



# *Three of Hearts*

*An Ariel Espenosa Story*

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# *Chapter 1 - Sometimes Helping Is a Bad Idea*

"They watch and they feed  
They take what they need  
They bite as you bleed  
The birds of prey"

Christina Aguilera  
"Birds of Prey"

## **January 2002**

The night was chilly for January in Nashville, but because I was a vampire the temperature didn't bother me. With only thirty minutes before midnight, I was on my way home after meeting with my good friend, Nathan Cruz, about the possibility of writing some music for an artist he was trying to sign to a record deal. It was a Wednesday night, so while the streets weren't overly crazy with weekend traffic, it was still pretty early and there was quite a bit of pedestrian and car activity.

Even with so much to draw my attention I was surprised when I noticed a familiar car parked on the street a few blocks from The Iron, the bar where I'd met Nathan. The car belonged to Trent Diesel, a guy I'd dated only a handful of times three years ago, but the 60's era red Mustang he'd done most of the work restoring stood out on the street. I hadn't talked to Trent in a long time. Not because we'd parted on bad terms or anything. Our budding relationship just kind of fizzled out because he'd become really unreliable.

I didn't recall seeing Trent in the bar, but that didn't mean he hadn't been there. Now that I was thinking about it, I was almost positive I'd caught a glimpse of his friend Scott, but I hadn't thought about it at the time. I found myself wondering how Trent had been doing lately when my eyes caught movement in an alleyway just past his car and I could have sworn I recognized the young man. It looked like there was some kind of a struggle in process.

I didn't know what help I would be in a fight, but I was concerned about Trent so I parked my car in the first available spot I could find and quickly got out to investigate, palming my keys and locking the car as I quickly walked away from it. I paused at the mouth of the alley to determine if there actually was a fight underway and to see if one of the persons involved was, in fact, Trent. It didn't take long to determine the answer to both questions was yes.

The biggest surprise was that Trent and Scott appeared to be fighting a relatively young vampire I knew named Beck. My first thought at seeing two mortals fighting one of my kind was that they were hunters, and what was really disturbing was that Beck appeared to be losing.

Being a vampire gives you certain supernatural abilities that are different from one bloodline to another. One of these abilities allows you to affect how mortals regard you. It makes them want to do what you say, to make you happy. I happened to have this ability so I manipulated the blood in my body to enact that power as I stepped into the alley opening.

"What's going on here?" I asked to get their attention.

Scott was the first to look my way, but he was seemingly unaffected by my presence. Trent was too busy fighting off Beck to notice me just yet. I was a little perplexed because unlike normal mortals, neither of them was instantly affected by my power and I quickly decided that I needed another approach to the situation because Beck seemed to be fighting desperately for survival.

"Get out of here!" Scott cried as he waved at me to go back the way I'd come.

"Scott, that's a friend of mine. What are you doing to him?" I asked. I began to hum, something I did often unconsciously, usually when I was stressed or trying to figure something out.

At that moment, Trent violently threw Beck back against the wall of a building. The young vampire hit the wall with a tremendous amount of force, enough to have knocked a human unconscious, but thankfully it only stunned Beck. How had Trent been able to do that?

Scott looked at me in confusion. "Ariel? You can't be friends with that thing," he said, sounding like he was trying to convince himself. Trent turned to see me for the first time and it was apparent that he was surprised to see me there as well.

I started to move around the two men, trying to put myself between them and Beck. There was something about this entire situation that felt incredibly wrong to me. Why would these two attack one of my kind? And more importantly, how were they able to so easily defeat one of us? "What's going on here, guys? Why are you fighting?" I asked, hoping my voice didn't shake too much.

Trent took a step toward me, his hand raised as if he were trying to stop me from moving any closer to Beck. "Ariel, what are you doing here?"

"I was driving by and saw that you might be in trouble so I came back to see if I could help," I explained, still trying to work my way around them. I pointed to Beck. "Why are you hurting him?"

I didn't get very far before Trent grabbed my arm and pulled me away from the other vampire. "Ariel, stay away from that thing!" he ordered.

