," he told me.

"I doubt he'd want to." Somehow I couldn't see Scott living in a Tremere chantry for any reason whatsoever. "My boys would have to come with me."

"I believe they would be given little choice in the matter," he agreed. "You are their domitor. They are your ghouls. And she's made it relatively clear that you'd be expected to stay at one of the chantries. The city chantry is only twenty-five minutes or so away from your current family."

I didn't know what else to say. He obviously wasn't going to allow me to avoid spending any time with the Tremere. The most I could hope for was that he would take my wishes into account when he made his decision. "I know she wanted me to stay secluded for the first month," I said hesitantly. "If I could visit the others after that, if you could guarantee no brain washing would happen with me or my boys, and if I really could do what I want after six months..." I let my words trail off, not wanting to say too much.

He sat quietly for at least a minute, thinking without looking at me. At last he reached out and pushed a button on his desk. "Bring them."

A moment later the doors opened behind me. When Madelynne and the countess were seated, the Prince spoke again.

"Madelynne will not give up her claim or her protection to Miss Andrews willingly. Equally the countess will not give up her claim or her pursuit willingly. The decision will fall to me," he said slowly, "and I will make it in three nights time. Miss Walker, you should prepare yourself and your people for the possibility of her going away."

Madelynne nodded, but I could tell she didn't like it.

"I have not ruled it out," he continued. He turned to the countess. "However, if I do grant her into your... care, there will be some terms. I know you feel Miss Walker has 'kept' Miss Andrews. I don't share the opinion. As such, should you truly wish the six months time, Miss Andrews will be allowed to see certain members of Clan Gangrel," he told her. "Should you wish to lower the time you're requesting, you will have more time with just her."

His eye turned to me once more. "Regardless of any final decision, I feel personally that it would do Miss Andrews well to spend at least a month among the Tremere. I have seen thaumaturgy in practiced hands, and I have seen it in unskilled hands as well. It is a dangerous art they practice. And while I'm not thrilled about giving Clan Gangrel a thamauturge, I believe that should Miss Andrews not go with the Tremere it would do her well to have some control. I will be speaking with each of you further over the next three nights. You will be summoned when I require it."

We were silent as we walked out of his office. It seemed neither Madelynne nor the countess were happy with what the prince had said, and it showed in the awkward silence that filled the elevator as we rode it downward. When the doors opened on floor where the others were waiting, the countess turned to us.

"Good evening," she said curtly.

All I could manage was a nod, but Madelynne repeated her salute as the countess walked off the elevator. Madelynne and I waited on the elevator for the others to join us and together we headed down.

Preparing for the Worst

ONLY FOOLS BELIEVE THAT
NOTHING CHANGES, NOTHING LEAVES
JEWEL - FRAGILE HEART

We'd barely walked out onto the main floor of the Renaissance Center when the others asked what had happened.

"The prince will make his decision in three days," Madelynne told them.

"What's he waiting for?" Scott demanded impatiently.

"He's going to talk to us all individually," Madelynne explained. "I was hoping he'd make the decision right then."

"I think he already did," I said softly.

Michael looked at me. "What do you mean 'he did'?"

"I think she's going to the Tremere," Madelynne answered.

"But not like they want," I shot back quickly, then more slowly added, "Maybe."

"You're still going," she replied.

As we walked out onto the street, I looked at Scott and said in a low voice. "Kentucky's looking better and better."

We stood on the sidewalk as Madelynne explained what had happened. I gave them a shortened version of what had happened when I'd been alone with the prince, telling them what he'd said about giving his word, and that it was possible I'd get to visit the pack once the initial month was over.

"It's not a child custody case," Madelynne snapped irritably.

"It feels like it," I shot back.

"You don't know what will happen when you're with them," she reminded me. "You don't know what they'll do to you."

I looked at her in surprise. "Do you doubt the prince's word?"

"I doubt they'll follow it," she said simply.

"She doubts his ability to enforce it," Logan clarified.

"We don't follow every decree he's made," she reminded me. "There's ways around everything."

"If we can't trust his ability to enforce it, what do suggest I do?" I demanded.

She glanced at Scott before looking back at me. "You said something about Kentucky."

"Excuse me," Giles called. We turned to see that he had just come through the doors out of the Renaissance Center and was quickly making his way to our side. "One last thing, Miss Andrews," he told me, "from the prince. He suggests you stay in town until his decision is made. This on the behest of the countess, but it is a good idea."

So much for my thoughts of escape. "Of course."

When Giles had excused himself, Madelynne turned to me. "Guess Kentucky's out."

"Looks that way," I agreed.

"Let's go home for tonight," she suggested.

As one we headed for our cars. Michael came back to the pub with us and spent some time talking to Madelynne about clan stuff. Scott and I didn't stick around very long. We both knew that we only had a few nights left together and we wanted to make the most of it.

We were on the way to the agency to tell the boys what had happened when I asked him what he thought of the situation.

"The decision is yours to make," he told me, "but I will wait for you to make it."

"I'm not being given a decision," I reminded him. "I told the prince what I wanted; now it's up to him."

"No," he said softly. "I mean about you coming back to me at the end of whatever you have to go through."

"Oh." I suppose I'd been so worried about whether or not he was planning on taking me back that it hadn't occurred to me that he'd be worried I wouldn't want to. "Well, I've already made that decision. Six months with the Tremere, good or bad, isn't going to make me change my mind."

He didn't say anything, just smiled. I smiled back, but deep down I wondered if he really would wait for me, if he'd really want me back when the Tremere were done with me. I might have asked if my phone hadn't rung. It was Isa.

"Are you heading back to the pub yet?"

"We're on our way to the agency actually," I told her. "I need to talk to the boys."

"The prince thought it best that I clear my calendar and stay with you for a few days."

"Does he think that the countess is going to try something before he makes his decision?" I asked.

"No," she replied, "but he wants to insure that if she does that you're protected. I need to stop and take care of a few things at my apartment and the shop and I'll meet you at the agency."

"Take your time." I hated that my personal emergencies always seemed to interrupt other people's lives. "Sorry to mess up your schedule again. I know this has really put a dent in your social life."

"What social life?" she said wryly. "Besides, it's fine, I gave my word."

I hung up soon after promising to call her if we left the agency before we got there. "It appears I will have a babysitter for the next three days," I told Scott.

He glanced over at me in surprise. "Besides me?"

"Yeah," I replied with a smile. "Isa is going to meet us."

We got to the agency a few minutes later and went up to Petor's apartment to talk. I wasn't sure what to say at first, and every one of them sat there looking at me patiently.

Finally I sighed. It would be best to just say what I had to say and get it over with. "The long and the short of it is that we may have to spend the next six months living with the Tremere. At least the first month we would have no contact with the outside world. After that, we may or may not be able to visit with the pack."

Neither of the boys had much of a reaction. Frasier had lived as a Tremere ghoul before, and had never complained about what it had been like. Petor had no way of knowing how it would be different from what he knew now.

"I don't know what's going to happen," I said, looking first at Petor then at Frasier, "with the business, or if they'll let you see people other than the pack once the month is gone, but once we get this out of the way, they're supposed to let me choose where I want to live and we can get back to normal."

Once again they didn't really react; in fact they both looked lost in their own thoughts. I knew this couldn't be easy for them. They'd both just gotten adjusted to our lives here in Detroit, our lives with the pack. The countess wasn't just fucking with my life, she was fucking with theirs too.

"If-if you'd rather stay with the pack, I-I don't know if I could manage it, but I could try," I said hesitantly. I didn't really want to leave them behind, but I would if that's what they wanted.

"We all know that's not really an option," Frasier said quietly. Petor nodded, telling me they were both determined to come with me into hell. I couldn't help but feel a little relieved, even though a part of me wanted to keep them as far away from the Tremere as possible.

"Though the prince claims he hasn't made up his mind yet, I'm fairly certain that we'll spend at least a month in the chantry." I studied them both closely, hoping they understood the gravity of the situation. "You should enjoy the freedom you have as long as you can."

I waited for a few minutes, but neither of them had anything else to say. A look at their auras showed that they were sad, thoughtful, and mostly confused. I told them to call me if they needed anything and let Scott take me home.

Isa showed up a few minutes after we got there. She was curious about what had happened, and I told her quickly, without going into a lot of detail. She didn't understand why I didn't want to go with the Tremere, she seemed to think that I should jump at the opportunity to learn about that part of my past.

Scott's phone rang while we were talking, and after a glance at the display he went into the bedroom to answer it. He was gone for only a minute or so when he reappeared in the doorway. "I'll be back," was all he said on his way out. He looked pissed, and in a hurry. He left without a kiss and before I could ask him anything about where he was going or when he would be back.

"Can I ask you something?" Isa asked as I stared at the door wondering why Scott had left so fast. When I looked at her and nodded, she said, "What do you think is going to happen at the end of this if you don't cooperate with them?"

"Well, seeing as how the prince is giving the decision," I reminded her, "I'm going to have to cooperate, I have no choice."

"I'm sorry that it's coming down to this," she offered, "but they're not going to leave it alone."

"No, they're not," I agreed sadly. "And maybe at the end of whatever time, they'll finally just leave me alone."

"You know that the Tremere are incredibly powerful."

"Unfortunately that's true," I murmured.

"And they're possessive," she added. "There won't be peace in the city until they've had their chance. You know that is what the prince wants, peace."

I sighed. "Yes, and I understand why he wants it. This kind of attention isn't good for our kind."

"Why don't you want to go back?" she asked. "We've never really discussed it."

"Well, the biggest reason, aside from free will, is that the pack is my family," I explained. "I have a relationship with Scott. They're asking me to leave everyone for six months, no contact at all, not even an 'I miss you' letter."

"Well I don't think that six months in our existence is a long time," she murmured.

"Six months is my existence," I reminded her. "It's most of what I remember."

"It's a pinprick in the amount of time that we as Kindred can live," she said logically. "I don't think that in a six month period Scott is going to meet someone else and not want to be with you anymore if that's what you're worried about. I don't think that six months is going to affect the relationship that you have with Madelynne or the rest of the pack."

"I think that's debatable," I drawled. "The Tremere, being who and what they are, and given the abilities that they have, I really don't know if they're going to use those abilities on me to try and turn my will to theirs."

"Don't you think then that it might be a more valid point to negotiate that they don't do something like that?"

"Yeah, I did talk to the prince about that," I admitted. "He talked about giving his word that they would not do that, although he stopped just short of it."

"In all honesty," she said carefully, "and I'm only saying that because we've allowed ourselves to develop a friendship, I could probably do without the Tremere. They're sneaky, as we've seen, but there could be a reason for that. I don't know that much about them. I don't think that six months is a long time to ask to give you the opportunity to learn about these people and give yourself a chance to reclaim the life that you lost. Like I said, six months isn't a long time."

"No it's not," I agreed reluctantly. "But it's a long time away from people I have been very close to, and again, Madelynne has never told me who I can and cannot hang around with; I do not see why the countess should get to."

"I think the countess just wants equal opportunity," she said reasonably, "and you've been so adamant about not being with them that they feel in order to get the fair chance they want that they must place these restrictions on you." She hesitated a moment, then added, "Are you afraid that you might want to know them?"

I pondered that for a long moment before answering. "I have not seen anything in the Tremere of this city that has made me want to be friends with them. I can't imagine that I ever could, given what happened in the last few months. I'm not sure what she hopes to gain by these six months, but I guess we'll find out."

"I'm sure that the prince will make the best decision," she assured me.

"He'll make the best decision for the city, I'm sure," I agreed. Whether he made the best decision for me was another story.

Scott came back about an hour after he'd left, in a worse mood than before. When I asked where he'd been, the only thing he would say was that Madelynne had a question. Isa went home after I assured her that we wouldn't be going anywhere else that night. I called the boys to see how they were doing, and they seemed fine, if a bit tipsy.

Even after Isa left, Scott was sullen and moody. He wouldn't talk about where he'd been or what Madelynne had wanted, or anything really. A bit more probing on my part didn't get me anything but

growled at, so I dropped it. We had more important things to do in what time we had left together than argue.

Bargaining Chip

OF ALL THE THINGS I BELIEVED IN
I JUST WANNA GET IT OVER WITH
MICHELLE BRANCH - GOODBYE TO YOU

The next night I decided that it might be better to negotiate directly with the countess myself than let the prince do it. I talked to Scott about it, and he agreed it was probably a good idea.

The only Tremere number I had was Zach's, so I called it and left him a voice mail. He called me back around eight. "Miss Andrews," his voice came through the receiver. "You called?"

"Thank you for returning my call, Señor déla Rocha," I said with as much respect as I could muster. "As I said in the message I left, I would like to speak to the countess. Unfortunately, I do not have a number to reach her."

"May I inquire what this is in regards to?" he asked.

I hesitated a moment, biting my tongue to stop from asking what the hell he thought the call would be about. "Negotiations."

He gave a small laugh. "Let me check with her. I shall call you back shortly."

"Thank you, Señor." A small click told me he'd hung up. "I hate the Tremere," I muttered to myself.

While I was waiting for him to call back, I took the time to go through the clothes I had put in the back of the closet. Among the things I never thought I'd wear was a pair of dark brown slacks and a cream colored chemise. I changed into them, hoping that the countess would agree to meet soon so we could get this over with.

I'd barely gotten changed when my phone rang again. Zach was pleasant, but soon cut to the chase. "The countess has agreed to meet you at the Sanctuary at nine thirty this eve." He told me she'd be in the conference room on the third floor.

Once the arrangements were made, I sat there with the phone in my hand looking off at nothing in particular, wondering if I was doing the right thing. I'm not sure how long I would have sat there had Scott not spoken up.

"Do you think you can make a deal with them?"

"I don't know," I said softly. "I'd rather not have anything to do with them, but I think the prince is going to make me go back no matter what. It might make things easier for me and the boys if the countess thinks I'm cooperating."

Not that I wanted to cooperate. I wanted nothing at all to do with the Tremere, but there was no use in continuing to fight, especially now that the prince was involved. It would only get someone else killed and I didn't think I could handle that.

Scott seemed to sense my unease, though he was very tense himself. He put his arm around me and I leaned against him, trying not to break down. Though he wouldn't talk to me about what was bothering him, I knew something was and I didn't want to burden him even more with my worries.

I called Madelynne to let her know that I was going to meet with the countess to discuss terms. She seemed very surprised.

"Really?" she said after a moment's hesitation. "What time is your appointment?"

"Nine thirty," I replied. "Look, I don't want you to think I'm just walking back to them after all that's happened. They're not just gonna go away, and if I don't do this they'll just—I don't want to get anyone else killed because of me."

"Tina, I have a meeting with the countess at nine," she told me. "I think that we should go together."

Her words froze me for a moment. "Did you call her or did she call you?"

"I called her," she replied.

I don't know why I was surprised at that. I didn't want to think that Madelynne would take it upon herself to bargain my life with the countess, but wasn't that what I was planning to do? Hell, Madelynne probably didn't want any one else to die either. "Where are you now?"

As Madelynne was already on the way to the Sanctuary, I arranged to meet her in the parking lot. Before hanging up, I asked her one more question. "Anything you need to tell me before we go in?"

"I am going to talk to her about Clarice."

"I see."

"Do you?" she asked questioningly.

