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## Into the Breach

TO EVERY THING THERE IS A SEASON, AND A TIME TO EVERY PURPOSE UNDER THE HEAVEN  
ECCLESIASTES 3:1

"It is time."

The words echoed in my mind as I followed Zach dela Rocha through the dark streets of Detroit, out of the city and toward the Tremere Country Chantry where I would be spending the next six months. I kept an eye in the rear view mirror where I could see the SUV that carried both Petor and Frasier to make sure that they stayed with us.

"It is time."

Zach had said those words when he walked into Walker's Pub an hour after sundown this evening. I'd known he was coming, known that the time was at hand for me to leave my lover and friends behind, but knowing didn't make hearing those words any easier.

"It is time."

I sighed into the darkness, wishing for the thousandth time that there was some other way for me to make the Tremere happy, a way that didn't involve me living with them while they retrained me in the art of being one of them. Given a choice I didn't want anything to do with them, but thanks to Christina Kline's adopted sire, I had no choice.

"It is time."

Deep down I knew I was Christina, but I didn't *feel* like I was her and I sure as hell didn't want to *be* her. I was happy with the life I'd built here in Detroit since I'd appeared on her streets with no memory and only Petor to look after me. Unfortunately, I was Christina Kline, was Tremere, and I knew I couldn't fight them any longer.

"It is time."

It *was* time, time for me to stop fighting the inevitable, time to bury everything that made me Tina Andrews and get through the next six months as best I could. It wouldn't be easy, but I'd get through it one way or another. I'd promised the countess my full cooperation and that was what I intended to give her.

# The Chantry

HOGGLE: YOU REALLY GOING IN THERE, ARE YOU?

SARAH: YES. I'M AFRAID I HAVE TO.

## LABYRINTH

The Tremere Country Chantry was a large mansion on a spacious estate, with an identical yet smaller house behind it along with several other outbuildings. Zach led the way inside while the house ghouls took care of our luggage. Gathered in the foyer large enough to hold the entire apartment I shared with Scott was a group of Tremere, all of whom I'd seen before.

I'd hoped that I could maintain my calm, but seeing two of the gathered Tremere caused a hesitation in my step. I wanted to stop, hell I wanted to leave, but I forced myself to walk on, toward the Countess and her people, toward Antonio Moreno and Brenda Thompson-Brown. The last two were people I'd hoped to avoid during my stay at the chantry and I'd had good reason to hope. They didn't actually live in Detroit.

I couldn't help but wonder what they were doing there, Christina's adopted sire and sister. I'd thought for sure that Brenda would never have anything to do with me again, and while my relationship with Antonio was a bit better, he was a very important player among the Kindred of Las Vegas. I honestly wouldn't have thought he'd have time to come visiting for my re-indoctrination into the clan.

Countess Victoria Dulac was the Tremere Primogen of Detroit and the woman I'd made my bargain with. She introduced me to the people I'd never met, though I already knew most of their names and faces. I could feel Brenda's eyes on me as I greeted each of them with as much respect as I could manage. Jonathan McMichaels was the head of the country chantry while Gerard was the Regent. Riley Owens was the Keeper of the Scrolls. I wasn't given titles for Dunstan Bruce or Libby.

I held my emotions tightly in check as I greeted Missy. As the clan enforcer, I'd fought against her and her people more than once. While she wasn't the main reason I was returning to the clan, her actions had forced me into the agreement I'd made with the countess. I didn't like Missy, not one bit, but I didn't want her to know just how much animosity I held for her. I wasn't sure I was hiding it well, but then again she always had the same disgruntled expression every time I saw her.

There were several Tremere missing and I made careful note of their names; Amy Owens, the city chantry leader, Trevor Steel, Nikki, and Harry Hammer. I was glad the first two were absent. Amy had been Scott's lover years ago and she'd used him to take over the city chantry. Each time I'd seen Trevor he'd looked at me like I was a buffet he wanted to take his time dining at.

The countess dropped a bit of her formality when we approached Antonio and Brenda. "And your sire and sister have honored us by deciding to join us here for your stay to aid in your training and other tasks."

While I hoped that didn't mean they were staying as long as I was, I wasn't willing to bet on it. I nodded to Antonio respectfully and tried to keep the anger out of my voice. Antonio was the reason I was even here at all, and I was sure I'd never forgive him for forcing me to return to the Tremere fold, even for six months. "Senor Moreno."

"Miss Andrews, my dear," was his reply.

Brenda was a bit stiff, obviously not comfortable with the situation, but at least she was polite. "Good to see you. I hope everything is well?"

I strove to keep my voice as polite as hers had been. "I'm sure everything will be fine, in time." That would be about six months from now, when I could leave this place I was already coming to hate. I wanted so much to ask her what the hell she was doing there, but I managed to keep a tight hold on my emotions. "How are things in Salem?"

She smiled slightly and glanced over her shoulder at her ghouls. "We're fine, thank you for asking." She turned to Frasier and gave him a warmer smile than she'd given me. "Frasier. Good to see you again."

Her movement left me facing her husband, who nodded politely but didn't so much as look at me. I didn't know why Rafe hated me, but I'd known for some time now that he did. He behaved himself for the most part, but I could feel the resentment almost radiating from him whenever we were in the same room. He'd been like that ever since I could remember, and I had to wonder if he'd hated Christina, or if his hatred was something that developed after I'd come to Detroit.

As I moved on to greet Howie, Brenda's other ghoul, Frasier embraced Rafe in a manly hug. He asked about their flight and how things had been lately, and I think he'd have launched into a full blown conversation right there had Petor not nudged him along. When Frasier would have done the same with Howie, Petor cleared his throat, prompting Frasier to move on.

When the introductions were over, several of the Kindred left the gathering to return to their nightly routines. Only the countess, Paige, Zach, Jonathan, and Missy remained. Missy seemed to be hanging back watching all of us, while Paige stood beside and slightly behind the countess. The others were making polite conversation with Antonio, while the ghouls were talking amongst themselves.

I took the opportunity to speak with Brenda in relative privacy. "Why are you staying in town?" I asked without preamble.

"I'm here to teach you," she said, her polite veneer in place, "along with Antonio. Rafe will be working with Frasier and Petor."