Another ability of my particular vampiric bloodline was that we could use our voices to imbue feelings or to direct a situation the way we wanted. Usually this was done while we sang, but it worked when we spoke too. Given what I'd walked into I figured that if I tried to captivate them they would be more willing to explain what was going on so I started to sing.

From the corner of my eye I could see that Beck, who hadn't moved since being thrown into the brick wall, was now sitting at the base of the wall and staring at me, starry eyed with rapture. Well, I had him with my song at least. I looked toward Scott, who had stopped and was staring at me with a glazed expression. That was two.

Then my gaze moved to Trent. He seemed to be falling under the power of my voice at first, but it was only for a moment, then he kind of shook himself out of it. "What are you doing?" he asked in a low voice, his hand tightening on my arm.

The singing should have been affecting him more than it was, but I didn't stop, instead I manipulated my blood to become stronger and attempted to pull away from him. I managed to do so, but that was mostly because Trent was now clutching at his head with both hands, his eyes tightly closed.

"Stop it!" he growled. "What are you doing to me?!"

Another perk of my singing ability is that I could have two conversations at the same time. So while I continued to sing to captivate the two men I used a second voice to speak to Beck. "You must get out of here now!"

The other vampire blinked, coming back to himself, then he quickly scrambled to his hands and knees, then to his feet, and moved further into the alley, disappearing into the darkness.

Trent raised his head, his eyes glowing with some kind of an inner light I'd never seen before. "Stop!" he yelled and a second later my voice broke, cutting off my song altogether.

I blinked in surprise and stared at Trent in horror. Nothing like that had ever happened to me. This couldn't be a good situation for me. I began to back away from the two men. "What are you?" I asked Trent, fear palpable in my voice. I still had my car keys in my hand so I threaded one of them between my fingers so it would act like a mini knife if I had to punch one of them. Not that I would be any good at it. I wasn't much of a fighter.

"Me?" Trent demanded, sounding both shocked and angry. "I'm human! What the fuck are *you*?"

Scott grabbed his friend's arm. "Come on, man, let's get out of here!" But Trent resisted, his eyes locked on me angrily.

"You're not human," I said, trying to convince myself more than them as I continued to move backwards. I wanted to put as much distance between us as possible.

Unfortunately doing that meant that I was headed further back into the alley, away from the road and my car, but there was nothing I could do about that now. There should have been no way for Trent to break the effects of my singing ability and I was really frightened. I patted my pants pocket's for my phone and realized that I'd left it in my car. How could I have been so stupid?

"I'm more human than you are, witch!" Trent cried, bending to pick up a piece of broken pallet from the floor of the alley.

Now I was even more frightened, a sharp piece of wood was a very bad thing for a creature like me. If he pierced my heart with it I would be paralyzed, unable to move or protect myself. That had happened to me once before and now I was truly terrified. I turned and started to run away from the two men, using my supernatural blood to boost my dexterity so that I hopefully wouldn't fall. I could see that the alley opened at the other end, but it was very dark between here and there, and the other street was dark too.

I heard two sets of running feet behind me and knew that I had little time. Suddenly I remembered that Sebastian Ritter, the owner of The Iron and another vampire in the city, had been at the bar when I'd left. I'd talked to him briefly on my way out. He was the Sheriff, the vampire in charge of keeping the city safe for our kind. It was a small twist of fate that this attack had happened so close to his place.

My singing ability had another helpful application. I could use it to speak to someone that I knew over a distance. They would be able to hear what I was saying, but I wouldn't be able to hear them. It was kind of like a one way walkie talkie and I used it in two small message bursts as I ran.

"It's Ariel, I need help," was the first message, while the other was, "Alleyway down from The Iron."

I had a pretty good feeling that it had worked, but in the meantime I knew that I couldn't stop running. There was no telling how long it would take Sebastian to get to me even if he did hear me. I was now in the darkest part of the alley, but I could hear Trent and Scott still coming behind me.

"Do you see her?" I heard Trent ask.