"If I don't I will by the end of the meeting," I replied dryly. "I'll see you there."

"It's not what you are thinking," she protested.

"If it was I couldn't blame you," I said softly. "I've been nothing but trouble since the night you found me. Look, we've got to leave now or we're not going to make it. We'll talk about this later, okay?"

When she agreed, we said our goodbyes. I hung up the phone and looked at Scott. "Did you know she was going to call the countess?"

He met my eye unflinching. "Yeah."

He'd known. He known and hadn't told me, even when—I shut that line of thinking off quickly. Scott had only been my lover for six months; he'd been a member of the pack for much longer. Besides, Madelynne was his Primogen, and Logan his sire. He owed them his loyalty, and honestly he didn't owe me a damn thing. I nodded and reached for the jacket I'd found to match the slacks I was wearing. It covered the gun at the small of my back, the only weapon I had on tonight. "Let's go."

We were on our way to the car when Isa pulled up. I explained about the meeting, and she agreed to ride with us. Once we were on the road she asked why I was meeting with the countess.

"You suggested negotiating with her, I'm gonna try it," I told her.

"What are you gonna negotiate for?" she asked.

"Whatever I can." Anything would be better than what the countess wanted.

Isa spent the car ride coaching me on how to behave while meeting with the countess. She claimed it was all politics with the Tremere, power plays, and that I had to play the game to get what I wanted.

"Madelynne is meeting us at the Sanctuary," I told her.

She hesitated for a moment. "Do you think it's best that she be there?"

I couldn't hide the dryness in my voice. "Well her appointment is first."

"She has an appointment as well?" Isa asked in surprise. "About you?"

It was my turn to hesitate. Madelynne had said she was going to talk to the countess about Clarice, but honestly I didn't see anything that the Tremere would want more than to have me handed back to them on a silver platter. "I suppose we'll see."

"She didn't tell you?"

"She said it was about Clarice," I replied.

"What about her?" she demanded.

"I don't know."

"Do you think you'll have an opportunity to talk to Maddy before you're supposed to meet the countess?" she asked.

"I don't know," I repeated. "I don't know if the countess will let me into Maddy's meeting, but I really hadn't planned on taking anyone into mine."

"What do you make of the whole thing?"

I didn't want to tell her that in a way I felt as if Madelynne was going to betray me, as if Scott already had. I settled for another truth. "If the prince hadn't given his orders, I'd be making the state border right about now."

She didn't seem to like my answer. "We need to be totally open and honest here. I'm reading your tenseness and that you're upset. I have to be able to understand about all of this if I'm going to protect you."

I shook my head. "You know everything I do."

"What did she say about Clarice?" she asked.

"Just that she called the countess to talk to her about Clarice. I think she wants help taking care of her debt to Billy Dean."

"Why would she possibly turn to the Tremere about this, knowing the situation?" she murmured, then louder said, "What, is she bargaining for your place in the pack?"

"The Tremere don't care about my place in the pack," I reminded her. "They care about my place in the clan."

"Would Maddy use that as a bargaining chip?" she asked. "It seems like a bad idea to continue to making deals at this point, especially with the Tremere."

"I'd like to think she wouldn't bargain my life like that," I murmured, "but honestly I couldn't blame her if she did."

"Why? I thought you were friends?"

I looked back at her. "She's got a lot of people to take care of. The good of the many outweigh the needs of the one. Besides, the Tremere aren't going to kill me." I wasn't sure exactly what they were going to do to me, but they were too hot for my return to send me to final death. "Besides, it's only logical, isn't it? The countess only wants me for six months, and it's worth it to keep anyone else from being killed."

Isa didn't reply, and I didn't feel the need to say any more. When we got to the Sanctuary, We parked the car just down from where Madelynne, Logan and Michael were waiting for us. Madelynne gave Scott a thoughtful look as we approached, but I knew better than to ask what it was about.

Scott wouldn't have told me, and Madelynne, well honestly I wasn't sure how she'd take the question.

Madelynne and Logan took the lead, holding hands, with Michael but a step behind them. Scott and I followed with Isa trailing us, keeping watch for the bad guys. I was too tense to hold Scott's hand, too irritated by the fact he hadn't told me Madelynne was going to call the countess.

Zach was waiting for us, of course. He greeted us pleasantly and led us to the second floor. When he reached the landing, he stopped and turned to face us. "The countess is waiting upstairs," he said, gesturing toward the next flight of stairs. "She asks that only Madelynne and her second attend, as it is only the countess and hers that await you."

"I'd prefer that we all go together," Madelynne told him. "If she cannot accommodate that then I want at least Tina and Michael there."

"I am sorry," he replied, not sounding the least bit honest about it. "Miss Andrews' meeting is not until nine-thirty. The countess was under the impression that this meeting was not pertinent to her... situation. The remainder of your party is welcome to wait with myself and my company in here." He gestured toward the archway that led to the second floor bar.

"It's okay, Madelynne," I said, stepping forward to touch her arm. "If we can just talk a minute before you go up." She agreed, and we walked to one side, where we would hopefully not be overheard. "What is it you think she's gonna do for you?"

"Take Clarice out of the picture," she replied.

I'd thought as much. "What do you think she's going to ask for in return?"

"I don't really know, but I don't want to owe them," she said honestly. "My thinking is that they want you without my involvement for the next six months, the most I'm willing to do is three without contacting you. Now if you contact me that is another story." She looked down for a moment, then back at me. "I'd really prefer if you didn't even go back to them, but right now I don't see anyway around it."

I closed my eyes briefly and tried to focus. Though I'd known that Madelynne was going to bargain me away, hearing it from her own lips was a little hard to take. "There isn't any way around it. If I have a choice, you know I won't stay away. Just—" I didn't want her to bargain for me, but there was no help for it, not now. I just had to trust that she would do the right thing. "I know you'll do the best you can, Madelynne, but do what you gotta do. Do what's best for the pack; I'll handle whatever I have to do on my end."

"She'll keep you as long as she can, and we all know that," she reminded me. "Once I found out that you were on your way here, I wanted all of us to speak together, it would make negotiations easier."

"It might, but you going to her about Clarice takes away all the bargaining power I hoped to have with her." I turned a little to look at Scott, wondering how I could possibly go six months without seeing him, even three months seemed too long. Still, I knew that given a choice and my free will I would go back to him, come hell or high water. "If they don't let me in there, try to make sure she won't fuck with my head, or blood bond me. Argue that you didn't do either of those things, so it wouldn't be fair if she did."

"What were you going to bargain with or for what?" she asked.

"My cooperation for a shorter stay in their... loving care." My voice was full of sarcasm, and it was an effort to make it sound normal again. "It doesn't matter, what matters now is that you do what you can to keep your bargain with Billy Dean. Just don't budge on the mind tricks or the blood bond."

"Ok, we are going to bargain for a shorter time for you with the Tremere," she said in a low voice. "I and the rest of the clan will stay out of the way and not call or contact you for no more than three months, they cannot blood bond you to them or use any sort of mind tricks or anything that will alter your mind and in return they will take care of Clarice. Sound fair?"

It didn't sound fair at all, but the countess wasn't interested in fairness, at least not in any fairness that she didn't dictate the terms of. I nodded, but didn't trust myself to speak without screaming.

"You need to actually say something, Tina," Madelynne told me. "Nodding is agreement, but I'd rather hear it from you to be sure it's what you want." "

"What I want has no relevance at this point," I forced out. "Make your deal, Madelynne, the best deal you can. I'll find a way to live with it." I turned to go back with the others, but her voice stopped me.

"What you want is relevant, Tina."

I turned to look at her once more. "I don't want to go at all, but I'm going to have to. The most I can hope for is that they don't brainwash me or blood bond me. I think that's fair, but I'm sure the countess won't agree. Just do what you can."

"If you don't want to go then why the hell are you meeting with her?" she demanded.

"I told you, I don't want the prince to decide what my life is going to be for the next six months. He's gonna do what's best for the city, not what's best for me." I didn't really want to have Madelynne bargaining for my time, but hell, I'd thrown my lot in with her, good or bad, and it was too late to turn back now. "I trust you do to what's best for the pack and in the end, what's best for the pack is gonna be best for me."

She studied my face for a long moment before finally nodding. Together we walked back to the others, Madelynne to stand next to Michael, and me to stand as close to Scott as I could without trying to climb inside of his skin.

"If there is nothing else...?" Zach said dryly as he moved out of the way to let Madelynne and Michael go up the stairs. Once they'd passed him, he indicated that the rest of us should go into the bar.

As we entered, I saw that the countess had come with her own entourage. Zach's buddy Archie was there, of course, as was Missy, Trevor, and a few of the Sanctuary's ghouls. Zach went to sit with the Tremere, who greeted us politely as we sat down.

Missy looked like her usual self, all clan business and not much room for anything else. Though I'd seen Trevor at the party in Madelynne's honor, and during a visit the Tremere had made to the agency, this was the closest I'd gotten to him. He was dressed to the nines, and looked Hispanic, although not as full blooded as Zach. Of course with a name like Trevor he had probably been born in the US, while Zach gave off enough old world vibes that he was most likely from Spain originally.

Once the platitudes were out of the way an awkward silence filled the room. I knew better than to open my mouth since it probably wasn't a good idea to antagonize the people I was going to be forced to live with. Rather than let the situation get to me, I decided to practice my Auspex and try to read everyone's auras.

Isa seemed calm enough, if only a little nervous. Zach was also calm, too calm for the situation. I wondered what he knew that I didn't. Archie was, as usual, very, very crazy. Missy was impatient, and it took an effort for me not to open my mouth and ask her if she had something better to do. Trevor was calm for the most part, but something about him... he seemed to be mildly aroused either by, at or because of me.

Scott and Logan were both nervous, and apprehensive. Scott had the red of anger creeping in around the edges, and I reached for his hand, hoping that the contact would keep us both calm. He let me take his hand, but he didn't relax at all.

Isa began to make polite conversation with the Tremere, but it didn't go very far. Eventually she turned to me and asked in a low voice what Madelynne and I had talked about. There was no reason for me not to tell her, so I did.

"You trust her enough for that?" she asked when I explained that Madelynne was indeed going to bargain for my freedom.

"I've put my trust in her this long," I replied softly. "I have to trust that she'll do what's best for me." Though she nodded, I could tell she didn't necessarily agree.

Trevor kept watching me while we waited, and Missy watched Scott. Zach struck up a conversation with Logan about some long ago time and place that I'd never heard about before.

When the blood dolls offered us a taste straight from their veins I turned them down. I wasn't about to feed in front of the Tremere. I knew it was a petty thing, given that we were all vampires, but still. Feeding was a personal thing, private. I didn't mind doing it in front of any of the pack, but they were family. The Tremere would never be my family. Scott and Logan must have felt the same because they turned down the free meal too.

Only one of the Tremere took what the ghouls offered, and of course it was Trevor. He fed from the woman, but he watched me the whole time. I was going to have trouble with him, I just knew it. I hoped that he and the countess hadn't cooked up some scheme to replace Scott in my bed.

Trevor's interest in me was so obvious that at one point Isa leaned over to ask me about it. I tried to blow it off, saying that it was a power play to make me nervous, but honestly I was worried about his attention. Thankfully Scott was too busy playing a no blinking game with Missy to notice.

I sat there being calm and angry and terrified by turns. I didn't want to spend any time with the Tremere, didn't want to sit here while someone else bargained for my time with them. I was angry that Madelynne had planned on doing so without telling me, but I'd trusted her this far and all I could do was hope she did the best she could. On the other hand, Madelynne had been... funny about this whole thing since the countess made her power play. I was afraid that she blamed me for Alex's death, that she was angry because I hadn't tried to settle things before the attack on the agency.

Regardless of Madelynne's reasons for doing this tonight, I was determined to make the best of it. Yes, I was terrified that the clan would use some sort of force, mental or physical, to bring me in line, but to continue to fight would only bring more misfortune down on the pack, not to mention the wrath of the prince.

A part of me wondered if Madelynne would let me come back to the pack when my time with the Tremere was over, no matter what happened. She'd already expressed concerns about trust, it was possible that she wouldn't believe my sincerity when I eventually came back. I wondered too if Scott really would still want me. He'd said that he would, but a lot could happen in six months. Hell, for all I knew the countess was right and I'd like it so much with the Tremere that I never wanted to leave.

I looked at the Tremere gathered in the room and wondered how long I could hold out hope for the life I wanted without them in it.

Negotiations

I'VE TOLD YOU THIS ONCE BEFORE, CAN'T CONTROL ME
IF YOU TRY TO TAKE ME DOWN YOU'RE GONNA BREAK
GODSMACK - I STAND ALONE

Twenty minutes later Paige and Michael entered the meeting room. Everyone looked at them expectantly, but there wasn't much to tell from their expressions. Paige's face was carefully blank, and Michael's had an odd grin.

"It's your turn Tina," he said as he joined the other Gangrel at the table. "They are waiting for you." When I stood up Scott did too, but Michael's voice stopped him from following me. "Just Tina," he added firmly.

Scott hesitated a long moment, looking from me to Michael and back. I put my hand on his arm and tried to smile, swallowing my fear. I waited until he sat down again before making my way to the door.

The stairs seemed to go on forever, yet not quite far enough for me to regain my composure before I was standing before the doors to the conference room on the third floor. I went in and closed the door behind me, looking across the room to where Madelynn and the countess were sitting at a polished mahogany table. Madelynn sat at one end, while the countess sat near the middle across from an empty chair that was obviously for me.

The countess told me to sit and as I did she explained that her meeting with Madelynn was over, but that she'd asked my friend to stay to avail my fears of mind tricks and the like. "Now Miss Andrews," she said formally, "what was it you wanted to talk to me about?"

"While I had planned to speak with you alone as an act of good faith, I do not object to Miss Walker's presence," I told her. In truth, Madelynn's presence threw me a bit, but I did my best to hide it. "However, depending on what the two of you spoke about in my absence, there may be no need for our discussion." I looked at my friend questioningly, but she didn't answer.

"Your name did come up, but only in conversation," the countess assured me. "You, your mind, or your soul were in no way part of the accord Madelynn and I are negotiating. Now then, you were saying...?"

I gave a small nod and turned back to the countess. "The prince has stated that he will make a decision about where I am to live in two nights. While I believe that he has the best interests of the city at heart, I find that I would rather not rely on him to decide what is best for me. With all due respect to Madelynn," I said, glancing at her for a moment, "it is time that I stop hiding behind her and the pack."

The countess raised an eyebrow. "Go on."

"You would like me to return to the clan and have no contact with the Gangrel for six months," I stated. "I would prefer not to return at all. I believe that somewhere between the two extremes is a common ground that we can both live with."

"But you told the Prince you could not live with us at all," she reminded me. "Why the change of heart?"

"I believe that no matter what my wishes are, the prince is going to allow you... custody if only for a short time," I said honestly. "I would prefer that my stay with you be more on terms we agree

upon than on terms the prince decides upon. As I said, I know he will focus on what is best for the city, not what is best for me."

"And what is it you have to offer me that would make me agree to 'lesser' terms?"

"My cooperation." I let that hang in the air a moment before explaining. "Regardless of my respect for the prince, if I am ordered to return to your clan there will be a great deal of resentment involved and it will interfere with my ability to... look upon you as family. Should we be able to negotiate, I would be with you of my own free will, and I would cooperate to the best of my ability."