I blinked in surprise, unable to hide my reaction. "Why?"

She frowned slightly. "Why? Because he cares about what happens to you and is responsible for both of us. We are his childer. Of course he would drop everything to come if he needed it. He's done so for Michael as well."

Her reply had only partially answered my question, and the way she'd worded it made me think she didn't really want to be in Detroit. "Antonio wanted to be here. Why are you here?"

She looked down for just a moment and that one gesture spoke volumes. "Elvira wanted me to be the one to come."

I nodded, not sure if I was happy that I'd been right. "Guess I'm fucking up your life again aren't I?" The countess seemed to be talking with Antonio yet I knew they were both watching us. "I'm sorry," I added softly.

The bitch of it was that I really was sorry. From what she'd said, it was clear that she didn't want to be there any more than I did. Being a bitch at this point would only make it harder on both of us.

Antonio stepped away from the others to join our conversation, proving that he had been listening. "My dear, of course that is not true," he insisted as he put his hand on Brenda's shoulder. "It is the furthest thing from the truth."

"Of course, that's not true," Brenda said stiffly with an attempted smile at her sire. "Regardless of our relationship you are a clan mate in need," she said to me. "I can put aside my feelings to do so."

Only time would tell if she really could, but for now I could only try to do the same. "I suppose I could argue the 'in need' part, but I will do as the countess wishes, of course."

Her delicately arched brows lifted as if she couldn't believe I wasn't going to argue with her. "Your views of the clan have been skewed since you woke here. We are not the... controlling entity that you first thought we were."

I choked back the bitter words that threatened to spill out. If the clan wasn't controlling as she claimed, I sure as hell wouldn't be standing in front of her. I'd be home, with my lover, or working at the security agency I'd started months ago.

Brenda looked away quickly as if she wasn't really sure she'd spoken the truth, but a glance at Antonio brought her composure under control. "I should go check on Howie," she said to him. "This is his first visit outside Salem and I want to make sure he is comfortable. I also want to call Amber and check in on Matthew."

He nodded. "I know you are concerned that the boy is settled in for the night. Go look into matters and I will speak to you later."

As she walked away, I eyed my boys where they stood talking with Brenda's ghouls. I hoped they'd be safe here at the chantry, but I knew there was nothing I could do about it either way, not now.

"What of your abilities have you recovered on your own, my dear?" Antonio asked.

"Blood Rage," I replied, trying not to smile at how I'd remembered that one in the shower with Scott. "Auspex and Dominate only work sometimes, though Heightened Senses is usually reliable. Occasionally things move when I'm... upset. Protean, of course, and Celerity."

He seemed to be happy enough at the things I'd rediscovered on my own. "Is there something specific you would like to start with? I understand that there will be some initial lessons that are more general in nature, like Tremere history and such, but after that."

There was a lot I wanted to say to him, and might have if the countess were not standing there watching us. As it was, my bargain with her decreed that I cooperate fully with whoever she chose to teach me, even if it was the two people guaranteed to bring out my bitterness and resentment.

"It's not my place to say where my lessons begin or what they consist of," I said coolly. "My place is to learn all that the clan chooses to teach me."

He looked as if I'd surprised him. "I see," he murmured. "Perhaps this is a question we can best answer at a later date, after you have had a chance to catch your breath a little."

I bowed my head politely. "As you wish, senior Moreno."

Again he seemed surprised, in fact everyone seemed surprised that I was cooperating. I was betting the countess hadn't shared the details of the deal we'd made, either that or Christina hadn't been very good at keeping her word.

"If you will excuse me, my dear, I wish to speak to Victoria about something before I forget," he told me. "If you have any troubles settling in Brenda and Rafe will be across the hall from you." He paused for a moment as if remembering something. "Ah, but I believe they will be spending the day at the house because of Matthew. At any rate, if you need anything you have but to call and I will give what aid I can."

The countess stepped forward and suggested that everyone get settled in their rooms. She asked that the boys and I meet back in the foyer for a tour, and added that her other guests

were welcome to join us. There was nothing I could do but agree, though it left a bitter taste in my mouth.

Rafe went with the boys to show them their rooms, while Brenda and Howie led the way upstairs to my room, which was in fact across the hall from her and her husband. The room was small and plain enough, with a bed running across the wall opposite the door, a chair and lamp in a corner, and a dresser and desk. It looked as if there were network connections for my laptop near the desk, and I wondered how much of my communications with the outside world would be monitored. Opposite the desk were the bi-fold doors of a closet. An overhead light emphasized the room's starkness. There were no windows, and immediately the walls seemed to close in on me.

The luggage I'd brought was lying on the bed. Two suitcases were full of clothing, suits, blouses and other things I'd had pushed to the back of my closet for the last six months. A carry on bag held all of my toiletries and in another case was my laptop and all of Christina's notebooks. The ritual bag Brenda had given me for Christina and Jason's anniversary held what few Thaumaturgical supplies I owned.

"Do you need any help unpacking?" Brenda volunteered from the doorway.

Her offer threw me off guard a bit. I had expected her to stay as far away from me as she could whenever she could. "Ah, no, I think I'm good, but..." as long as she was there, maybe she could help with something else. "I was wondering where the boys' rooms were."

She made a movement like she wanted to come in, and really it was childish for me to want to leave her standing in the hall. I gestured for her to come in and walked toward the bed to open the larger suitcase.

"They are in the basement," she said as she and Howie walked into the room, closing the door behind them. "Rafe went with them to help them settle in. Rafe is glad to be able to spend time with Frasier again, he's missed him."

"I'm sure he has." I began unpacking as I tried to relax but it was almost impossible to do so. I kept waiting for the attack I knew was coming. "I think Frasier has missed him too."

She glanced over the cases on the bed. "You still have the bag I gave you," she commented as she began helping me unpack.

I spoke quickly and without thinking. "You expected me to burn it?" I will immediately catch myself. "I'm sorry. Of course I still have it."

A smile touched her lips. "You know, you keep biting your tongue and eventually it you'll bite it off." There was a slight challenge to her familiar tone, as if she was trying to forget what had passed between us and behave like she was my sister again.

I didn't want to play her game of make believe, yet I found myself responding as if I was a lot more comfortable with her than I felt. "I think I'll have plenty of time to grow it back before I go home."