"There, at the end of the alley!" Scott replied a second later.

I kept running and was nearly five feet from the alley opening I felt a hand roughly grab my arm from behind. I didn't bother looking to see which of the men it was that grabbed me, it didn't matter, I had to get away from them and continue to the safety I hoped I'd find at The Iron.

I wrenched my arm hard and managed to twist away, but I had to stop to do so and as I did, I realized that my arm was being burned where I'd been seized. I glanced back and saw that it was Trent who'd grabbed me and I felt my fangs drop defensively.

"Don't touch me!" I hissed at him.

Trent took a step back in shock as Scott also came to a stop next to him. Both were looking at me in horror.

"She's not a witch," Scott gasped. "She's a fucking leech!"

Trent raised the piece of wood that he'd been holding like a spear and watched me with wild eyes.

"Stay back," I warned them both, doing my best to take a fighting stance even though I had no idea what I was doing. The burn hurt a great deal, but I pushed the pain aside for the moment, to worried about whether that wood was going to find its way to my heart and incapacitate me.

Just as Trent pulled his arm back to throw the spear time slowed as I heard a gunshot ring out from behind me. Trent jerked back and dropped the spear as blood seeped

into the cloth covering his shoulder and Scott's gaze swung toward the bullet's origin, his eyes full of fear. He grabbed Trent's arm and began to pull him back toward the alley.

I looked behind me, hoping to find someone friendly and nearly sobbed when I saw Sebastian come to stand beside me, his shoulder length, dark hair loose around his face, which was set with severe determination. A warrior's face. His gun was still raised and even as he used his free hand to pull me behind him, he shot two more rounds at the two men as they ran away.

Relief flooded my body and I slouched against his taller frame a bit, grateful that I was no longer alone. "They know what I am," I told him. "They can't get away."

Sebastian's gaze was on the opening where the two men had retreated as he passed me over to his ghoul, Raleigh, who was suddenly next to me, then he ran into the alley after them.

"Are you all right?" Raleigh asked. He also had a gun drawn, and was holding me to his side with an arm around my waist. He was about the same height as Sebastian and while he had the same clear blue eyes and long hair, his locks were curly and blonde where Sebastian's were dark brown and straight. They made an incredibly striking pair.

I nodded. "I'll be fine. Go with him. I thought they were human, but they aren't. One of them burned me."

He looked between me and the alley opening for a long moment, then shook his head. "I'm sorry, miss, but I'm sure Sebastian wouldn't like it if I left you alone. He can handle those two."

Down the alley, I heard a gun go off twice more and I couldn't take my eyes from the opening, terrified that something would happen to Sebastian, one hand holding my injured arm to my torso. "I'm fine, really," I urged. "I'll stay right here. Please, go with him, Raleigh. If anything happens to him because I called for his help..."

"He would never forgive me if something happened to you while I went to his aide," Raleigh countered, still keeping an arm around my waist and holding me close to his side. "He'll be fine, you'll see."

From the alley I heard the faint sound of car doors slamming as a couple more gunshots rang out and a car squealed away. It was probably safe to assume that Trent and Scott had gotten away, but I knew that I was going to be nervous and jumpy until I knew for certain that Sebastian hadn't been hurt.

Then I realized I did have something else to worry about. The rules that vampires lived by, *The Masquerade*, had been severely compromised tonight and I didn't know how these events would affect me. The Masquerade allowed vampires to live side by side with humans, while keeping our existence secret. We didn't need to kill to feed. We covered up our activity from the humans. And for the most part we were no longer hunted like our kind had been during the Inquisition. I hoped that I wouldn't be in trouble, but I honestly couldn't think of anything else I could have done to handle the situation better. I was just glad that Beck had gotten away.

I had no idea what Trent and Scott were for sure, but it was more than obvious that they weren't the humans I'd originally thought them to be. I didn't say anything but watched the alleyway instead, straining to hear Sebastian's return or a call for help.

I was still hurt and had enough blood to heal, but there was no way to know for sure if the situation was over for the moment so I decided to hold off for now. There was a chance that I might need the blood for other, more important things.