"And what would it cost us for your cooperation for six months?"

I tried to smile, but I was nervous and I'm not sure how well it came across. "That would be negotiable. However some things are not negotiable, and it would be best to get them out of the way as soon as possible so we can move on to what is."

"And what are these things?" she asked with a smile playing across her lips.

"The Gangrel have used no dominate, no presence," I told her, "no blood bond. I will require a guarantee that the Tremere do nothing more to me or to my ghouls than the Gangrel have done."

"And that is all?"

I looked at her thoughtfully, wondering what else I should be asking for and what I could get away with. "Those are the only conditions that are non-negotiable."

"Then I am afraid we can not make this deal," she said shortly. "Dominate is one of our Clan disciplines. As well as testing for ability, we also test for resistance. You and your 'boys' would not be subjected to any long term Domination effects, but would be subjected to some uses of the power, to gauge your defenses."

It sounded reasonable, but I didn't know if I could trust her. On the other hand, if I walked out now, I would have no control over my future for the next six months. "I can understand your concerns on this matter," I said after a moment. "If you can personally guarantee that Dominate would be used strictly for training purposes and would not involve any type of reprogramming, reconditioning or mind control on either myself or my ghouls, I believe we can still negotiate." It would have to be enough.

"I believe we could agree upon a neutral third party observer to ensure that," she replied.

I nodded. "That would be acceptable."

"And you would stay with us for the entire six months?"

"Our discussion so far has simply been to make sure we can further negotiate," I corrected her. "The length of my stay and other issues are what is negotiable."

She didn't seem to like my answer. "And what will we get for accepting a lesser amount of your time?"

"I'll agree to your six months if you'll agree to let me see whom I please."

A sly smile played across her lips while her eyes narrowed slightly "Done. When you are not training, you may freely see whom you like. But you will be required to stay the day at the Chantry."

That was just way too easy. "I hope you are not planning on filling my nights with training to ensure that I have no free time to see whom I please," I warned her. "It would make the six months very difficult for me and my ghouls, and aside from seeing my friends, I do have a business to run."

"Miss Andrews, when I became Kindred, I did not leave my Sire's side for over two decades. Study and the pursuit of knowledge is what Clan Tremere is founded upon." Her voice had begun softly, but now the volume rose. "This is what it means to live as a Tremere," she said in a hard voice. "If you wish your nights to be filled with party and socializing, perhaps you should petition the Toreador for entrance into their Clan." She took a moment to calm herself before continuing. "We have only a passing interest in your ghouls, after an initial measure of their abilities, and your ability to control them they will be free to live their lives and run your business. You will be busy. Perhaps if you prove yourself a true talent of your abilities the study will decrease. But you aren't, are you?"

It was an effort to keep my voice calm and even but somehow I managed. "I believe, countess, we have already established that I do not want to live as a Tremere. If I thought the Toreador, or any other clan in the city, could keep me from you, I would honestly consider petitioning them for sanctuary," I said bluntly. "While I do not wish to 'party' as the Toreador, I do have an interest in spending time with my friends. If you cannot agree to give me that time in the six months we're asking, then we must further negotiate. I could agree to one month in your care with no contact with any outside clan."

"Do not insult me child." Her voice was low, nearly a growl. "One month?"

"This is going nowhere," Madelynne interrupted. "I suggest that we wait for the Prince's decision in two nights time. I don't think that the two of you will be able to come to an agreement between you that will satisfy both parties."

"But Miss Andrews wishes to make her own decisions," the countess replied, looking at me. "Doesn't she?"

"This meeting is about me wanting to make my own decisions," I agreed calmly. I was afraid that if I looked at Madelynne, the countess would take it as a sign that I was looking for direction, though honestly I felt as if I were failing miserably. "I suggested one month if you insist I have no contact with the Gangrel, countess. If you choose to be more flexible, we can continue to negotiate."

"I already agreed to let you spend your free time with those you see fit for all six months," she reminded me.

"No, countess, you did not," I argued. "You agreed to keep me so busy that I will not have time to do anything but what you tell me to."

She spoke as if she were talking to a stubborn child. "No, I conceded that ours was a life of study. I know you have regained some of your abilities already, but lack the control to go with them. When we have seen what all you can do, and when you have proven that you can control what you can do, there will be no more need for intense study and training, now will there? The more cooperative and open you are to what we have to teach, the faster you will learn, or relearn, and the sooner you will become an open and productive member of House and Clan Tremere, if only for the remainder of your appointed time with us."

"Neither of us have any way to know if I will regain my abilities quickly and I have already agreed to give you my full cooperation," I reminded her. "Why don't we say two months, with a guaranteed full night each and every week during which I can leave the chantry after sundown to do as I please and return before sunrise?"

"Again, I ask what you would give to have your time lessened?" she demanded. "So far you have but offered your cooperation." She leaned forward and said gravely, "Little girl, I give a shit about your cooperation. We will have you for the time we are given. The only thing your cooperation will dictate is hard you are trained. We will train you for all six months if need be, or for a little as we

need to. That choice is yours. Do you wish to spend all your time with us in forced study and training, or a few months of dedicated work and the remainder of the time enjoying the power that could be yours?"

My temper and my patience snapped, giving way to words I'd kept inside for a long time but normally knew better than to say to her. "I don't care about your power, countess, it doesn't mean a fucking thing to me," I shot back angrily. "If I had my way I'd never return to the 'loving' arms of your clan. I don't honestly expect you to lower the amount of time I'm forced to spend with you but I think it's forgivable if I try to find a little bit of freedom within the hell you want to put me through. I know that it won't be easy to study with you, and yet I'm prepared to do my best to live up to your expectations however unreasonable I think they're going to be."

I tried to get a rein on my temper, but the words kept spilling out. "Neither Madelynne nor any other member of the pack has ever dictated who I may or may not see, where I may or may not live. Madelynne offered her home to me. Scott did the same. Frasier has an apartment I can stay at should I feel the need, and I have often stayed at the agency often in the past few months. By insisting that I spend every day in the chantry, you are already overstepping what the Gangrel asked of me, but all I want is one goddamned night a week to see my friends. Why is that too fucking much to ask?"

"Because you have offered nothing to us in return for that privilege," she explained impatiently. "For all your talk of 'cooperation' the truth finally comes out." Her voice took on a mock whining tone. "You do not want to come back, you do not want to learn, you do not to be Tremere." Her voice returned to normal, hard and biting. "Why should we reward such infantile behavior?"

"This is getting nowhere fast," Madelynne barked, getting to her feet. "I suggest that we end this meeting right now and wait for the Prince to make his decision!"

The countess sat back and folded her hand in her lap. "That is fine with me. I want time with Miss Andrews, and weather it is she who comes of her own free will or the Prince who orders her to, I shall have it."

"Am I needed here anymore?" she asked the countess.

"It is your Tina who is afraid of my 'mind tricks' and such. Ask her."

When Madelynne's eyes turned to me, I said, "You don't have to stay if you don't want to. I'm sure this won't take too much longer."

She nodded and looked at the countess, "I will see you in two days time."

The countess nodded her agreement and watched while Madelynne walked out. When the doors closed behind her, she turned to me. "Was there something else you wished to offer? Or are you finished as well?"

"What exactly is it that you want from me?" I demanded.

Her voice remained calm and reasonable. "Six months of your time."

That was nothing I hadn't heard too many times already. "What do you hope to gain by keeping me from the people I now consider my family?"

"A fair chance at being considered the same."

"Countess, forcing me to consider your clan family is very much like a man forcing a woman to have sex with him and expecting her to fall in love with him," I scoffed. "It's not likely to happen."

"I don't want to force you," she said patiently. "I want the opportunity for you to come to that thought on your own."

"How can you realistically expect that to happen if you keep me a prisoner in your chantry?"

"Would you like your time with us to be as a prisoner?" she offered in a cool voice. "I am sure we could find a dank room for you to spend all your time with us in. What I want is the opportunity for you to explore the Clan you truly are, without certain 'distractions'. Scott has known certain members of our clan before as you have known other Gangrel. It is not the 'Romeo and Juliet' scenario I have a problem with, nor the fact that despite how nice we are to you, you will go back to the Gangrel in the end. It is the fact that you will not even grant us the chance to be more than 'the other clan' to you."

"And why should I?" I demanded. "What have you done for me besides make demands and kill my friends?"

She had the nerve to look confused. "Who have I killed?"

"You killed Alex," I reminded her harshly. "He was my friend, and you killed him because he was trying to protect me. You have no idea what that did to the pack, what it did to me. I'm not sure you care. While I know that you didn't physically hold the sword, and I have no proof that you hired the Eighty-Eights to come for me, it was your greed that killed him, your greed for me."

"It was not I that struck a deal with the daughter and her Eighty-Eights," she denied.

Not that I believed her, but I had to ask. "Then who did?"

"Why should I tell you?" she shot back. "You have done nothing this night except dictate your terms to me and demand information and consideration for your wishes from me, regardless of my or anyone else's desires. The Prince told you months ago to resolve this, but you've fought us tooth and nail the whole way and hidden behind the Gangrel. It is only now, after he has been forced to intervene, that you decide you want to take control of your life."

"We have both made demands of each other, countless. And yes, I have hidden behind Madelynne and her clan, but neither is here with us now. Despite how I feel about spending time among your people, I am here trying to work out a peaceful solution we can both live with." I frowned, knowing that we'd come to no agreement tonight. "Well, I was. It seems we are at an impasse."

"There is no impasse. You were never negotiating, simply demanding," she said smugly. "Madelynne knew it as well as I did, that is why she left. She hasn't the patience for your pouting, and I fear mine has run out. Now, do you actually have anything with which to barter a more lenient stay with us?"

"It seems I have nothing to offer you that you feel you cannot take from me." I said as evenly as I could as I came to my feet. "I apologize for wasting your time."

"Perhaps I'll get it back from you."

Her words were vaguely threatening, but somehow I managed not to flinch. With a final nod in her direction, I left the room only to stand on the landing for a long moment, trying to regain control of my emotions. I wanted to scream, I wanted to cry, but I knew that neither would help me. Fuck, nothing would help me, not after that fiasco. I dashed away my tears and went downstairs to face the others.

Fallout

RAINING IN MY HEAD LIKE A TRAGEDY

TEARING ME APART LIKE A NEW EMOTION

EURHYTHMICS - HERE COMES THE RAIN AGAIN

When I opened the meeting room door, every eye in the place turned on me. I looked first at Madelynne, wondering if she really had thought I was being unreasonable, as the countess believed. Keeping a reign on my thoughts wasn't easy, but at least I managed to turn away, to look at Scott and Isa. "We're done here."

Scott was at my side before Madelynne had gained her feet. "Alright, where to?" she asked.

"Anywhere else," I replied as I noticed that the Tremere had stood as well.

Madelynne led the way out of the room, followed by Logan, Michael, Isa and Scott. I was halfway through the door when I heard Zach's voice behind me. "I will see you in two days, Christina."

My spine felt stiff and it was an effort to turn and look at him calmly. "For the next two nights at least, Señor déla Rocha, my name is Tina."

His voice followed me out the door. "Have it your way, Tina."

Once outside the building Logan and Michael asked Madelynne how her meeting with the countess went. Scott, Isa and I walked behind them toward the cars and listened while she explained that the Tremere would be taking over the Ventrue portion of her new bar. She had apparently also agreed not to support Jac. In return, they would deal with her 'problem'. She didn't clarify what that problem was, and I was afraid to ask just in case it was me.

Michael turned to me. "And how did your meeting go?"

"Like shit," I bit out. Turning to Madelynne, I asked, "Can we go now?"

Madelynne agreed, telling everyone to meet her at the pub. I handed the car keys to Scott, knowing I was much too upset to drive.

"I take it that it didn't go very well," Isa stated dryly once we were on our way.

"That's an understatement," I agreed.

"Do you want to talk about it?" she asked.

I could tell from her voice she was tense, but it was still an effort for me to talk without screaming in frustration. "Not really."

"Do we need to worry about them coming after us?"

"Why should they?" I demanded, my voice cold as the countess' heart. "The prince is gonna hand me over in two days." While that probably wasn't the best thing to say to the Prince's personal advisor, it was the truth and I wasn't about to take it back.

After a long moment, she spoke again. "So Madelynne has made a deal concerning Clarice?"

"Looks that way."

"What are the terms?" she asked.

It took me a minute to remember what Madelynne had said about the new bar and not supporting Jac, but when I did I repeated it to Isa.

"Was this some of the promises she made in order to get her seat?" she asked.

I hesitated a moment, not sure how to answer. "You'll have to talk to Madelynnne about any promises she may have made."

"I don't care about promises she may or may not have made," she replied. "It only affects her honor if she does not live up to her word."

There was nothing I could say to that. Madelynnne's honor was her own to make or break; I obviously had no part in her decisions, not even the ones that affected me. I turned to stare out the window, struggling to keep a hold of my temper and wondering how badly I would pay for pissing the countess off.

We all went upstairs once we got back to the pub. Madelynnne looked lost in thought, while Michael had some damned odd grin on his face. Isa looked neutral, but neither Scott nor Logan seemed anything other than normal. The pack was gathered, although my boys were no where to be seen. I made a mental note to call them once I calmed down.

"So, how'd the rest of your conversation go once I left?" Madelynnne asked me as she sat down on one of the couches.

I moved to stand by one of the windows, feeling much too restless to sit down. "Downhill."

"What was said?"

Looking at Scott I remembered what the countess had said about him 'knowing' another Tremere and wondered again if she had been lying just to throw me off guard. To Madelynnne I said with a shrug, "Nothing that really mattered."

"No?" she demanded. "Why is that? Because you didn't get everything that you wanted?"

My voice was hard as I met her gaze with an even look of my own. "Apparently I'm getting exactly what I deserve. Karma's a bitch."

"Then it's what you think you deserve," she said as if reminding me. "You know it's easier to catch a fly with honey than it is with piss and vinegar!"

"The Tremere don't want honey, they want Christina Kline," I shot back. "As the countess pointed out, I have nothing to bargain with and what I want doesn't matter to them. I just need to deal with that fact and move on."

"Possibly," she chastised, "but if you were less demanding maybe you could have gotten farther."

She was right and I knew it, but bitching about what had already been done wasn't getting me anywhere. When she turned to talk to Michael I walked downstairs in search of a phone book, hoping I could catch the countess before she left the Sanctuary. Unfortunately, I was too late. The ghoul tending bar on the second floor told me that she'd already left, so I had no choice but to call Zach, again. I was beginning to hate the sound of his voice.

"Good evening Miss Andrews," he greeted me pleasantly.

"I'm trying to reach the countess and once again you're the only number I have," I said apologetically.

"Yes," he drawled. "We shall have to remedy that."

I waited for a moment and only spoke when he said nothing more. "If you would give me her number, I would dial her directly."

"I'm afraid the countess is on her way to a meeting with the prince," he told me. "She has been summoned."

"Could you let her know that I am trying to reach her?" I asked. "I feel I owe her an apology."

"Certainly."