She shook her head ruefully. "Always the mar—no, I'm sorry. I will not do this Tina." She took a deep breath before continuing. "Look, if we're going to get through this, why don't we set up some ground rules so we aren't arguing every day?"

I sat down the shirt I'd been folding and looked at Brenda as calmly as I could manage. "I don't intend to argue with you. I intend to get through my time here because I gave my word to the countess and when that time is over I hope to god I—" With a sigh I stopped myself from saying what I really felt. I knew as well as she did that bickering would only make this harder on both of us. "Okay. Ground rules."

"First of all, no nit picking at each other around Antonio," she said with a nod. "He doesn't need to hear us squabble."

I could agree to that easily enough. "He's an elder of the clan. I may not remember much about the Tremere but I know better than that."

"Secondly, I promise to not bring up our previous relationship," she told me, "unless it would be to help your studies. Consider this a business relationship and nothing else."

"Are you including Jason in that 'previous relationship' thing?" I asked carefully.

Her voice was even more cool than mine had been. "Definitely. I really don't want to talk to you about him."

"Good, cause I'd rather not hear the lecture," I murmured. "So we agree to a business relationship, with no past baggage brought up in public or private, and no snide comments about my—about each others' personal lives."

"Fine," she agreed. "Anything else?" Before I could answer, Howie cleared his throat. Brenda seemed to know what he was reminding her of and said, "Because there is a phone call that I need to make before we're expected back downstairs."

"I'm good." I picked up the shirt I was folding and turned to put it into the drawer. "I meant what I said." It was bad enough that the boys and I had to be here, I hated that anyone else was forced to come here because of me. "I'm sorry you have to be here. I know you'd rather not be."

Behind me I heard the door open and Howie say, "I think I'm going to head back to the house when you have to meet up with everyone else. I want to be there if he wakes up hungry."

"That's fine," she replied softly. Louder, she said, "Tina, I will meet you in the hall ten minutes before we're to be downstairs okay?"

"Yeah." I heard the door close and slumped over the dresser. If we could stick to the rules, we'd be alright, but somehow I didn't think Brenda had the self control, and I knew once she started in on me there would be no way I could keep my mouth shut. But I had to keep my mouth shut, and I knew it. My deal with the countess didn't include arguing with my teachers.

I knew it did no good wishing I was home with Scott, with the pack, but I still made that wish. I'd never felt like I belonged among the Tremere, and having Brenda there just compounded my feelings of inadequacy. She was the perfect Tremere, beautiful, cultured, and dedicated. I was the black sheep, a Gangrel wannabe that everyone was determined they would force into the clan mold.

Near the end of the prescribed hour I walked out of my room to find Brenda and Howie waiting for me. The ghoul had his arm around her, which surprised me since he wasn't the one she was married to, but I didn't comment. It wasn't until we moved toward the stairs that his arm fell away.

We rejoined the boys and Rafe in the foyer and were joined by the countess and Antonio minutes later. Frasier and Petor stayed close to me during the tour, for which I was grateful. It was hard to maintain a calm façade when all I wanted to do was run screaming from the chantry.

The countess conducted a tour of the house and grounds, showing us where the living, training and sleeping quarters were. The ghouls had rooms in the basement, which also held a gym and a common room for the servants. A subbasement held a pool and sauna area, which I thought the boys might like. The lower levels had entrances to underground tunnels that led

to the smaller house we'd seen on the grounds where the Thaumaturgical laboratories were kept. The tunnels also led to the garage and a shooting range.

Once the tour was complete and we had returned to the foyer, the countess paused long enough to say, "The re-training and other duties relating to Tina and the Trimuritive will begin at sundown. The ghouls' training will begin at noon, so I suggest they all get some sleep."

## *The Trimuritive*

YOU KNOW I'VE TRIED A THOUSAND TIMES AND I'VE TRIED TO EXPLAIN  
AND I'VE CRIED A THOUSAND TIMES OVER THINGS THAT I CAN'T CHANGE  
KID ROCK - WHAT I LEARNED OUT ON THE ROAD

The countess and Antonio were gone by the time I was able to process what she'd said. "Wait, what about the Trimuritive?"

Brenda glanced at her husband before answering. "Perhaps we should return to our room to discuss the Trimuritive."

I nodded. "Yours or mine?"

She glanced at the five of us gathered in the hall. "My room is larger. Let's go there."

Brenda's room was actually a suite and the furniture was much better quality. The main room had a desk and phone, along with a table and chairs, and a seating area that included a TV. Open doors showed the bedroom and bath. I wondered if the difference in our rooms was because her husband was staying with her, or because she was basking in the clan's good graces.

Once the door closed behind Petor, I asked, "What does the Trimuritive have to do with my training?"

Rafe moved chairs from the table closer to the seating area and motioned for everyone to sit. I stood near the boys as Brenda began to speak.

"The Trimuritive was in Salem recently," she told us, moving to stand behind Rafe and putting her hand on his shoulder. "I have talked to him and he isn't finished with you yet." Her eyes fell on me with the last of her words and a chill ran through me.

"What do you mean, he's not finished with me?" I asked.

"Just what I said," she replied calmly. "I believe that is may be dying, or at least coming to the end of his time this go around." She glanced down at her husband and squeezed his shoulder lightly. "He came looking for a child to replace him and wanted our help." Once again her gaze fell on me. "He told me he still needed you."

"What does he need me for?" I demanded as calmly as I could. "And why would he come to you for anything? I thought you hated him."

"I tried to find out but he wouldn't give any specifics," she told me. "And I don't know why he came to me, but he got what he needed and the Verbena magic will continue." She looked a little sad about that, as if she'd lost someone personally in the exchange.

"It's good to know I didn't completely waste my time saving him in Russia," I murmured, then louder asked, "You helped him find a child?"

She nodded, but before she could answer Rafe stood and pushed his hand through his hair, Brenda's gaze followed him for a moment before she turned to look at me sadly, not saying a word. Obviously something else had happened, something she wasn't telling me.

"Who'd he take?" I asked softly.

Rafe glared at me, his eyes dancing with anger. "My nephew," he ground out through clenched teeth. "My nephew's childhood gets sacrificed for the Verbena. I'm so glad you helped free him."