A few moments later, Sebastian cleared the corner of the building at the opening of the alley, looking angry as he reached behind him to tuck his gun in the small of his back. "Take a car and see if you can find out where they went," he told Raleigh. "Red Mustang, went south on Van Patten Avenue."

Raleigh nodded silently and released his hold on me, then trotted off toward The Iron.

## Chapter 2 - Explanation

"No one ever wants or bothers to explain  
Of the heartache life can bring and what it means"  
Christina Aguilera  
"The Voice Within"

Sebastian moved closer to me, looking me over for injuries. "Are you hurt?" he asked.

I scanned his body for injuries and found none as I shook my head. "I'm fine. Trent grabbed my arm when I was running away and he burned me, but it's okay."

"Trent?" Sebastian asked, moving even closer to take my arm with gentle hands. "You knew them?"

"I went out with one of them a couple of times a few years ago," I admitted, letting him examine my arm. "Trent, actually. It didn't last long. If Raleigh doesn't have any luck picking up their trail he can try Trent's apartment. I have the address somewhere."

Sebastian's clear blue eyes flashed as they met mine. "Does this Trent know where you live?" he asked, his tone very serious.

His question caused me to go still. I realized what my answer was as I met his gaze. "He does," I confessed. "Dammit. I'll have to find somewhere else to stay. We do have to find them, right? I don't know what they really are, but it's obvious they aren't human, Sebastian."

"The one I shot sure bled like a human," he said, taking my uninjured arm and leading me back toward The Iron. "Come on, I want to get a better look at that in the light. What did he burn you with?"

"His hand," I replied quickly, not wanting to be sidetracked from the more important issue. "Sebastian, I'm fine, really. I think if I took a moment to concentrate I'd be able to heal, but they are getting away. Shouldn't we go after them? Help Raleigh? I made the mistake of leaving my gun in my car, but I won't do it again." I wanted to go after them before anyone else was hurt, but Sebastian kept moving, bringing me along with him.

"Raleigh will find out where they went, if he can find them. He'll give me a call if he does and I can meet up with him. He burned you with your hand?"

"His hand," I corrected. "I saw Trent in the alley on my way home and it looked like he was fighting so I came back, thinking I could help him out. When I got there I realized that they actually had Beck, you know, the Nosferatu? They were beating the crap out of him and I managed to sing them into distraction so Beck could run away."

The next part of the story still disturbed me so badly because I couldn't explain it. "Then Trent was able to do something... I'm not sure what... but he stopped me from singing. I knew something was really off then and I was in trouble so I tried to get away. I ran. Trent grabbed my arm and burned me with his touch. I've never seen anything like that."

Sebastian glanced over at me, but didn't stop moving. "Don't beat yourself up about it. You had no way to know that these men were more than human. Beck got away, and you're safe. You should keep your gun on you though," he added.

"I will from now on," I promised him earnestly. Sebastian's approval meant a great deal to me, letting him down wasn't an option. You see, I'd been half in love with Sebastian for the last three years. That's when his sire, Tristan d'Castilla, became the Prince of the city, the leader of the vampires.

Sebastian was an amazing man, but I hadn't deluded myself with my attraction. We had nothing in common. He was a protector of the city, while I spent my time singing and writing music. Our flirtation had nothing to build on. "Thank you for coming to help," I added.



He smiled at me and my heart melted a little. "It was my pleasure. Do you need a holster for your weapon? Are you comfortable with it? I can show you a few things if you aren't."

I smiled a little, feeling the effects of our familiar flirtation dance falling into place. "I don't have a holster. I usually carry it in my purse." I shrugged. "I'm okay with it I guess. I haven't needed to use it much, but I know the basics." I laughed a little at the absurdity of carrying a weapon I hardly ever used. "Haven't shot myself yet at any rate."

I glanced up at him quickly and started humming 'Crazy' by Patsy Cline. My sire once said that humming was therapeutic for me, a way of dealing with stress and nervousness, which I usually felt when thinking about my attraction to Sebastian. He smiled again and I found myself wanting to touch those lips so badly that I barely stopped myself.