I had no choice but to take him at his word, though I hung up feeling very uncertain that he'd actually pass my message along. I took a couple of minutes to call and check on the boys. Frasier was out with Nancy, while Petor was at the agency working. Since I didn't really feel the need to go back upstairs and face Madelynne's disappointment, Scott and I sat in the bar for a while, waiting to see if Zach would call me back.

The others came downstairs a little while later, headed for the door. It turned out that the Prince had also summoned Madelynne, and though Isa asked if I wanted to go along, I hadn't been invited, and really didn't want to spend one of my last nights of freedom sitting in a waiting room at the Renaissance Center.

Isa wanted to talk to us about something and suggested we go back upstairs for privacy's sake. "Apparently the Tremere are going to take Clarice out in exchange for the things Madelynne spoke of earlier," she said when we were alone.

Her words took me by surprise. Why in hell had Madelynne asked the Tremere, the *Tremere*, to take out Clarice? I would have jumped at the chance to help her with anything, especially something like this. Realistically, it was Scott's job as the clan enforcer to do it.

"What are you thinking?" Isa asked when I said nothing.

"I just don't understand why she didn't ask *us* to do it," I admitted.

"That's what I asked her," she agreed. "Well, not so much about *us* but about why she didn't ask me to do it, given what I am. She was a little unclear as far as where my friendship with Clarice stood, and so we discussed it a little more in depth than we did the other night. She asked me what I would want from her to take care of it myself."

"And what did you say?" I prompted.

"I said that I had to think about it. I'm not sure what she could give me that I would want, that could come from a deal," she admitted. "The only thing that I would want from her is her friendship, and those types of things aren't earned by making deals. I told her I'd think about it for the evening and I'd get back to her."

I shook my head. "I just don't understand why she went to the Tremere for that when we could have taken care of it ourselves."

"I don't know," she replied softly. "It's not my place to question her on that."

"Apparently it's not my place either," I murmured.

"I will admit to present company only that if Clarice is to be taken out I would like to handle it but I don't know what I would want from her. And to be honest, between the three of us here," she said, watching Scott for a reaction, "I'm not sure how much I would trust her word anyway, because she's already proven that her word means nothing. She's willing to back out of agreements that she's made, and when I give my word that means something. I don't know if I want to enter into an agreement with her."

"You realize that if you do," Scott surprised us both by saying, "she won't have to back out on her deal with Jac."

"This is true," Isa murmured, "but does she want to do business with the Ventrue? I mean, does she hope to save face by approaching the Tremere to aid in Tina's situation? Because there was no mention of anything having to do with Tina and her situation in what she said she talked to the countess about."

"The countess apparently refused to talk to Madelynne about my situation," I told her.

"Tina was what Madelynne was going to bargain with," Scott added. "Chances are she was caught off guard."

"In all honesty I don't need to make a deal with her to kill Clarice," she replied. "It might help me not be in trouble, but I definitely don't need to make a deal for it."

"Then do it," he suggested.

"Want help?" I asked.

With that we were off. Isa confided that she didn't plan on taking Clarice out tonight, she just wanted to check the lay of the land and see if she could actually find her resting place. Isa also didn't want me in harms way, so I had to agree to wait in the parking lot while she checked a few of Clarice's known hangouts.

Digging up Bones

AND THIS ONE'S FOR MY LOVER

THE ONE WHO HAD TO SUFFER

GARBAGE - 13 X FOREVER

Isa left Scott and me in the parking lot of some dive in one of the poorer sections of town while she went inside to see what she could learn about Clarice. I didn't much care for the inactivity, but I didn't really have a choice. The prince had set her to guard me, and I respected Isa too much to put her reputation with him in danger.

I waited until I couldn't take the silence any more before saying softly, "Did you know last night that Madelynne intended to barter my freedom with the Tremere?"

"I knew she was going to try," he admitted.

"Why—?" I knew why he hadn't told me, and hearing him say it wouldn't make me feel any better. I'd always known he was loyal to Madelynne. "You should have told me."

"What would it have helped?"

"I don't know. Probably nothing, but I would have known. I would have—" I wondered honestly what I would have done differently. "I would not have called the countess."

"But Madelynne couldn't bargain you," he pointed out

"No, she couldn't, but she didn't know that going in." I hesitated a moment before going on. "I don't know why I-I really can't blame her for trying to-for doing what she has to do to protect the pack, it's just... it would have been nice to know before hand."

"Again, what would that have changed?" he asked logically.

He was right. If he had told me, nothing would have turned out any differently, and yet it would have made a world of difference to me. I kept my voice carefully neutral as I replied, "Nothing."

Silence filled the car again and I let it sit between us for a while. Something the countess said had been weighing on my mind but I wasn't sure if I wanted to ask him about it, or even how to ask. Eventually I gathered my courage.

"The countess said something tonight. I mean, I know it's none of my business, but I..." I let my words trail off, still unsure how to ask the question. He watched me in silence, waiting for me to finish. There was nothing to do but just say it. "She hinted that you'd had a relationship with one of the Tremere before I came here."

He gave a derisive snort. "If you could call it that."

"What do you mean?"

"Remember how Madelynne told us the countess said that our relationship was forced?"

"Yeah, I remember." As if I could forget the fear shooting through me at the idea that Scott wasn't with me because he wanted to be.

"She wasn't pulling it out of her ass," he told me. "Holden tried to get them as allies by 'encouraging' a relationship."

Holden really had been an ass. There were a lot of things I could have said, but I knew they wouldn't go over well. I wondered exactly what 'encouragement' Holden had used on Scott, and just who had 'encouraged' the Tremere. I settled for saying, "Who was it?"

He sighed heavily. "Do you really want to know?"

"No," I said honestly. "It happened before I knew you and it's none of my business. But I gotta spend the next six months with the bastards, and I don't want to be surprised when whoever it was decides to rub my face in the fact she had you first, or punish me for something I had no control over."

He nodded in agreement. "Amy."

"The city chantry leader?" I asked in surprise.

"Yeah."

I rubbed my hand across my eyes, trying very hard not to picture them as a couple in my mind. I didn't know very much about her, and had only seen her once or twice. "And here I thought nothing else could make my time with the Tremere less fun."

"She didn't have the Chantry then," he added.

"No, I don't imagine she did." Tremere Regents don't have affairs with Gangrel. I studied his face in the dim light of the parking lot. "Is she still gonna be mad about how it ended?"

He met my eye without flinching. "I killed the old leader so she could have the spot. I think she's fine." With that he turned away, looking out the window on his side of the car.

I hated that Holden had forced him to do things that years later still hurt him to remember, hated that we had to talk about this now. I reached over and took his hand. "I'm sorry; I know you don't want to talk about it. I just—they're gonna have enough over my head without coming up with more surprises."

Though he let me take his hand, he remained silent and continued looking out the window. I knew my questions had dug up pain from the past, but I didn't know how to make it better. It was so frustrating, not knowing about his life before I'd known him. I understood his need for secrecy, but I didn't know where the landmines in his past were or what topics I needed to stay away from.

Finally I changed the topic to one that had been weighing heavy on my mind. "Do you really think Madelynne is going to turn out like Holden?"

"I hope not." He paused a moment, but spoke again before I could say anything more with a nod toward the window. "Your friend is back."

Looking past him I could see my stalker the usual block away, sitting on the motorcycle. "This is getting old." Impatiently, I opened the car door and got out, standing next to the car for a moment to see if my 'friend' would stay or go. In the time it took me to get out of the car whoever it was had already disappeared.

"Damn it." I slammed the car door and started walking in that direction, hoping there would be some clue left behind that could tell me who my stalker was. Behind me I heard Scott get out of the car and follow. Enhancing my senses brought everything into sharp focus, every sound, every sight, every smell, but it didn't tell me anything about the biker or where it had disappeared to.

We were halfway to where the bike had been when Scott spoke up. "What are you gonna do, just walk up and say 'hi'?"

I stopped and turned to face him. "How can I say 'hi' when they're gone? I just wanna check the area out."

He glanced at me, puzzled. "What do you mean gone? They're right—" As he looked back to where the biker had been, his words cut off. "What the fuck?" Obviously he couldn't see them any more either, but somehow he'd still seen them when I hadn't been able to. Together we walked toward where the biker had been parked.

Auspex showed up nothing unusual, even when I tried for an aura reading. "Do you see anything?" I asked Scott.

"Not anymore," he replied irritably.

"This is just fucked up," I growled. "Was it there or wasn't it? Is it there now even though we can't see it?" I moved closer to the spot where we'd seen the biker and put my hands out, but there was nothing to feel. I knew I looked like an idiot, but there was no hope for it.

After a moment I gave up and with a soft curse we headed back for the car. "I can't just be imagining this person," I muttered darkly. "You saw it, and Maddy did before." When he nodded his agreement, I asked, "What could it be? Obfuscate? Magic?"

"Don't know."

I pondered the problem for a moment before realizing I'd find no answers tonight, and once the Tremere got a hold of me, the last thing I'd be concerned with was my mysterious stalker. "I've got enough to worry about without trying to deal with this ghost. If it wants to talk to me, then it will. If not, fuck it."

Isa caught up with us about halfway back to the car. As I hadn't told her about my biker friend before, I had to spend several minutes filling her in on the situation. She seemed frustrated that I couldn't describe whoever it was. Even Scott couldn't seem to describe the bike.

"We probably shouldn't linger on the street here," she suggested after several minutes of fruitless questioning.

As we walked back to the car, I asked her what had happened inside. She'd apparently had a more interesting time of it than we had. Clarice had some new henchmen, Brujah who hadn't been real friendly with the prince. Isa's call to Giles told her that the Frenchman knew about them but hadn't had a reason to come down on them yet. Looked like he was holding out hope that whoever ended up as the lone Primogen for the Brujah clan would keep them in line.

New Conditions

IMMOBILIZED BY MY FEAR

AND SOON TO BE BLINDED BY TEARS

EVANESCENCE - WHISPER

We'd barely gotten back on the road when my phone rang. "It's Madelynne," she said when I answered. "Are you busy?"

"Not really, what's up?"

"Can you meet me at the pub?" she asked.

"Sure." I didn't like the urgency in her voice. "Is there a hurry?"

"Not really, I just have to tell you something."

"All right, we'll be there soon." As I hung up, I told Scott that Madelynne needed us at the pub. As soon as Isa got off the phone I told her the same thing. "She didn't really say," I replied when she asked my why, "which is never good."

Less than an hour later we were sitting upstairs at the pub waiting for Madelynne to tell us.

"I talked to the prince tonight," she began carefully, "about your ghouls."

The way she'd said that made me tense up. "What about them?"

"I'm not sure that they will get to go with you," she told me. "At least not Peter."

"I don't understand. Why wouldn't they go with me?" I demanded. "And why only Peter?"

"I guess they aren't interested in them," she replied calmly, "but Frasier may be a different story since you did that thing to him."

"That thing?" It took me a minute to realize that she was talking about the ritual Christina had performed on Frasier, the one that would ensure he'd become Tremere when he died. "But they're not the countess' ghouls, they're mine. They go where I go."

"They may have to stay here with me," she told me.

"But they're mine," I protested, trying very hard not to panic. "Why should she get to take them away from me too?"

"I don't know, Tina," she said soothingly. "I'm just telling you what I was told."

"Why did the prince say the countess didn't want them?"

"The Tremere are not interested in them," she replied simply.

"Christ, I knew she'd be pissed about what happened earlier, but this?" I muttered, ignoring the confused looks from Logan and Michael. "She must really fucking hate me."

"I don't think that this has anything to do with that."

"Then what?" I demanded irritably. "She didn't say anything about them not going before."

"Did you ask?"

I thought for a moment, trying to remember exactly what the countess had said. "She said that they would be tested, and then they'd be free to live their lives."

"I don't know then." She explained that the prince had told her the Tremere would provide the boys with my blood while I was kept away from them, and that the ritual I'd done on Frasier might allow him to stay with me, but she wasn't sure.

"I can't leave Petor behind," I said firmly, trying not to panic at the very thought of not having him with me. "I can't."

"You know we'd take care of him." Her voice was kind, meant to calm me, but in this I couldn't be calmed.

"Well, I know you would," I said gently, not wanting to hurt her feelings. "It's just—you shouldn't have to. He's mine. I want to take care of him."

"I understand that, but you may not be able to."

I paced for a moment, trying to come up with some way I could take both of my boys with me. "What do you think it will take to make her change her mind?"

"I don't know," she replied. "We will have to discuss it when we go meet with the prince."

"I-I called Zach earlier," I admitted softly. "I'm trying to set up another meeting with the Countess. Maybe-maybe if I explain to her how..." I let my word trail off because there was no use in going on. The Countess didn't give a shit about how I felt, and nothing I said would make any difference to her. I wanted to sit down and cry, but that wouldn't do me any good either. "There has to be something we can do."

"Like what, Tina?" she demanded.

"I don't know, but there has to be something," I insisted, fighting tears that burned my eyes. "I can't just leave him behind, I can't."

"I understand that," she said gently, "but I think that our hands are tied."

I couldn't answer her. I knew there was no way she could understand what I was feeling, what I knew being separated would do to me and the boys. She had never agreed with the way I watched over them. Hell, no one did. While I knew that the pack would protect my boys, that thought held little comfort. Even holding Scott's hand brought me no consolation. No one would be able to protect my boys like I could, no one.

"I have an idea," Michael suggested, "but you won't like it."

I looked up for the first time in long minutes, surprised to see that Isa had left the room. "What is it?"

"I am sure the countess will never agree to let you see everybody..." He let the thought trail off without finishing it.

"You're saying I should pick my battles," I said softly. "Decide who it's most important for me to be able to spend time with."

"Yes."

I looked at each of the people in the room, the faces of the pack that had become my family, trying to figure out how I could possibly choose one over another. "How the hell am I supposed to do that?"

He shrugged. "I said you wouldn't like it."

I still wasn't sure that I liked Michael at all, but in this his reasoning was sound. "I don't, but that doesn't make you less right."

Isa came back in the room and did her best to assure me that the boys would be safe without me to watch over them. She seemed to understand my need to protect them, but insisted that if things didn't work out the way that I wanted them to she and the pack would look after them.

"I realize that you would do your best," I told her sadly, "but it wouldn't be the same."

"I would give you my word that I would do everything in my power to make sure that nothing happens to them," she promised. Isa was not one to give her word lightly, and I knew that when she did give it, only hell itself would stand in the way of her keeping it. Her words gave me some comfort, but not much.

"I do appreciate that, really," I said honestly, "but given a choice I would rather take care of them myself."

Scott and I went back to our apartment soon after that. We were able to spend some quality time together before my phone rang near dawn. I'd been summoned by the prince.

Summoned

YOU'VE GOT TO LEARN TO SAVE YOURSELF
BEFORE YOU FIND THERE'S NOTHING LEFT
GARBAGE - AFTERGLOW

My appointment with the prince wasn't until eight thirty, but I took much of the time before that getting ready. I wanted to look my best though I wasn't really sure what to wear. Hell, I still didn't know what to say.

"What's wrong with what you wore last night?" Scott asked after I'd been going through clothes for nearly half an hour.

"I wore it last night," I reminded him.

"Can't wear it twice in a row?"