The last words were dripping with sarcasm and I could tell that he blamed me for the loss of his nephew. Petor noticed it too, and I could see he was preparing for any violent action Rafe might feel compelled to take against me.

"Rafe," Brenda soothed, moving to his side and putting a hand on his arm. He sighed loudly and walked away, keeping his back to the group.

At first I didn't want to say anything because I was sure that anything I said would be taken wrong. The longer I held my tongue, the more I was sure I didn't want to, couldn't in fact. I knew the situation wasn't a good one but I wasn't about to let a ghoul walk all over me. I had enough of that attitude from Frasier.

"I didn't hand your nephew over," I pointed out. "I did what I had to so the magic would continue. I think." The last bit was added softly, since I wasn't sure exactly what I had done in Russia to save Malcolm Robbins and the Verbena magic.

Rafe wheeled around, causing Petor to leap to his feet, but before anything could be said, Brenda moved to stand between them.

"Rafe, stop," she said softly, putting her hands on his chest. "This is counterproductive to why we are here and we've talked about this."

"You always stick up for her, don't you?" he growled down at her. "No matter what happens, you—"

"Stop," she repeated more forcefully.

The look that passed between them spoke volumes, but after a few moments he closed his eyes, held his hands in surrender and took a step back.

"I'm sorry, Tina," she said without looking at me. "As you can imagine this adjustment has been really hard for all of us. Harder for some," she added under her breath as she reached out to touch her husband's arm.

I put my hand on Petor's shoulder and pushed down gently. He got the point and sat down, but before any of us could speak there came a voice from the direction of the door.

"I was wondering if this would come up tonight." The light Spanish accent identified the newcomer as Zach even before I turned to see him standing calmly in the doorway with Archie not far behind him. "Pardon me for intruding un-invited, but I heard the raised voices. May we enter?"

Brenda nodded and took a step toward him. "Of course, Senior dela Rocha. Please, come in. Tina had questions about the Trimuritive after the Countess mentioned him so we were trying to explain the recent happenings to her." She glanced at Rafe, who seemed to be taking the opportunity to calm himself. "I'm sure you are aware of what happened and the loss that our family has undergone. We realized that Brendan isn't completely gone from us, but it's still hard to deal with nevertheless."

The two men entered the room and closed the door. "Correct me if I am mistaken," Zach said logically, "but the child was given freely by his parents, was he not?" When Brenda nodded, he added, "As much as that might pain you, it is hardly fair to say Malcolm 'took' him. He paid a price, did he not? Gave something of equal value to balance the loss of the child?"

"That is correct," she agreed with another nod, "and an easy way to look at the situation if you are removed from it. However, it is something altogether different to deal with and accept on a personal level." After another glance at her husband, she continued. "The hurt is still fresh, but I'm sure that in time we will look at the situation differently and look forward to the time when we might see Brendan again."

"There is no comparison for our kind of the honor it is to have a child chosen for this," he told us. "The closest we could come would be to imagine your favorite ghoul being offered the embrace from the likes of Tremere himself. But your point is a valid one my dear. The pain is

fresh, but I speak from experience when I say that it may not ease with time. Brendan as you knew him is gone. Magic of that level changes people."

I watched Zach as he spoke, wondering how much he knew of the Trimuritive. It sounded as if he knew quite a bit, perhaps had even known him personally, or perhaps one of the other incarnations. I knew I could be wrong, but I just had to ask. "Who was he to you, the one who changed when he became the Trimuritive? I mean, we're probably not talking about Malcolm Robbins, are we?"

"No it was not Malcolm," he told me sadly, "nor was it one close to me who became the Magic, but rather someone close to me who was changed by the Magic. He was, and is, my childe."

Brenda reached for Rafe's hand and he seemed to be comforted by her touch. "Well, since we don't know what to expect we will just wait to see what happens," she told him. To Zach, she said, "I apologize if our raised voices disturbed you. Tina and I have already made an agreement to put aside any past baggage that we have incurred in the last few months and I haven't had a chance to bring everyone up to speed. It will not happen again."

Rafe seemed to take her words as a cue and looked first at Zach and then at me. "I apologize for speaking out of turn. It-it won't happen again."

I nodded. "Honestly I'd prefer to pretend it didn't happen in the first place."

"You did not disturb me," Zach assured Brenda. "I was on my way to see you as a matter of fact, to speak to you about the Trimuritive and your dealings with him."

"Of course." Brenda glanced between me and the boys before continuing. "I think we were done here anyway, right? The guys need to sleep soon so that they are ready for tomorrow so that will give us an opportunity to talk." To Zach she added, "Did you wish for Tina to stay?"

"That is between the two of you," he assured her. "I merely wish to hear the events again, before we begin tomorrow."

Brenda looked to me, but I knew my place here. It wasn't my decision whether to stay or go, though I desperately wanted to stay.

"The outcome will affect her in the end ultimately. I don't mind if she stays," she told Zach before turning to Rafe. "Why don't you go lay down so that you are prepared for tomorrow?"

He came close to protesting, but in the end he simply nodded and went into the bedroom, shutting the door behind him.

"You'll have a long day ahead of you," I told my boys. "Go get some rest, I'll check on you later."

Frasier opened his mouth to say something smart assed, I was sure, but Petor nudged him before he could voice his humor. My hard look went unnoticed, though I did see that Brenda was amused by his misbehavior.

When the four of us were alone, Brenda gestured for everyone to sit down. Zach was the only one who accepted her offer, sitting in one of the chairs with Archie just behind him. I moved off to one side, trying to stay inconspicuous.

We listened as Brenda told of how she and her ghouls had struck a homeless man in the street, how the car had crumpled around the figure but he didn't move. Once they had gotten outside the car, time had stopped for everyone but Brenda and Malcolm, the latter of which had offered to return my memories in exchange for a child given to him freely. I stayed silent while she explained that she had been loathe to make any kind of deal with Malcolm, but he had given her twenty-four hours to think about it.

At that point in the story I couldn't keep quiet any longer and I couldn't keep the anger from my voice. "You made a bargain with him for my memories?!"

"That is what he was bargaining for," she confirmed calmly. "He says that he is the only one who can return them."