"I can fit you up with a holster if you like," he offered. "First though, if you give me your keys I'll send one of the guys for your car."

They were still in my hand so I handed them over to him. "I left it close to the other end of the alley," I said, realizing how alone I was with Sebastian. This was a first even though we saw each other frequently and I just knew I was going to do something to embarrass myself in front of him.

Sebastian took the keys, his fingers brushing my hand as he did so. "I'm glad you called me, Ariel. I would hate to see anything happen to you," he murmured, his voice warm and promising.

This was how it was whenever I saw him. We never talked more than a few minutes at a time, but there was this... attraction that always there, just under the surface. I wasn't good with relationships. I'd only dated two guys in my entire life. The first was a boy in high school who'd ended up sleeping with my best friend. Then there was the short lived relationship with Trent. I spent most of my time since being made a vampire with the sisters of my bloodline, writing music and singing. I didn't know what to do with the feelings I had for Sebastian.

I smiled slightly up at him. "I'm... I'm glad you came."

"Let me pass these keys off," he said, never taking those beautiful blue eyes off me. "Then we can head for your place to pick up some things. I've got a spare room you can use until we get this all sorted out."

*Wait, spare room? That I could use?*

To say I was shocked was an understatement. He wanted me to stay with him? How would I be able to hold it together? I couldn't do more than nod. "Sure. Um, I'll... I'll need my house key off the chain first."

Sebastian grinned impishly. "Ah, yeah," he said as he handed the ring back to me.

I quickly located the correct key and removed it from the ring with shaking fingers, before handing it back to him again. "My, ah, my purse and phone are in the car, too."

"If you want, we can wait for the car so you can grab them before we head to your place," he offered. "That will give me some time to call Raleigh, too; see how he's doing and make sure those men didn't head for your house."

"Whatever you think is best," I told him, trusting Sebastian completely. "I should probably have the phone in case Vanessa tries to get a hold of me."

"All right," he agreed, a ghost of a smile on his lips. "Let me give these keys to Oliver and we'll wait for him to get your car. I'll be right back."

Sebastian left the room and when he came back a few minutes later, he was on the phone. It didn't take long to piece together that he was talking to Raleigh and that his ghoul had been unable to find the car. Sebastian told him to head over to my house and wait for the two of us, then he hung up.

"He's okay?" I asked when Sebastian was off the phone.

I'd gotten a chance to work with Raleigh a few months ago when it had come out that Sebastian had unknowingly become blood bound to another vampire, Duncan Masters. When a vampire drinks the blood of another vampire a bond begins, one that makes the

vampire more inclined to do what the other wants. It's a very taboo thing in vampire society, especially for someone like Sebastian who had such a high ranking in the city.

I wasn't sure what the entire story was concerning Duncan and Sebastian, but when I'd found out about the bond I knew that I would do whatever it took to end it. Duncan had ended up paying with his life and I'd spent some time with Sebastian's ghoul, getting to know him. During that short time I'd found that Raleigh was a very interesting guy. I like him as much as I liked Sebastian.

"Yeah, he's fine," Sebastian answered as he turned to search the top of the desk for his keys. "He's going to meet us at your place. If you can find this Trent's address, he'll check that out while I get you settled in at my place." He stopped and turned at the waist to look back at me. "Unless you'd rather stay somewhere else?"

Oh, I probably should, but right now he was the one I felt safe with after what had happened in the alley. "I... I could probably stay with my sire, but... I don't want her to worry," I said slowly. "I messed this up pretty bad. I don't want her to be disappointed in me."

Sebastian moved to stand in front of my again. "You've done nothing wrong, Ariel. You came through okay, saved Beck, and found out that we have these strange hunters here, too." He smiled slightly. "Tristan will be pleased, and your sire should be too."

"I would feel better if I hadn't had to bother you and Raleigh," I confessed. "Don't get me wrong, I'm grateful you came to my rescue. It's just me." I rolled my eyes a little. "Nathan claims it's a perfection complex, but I don't know..."