I shot him a look that told him 'no' without saying a word, and was reminded that his idea of dressing up was buttoning his shirt, which to his credit he had done this evening. Not that I minded his usual state of disarray, but if I was going to get anywhere with the prince, or with the Countess if she agreed to meet tonight, I knew I had to look less like the Gangrel I wanted to be and more like the Tremere they kept insisting I was.

Isa phoned to let me know that she had an appointment and that she'd catch up with me later. I told her about the summons from the prince and that I would call her when I was done. I also called the boys to let them know what was going on. Neither of them wanted to go with me to see the prince, which was just as well in my mind.

We were on the way to the Prince's house when my phone rang. It was Zach. "How soon can you be at the Sanctuary?" he asked.

"That depends on how long my meeting with the prince lasts," I told him.

"Oh, you've been summoned." He seemed pleased about that for some reason. "Call when you are out of your meeting and we will see where we are at."

I agreed, of course. I wanted to get the meeting with the Countess out of the way as soon as I could. The stress of not knowing what was going to happen was killing me.

When we reached the Prince's estate Scott was shown a room and told that he was familiar enough with the grounds to know where he could and could not go. I agreed to call him when I was done and followed the butler to the Prince's study, where I greeted him suitably and sat when I was told to.

"You haven't by any chance changed your mind about going back to the Tremere, have you?" he drawled in a joking manner.

"Would it give me any bargaining power if I did?" I asked seriously.

"No."

"Then no, I haven't," I replied quickly.

"At least not with me," he added. "I'm not the one you're bargaining with."

"I doubt anything would help me with the countess," I said dryly.

"So tell me about your relationship with your ghouls," he directed.

"They're my ghouls," I reminded him. "What do you want to know?"

"Well, it's not a..." he paused as if searching for a term to use. "...carnal relationship."

"Oh, no," I assured him quickly.

"But yet you seem rather..."

"Protective."

"Overly so," he agreed.

"I've been told that a lot," I murmured.

"Why?"

"They need to be protected." It was only common sense, and I didn't understand why no one seemed to get that but me. "Someone has to take care of them; they can't take care of themselves. I realize that they're men full grown and that they're ghouls and have abilities that normal mortals don't," I added when he gave me a questioning look, "but I just, I need to protect them."

"From what?"

"The Sabbat," I said softly. "The Tremere, random Toreador."

"From what I understand that one was rather willing," he drawled with a smile. "The Tremere have no interest in them, and you're friends with the only Sabbat in town."

"There was an attack not that long ago on the agency by Ralph's people," I reminded him. "Not that he's around any more."

"Those were Gangrel," he replied. "Do you need to protect them from the 'Grel?"

"Apparently some of them," I said calmly. "There's still Patrick."

"You really don't think either of them could handle him or handle themselves enough to get away from him?" he asked doubtfully.

I knew as well as he did that it was likely any ghoul could get away from a vampire if they tried hard enough. "Maybe."

"As I said, the Tremere don't particularly care about your ghouls," he repeated, "as far as having them, in regards to having you."

"Well, I particularly care," I said firmly. "They're mine."

"At this point you're not really given a choice," he pointed out, "at least not by me."

I didn't like the way that sounded. "Are you saying that I can't take my boys with me should I spend time with the Tremere?"

"I'm saying that should I have to decide what will become of you and your time and them, then that is what will happen," he said in a hard voice.

I recognized his words for the threat they were. "And if I choose to go back to them myself?"

"If a deal can be reached that is amicable, and befitting of all parties..." He let his words trail off unfinished, but I knew what he meant. If the countess and I could come to an agreement, then the Prince would not force me to go to the Tremere alone.

"I actually will be meeting with the countess some time this evening," I told him. "Perhaps we can work something out."

He nodded. "Let's talk of Scott for a moment."

"All right." I tried to prepare myself for whatever he might say next.

"Short of my ordering it, I do not believe the countess would ever freely allow him within sight of the chantry."

After what Scott had told me last night, I could understand why they wouldn't. One didn't let the wolf back in the henhouse after he killed the head rooster.

"Given that, if you only are allowed to see one, whom would it be?" he asked.

"Well, my choice would be Scott," I told him, "but it would be difficult to see him if he can't get within sight of the chantry." That was especially true if I couldn't leave it.

"Over your ghouls?"

My mind froze for a moment as I fought the fear that threatened to choke me. "I'm not sure that's a fair question. I have two ghouls."

"I don't care about fairness," he said briskly. "Were you allowed to see only one in your time with the Tremere, be it your ghouls, Scott or any member of any other clan you have acquainted, whom would it be?"

How could I make that kind of decision? I loved Scott, but my boys needed me to take care of them. Even leaving Scott out of the question, the decision was still a hard one. "If I'm only allowed one," I said at last, feeling as if the words were being pulled from me one by one, "it would have to be Petor."

"Really?" The Prince seemed surprised. "Why him?"

I searched my mind for a logical reason but could find only one. "He was there when I woke up, and he's been with me the whole time, loyal to me." I couldn't stop myself from adding, "He just needs protecting the most. Scott can take care of himself, mostly."

"I shall keep that in mind," he murmured. "When your time is up, I regret to say that not all of your current friends may look upon you in the same light."

I looked down at my hands, wondering what it would take to make Madelynn trust me once the Tremere were done with me, if she would ever come to trust me again. "Yes, I've been told that," I replied, meeting the prince's eye.

He was silent for a long time, watching or perhaps waiting for something. Finally he said, "Do you have anything further to add to your case?"

"There is a lot I could say, I'm not sure it would do me any good." I tried to keep my voice and words neutral, but it was very difficult. "I understand the Tremere's position, that they want one of their own back, but I believe the countess is going about this the wrong way. Forcing me to spend time with them is not going to make me feel like I am a part of their family. It's just going to cause more resentment."

"How so?"

"They want to take me away from the people I consider my family and my friends, and force me to be one of them for however long the count—" I had to stop and change my words before I offended the prince. "—however long you decide. Not only that, but they want to take away my servants and leave me isolated. That's not the act of a friend or family member, that's the act of an enemy."

"The countess is very old." The seriousness in his eye told me more than his words. "I think that she cannot see it that way."

I shook my head. "I'm afraid I can't see it any other way."

"She does not want you to look on them as friends in your time spent with them," he continued, "but rather to get to know them and then when you are returned to your life, to develop friendships on your own similar to those you have developed with the Gangrel. I must tell you that her motives are not based entirely on that. She does see, if you will permit me to say, a tactical advantage in having an ally with the Gangrel. Whether you choose to see that as malicious or not, I don't think it was or is intended. Of the four—of the five females who sit on conclave, the countess can only identify in spirit with your Miss Walker."

"This is surprising considering she wants to take me away from her," I said dryly.

"But she is willing to give you back."

Sure she did. "Once she's molded me to her satisfaction."

"Are you really so afraid that she will attempt to blood bond or dominate you?" he challenged.

"Honestly I think I'm more angry than anything that she did not attempt to approach me in any other way than this demand that I spend time with her and the Tremere," I told him. "I had attempted to... play nice with the Tremere of Detroit and was turned down flat, more or less, unless I walked away from the Gangrel."

"That was not entirely Victoria, you should know," he replied smoothly. "The countess placed Miss Owens in charge of your recommitment to the clan."

I felt the words sink into my brain, echoing there for a long moment. Scott's former lover had been in charge of my return to the clan. Something clicked in my mind and suddenly a lot of things made a lot more sense; the lack of willingness to negotiate, the dogged insistence that I give up the Gangrel, the warning from Joan about the Eighty-Eights' attack, even the Countess' hurt feelings when I kept turning her away. "That's quite an interesting statement," I breathed.

"By the time the countess found out how Amy and hers were handling the situation," he continued, "this formal demand was but her only avenue."

"Was this before or after the Eighty-Eights attacked us?" I asked dryly.

His voice was quiet, but certain. "That was entirely Missy."

I raised an eyebrow. "Does the Countess not have control of her own clan?"

"The Countess put her faith in her people," he said simply. "They let her down. There are very few of the city Tremere whom she trusts with any level that she used to."

"That is a shame," I replied sympathetically, "but she still could have tried calling to explain the situation."

"Would you have listened?"

"Maybe, maybe not." After a moment under his intense gaze, I looked down. "Probably not."

"I don't believe there's any probably about it," he countered.

He was right and we both knew it. "Do you know if the countess intends for me to stay at the city or the country chantry?"

"As I said, she does not trust the majority of the city Tremere," he reminded me. "I believe that should you stay with her it would be at the country, as that is where she primarily resides."

I nodded. "You've certainly given me a lot to think about."

"You don't have much time to think on it."

"I'm aware of that," I agreed. "It is my hope that the countess and I can come to some sort of an agreement so that you will not be forced to make a decision on this matter."

"I hope so too."

There was a little bit of small talk to wrap up the meeting before I was free to go. A call to Scott told me that he was waiting by the car, and a passing ghoul told me that Isa was on the grounds and wanted to talk to me when I was done with the prince.

On my way to the car I called Isa to let her know I was done, and that we would be heading for the Sanctuary, or some other place of the countess' choosing.

"Oh, you have another meeting with her?" she asked.

"Yes, I just have to call Zach and let him know that I'm done here," I replied.

"How did it go with the prince?"

"Very interesting," I murmured.

"Did you play the game like we talked about?" she questioned.

"Poker?" I teased with a smile. "I learned a few things I was not aware of. We'll see where it gets me." I asked her to meet me near the car, and when she agreed we rung off.

Scott was leaning on the car when I approached, and I smiled at the picture he made. I tried to memorize every nuance of the image so that I could hold on to it during the months I wouldn't be able to see him.

Yet another quick call, this one to Zach, finalized the meeting with the countess, at the Sanctuary as I'd thought it would be. Surprisingly enough Zach passed along her offer to let me have a liaison as an assurance against any 'tricks' she might pull.

Isa followed us to the Sanctuary, and it was a quiet ride in the car. I made one last call to Madelynne to let her know that I'd spoken with the prince and was now on my way to meet with the countess. She asked some questions about both meetings, wanting to know the details. I explained that I hoped to negotiate better with the countess this evening and work things out so that the prince was not forced to make any decisions about my life.

"Did you ask the prince about taking your boys with you?" she asked.

"Of course I did. I-I think if the prince makes the decision I'll only be able to take one of them with me, if I can even take one," I told her. "I'm hoping that if I am more... reasonable with the countess, she will give me a bit more leeway when it comes to taking them with me."

"You know that he will make you take Frasier because of that thing you did," she warned me.

"Maybe," I said softly. I didn't want to leave either of them behind, but I thought that Frasier could take care of himself just a bit more than Petor could. Not much more, but enough to make a difference in my mind no matter how slight. "I just don't know what I have to do to make sure Petor comes too."

"Why don't you just plan for the worst?" she suggested pragmatically. "Plan on him staying with us and you feeding him once a month and then if you are able to take him then good, but if not then he has been taken care of."

"I know. I just-I just don't want to leave him behind. We'll see how things work out when I talk to the countess, maybe—" I closed my eyes, hoping against hope that she would listen to reason. "I don't know, maybe she'll change her mind."

"Be prepared for the worst and hope for the best," she suggested.

"I will," I sighed. "I'll give you a call when I get done with the countess."

Scott hadn't brought any weapons with him, and I left mine in the car while Isa had to check hers at the door. On the way in to the club I said to Isa, "The countess has offered to allow me a liaison to ensure there are no mind tricks."

She nodded. "I'll wait for you and Scott."

"Actually I don't think I'm going to take anyone in with me," I told her.

She looked at me in surprise. "You're not going to take a liaison with you?"

"I have to face her sooner or later, don't I?" I said wryly. "And if I have to spend the next six months with the Tremere, I'm not going to have you or Scott or anyone else next to me to hold my hand, so why have it tonight?"

"It makes sense," she admitted. "It's your decision."

"However, if she insists," I hesitated a moment to glance at Scott before turning back to Isa, "I think you're a little bit more even tempered."

"I will do whatever you ask," she promised.

"He growls sometimes," I said, trying not to smile. I liked the way he growled, it made me feel safe. "It's distracting." The man in question caught my eye and smiled in a very masculine way.

The playful mood was ruined when I caught sight of Zach. We made our way across the room to his side, where he explained that the countess was again on the fourth floor waiting for me. "The others will wait on the second floor," he added. "You and whomever you choose can go up to the third floor."

"Okay, that'd be me," I murmured as we reached the second floor, earning a surprised look from déla Rocha. "I'll be back," I told the others with a final look before continuing upward to meet the lion in her den.

Starting Over with the Countess

A MIRACLE IS ALL I NEED

A BUSH TO BURN

A STONE TO BLEED

MELISSA ETHERIDGE - WALKING ON WATER

I stood outside the doors of the conference room for a moment, trying not to think about what would happen if things went badly. I didn't want to leave Detroit; I knew it would be dangerous and that the boys and I would never be able to rest without a price on our heads, yet I couldn't honestly think of any other way to keep them with me if the countess refused to listen to reason.

Bracing myself mentally, I opened the door without knocking. The countess was alone, sitting at the table as she had been the night before. I greeted her politely, and she gestured for me to sit.

"What can I do for you this night, Miss Andrews?"

"Well, first of all, as I told Señor déla Rocha, I owe you an apology for my behavior last night," I told her. "I was... unreasonable, and I am sorry for that."

"Accepted," she said quickly.

"In fact, I find that I owe you another apology as well, countess," I admitted.

"Oh?" She seemed surprised. "For what?"

"Believing the misconceptions that some of your clan have given me."

"And what are those?"

I could have told her the truth, but I wasn't sure how much I wanted to let her know I knew, not just yet, anyway. I really had no idea how much I could trust her but at least I was more willing to do so than I had been at the beginning of the evening. "Let's just say that I understand a bit better about how things have come down between your—the Tremere here in Detroit and myself."

"Do you?"

"Yes, I believe I do."

While she simply sat back and waited for me to say more, I studied her body language, finding nothing more than a poised businesswoman ready for a business meeting. I wished I felt the same, but my life for the next six months hinged on what happened between us in this room tonight.

"I think it might be best if we were to start over, you and me," I suggested. "That is, if you could find it possible to do so."

"I would be willing to entertain it, yes," she agreed.

I nodded but took another moment to gather my thoughts. I knew that I had to remain calm and logical, and be careful in both what I said and how I said it. "Would you please explain to me again what it is you hope to gain from my stay with the Tremere?"

"We hope you will come to look upon us as your friends and allies," she said reasonably. "To embrace that part of you that is yet Tremere and thereby bolster our numbers."

I thought about that for a minute, letting the implications of her words sink in. She hoped my time would remind me what I'd forgotten; Christina's loyalty to the clan. "Yet you are aware that I will most likely attempt to rejoin the Gangrel when my time with you is over."

She nodded. "But I hope you will do it as an ally to the Tremere, with the knowledge you can call upon aid if needed, and that aid may be called upon from you as well."

"There is some doubt as to whether I will be able to rejoin Madelynne and her people. Were you aware of that?" I watched her closely for a reaction, but didn't really see one.

"I had suspected as such," she admitted.

"Apparently the concern is that after six months of no contact with anyone in the pack, they would no longer be able to trust me." When she nodded, I added, "Would I not prove to be a stronger ally to you and your people if I had strong allies of my own?"

"Yes." Something moved behind her eyes. "Are you guaranteeing that you would be our ally?"