"But he knows I don't *want* them," I protested tightly, "and so do you. Why would you trade Rafe's nephew for something I don't even want?"

Brenda's eyes narrowed a bit. "What do you mean, you told him?"

"I told him just like I told you," I replied hotly, more than irritated that she had agreed to change my life when she knew that I liked it just the way it was. "What is it with you people making deals for my life?"

"When did you talk to him?" she demanded.

"What does it matter?" I shot back. "Obviously he didn't listen to me any more than you did."

"Of course, it's important," she replied, glancing at Zach. "You will be involved in the shifting over of a huge amount of Mage power if Malcolm can be trusted enough to be believed. There's no telling what could happen. Anything that he said needs to be analyzed in the hopes of giving you an upper hand so that you are guaranteed to survive."

I frowned, not fully understanding what she was getting at. "What are you talking about? What shift of power and why would I have anything to do with it?"

"Malcolm holds the source of the Verbena magic within himself," she explained. "That's why their magic was diminished when he was held, wherever he was when you freed him. He claims that he is dying, or rather that his time is coming to an end; I'm not exactly sure what that means. Anyway, that's why he needed a child. He needed someone to take over for him once he's gone. That's why he approached Samantha and me, to help him find the child he needed."

"Okay, I got that part," I said curtly. "But what does it have to do with me?"

She shrugged as if it really didn't matter to her. "I don't know. Malcolm never said anything to me about the specifics. What did he say to you?"

"He-" I hesitated just long enough to glance at Zach and remember that I was supposed to be cooperating. I didn't like it, but that was the bargain I'd made with the countess. "He offered to give me my memory back. I said thanks but no thanks and sent him on his way." I'd managed to calm my voice but it was harder to get a hold on my temper.

"What did he want you to do for him?" she pressed, watching me carefully.

"Nothing," I said honestly. "He's one of the few people from Christina's life who never asked me for anything." Unlike everyone else who had approached me since I'd come to Detroit. It was frustrating, really, knowing that every time they looked at me they wanted me to be someone else.

"Doesn't sound like him," she commented absently.

"Why, because he didn't ask me to sacrifice my self for—" I stopped myself before I could say something hateful. "You said I'm supposed to be involved in the shift of power. What does that mean? How?"

"Like I said, I don't know," she repeated. "He wouldn't say."

"But you said he was dying," I reminded her. "How does the power get transferred to-to Brendan?"

To everyone's surprise, Archie spoke in a very low voice. "He must die."

"But-but if he's dying, what does he need me for?" I wasn't sure who I was asking that question of. I was too busy trying to deal with the fact that one of the few people I'd thought understood my need to leave the past behind had gone to Brenda and bargained for my memories. To top it off, I couldn't help but feel like I'd failed when I thought about him dying. I knew it made no sense, but there it was.

"I don't know how the transfer will happen." She took a deep breath as if the very thought of the transfer of power upset her. "He took Brendan to another realm where time moves differently so that he would have time to train him."

I looked at Zach and his companion, hoping they'd have better answers.

"I do have some theories and references as to how it will happen, but we shall discuss this more tomorrow," he told Brenda. To me, he said, "We should not bother you further this night, but rather allow you to settle in completely."

I knew when I was being dismissed and I didn't like it one bit. Obviously there was more to the story that he didn't want me to know. I opened my mouth to argue and shut it again quickly. I wasn't there to argue, I was there to obey. "Tomorrow night then," I said tersely as I stood in preparation to leave.

Before I could, Zach rose and the two men made their way to the door. Brenda followed them to it and after brief good-nights, they were gone leaving Brenda and me alone, which was somewhere I didn't want to be.

"I guess I'll see you tomorrow," I told her as I headed for the door.

"Yes, tomorrow," she agreed. "Sleep well and I'm sorry about Rafe. He's dealing with his anger issues but seeing you has brought it all back again. It won't happen again."

"I'm not sure what I did to piss him off, but I hope you're right." I knew he was mad about Brendan, but there was more to his anger at me. "Good night then."

"Good night."

I returned to my room, but it wasn't long before I felt like the walls were closing in. I couldn't help but wonder how long it would be before Christina's past caught up with me. Though I hated what she'd done, I couldn't really blame Brenda for making the deal with Malcolm. She wanted her sister back and she believed if I remembered who I'd been she'd get what she wanted. Unfortunately I couldn't bring myself to believe in that fairy tale.

Unfortunately there was nothing I could do to change the bargain Brenda had made with Malcolm, nothing I could do to stop the memories from returning and ruining my life. I just couldn't believe that I'd ever be able to step back into Christina's life no matter what I did or didn't remember. No matter how many tears I cried or how well meaning Brenda's actions were, I knew that if I got Christina's memories back I would hate her, and myself.

I'd done things that Christina would never have done, made decisions that she would have shied away from. I knew now that Christina would never have slept with Scott, never have chosen to ignore her friends and family to build a life here in Detroit. She would never have fought her clan or struggled so hard to keep Frasier under control.

Knowing those things didn't mean I wished I'd made the choices she would have. I loved Scott, loved the pack, and though I did wish I knew how to handle Frasier better, I honestly believed I had a better, happier life here in Detroit than Christina ever had known living in Salem with the Tremere. I was happy with my life now, but if I remembered what I'd had, what I'd thrown away... I wasn't sure I'd ever be happy again.

I paced for a while, then looked over what few notes I had from Cormac on Thaumaturgy, but neither occupied me for long. Eventually I went downstairs to check on the boys, but even there I was thwarted as their door was locked.

I stood there for a long moment with my forehead resting on the door. Part of me wanted to wake them up to make sure they were all right, but I knew that my fears were most likely groundless. I forced myself to simply listen for the sounds of their breathing and was satisfied when I heard two separate rhythms of snoring.

The next few hours were hard for me. I wasn't sure if I had the run of the chantry, so I limited myself to my room. I hadn't planned on being so idle so soon after my arrival, but after an hour or so of pacing I sat down to look over Christina's notes and compile my own from hers on the Trimuritive.