"We all need a little help sometimes, nothing wrong with having someone to watch your back." His smile widened. "I'm very thankful I have Raleigh to watch mine."

I cleared my throat, and before I was aware of what was going to come out of my mouth I spoke. "I hope you know that I would do anything, come to help you, whenever you needed, Sebastian." I quickly looked down at my hands, a little embarrassed.

Sebastian hooked a finger under my chin and lifted my head to face him. "I hope you know I feel the same about you, Ariel."

His voice was liquid warmth that made my insides heat with his unspoken promise. I found myself wondering what it would be like for him to kiss me, take possession of me. I studied him a moment, wondering just how deep the sentiment went, then I smiled slightly.

"I think you've proven that already," I whispered.

He grinned and let his hand fall as he spoke. "Good. Now, do you need to hunt before we go to your place? I probably have something at mine if you can last that long, but I don't like the idea of you running around hurt like that." He gestured toward my arm.

Having Sebastian so close had made me forget my injury altogether, but his reminder was like a light switch. "I should make it back to your place," I told him. "I don't want to waste anymore time in finding Trent and the others. Just a moment."

I took the time to close my eyes and concentrate a moment so that I could heal, manipulating the blood in my body to make the burn mark go away. I'd used a great deal of blood while dealing with Trent and Scott and would have to feed soon, but I was okay for the moment.

Sebastian put his hand on my now unmarred skin to examine it. "Don't worry about Trent. I'll give Tristan a call once we get his address, he'll send some guys to help Raleigh and they'll take care of it."

"Okay," I answered with a nod. Regardless of what he'd said a moment ago, I felt responsible for bringing trouble to his already busy schedule. The perfectionist in me kept analyzing what happened, thinking that there had to be something I could have done different to contain the situation better. Leaving my gun in the car was a huge mistake and one that I didn't plan on making again.

A knock sounded at the door and Sebastian moved to answer it. I recognized the guy as one of the employees from The Iron, Oliver more than likely. He passed Sebastian back my keys, telling him there was no problem getting it and that it was parked out back.

Sebastian handed me the keys then led me out the back of the building where he waited patiently while I collected my purse, checking to make sure my gun and phone were still inside. I relocked the door then he led me over to where his black Charger was parked, opening the door for me and everything.

I thanked him quietly as I slipped inside, his presence so protective and strong. As he rounded the vehicle to the driver's side I pulled out my phone to see if I'd happened to have programmed Trent's address there, but no luck, just his number.

Sebastian drove fast, but well, and we were halfway to my apartment before I realized that he hadn't asked where I lived. Then I remembered that Sebastian had visited me once to tell me of my brother's death. It had been an awkward visit to have him in my haven, but nice at the same time.

"You said one of the men knew where you lived," Sebastian said, breaking the silence. "You dated him?"

I nodded. "Yes. We went out a few times about three years ago. It fizzled before I needed to worry about The Masquerade," I explained.

"You nearly pass for human," he pointed out. "Surely you know this."

I nodded again. "Vanessa has always told me that I was very lucky to pass so easily for human. She says that would give a music career extra years, but I've never enjoyed all the limelight that would entail."

Sebastian smiled, setting my insides warm again. "Never minded it much myself, but didn't have the drive for a music career. I've got more of a talent for business."

"I really love singing. And writing. The creative process of writing a song is so amazing. The fans and bright lights and scrutinizing I can do without." I looked out my window and started humming again.

"Well, we've got a small studio at the house," he offered, "if you're interested in using it while you're staying with us. No bright lights and only a couple of fans."

"You're very kind," I said, casting a quick look his way. I hadn't known that he was into music and I couldn't help wondering what his voice would be like when he sang. "What if I want to hear you sing?" I asked before I could think twice about the question.

If it was possible his smile got even bigger and a mischievous gleam twinkled in his eyes. "Then I suppose I will have to grant your wish, my dear. Raleigh and I both tend to sing while we're playing in the studio."