I smiled a little. "I guarantee there's a better chance of that now than there was last night. Then I would have said you had a snowball's chance in hell. Tonight I can honestly say that it depends."

"Upon what does it depend?" Her head tilted a bit as if she was trying to puzzle out the meaning behind my words. "And what has changed your mind?"

"A number of things, and as I said," I replied, "I believe I have a better understanding of the events that have occurred in the last six months. While I may not know all of the details, what I do know makes me much more open to your point of view than before."

Her expression was one of interest, and it gave me the courage to continue.

"If I were to have some contact with Madelynne and certain other members of the p—" I kept forgetting they weren't just the pack anymore. "—Gangrel Clan during my time with you, I believe it would mitigate some if not all of their concerns about my reliability once I leave your care."

"And how much contact, exactly, do you suppose it would take to mitigate these concerns?" Her voice was more playful than mocking, and I had to smile.

"I have to admit that a part of me wants to be... demanding once more," I admitted, "I don't believe it would need to be excessive. I think that six hours, once a week, could be sufficient." Sufficient to maintain the friendships I had, and to alleviate Madelynne's fears, perhaps. I hoped it would be enough for my relationship with Scott as well, but he had already promised to wait for me. I wanted to ask for more time, but I knew it wasn't a good idea, not after last night.

She sat back and thought for a long moment. "Our clan is... secretive by nature," she reminded me, "and protective of its secrets. Just as you do not trust us not to play 'mind games' or bond you to us, so would some members not trust you to not give up any secrets you might learn."

"While I understand that," I admitted, "I have known for some time how important secrecy is to the clan, and even with the... animosity I felt toward you and yours, I did not share what little information I was given months ago." Though it was true that I no longer thought of myself as Tremere, I still respected the fact that Christina had been loyal. "The Gangrel are not Tremere, and they will never learn anything of the clan secrets from me, regardless of what happens in the next six months."

"Your sincerity is touching," she said kindly, "however as I said, there are some members that would not believe you. Would you agree to a chaperone of sorts, on these visits?"

"I suppose that would depend on who the chaperone would be," I replied carefully. "I realize there are those among you who would—" I cut my words off. Pointing out that certain Tremere would antagonize the situation had no purpose here, and I wasn't about to tell the countess that I couldn't guarantee what I would do if Missy or even Amy accompanied me on my visits with the

Gangrel. I'd deal with the Tremere enforcer in my own time. "I hope that in time I could prove myself to you and be allowed to visit my friends without the necessity of a chaperone."

"I hope you would too."

I looked down at my hands for a long moment. I knew I had to be honest here, more honest than I'd been even to myself. With an effort I met her eye and forced myself to speak words that felt like they were coming from the vacuum that Christina Kline had disappeared into months ago. "I must confess that there is a part of me that wants to know more about what—about the Tremere. From what Brenda has led me to believe, Christina was quite loyal to the clan, and gifted. While I cannot claim to share her enthusiasm, I know that this may well be my only opportunity to learn something of the life and talents Christina lost when she—" I stopped, not wanting to bring Malcolm into this. "I want you to know that I will not waste this opportunity, countess. I told you last night that you would have my cooperation, and I meant it. I mean it still."

A smile lit her face, a genuine one from what I could tell. "Tonight that means what you hoped it would to me."

I was surprised by how much her words touched me and I couldn't help but smile in return. "That's good to know." I looked down, trying to hide my confusion. Until tonight I'd considered this woman my enemy and I didn't understand how her approval could affect me so strongly.

I pushed my feelings aside and tried to refocus on the issues at hand. She had agreed to let me see the pack once a week but it wasn't enough, not when it came to my boys. "You may not be aware of this, but Christina performed some sort of... ritual or curse or whatever upon Frasier that would ensure his embrace upon his death. I'm sure you know what I mean even though I don't."

"The Curse Belated, yes." From the look on her face and the tone of her voice, I knew that she'd heard the news before.

It was time to play the game that Isa had talked about. "Would it not benefit Frasier as well to spend more time with the Tremere, given that he will be one in time?"

"I could see where it would be beneficial for him to spend time amongst the house and Clan ghoul," she conceded.

"Petor has spent no time among the Tremere," I added carefully. "The only exposure he has had with the Tremere is what he saw during the few visits we've had from those of Salem. I believe it would help him to also spend time with Tremere ghouls so that he would know that not all of... our clan blame him for my memory loss." It had been a hard concession for me to make, claiming the Tremere clan as mine, but I knew I had to get used to it, at least for now.

"How can any blame him?" she questioned. "Didn't he also lose some of his memory?"

"He lost very little, only the time that he would have known Christina in Russia. I believe that Brenda and," I hated the way my voice hesitated over his name, but there it was, "Jason believed him to be an agent of Malcolm Robbins, despite our protests and all evidence to the contrary."

"Most of our Clan here has the advantage of not having known..." it was her turn to pause over her words, "Christina before. Therefore we do not have the prejudices others might."

"Perhaps, but Petor does not know that," I pointed out. "In fact, he has been injured several times during incidences that were instigated by the Tremere here in Detroit, as has Frasier. If we are to become allies, I do not want either of them to second guess my decision to do so, nor to doubt our safety when working with you or your people. I believe the only way to ensure that does not happen is for both of them to share my time with you."

"Perhaps 'sharing your time' with me is not quite what they need," she corrected. "I believe they would be better suited to spending time among the other ghouls rather than in your lessons. Or have you taught them Thaumaturgy as well?"

I tried not to laugh the idea. "No, countess, I haven't. I don't remember enough of Thaumaturgy to do anything on a reliable basis, let alone teach them," I assured her honestly. "And I didn't mean spending time in my lessons. I simply meant that perhaps they could have contact with me during the time we spend at the chantry. While I agree that it would be good for them to spend time with other Tremere ghouls, once I get a better grasp of Auspex and Dominate I will be able to help them advance their own talents in those areas. Is it not true that one can sometimes learn by teaching?"

"Who would run your business then?" she asked.

"I think it would be possible for them to do both. It would simply mean a difference in where they sleep, and spend some of their free time." Of course, they didn't know much about running the business themselves, and they were horrible when it came to paperwork. "What would it take to get a couple of nights a month to work at the agency myself?" I asked. "Just to make sure everything is running smoothly."

In order to make my business matter to her, I ended up giving her twenty percent ownership of the agency in exchange for two nights a month during which I would be able to work there uninterrupted. The boys would have more time to work there, of course, as their study load would be considerably lighter than mine.

"I can even provide a clan ghoul to work as your office manager when you're not there," she offered. "I have someone that I am just not sure what to do with. She is smart, no doubt about it, but she was ghouled only to save her life."

While I could see why she would want one of her own working at the agency since she now owned part of it, I wasn't sure I liked the idea of a Tremere ghoul in my business especially when I couldn't be there. "Is she your ghoul?"

"No," she replied. "Zach has a bit of a soft spot; he saved her only a week ago. She knows too much for us to let her go free. Yes, we could change her memories, but she is intelligent and business smart. If we can use her somewhere I think we should do so."

I wasn't very fond of Zach, and I really didn't like the idea of his ghoul running my business, but I didn't have a whole lot of choice at the moment. The countess had been generous in agreeing to the things I'd asked for, and it was only six months after all. I doubted that Zach would have her run my business into the ground, what with the countess owning part of it now.

"All right," I said after a long moment. "My ghouls and I will stay with you for six months with our full cooperation. Aside from some minor training, the boys will be free to live their lives and work at the agency. I will have two nights a month to work at the agency, and you will provide a ghoul to help manage the place while I'm away. Once a week I will have a six hour chaperoned visitation with the pack."

"You will have the opportunity to work your way out of the chaperone," she reminded me, "but you have only my word on that."

"That is fair," I agreed, "as you have only my word that I will cooperate."

She nodded. "And to avail your fears of any mind altering or bonding, the Prince will personally 'inspect' you every month," she offered.

It didn't surprise me that she had the authority to throw that one into the mix. "I believe we have a deal," I agreed. "When will the six months begin?"

"I would not be disinclined to allow you until the first of May to arrange your affairs," she said with a smile. "I will call and arrange for Kristin to come over in a day or two so that you can show her what's what at the agency."

I nodded and took note of the name. "The delay would be welcome to make sure that she has everything well covered while I'm busy elsewhere. Would you like to call the prince and let him know we've come to an agreement, or should I?"

"I can call him right now, if you like," she suggested. When I agreed, she pulled out a cell phone and made the call, running through the details quickly. Within a few short minutes she hung up the phone and turned to me once more. "He would still like to meet with the three of us tomorrow eve."

I had expected that he would and said as much. After I thanked her again for meeting with me it was time to go. Once outside the closed door I stood on the landing for a moment, not sure if I wanted to cry in relief, or frustration. The countess had given me a great deal of leeway in our agreement, but asked a great deal of me as well. While I was no longer sure that the next six months would be hell, I still didn't know if I'd walk out of their chantry intact. With a sigh I made my way downstairs.

The second floor lounge was quiet when I entered, but not as tense as it had been the previous evening. I nodded politely to the Tremere before walking to Scott's side and holding my hand out to him. "Let's go home," I said softly, eager to be free of the Tremere for at least a little while.

There were questions in his eyes as he took my hand, but now wasn't the time to answer them. Isa said polite goodbyes to the Tremere and trailed after us. I hesitated near the door to wait for her and looked at Zach, curious about something.

"Señor déla Rocha," I said formally. "May I ask if you spend the majority of your time at the city chantry?"

"My time at the moment is split between both Chantries and my duties to the Prince," he answered. "Why do you ask?"

I shook my head, mostly because his words hadn't told me what I wanted to know. The prince had said that the countess didn't trust those of the city chantry, but Zach seemed exempt from classification by chantry, at least for now. "I was just curious, but thank you for your answer."

"Why do you hide the real reason for your question from me?" he asked before I could turn back toward the door.

"I will be spending some time with your clan," I said calmly. "It is important to me that I know where you stand." It was even the truth, just not all of it.

"On what issue do you wish to know my stance?" he questioned.

I looked at him for a long moment, wondering just how much I could say here, how much I should say to him at all. If he'd been involved with Christina's embrace as he claimed, she must have trusted him, but that didn't mean I could trust him now. While I knew the countess trusted Paige, I sure as hell didn't and Trevor was a complete unknown. Besides, I'd promised to keep clan secrets to myself, and as much as I loved Scott and trusted Isa, neither of them were Tremere.

"This is better discussed at a later time, Señor déla Rocha," I said at last. "If you will excuse me, the countess had been kind enough to give me time to put my affairs in order. There is much to do."

I nodded once more to him and to Paige before turning and walking out as calmly as I could manage.

"I take it things went well then?" Isa asked once we were outside.

"A hell of a lot better than last night," I agreed.

"That is good," she said, sounding pleased.

"We'll see about that when my time is up," I murmured.

"So how long?"

I sighed. "Six months. But I get visitation." I left out the chaperoned part; there would be time enough to go into details later.

"That will at least let your friends within the pack know you're doing well," she commented.

"I hope so." I wasn't exactly sure it would be though.

"What changed things?" she asked.

While I'd learned a great deal from the prince tonight, I didn't really want him to know that the information he'd shared had made such an impact on my state of mind. I knew that Isa considered herself my friend, but in this matter telling her would be the same as telling the prince. "I guess I played the game a little better tonight." That too was the truth, as far as it went.

She smiled. "Good."

"I think before this is over I'll be damn tired of playing games," I said dryly. "That or damn good at it."

"And probably the better for it," she added. When I didn't say anything more, she asked, "When does your time with them begin?"

My smile seemed to take her by surprise. "May first." It was nearly two weeks away.

"And your boys?"

"They'll go with me," I told her, "but I'd rather go over everything when we get back to the pub. I'm sure Madelynne is going to want to know what's going on. We do have to meet with the prince tomorrow night, eight o'clock," I added.

I put off any more questions she might ask by getting into the car. On the way to the pub I called Madelynne to let her know we'd be there soon, and promised her I'd tell her everything when we arrived.

Consequences

I TRIED TO LEAVE IT ALL BEHIND ME
IN MY DREAMS SOMEHOW I GOT AWAY
MELISSA ETHERIDGE - THE PRISON

We got to the pub before Madelynne did, which gave me time to change out of the suit I'd been wearing for far too long. Michael was hanging out, and more than happy to wait upstairs with us for everyone else to arrive. Madelynne and Logan joined us within twenty minutes and the boys not too long after that.

"As you know I had a meeting with the prince this evening," I told everyone in a calm voice. "He told me more or less flat out that if he made the decision about my time with the Tremere, I'd only be able to see one person during my time with them. Given that and a few other things he said, I figured it was in my best interest to make sure my negotiations with the countess went better tonight than they did last night. Surprisingly, we were able to come to an agreement. It isn't what I want, but the terms are better than what she was asking for and, I believe, better than the prince would have dictated had he been forced to make the decision."

I took a moment to gather my thoughts, hoping I could get through this without crying. "Starting May first, my ghouls and I will be spending six months in the hands of the Tremere." I looked at the boys to make sure they understood what I was going to say next. "You'll be tested initially, and once I get a better handle on some of my disciplines we'll be working together to improve yours. Other than some time you'll be expected to spend with the Tremere ghouls, for the most part you'll be free to live your lives."

Frasier didn't look real happy, but he'd known from the start we wouldn't have any other choice. Petor's face was carefully indifferent. When they both nodded, I turned back to Madelynne and Logan.

"I'll be able to visit with the pack for six hours once a week. Since apparently certain members of the Tremere clan do not trust me, it will have to be supervised at first, until I prove I'm not going to spill every clan secret I learn. I know it's not a lot of time, but I didn't really feel that I could ask for more, not after last night. I hope it's enough."

Madelynne nodded, but I could tell from her lack of expression that it wouldn't be. She reached for Logan's hand and said nothing.

"I will also have two nights a month to work at the agency, and 'help' running the agency while I'm busy elsewhere." I could hear the distaste in my voice but I didn't explain why I didn't like the idea. "It's not what I wanted, but—" I broke off with a few choice words said under my breath. "As much as I want them to leave me alone, they're not going to. I know this isn't what any of us want, but it's the best I could get. It's more than I hoped for when I walked into the Sanctuary tonight."

Without saying a word Madelynne stood up and headed for the stairs leading down to the pub. Logan stood and followed after her quickly, catching up to her on the first step and grabbing her arm. "What are you doing?" he demanded in a voice loud enough for us all to overhear.

I couldn't hear what she said to him, but I didn't really need to. It was obvious that she wasn't happy about the bargain I'd made. I had to face the fact that once we left here to join the Tremere the boys and I might never really be welcomed back, at least not by Madelynne.

"Your work?" Logan growled, catching my attention. "What about Tina?"

I felt a strong hand on my shoulder and looked up to see Isa standing beside me. I put my free hand over hers to show that I appreciated her support, but continued to clutch at Scott with my other hand.

"You have never run away from problems since you've been here," Logan said sharply to Madelynne. "You gonna start now?"

It took her a long moment to answer. "No, I'm not."

"Then go back in there and do what you have to," he told her.

"But what am I supposed to do, Logan?" she pleaded. "We're losing her."