## *Lessons Begin*

AND THE LEAVES AT MY FEET

WHISPER SOUNDS SO FAMILIAR

CONCRETE BLONDE - DARKENING OF THE LIGHT

I woke the next evening to find Frasier and Petor waiting just outside my room. After I got dressed, we spoke for a few minutes while I finished getting ready for the evening. I felt almost naked without most of my weapons, but the reason I'd gone completely armed for the last few months was to stay away from the Tremere, it seemed a bit like overkill now. I had the Walther PPK at my ankle, of course, and a Glock 17 in the small of my back, but I'd left the rest of the arsenal at home.

The boys had gone on another tour of the house and grounds during the day, seeing more of the working areas than we had the night before. They'd also toured the city chantry, a place I'd never been and hoped to avoid.

We walked downstairs together where we found Brenda and Jonathan waiting for us. The boys went off to more evaluations while the three of us went on the more detailed tour of the house and grounds that the boys had been on earlier. The library was magnificent, and I was told that I could use it whenever my free time allowed.

It was almost nine when we met up with the countess, Antonio and Zach in a private study. Zach and Brenda went off to talk about the Trimuritive while I was asked to sit down. For the next few hours I listened as Antonio and the countess outlined the Tremere clan history, structure and organization. I was glad I'd had the foresight to bring a notepad as it was fairly complicated. Although I didn't remember any of it from Christina's time in the clan, all of it sounded like it should have been familiar.

The countess and Antonio were patient with me as I asked questions and took notes. They even took the time to explain the animosity between the Tremere and the Salubri when I asked about it. When it looked like they were wrapping the lesson up, I asked about one more thing.

"Why is the clan so interested in the Trimuritive?"

"We wish to better understand the very nature of magic itself," she said calmly. After my conversation with Zach and Brenda the night before, I was sure she had expected me to ask.

"Then you wish to study him?"

"At least," she conceded.

"And at most?"

She said nothing, just sat back smiling coyly in a manner that had 'embrace' written all over it.

"Surely you realize that he knows what you intend for him," I murmured.

"Of course," she agreed easily. "We have been close to having him a few times."

"Brenda said that he still needed me for something," I told her. "Is that why I'm here? So you can have another chance at him?"

"My dear, you have been told our reasons for wishing you back numerous times," she said patiently. "The fact that he is not through with you just came out, after we had struck our agreement I might add."

I nodded and looked down apologetically, although I still didn't see why I was so important to the clan that they'd go through all the trouble they had to bring me back. Then I glanced at

Antonio from the corner of my eye and remembered that *he* was the reason I was here, he'd made his own bargain with the countess to bring me back. I didn't know what it had cost him, but I hoped that it had cost him a lot. After a moment, I looked back at the countess. "Do you have any idea what he wants with me?"

"None," she admitted. "That is what senior dela Rocha is trying to figure out."

"Brenda told me last night that Malcolm is dying," I said carefully, "which means you won't have much time to find out what he needs. When he dies, will Rafe's nephew become the Trimuritive?"

"Yes."

A part of me hoped that Malcolm would die before he had the chance to give me back my memory. I knew the thought was harsh, but I couldn't help it. Another part of me wanted to volunteer to help Zach figure out what Malcolm needed of me, but I didn't know if I could stand to work that closely with the man.

"Thank you for answering my questions," I said at last.

"But of course," she replied with a smile. "We are here to help you. Now then...."

As if on cue, the door opened and Paige walked in.

"If you will follow Paige we will rejoin you shortly," the countess continued.

"Of course."

I followed Paige to the basement, into the underground tunnel and to a large room with several chairs around a table. She offered me a seat on one side of the table and then went to wait on the other side.

We sat there in silence for several minutes until I couldn't take it any more. "So, been in Detroit long?"

"As long as the Countess has," she replied politely.

Of course that didn't really tell me much. "Is that a long time then?"

"A very long time, yes."

I wondered if she had been the countess' fetch and carry girl the entire time. "I guess it's not often that a city has two chantries. When did that happen?"

"The Clan decided they needed to take a more active role in the economics of the city after the Brujah revolted, so we established the city Chantry," she explained.

I raised an eyebrow. I hadn't heard anything of that in my dealings with the Brujah, and the clan seemed far too fragmented to try and stage a coup. "The Brujah revolted?"

"Yes. It was some time ago," she told me. "The Primogen who led it is dead, as is his childe who replaced him."

Which explained why the Brujah clan was so fragmented. "Do you spend much time at the city chantry?"

"Only when The Countess does."

Though she was answering all of my questions, I felt like I was pumping her for answers. "Is that a lot or a little?"

"We are here more, and have always been."

"I understand the leadership of the city chantry changed hands not too long ago."

She sighed and looked directly at me for the first time. "Yes it did, Tina. And your boyfriend killed to make it happen. I *know* who you are, I know who your friends are, and what you all will do to get what you want."

While I didn't really want to get into an argument with the countess' pet, this open hostility was much easier for me to deal with than the polite veneer she'd been giving me. "What is it that you think I want?"

"I don't know yet," she replied, "but I do know that your type will do anything to get it."

"My type?" I might have been amused at her opinion of me if the circumstances had been different. "Would that be the amnesiac type or Dougal's childer, or maybe the type to hang out with Gangrel?"

Based on her reaction I was willing to bet it was the latter, but at that point the countess, Antonio, Missy and one of the clan ghouls entered the room.

Stifling a sigh I tried to bring my emotions under control. I knew I'd have a hard time with some of the Tremere because of my choice of friends, but it was rather irritating to be classified with Amy Owens, a woman who had used Scott to further her interest in the Tremere clan. There was also the fact that I wasn't real happy to see Missy.

The Countess excused Paige then indicate everyone should be seated. The next few hours were full of rigorous testing to see what disciplines I could remember, then retesting them to see if I could repeat them at will. While they didn't show me how to do the things I couldn't remember, they did at least tell me what they were.

They also wanted to know what non clan disciplines I could use, which meant showing them what I knew of Protean and Celerity. Thankfully there was a supply of blood in the room that I could drink to replace what I used during our show and tell session.

## *A Walk in the Garden*

AND I'M SORRY IF MY HEART BREAKING

RUINED YOUR DAY

JEWEL - SOMETIMES IT BE THAT WAY

When I got back to my room I found that it was nearly three o'clock. I still had three hours of time to kill before dawn, and I didn't really want to spend all of it in my room. Petor had left a note on the desk telling me about the training they had scheduled for the next day, and while I was a little anxious about the testing of disciplines they would go through, all I could do was hope that Petor found a way to hide his magical abilities.

I knew I couldn't spend the next three hours staring at the walls, so I grabbed a jacket and set out to find a little fresh air. I'd barely left my room when I saw Brenda coming out of hers.

"Need some air?" she asked with a smile.

"A little," I admitted. "There's no window in my room. I thought I'd try to find the gardens, or the roof or something. See a little sky for a change."

"Would you mind some company?"

I couldn't help but wonder why she wanted to spend time with me, and looked down quickly to hide my suspicions. "No, not at all. Up or down?"

"Hmm, garden," she answered absentmindedly. "I'm feeling the need for green."

Turning toward the stairs I tried to stifle the hope that she'd be too preoccupied to pay much attention to me.

"How were your lessons?" she asked, proving that even with other things on her mind, she would still be interacting with me.

I wasn't really sure how well things had gone, so I shrugged. "I don't remember how to do very much. I'm afraid I disappointed the countess and your sire."

"Our sire," she corrected. "I'm sure it's fine. You'll be able to do everything you could before and then some. You were always a quick study. I, on the other hand, not so fast."

For a moment I didn't reply, but no matter how much I knew I had to cooperate, in the end I couldn't let her thoughtless comment pass. "I thought we weren't going to bring up the past?"

She looked up in confusion. "Huh?"

"Senor Moreno is *your* sire." Though Antonio had adopted Christina, and she had accepted him as her sire for nearly eight years, I barely knew or remembered him. Dougal Galloway, killed years before I'd found myself in Detroit, was my sire.

"Sorry," she murmured. "Momentary bout of forgetfulness, won't happen again."

"It's okay." Obviously she had her mind on other things. I was tempted to leave it at that, but something made me say, "You seem a bit preoccupied."

"Yeah, I spent most of the night reading," she replied. "That's why a walk sounded good. Rafe is fast asleep and I didn't want to wake him. He left a schedule, sounds like they're getting a good workout."

"So I gather."

"It's good for them," she continued. "Rafe is overly conscious of his health and Frasier has always been in shape for as long as we've known him. If this keeps up, though, we might not see much of them."

"I didn't think we would." I was worried about that, but I tried to keep it from my voice. I liked my boys where I could keep an eye on them and make sure they were safe even though I knew it drove them, and usually everyone else around us, crazy. "Once the initial training is over, they're supposed to have a lot more freedom than I do."

"I'm sure that's true." She glanced at her watch. "Oh, crap. I forgot to call Howie tonight to see how Matty's doing."

"Did you take on another ghou?"

She nodded. "Howie and Rafe are old college friends. They run their business out of the house so Howie was around a lot. I was worried that he might get pulled into our world so I asked to ghou him. It was a great choice."

"I knew about Howie," I reminded her. "You told me before that you had ghoued him. I'm talking about... Matty?"

"Matty." A secret smile crept onto her lips at his name. "Matty is the new man in our lives," she told me, sounding very excited. It was almost as if she'd been waiting for the chance to tell me about him. "He is the baby that the clan found to give Malcolm. When we found out he wasn't the one we decided to keep him. I think mentioned him earlier."

I shot her a glance, but couldn't read much besides happiness from her expression. "I guess I'm confused. You tried to give this child to Malcolm and he wouldn't take it?"

She shook her head and her voice was sad when she answered. "He wasn't the one, Brendan was. Matty's mother didn't want him, sold him to us as a matter of fact, so that's why we decided to keep him. Oh, he's so beautiful, dark hair and eyes, like Rafe's."

"You bought a child?" I asked softly. "I mean, just to give him to Malcolm?"

"Actually, the Clan did," she admitted, "but I would have if they hadn't."

"Why?" I could tell she wasn't sure what I was asking, so I tried to clarify. "Why is my memory so important that you and the clan were willing to give up an innocent child for it? Any innocent child apparently."

"The stipulation was that the child had to be given freely, that's the only reason why I was okay with even going along with it," she told me firmly. "I'm not some monster who would randomly buy or steal a child to give to anyone, especially to that... man. You should have seen how that baby was living," she added earnestly. "His mother didn't want him, didn't take care of him. I couldn't let him go back to that after we found out that Brendan was the one that would work Malcolm."

If the circumstances were as bad as all that, I could admire her for wanting to save the child, for taking him into her home, but the fact was that she *had* bought an innocent child with the sole purpose of giving him to a man she hated.

"Well it's great that things worked out for you then," I drawled. "I mean, yeah, you had to deal with your worst enemy, and give up Rafe's nephew, but you got a son, and I'll get my memory back. When's that supposed to happen anyway?"

"Well, it might not," she said tersely, almost as if she was talking to an impertinent child. "Since Brendan was the child that Malcolm ended up taking, it was Samantha's bargain that was honored, not mine. She received a child to replace the one she gave up."

I stifled a sigh of relief as we walked outside even as I wondered why she hadn't told me that much the night before. It would have saved me a night of worry and tears.

"That doesn't mean that Malcolm is done with you, though," she continued, bringing my tension levels back up. "He'll be back some time before his time is done. If he's nice enough he might give you your memories back, but it won't be because he has Brendan."

"Nice enough," I repeated slowly. "Well that's one way to look at it." I knew Brenda could only see it that way and there was no use arguing that getting my memory back wouldn't be nice at all. "So Matt's mother sold him to you?" When she nodded, I asked, "How's that working? I mean with you here to baby-sit me."

"Howie is taking care of him most of the time, unfortunately," she told me as we entered the garden. "But he will be here every weekend with Matty and we've been given the use of a house in town since the baby isn't allowed at the chantry."

"That's nice for you." At least someone got to continue their lives during these next six months even if it wasn't me. I didn't really wish Brenda ill, I just wished her... elsewhere. "I've never been around kids. Well, unless you count the boys. And the Brujah. Well, and Maggie." Just talking about them made me feel homesick.

"Of course you ha—shit," she exclaimed apologetically as she rubbed her forehead. "Sorry. Sometimes I speak without even thinking. Look, if you want to meet him... maybe you could come over one weekend," she offered hesitantly.