"Not for a week and a half," he reminded her impatiently, "and then only for six months. We're fucking vampires, six months is the blink of an eye to us."

Her next question brought tears to my eyes. "What if she doesn't come back?"

"That is her choice," he said firmly. "'Free will', remember?"

"I know," she sighed.

I had to strain to hear Logan's next words. "Tina's fate is sealed, at least for the next half year. Be her friend. But you still need to deal with Billy and Clarice."

She hugged him for a moment before taking his hand and walking back to sit down again on the couch. "I'm sorry," she told me. "I knew that you would more than likely be leaving us and honestly I expected it, but I thought I could handle it better than this."

"I don't want to leave, Madelynne, but I don't have any other choice." Even to my own ears my voice sounded painful, even pleading, but I couldn't help it. "If I fight this, the prince will come down hard on all of us and I can't do that to the pack. I don't want to go, but they can't make me stay with them. You're my family. I belong here."

She nodded, but I didn't know if she really agreed or if she was just putting on a show for Logan's sake. I hated that it had come to this, hated that the Tremere were ripping me away from the people I cared about, but I knew there was nothing I could do about it.

After a long moment Madelynne sighed and took her feet. "Well, we have one week. I suggest that we make the best of the time we have together and I think that we should start by going out and partying tonight!"

I hesitated for a moment, not really sure where this change in behavior had come from. One minute she was mourning my leaving, and the next she was celebrating. Hoping that she was just trying to make the most of the time we had left, I forced a smile and agreed.

Though Madelynne did her best to behave normally toward the boys and me, I was certain that she was angry about the deal I'd made with the countess. It was fairly clear to me that the only reason Madelynne was still talking to me was because Logan had made her. I kept my opinion to myself and did my best to give an outward show of enjoying one of my last nights of freedom even though I'd much rather have spent the time at home with Scott, or at the agency.

Not long after we'd gotten to the Rabble hangout, Madelynne sat down with Scott and me. "Hey, how are you doing?" Her manner was friendly, almost normal.

I hoped the smile I gave her looked more natural than it felt. "Great!"

She saw through my pretense rather quickly. "How 'bout the truth?" she suggested dryly.

The truth was that I'd rather be anywhere else than here, celebrating the fact I had to leave the pack, but I wasn't going to spoil her evening. I shrugged and looked away. "All right, I guess."

"Why can't you even look at me when you answer?" she asked. When I made the effort to look her in the eye, she added, "What's wrong?"

I didn't know what to say to her. She knew I didn't want to leave the pack, didn't want to have anything to do with the Tremere. I'd said all of that to her at the pub but it hadn't been enough. "I'm sorry about all this."

"It's not your fault," she sighed.

"Yeah, it kinda is," I said firmly. If I wasn't Tremere, if I hadn't gone to Russia chasing some damned noble cause, if I'd just made a damn deal with the countess months ago, none of this would be happening now, and Alex would still be alive. "Anyway, I'm sorry."

"No reason to be," she told me as she put an arm around my shoulder. "Some things are just out of our control."

I couldn't see anything but friendship in the lines of her face. "You're not still mad about the deal I made with the countess?"

"I was never mad, it's your life to make deals with," she told me. "I can't say that I am happy about it all. I don't want to lose you as a friend and my fear is that by you leaving I will."

"I don't have any choice about going," I protested. "You know that."

She nodded sympathetically. "I know you don't."

"She said she'd let me do what I wanted when the time is up. I won't stay with them, Madelynne," I promised.

"How do you know that for sure?" she questioned. "You don't know what it's like with them, what if you like it better?"

"I don't think so." I couldn't imagine fitting in, or even wanting to. The pack was my home. "The countess can't even trust her own people. How could I ever look at them like family?"

"I don't know, Tina." Her voice seemed sad, even wary. "But things may be different there than what we see on the outside."

I shook my head. "It doesn't matter how nice they might be, they still won't be the pack. I won't be happy there." She tried to smile, but it didn't get to her eyes. I looked down, unwilling to see the disappointment on her face. "I don't know what to say that will make you believe me."

"I believe you," she assured me. "I've never not believed you, Tina."

"But you act like I'm going to turn into—" A monster, but I didn't want to say that. "I don't know what."

"I'm sorry." She sounded as if she honestly meant it. "This is hard on all of us too ya know."

"I know it is." And I did, I really did, but Madelynne would be able to continue living her life. Mine would be on hold until the countess was done with me and even then there was no guarantee I'd still be me. "I wish there was some way around this, but there just isn't. Once I do this, they'll leave me alone. I know you're concerned about what's going to happen to me while I'm with them. If you don't want me to come back, I'll understand."

"It's not that I don't want you to, Tina," she told me, "but I have to look out for everyone in the clan now and with none of us knowing what will happen in the next six months I have to be careful."

I knew she was right. Hell, I might have felt the same if I was in her shoes. "If it matters, the prince is supposed to 'inspect' me once a month to make sure that they don't brainwash me."

"Really?" she demanded, shock evident in her voice. "I hadn't heard that before."

"I didn't say it earlier. I guess I felt a little... paranoid asking for it," I admitted. "I didn't want you to think I was being..."

"Paranoid?" she echoed with a chuckle.

I smiled wryly. "Yeah."

"So are we cool then?"

There was nothing I could do to make things any better between us until I had a chance to prove myself, and that wouldn't happen until long after my time with the Tremere. "We're cool."

She seemed pleased at my agreement, and went off to dance with Logan. I watched her go and sat back, holding Scott's hand and wishing we were somewhere that I didn't have to pretend I was happy.

Unexpected Trouble

AT THIS POINT IN MY LIFE

I'D LIKE TO LIVE AS IF ONLY LOVE MATTERED

AS IF REDEMPTION WAS IN SIGHT

TRACY CHAPMAN - AT THIS POINT IN MY LIFE

While Petor and Frasier seemed to be enjoying the night out a bit more than I was, I needed to talk to them, and I knew it wouldn't wait.

I managed to get Petor away from the crowd for a moment and asked him how he felt about my agreement with the countess. Though he didn't seem to think his feelings mattered a whole hell of a lot, he didn't know enough about the Tremere to be worried.

"Fair enough." I glanced around for a moment, not wanting to be overheard, but there were too many people for me to be completely honest with him here about my plans for the Tremere enforcer. "There's a few things we need to go over, but it can wait. We'll have to be very careful about a lot of things while we're there."

"Okay."

His aura told me that he really wasn't worried about what would happen, that he trusted me to make sure he stayed safe. I hoped I could live up to that trust. Unfortunately, Frasier wasn't so trusting when I asked him how he felt a little while later.

"What about it?" he challenged in a very flat tone.

I closed my eyes and counted to ten, praying for patience. I'd honestly thought my problems with Frasier were over, but apparently I'd been wrong. When my count was done I gave him a stern look. "Everything."

"What does it matter?" he demanded.

"I value your opinion, Frasier, and you know more about the Tremere than I do," I said patiently. "Not that long ago you were complaining that I wasn't involving you in things. Tell me what you think, how you feel."

"I think your timing's shitty," he growled.

"Why, because I asked you after the fact?"

"That too."

"Why don't you just tell me what you think and stop making me drag it out of you?" I demanded.

"Because I finally find someone who is mine, just mine," he barked, "who likes me for me, and you go and get us locked away for six months!"

"I told you that you'd be able to live your life, Frasier," I reminded him tersely. "You won't have as much time to see her, but at least you'll get to do it unsupervised." It was more than Scott and I would have, a hell of a lot more.

"Free to live our lives," he muttered under his breath. "Shit, Chris, I'm from an alternate world and Petor can do magic. You think they're just going to let us wander in and out anytime we damn well please?"

"What?!"

"What?" he repeated, looking as confused as I felt.

"Since when can Petor do magic?" I demanded.

"For as long as I've known him," he replied easily.

"How did I not know this?" I muttered under my breath. Aloud I asked, "Why didn't one of you tell me?"

He shook his head. "It never occurred to me that you didn't know."

I looked across the bar to where Petor was sitting with Maggie. "I'll have to talk to him about that later. Maybe if we don't tell them, and he doesn't do magic while we're there, they won't find out." I turned my attention back to Frasier. "The countess only agreed to let you come with me because of that curse thing. I don't think she's much interested in where you came from."

"Does she know where I came from?" he asked, frowning.

"It didn't exactly seem to be a big secret when the Salem people were here, but I don't know," I admitted. "If she doesn't, we just won't tell her. I'm sure we can come up with some story about your background."

"You're going to lie?" he shot back. "That's a hell of a way to cooperate."

I gave him a hard look. "I said I'd cooperate in my lessons and what they want from me. I'll do anything I have to in order to protect you and Petor."

"And if you lie they will think you're hiding more than what you really are," he pointed out.

My temper snapped. "You know, you're not really helping. I asked you to begin with if you'd rather stay with the pack and both of you told me you knew that couldn't happen. I know you're not happy about this freaking mess, but guess what?" I poked my finger into the middle of his chest. "Neither am I. I'm sorry if this interferes with your social calendar, but at least you'll be able to see Nancy and have some semblance of a life. I get six hours a week to do what I want, and that will be with some nosy ass Tremere breathing down my neck. No matter what they decide to do to us, it'll be done in six months and we'll be able to walk away."

"You're the boss," he said dryly.

"I'll leave the choice of lying or not up to you, since you're the one who'll have to tell it," I barked. "Now do you want to be helpful and tell me anything I might need to know while we're with the Tremere?"

"Like what?"

I looked at him for a long moment, biting my tongue before I could state the obvious. If I knew what the hell I needed to know, I sure as hell wouldn't be asking him. Finally I said in a low voice, "Like what's the best way to take out one of them and not get caught?"

He laughed aloud but stopped when he saw the seriousness of my face. "Shit. Have someone else do it."

"Like who?"

"How the hell should I know?" he asked harshly.

"We need to figure it out."

"Who do you want to kill?" he demanded. "And why?"

"Alex has to be avenged, Frasier."

"That was the Eight-Eights," he reminded me, "and he was."

I shook my head. "Somebody hired them. I can't just let it rest."

"Who?"

"I'd rather not say right now, but I know she's not going to be easy to take out," I admitted. "I'll need your help on this."

"Not if you don't tell me who," he growled.

I took a step into his personal space and kept my voice pleasant, to begin with. "I value your opinion, Frasier, and I value you as a friend." I let my voice harden. "But I've done all the negotiating I care to do this week. You're not in charge here, I am. I will tell you who it is when I have a better grasp on how we can take her out without facing Cassidy or déla Rocha over it. In the mean time, you're the only one who even knows anything about what I plan on doing, and we're going to keep it that way. If you don't like it, well, I'm sorry, but that's just the way it is."

His voice was hard and level. "You're going to get us all killed." With that he turned and walked away.

Damn, I really needed to take that boy in hand, and I had less than two weeks to do it before the Clan did it for me. I couldn't really think of anything that would do the trick, at least nothing that didn't involve violence.

Scott was sitting at a booth alone watching people dance, and he smiled when I slid in beside him. I let my leg rest against his and allowed the contact to calm my troubled thoughts.

"Do you have any ideas about bringing Frasier in line that don't involve a full Nelson?" I asked after a few minutes of companionable silence. "I'm not quite tall enough for that."

"Don't feed him," he suggested.

"And that works?" He didn't answer, but I really hadn't expected him to. "How is he supposed to defend himself if he gets in trouble?"

He shrugged "Then he'll learn."

I thought about that for a moment. I kept the boys topped off for the most part, and I'd fed him only the night before. Scott's suggestion had merit, but I didn't think it would work in this instance. "I don't have much time to get him in hand. If he gives me this much trouble when we're with the Tremere...."

He finished the thought for me. "Then the Tremere will put him in line."

"Yeah, I definitely don't want that to happen." I sighed. "I have no idea how she kept him in line in Salem, and there's no one left I can ask. I'm not sure the lack of feeding will do the trick in the time we've got."

"Do you have a better idea?"

"Nothing that doesn't involve violence," I admitted. "My Dominate isn't good enough to do the trick." My eyes fell on Petor again. "Did you know Petor could do magic?" I asked in a low voice.

"No." He sounded surprised, but didn't say anything more.

"Me neither. You'd think he be able to fix your truck so it would stay fixed," I teased. Turning to where Frasier was drinking with one of the Brujah, I said, "Maybe if I took away his dating privileges."

"What's he gonna do, get lippy with you?" he drawled.

"I don't know what he's gonna do, that's the problem," I told him. "He doesn't listen to me. He argues with me every step of the way."

"So beat him down."

"You mean literally beat him?" I'd been hoping he wouldn't suggest that.

"There isn't a 'good puppy' pill you can give him," he pointed out. "You either need to bring him in line or live with the Tremere doing it."

I didn't much like either idea. I'd rather protect my boys from harm than be the one to harm them, but better I do it than the alternative. "I can't let the Tremere do it. It won't do either of us any good if someone else teaches him to behave. I guess I'll have to figure something out, even if it does mean... beating him down."

"It's for his own good," he assured me, "and yours."

He was right, I knew he was right, but that didn't make me like the idea. I wanted to let Madelynne have her party so I knew I couldn't do anything about it tonight, but tomorrow was another story.

Falling in Line

I'M LONG PAST INNOCENCE AND FAST APPROACHING APATHY. IT'S ALL A GAME - A PAPER FANTASY OF NAMES AND BORDERS. ONLY ONE THING MATTERS.... BLOOD CALLS OUT FOR BLOOD.

BABYLON 5: MIDNIGHT ON THE FIRING LINE

Scott and I met Madelynne and Logan at the Renaissance Center just before eight the following night. She didn't look any happier this evening than she had the night before, but then again I'm sure I didn't either. The men waited for us while we joined the countess in meeting with the prince.

The countess outlined our agreement once more for the prince, and he seemed pleased. To my relief he verified that he would indeed check me for conditioning once a month, and he also agreed to provide the chaperone for my visits with the Gangrel when the countess asked for him to.

"I must congratulate the three of you on coming up with an amicable solution," he said with a ghost of a smile.

Once the meeting was over, the countess asked Madelynne if she was ready for their meeting. When Madelynne agreed, Scott and I said our goodbyes, reminding her that we were going to the agency, but that we'd come to the pub a little later.

I'd told Petor and Frasier that I wanted to talk to them tonight, but hadn't said about what. I wasn't sure what to do about Petor's magic, but I thought together we could probably work something out. I wasn't looking forward to what it would take to bring Frasier in line, but I knew I couldn't wait any longer than put my foot down.

I took Frasier up to the bedroom that was set up for Scott and I mostly because there was very little in it beside the bed and if I did end up fighting with Frasier, there were fewer things to break in there. After telling him to sit down on the bed, I said, "We need to talk about your behavior."

He sat, but didn't say anything.

"I have tried to make allowances for you to ease your transition to living here," I began reasonably, hoping I could stick to being reasonable. "Your entire life has changed not once but twice since you met me, and I know that can't have been easy for you. Unfortunately, I don't have any more time to baby you. The Tremere will take one look at your disrespect and disobedience and take steps to correct the problem. I don't want that to happen. You don't want that to happen. It stops now."

"What disrespect and disobedience?" he demanded. "Everything you have told me to do, I have."

"Maybe, but you've done it with an attitude and an argument, especially lately," I pointed out. "That can't continue."

He got a stubborn look on his face. "I'll do what I have to do to protect you."

"You'll do what I tell you to," I corrected sharply. "Anything else is going to make the Tremere think I can't control you. What do you think is going to happen then?"

"You told me to protect you."

His stubborn insistence made me wonder if he'd protect me against my direct orders, but I chose not to ask that question. "How are you going to 'protect' me if the Tremere decide you need lessons in obedience? You'll be dancing on their string then, not protecting me."

"How do you know what they will or won't do?" he shot back. "It's not like you remember."

"And it's not like you're helping me a great deal by filling in the blanks, is it?" I growled.

"What do you want to know?"

"We'll get to that. In the mean time, I need you to realize how serious this is." I tried to keep my voice level, but he was already beginning to irritate me. "The Tremere are going to be watching us very closely, and I have to know that I can count on you to behave. And I don't mean just protecting me, you have to follow my orders regardless of what you think about them."

He sat very still for what felt like a long time. At last, he said, "Fine."

I studied him for a moment, trying to figure out if he was really agreeing or if he just wanted me off his ass. "I know that the next few months aren't going to be easy on any of us, and I'm sorry for that," I said as I went to sit next to him on the bed. "If I could change it, I would, but there's nothing I can do without pissing off the prince."

"It's six months," he replied with a shrug. "We'll get by."

"That didn't seem to be your opinion last night."

He stood quickly and turned to face me, "I just can't make you happy can I?" he demanded angrily. "You ask for my opinion and I give and get lectured for being disrespectful and disobedient. So I tell you what you want to hear and agree to play the good 'puppy' and you fucking aren't happy with that either! What do you want me to do?!"

"Asking for your opinion does not mean that I'm giving you permission to go off on me," I replied sternly. "I don't want you to 'play' anything, O'Connell. I'd rather be your friend than a hard assed bitch, but if that's what you prefer...." I stood up and met his eye. "Sit down."

He seemed to know I was trying to Dominate him. The moment our eyes made contact he flung his arm out and swept me aside, moving past me toward the door. I managed to keep my feet and tried to grab his arm, but he was moving too quickly.

By the time I followed him into the living room, Scott and Petor were on their feet. Frasier was standing in the middle of the room, glaring at me. "I can't believe you! Just tell me what the hell you want me to do!"

I strode across the room angrily. "Come here." I tried to meet his eye and force him to come to me, but he was quite obviously not looking me in the eye. I reached out the grab the front of his shirt, but he stepped away. I grabbed for him again, bunching his shirt up with my fist and holding him in place.

"What do you want me to do?" he repeated angrily.

"Quit fucking walking away from me when I'm talking to you would be a good goddamn start!" I growled.

"Then let go of me and quit fucking trying to dominate me!" he demanded.

I pulled him closer, until our faces were only a few inches apart. "Quit fucking making me!" I gave him a little push backward and let him go.

"Then answer my question," he growled. "What do you want me to do? Be myself or be the 'good puppy'."

"For the next six months, I'll take the good puppy," I snapped. "Maybe it'll give you some practice in actually listening to me."

"I already agreed to that in there," he said, pointing toward the bedroom, "but that wasn't good enough for you."

"What would be really damn good would be for you to tell me what the hell is bothering you," I said harshly, "but since you don't want to share, it doesn't matter. You need to get the fuck over it. If you're gonna go off every time I try to talk to you when we're with the Tremere, you're gonna be the one to get us all killed, not me."

"Fine!"

I poked him in the center of the chest once, hard. "And don't you *ever* push me again, got it?"

The lines of his face went hard. "Yes, master, may I go now?"

"You can take your ass down to the office and spend the next couple of hours writing down everything you remember about the Tremere," I ordered sternly. "Everything, no matter how trivial."

"Tell me what you want to know."

"Everything you remember," I repeated.

"I lived there for well over a year," he reminded me. "Get real, Tina. What do you want to know?"

"If I knew what I needed to know, I wouldn't be asking you, now would I?" I drawled. "Just write down everything you think is pertinent and if I have questions, we'll go from there."

"Pertinent to what?"

"The Tremere," I reminded him. "Living with them, dealing with them, getting along with them. Use your imagination, O'Connell." I couldn't stop the sarcasm from creeping into my voice. "Pretend I know nothing about them and have to live with them for the next six months. Write down what you think I need to know. I'll come down and check on you in a little while."

He snorted derisively yet bowed low at the waist. "Yes, mistress."

"Attitude, O'Connell," I said in a hard voice as he walked out the door. "Lose it or your dating privileges."

Someone cleared their throat and I turned to hear Petor say in Russian conversationally, "If I may say so, you're acting like a psycho bitch to him." It looked as if at some point Petor had tried to join my argument with Frasier, but Scott had stopped him with a restraining hand on his chest, one that dropped as Petor switched to English. "You might as well make him write 'I will not chew gum in class' one hundred times on the blackboard while you are at it."

"If I thought writing on the blackboard would cure his behavior problems, I'd be out buying chalk," I'll snap at Petor.

"Do you really think writing his memoirs of Salem is going to do it?" he asked calmly.

"No, I think it will help me," I said honestly, "that's the whole point." I shook my head and made an effort to calm down. "I don't know anything about the Tremere and neither do you. He's the only one who can tell me anything about them and all he can say when I ask is 'what do you want to know?' If I knew what I wanted to know, I wouldn't fucking ask him about it, but he doesn't seem to get that point."

"But rather than ask him to do it, or explain that it will help you, you've made it a punishment," he pointed out. "Don't you think the information would be better if you actually sat with him and played..." he hesitated, looking for the right phrase, "twenty questions rather than sending him off with a bruised ego? Weather or not he does what you ask, or how well he does this thing, I

guarantee you he is sitting down there fuming. If you treat him like a child, he's going to act like one."

"I have explained it to him," I ground out, "and I have tried to talk to him about it, but he keeps acting like a child so I'm going to treat him like one."

"How many people need to tell you that you need to kick his ass before you realize that is what you need to do?"

I groaned and ran a hand across my eyes. "Not you, too."

"He's a smart man," Petor pointed out. "He'll know when he's pushed you too far. But he's cocky enough to push you right to it, no matter what else you do to him."

"So, what, I'm supposed to go downstairs and beat the shit out of him?" I demanded. "You don't think that's psychotic?"

"If you would have knocked him on his ass instead of trying to shake him like an English nanny, he would have gotten the point a lot quicker."

"I'm fairly certain the opportunity will arise again," I said irritably. "Probably about five minutes after I go down to talk to him. Now if we're done criticizing my treatment of Frasier....?"

He shrugged. "Just my observations."

"Would those be observations from normal means, or did you use some sort of magic to figure it out?" I would have dropped the irritation in my voice.

"Even a blind man can see..."

"Well, apparently I'm blind," I murmured, sounding a little tired even to my own ears. "I had no idea you could do magic until last night."

He gave me a strange look. "You know I'm a ghoul though right?"

"Yeah, I know that, Petor," I said with a smile. "I do feed you, remember? Frasier said you do magic."

"Isn't that part of being a Ghoul?" he asked, confused.

"Depends on how you do it," I told him. "Why don't you show me?"

He shrugged. "I can only do it when I'm fixing things, or building them. I think it's cause you never got to show me how to really use it, and since I am good with my hands anyway..."

"Let's go downstairs then," I suggested patiently. "You can work on something while I watch. I really need to see how you do it."

"There's nothing I need to 'do it' on down there," he replied. "I really can't control when 'it' works."

"Then just tell me how it works when it does work."

"When I want something to do something and I can't make it do it, 'it' works."

I gestured for him to sit down, and when we'd all gotten more comfortable, I asked, "Do you just concentrate, or do you say something?"

"With a wave of my magic monkey wrench..." he said with a smirk, before noticing that his joke wasn't going over very well. "I just think about it."

"And it just... fixes whatever you're working on, like and engine or something?"

"Something like that."

"Petor, I don't know of any Tremere discipline that would do that." I looked at Scott questioningly. "Or any discipline for that matter."

"But you don't remember everything," he protested a bit uncertainly.

"No," I agreed, "but Brenda told me about all the Tremere disciplines and that's not one of them."

"Does she know them all?" he asked hesitantly. "Maybe there is a Russian one that she doesn't know about."

I shook my head. "I don't really know, and until you can show me, I don't have any answers about this, but I do know one thing; if it is magic and not some form of Thaumaturgy, the Tremere are going to be very interested about it, and you. It's important that you don't do... whatever it is around any Tremere until we know for sure."

"I'll try."

It was all I could hope for. "I wouldn't ask, but it could be very important if it really is magic." I hesitated a moment, knowing what I had to do next but dreading it. "I guess I should go talk to Frasier now."

Scott stood with me. "You want back up?"

"Well, yes, to be honest," I told him, "but if you handle him, or even help, he won't ever listen to me. He's not your responsibility, he's mine. I have to learn how to handle him or I don't deserve to be his master."

Frasier was in the office like I'd told him to be, but he was still pissed at me so I got nowhere when I tried to talk to him. I went outside instead, hoping to clear my mind. Standing in the night air looking out over the parking lot still scarred with the evidence of our recent battles didn't help my state of mind.

I'd fought so hard to stay away from the Tremere, and the pack had fought right along side me. All the trouble they'd gone through, even the pain of losing one of their own, and what had it accomplished? We had put so much hope in Madelynn becoming Primogen that it had never occurred to me that the Tremere would still get what they wanted.

I knew now that I should have tried to talk to the countess months ago, but I'd never questioned dela Rocha's word when he'd said I'd have to leave the pack behind. Not that the deal I'd made was much better, but at least I'd have some time with Scott and the others.

The next six months were going to be damned hard on all of us, I knew that, but they'd be particularly hard on me and the boys. Petor was used to the way the Gangrel ran things and I wasn't sure how he'd handle what was sure to be the stricter discipline of the Tremere. And Frasier... let's just say I wasn't holding out much hope that he'd play the good puppy for long.

I didn't know how the hell Christina had handled Frasier in the past, but I knew I'd have to figure it out and soon. I hated the thought of getting physical with him, but I knew I'd have to sooner or later.

I'm not sure how long I stood there brooding when I heard the door open behind me. A few moments later Scott was standing so close behind me that I didn't have to lean back much at all to bring my body into contact with his. He put his arms around my stomach and I covered them with my own, letting his quiet strength fill the holes of doubt in my soul.

Getting Ready for Exile

THIS WORLD DON'T GIVE YOU NOTHIN'
IT CAN'T TAKE AWAY
BON JOVI - LOVE ME BACK TO LIFE

After giving Frasier some time to calm down, I went into the office and explained to him that the information I'd asked for would really help me deal with the Tremere, and that I hadn't meant it as a punishment. He agreed to work on it over the next week and then sit down and go over it with me.

We rejoined Petor and Scott on the third floor and I let them all know that Kristin was scheduled to make her first visit to the agency the following evening. "She's a Tremere ghoul, so make sure you behave appropriately."

"So are we," Frasier reminded me.

"Technically, yes," I agreed hesitantly, "but you're not going to run tattling to Zach or the countess if we're doing something... unTremere, are you?"

"Stop being so paranoid," he replied. "She was given to you to help run the business, not spy on us."

"Besides," Petor added, "what is she going to see? We're going to be spending a lot of time with the Tremere aren't we? When would she see anything?"

"She's Zach's ghoul and we don't know what instructions he's given her," I told Frasier before turning to Petor. "It's better to be safe than sorry."

Simultaneously they said, "Whatever."

I wasn't just being paranoid, I knew the Tremere would do anything they could to have power over me, but I didn't say anything more. Either they'd listen to me and we'd be okay, or they wouldn't and we'd be screwed, but there was no use trying to drive the point home now.

Frasier went off to be with Nancy, and Petor went back to work. Scott and I spent the remainder of the night together doing nothing special, simply enjoying what time we had left together.

We were back at the agency shortly after sundown the following evening to meet with the new employee. Kristin Saunders wasn't exactly what I expected. She looked about my age, with long blond hair and striking blue eyes. She was tall and beautiful and quite intelligent. She picked up on everything we went over quickly, and showed no signs of resenting her employment at the agency.

In fact, she got on well with both Frasier and Petor, being friendly without going too far. I watched her interact with them and wondered just how far I could trust her, wondered what instructions Zach had given her to follow while she worked for me.

I hadn't planned on taking her to the pub, but when Madelynne called to ask us to come over around eleven, she included Kristin in the invitation. I'm not sure Kristin was enthusiastic about meeting the pack, but she did follow us to Walker's.

There was no reason to be mean, or even impolite to the newcomer. Kristin was nice enough, after all, and I couldn't be sure that she'd been sent to spy on us. I made sure she was introduced to everyone and made as comfortable as possible before I concentrated on spending time with the pack.

Once again I was surprised by how well Kristin got along with everyone. Though there was some tension initially, everyone got used to her quickly, and she seemed fairly comfortable even here, in

the midst of the Gangrel and Brujah Kindred and ghouls surrounding her. I wondered if she were that good of an actress or if she really was what she seemed. Either way I didn't have the time or energy to figure it out.

About the time the bar closed I noticed that she looked rather tired. I did my best to let her know that while she was welcome to stay, this was not part of the job and she wasn't obligated to do so. After saying her goodbyes, she left us feeling a bit relieved at her absence. It wasn't no one liked her, I think everyone found her pleasant enough. It was more that we felt we could relax a bit more now that she was gone.

I wanted to help Isa take care of Clarisse for Madelynne, but honestly I didn't have time in the week or so before I was scheduled to return to the Tremere. I was too busy trying to decide what to take with me, and working with Kristin so she knew how I wanted the business run and what to do while I was gone. She had some good ideas and was all for hiring some new people, which I told her she would have to work with Scott or the boys on.

Then there was the time I spent with Scott and the pack, and Isa. I tried to spend as much time as I could with them because I knew it would be a while before I would see them again unsupervised. Sometimes Kristin came to the pub, but she never stayed too long.

Frasier and I spent several long hours talking about the Tremere and what I could expect from living with them and to my surprise he answered my questions pretty easily. Other than that he wasn't around much, and when I asked him why he simply said he knew I was busy and he was trying to stay out of my way.

I tried to pretend that leaving wasn't going to tear me apart, but I know I didn't do a very good job of it. Scott stayed with me as much as he could, which helped, but I hated knowing I had to leave him, and not just because we wouldn't be together for the next six months. I knew that deep down Scott didn't expect me to come back. Unfortunately, I couldn't exactly promise him that I would, though I did my best to reassure him.

The countess had made arrangements for Zach to escort me to the chantry on the night our bargain was to begin. While I didn't much like the idea, I understood and agreed. Scott and I spent our last day together at the pub, and not long after sundown, the entire pack, along with Isa, was there to say goodbye.

"You can call me if you need anything," Isa reminded me yet again as the hour of my departure approached. "Try to keep an open mind, all right? Everything will be okay."

"It will be," I agreed, clinging to Scott's hand. "In six months everything will be okay." By now everyone knew the terms of the bargain I'd made with the Tremere. I reminded everyone that I'd be back once a week to visit, and that I'd be at the agency twice a month.

My bags were packed, my goodbyes mostly said, and I was as ready as I'd ever be. It was time.