"Maybe. I'd have to get permission to leave." Part of me wanted to meet the child she was so crazy about, but part of me was remembering Christina's past, or at least what I knew of it. "Cormac sent me a tape, before he died, of the-the holding." I tried not to remember that it was a tape of Christina and Jason's wedding and focused instead on the Christening. "Christopher was on it."

She nodded. "Yes. He is Lena's son."

"Yeah, I know." He was also Christina and Jason's godson.

"What about him?"

I glanced at her for a moment, then turned my head to hide my thoughts. "Well, nothing, really. It's just he's the only child I know of that Ch-I ever really got close to. I doubt I'll ever even see him again."

"You spent time with Brendan, too, while you lived with me," she pointed out. "Do-do you want to see Christopher?"

"It's a moot point, isn't it?" I smiled wryly. "Lena hates me."

"Well, she is a little upset with you," she agreed slowly. "I don't mean to sound like a shrink here, but I have to ask; how do you feel about that?"

We'd been walking through the garden, but as we approached a bench I took the time to sit down on it, trying to give myself a few more minutes of thought before I answered.

"No, she hates me," I said at last. "She called me, you know, just after I-I woke up here. I'm afraid I burned that bridge before I even knew it existed. She wrote me a letter that, well, it was venom couched in niceties and politeness." Though I couldn't remember Lena, the wording of her letter had left me aching. "And I don't know how to feel about that. Right now I guess it doesn't really matter, I mean, I don't even remember her or Christopher, but if I get my memory back...." I let that thought trail away unfinished and tried not to think about how I would feel.

"I don't know what to tell you," she said after a moment or two. "The likelihood that you ever get them back is still unknown so it might not matter."

It did matter, or at least I knew that it would matter if Malcolm played to Brenda's 'nice' standards. Even without remembering my relationship with Jason, I missed him. If I did remember what we had shared, I honestly believed I would be completely devastated that I'd lost him.

"Did you ever want something really bad," I asked slowly. "I mean like crave it, more than blood, more than anything, to the point that you knew you would give up everything you were, everything you ever wanted to be, to have it?"

I could see the war in her eyes over whether to answer me or not, but eventually she nodded. "When Michael told me what he was... all I wanted was for him to make me like him." She looked away briefly, almost as if she wasn't sure she should continue, but eventually she did. "I was already head over heels in love with him and I knew that. After he had ghoulé me, I asked him to embrace me but he refused. I carried that need around for a long time. I know what you're talking about."

I nodded at the truth in her words, hoping that her memory of that need would help her understand what I was about to say. I'd never spoken to anyone about what I'd felt when I was with Jason, but strangely enough I felt like I could talk to Brenda about it.

"That's the way I felt when I was with Jason," I admitted softly. "I wanted to be with him so badly that I felt like I would do anything at all just to be the woman he thought I was." I took a deep breath and forced myself to finish the thought, baring my soul to a woman who had shown little care for my feelings in the past. "It was terrifying, because I knew if I did it, if I just let myself be who he wanted me to be, I'd never really know who I was. I'd never really know if that woman really was me or just someone I became because I wanted to be with him so badly."

A strangled sound of anguish came from her throat. "Oh, honey," she soothed as she reached out to touch my hair. "Don't you know that it didn't matter to him? He just wanted you. He was more okay with accepting Tina than the rest of us were. If you would have given him a chance..." She stopped and pulled her hand away, as if she remembered why Jason had given up on me.

"It mattered to me," I said softly, sadly, watching her profile as she avoided looking at me. "I don't know what would have happened if he'd have come here like I asked him to. I guess it doesn't matter anyway, does it?" I reached up to wipe the tears from my eyes and made my voice as steady as I could. "No matter what happens with my memory, Jason and I are over."

She nodded firmly. "Yes. I'm sorry to see it happen, but you and he are over. Jason is a completely different person now."

I shrugged not because I didn't care, but because I knew I'd never see Jason again, never know what my rejection had done to him, and I didn't want her to see how much that hurt. "I don't regret it. I'm happy with Scott. I know you don't like it, and I know you don't like him, but I do. He makes me feel safe. I know that no matter who I am, he'll accept that and love me anyway. I love him," I said, looking up at her for a brief moment before looking out over the garden. "I don't regret breaking things off with Jason now, but how do you think I'm going to feel when I remember exactly what it was I walked away from?"

"You've made your bed, Tina," she said almost harshly as she crossed her arms over her chest. "You will have to lie in it and deal with your consequences if they happen." With a sigh, she added, "If you will excuse me, I need some time alone. I've recently found that talking about the past is exhausting and I'd rather look to the future. Good night."

As she moved away, I stood up, irritated that her attitude had taken such an about face. "What, the stroll down memory lane was cool as long as I was admitting I made mistakes? As long as I know I 'done wrong' you're happy? If you get your way, if Malcolm gives me back my memory and I hate myself for the choices I've made, will that be punishment enough in your eyes?"

She turned abruptly and headed for a bench not far away from where I was standing. "I don't think that you need any punishment," she said as she sat down. "You are my clan mate. I care about what happens to you, but I no longer have an opinion on what happens if you ever get your memories back, which I wouldn't count on that happening."

"You don't have an opinion," I shot back, "but you were willing to give Malcolm a child even after I made the deal with the countess to come here." I searched for her aura and found nothing but bitterness and uncertainty.

When she said nothing, I spoke again, trying to keep my voice calm, but even I could hear the anger that crept in around the edges. "You know what I think? I think you were more than happy to make a deal with Malcolm over my memories until you found out he needed Brendan. I built a new life here, I'm happy here, and you hate that. It doesn't matter if I want my memory back or not, you *want* me to have it because then I'll know just how badly I fucked up. I don't know what you expect to happen, Brenda, but it doesn't matter if I have my memory back or not. When I leave this chantry, I'm going *home*, and there's not a damn thing you can do about it."

Without waiting for a reply I headed for the house. I knew I'd hate being cooped up in the cage that was my room, but unless I was mistaken, Brenda had been charged with keeping an eye on me. The fact that she followed me as far as the house to make sure I went inside was all the proof I needed.