I smiled at him brightly. "I would like that very much."

Sebastian's phone began to ring before he could reply. I gathered that it was Raleigh since Sebastian's side of the conversation revolved around the fact that the area surrounding my apartment was clear and that we'd be there in a few minutes, then he hung up.

"I think those men are more concerned with taking care of a gunshot wound than hunting you at the moment," he told me.

"Something tells me that once that is taken care of, though, it will be an entirely different situation," I pointed out and Sebastian nodded.

"By then you'll be safe at my place, and we'll have an address to go after them at," he replied. "Do you know the full name of the other guy? Or anything else that might be helpful in tracking them down?"

I told Sebastian everything that I could remember about Trent and his friends. When I'd met Trent, he'd been in a band and they were trying to get noticed. There were five of them, all young men around the same age. I told Sebastian their names, what music company they were working with, and what clubs I remembered them playing at.

Sebastian listened carefully and asked appropriate questions. By the time I was done he was pulling up in front of my apartment and I saw that Raleigh was waiting by the door of my building.

I led the way inside, deactivating the security system and showing both of them how to disarm it in case they needed to come back without me. I lived in a loft with an open

floor plan on the main level where the living room, kitchen and dining room were located. My bedroom and bathroom were upstairs. I took stock of everything in my line of sight, but couldn't find anything missing or out of place. That made me feel better and I told the men that it didn't look like anyone had been here.

Then I went over to my desk and pulled out my address book where I quickly copied Trent's address and phone number, along with numbers for a couple of his band mates that I also had and the general areas where they lived.

Sebastian looked at the paper, then passed it over to Raleigh. "Get started on finding these guys," he told him. "Give Fly a call, he can track them down for you."

Raleigh took the paper, then smiled at me, tipping an imaginary hat in my direction. "See you a bit later, ma'am."

"Raleigh, please be careful," I told him earnestly. "There's no way of knowing what they are capable of."

He nodded seriously. "Don't worry, I'm not goin' after them alone. We'll call 'Bastian here before we go in for the kill."

I was glad to hear that, but I was still worried. I left them before I embarrassed myself with crazy notions and instead moved toward the stairs to pack some clothes. I heard the front door close and seconds later I was aware of Sebastian's presence in my bedroom. There'd never been a man in my bedroom before and the normally large room was suddenly filled with Sebastian's presence. I was filled with his presence.

"He can handle himself," he said in a low voice from the doorway. "We've both been trained in combat situations, and we've seen a lot of action in the last fifty years. He'll be okay."

"But if anything happens to either of you because of a situation I caused I'm the one who will have to live with it," I replied, going to the closet and opening the door. Damn, why did I leave my gun in the car? I could have taken care of Trent and Scott on my own and not involved Sebastian. I was so stupid!

"We make our own choices, Ariel," he said in a gentle voice as he came further into the room. "This kind of thing is what we do. Tristan trusts us to handle it because he knows we can. I won't say we've never been hurt, but we've always walked away."

I looked over my shoulder at him from where I was pulling a small suitcase out. "I get it, really I do. It's just... I don't know. Just me, I guess. Sorry."

"It will be all right, really," he assured me. "We should go, though. Do you need me to grab anything for you?"

"Um, no. I'm just gonna throw some clothes in here and I need to grab my stuff from the bathroom." I was pulling clothes blindly off hangers, shirts mostly, then I moved over to the bed to fold them quickly and pack them in the bag. Pants and underthings I would get from the large set of drawers on the other side of the room. "On second thought, could you get my phone charger?" I pointed toward the bedside table where it was still plugged in while I headed to the bathroom.

"Sure." As Sebastian unplugged the charger from the wall I noticed him looking at what was on top of my bedside table. "Is this your mom?" he asked, picking up the framed picture. It was the only one I had left of her.

I felt a hint of a smile tug at the corner of my mouth when I saw the tender way he held the frame. "Yes, it is. Will you bring that as well, please. And the rosary."

"This is a beautiful rosary," he said, picking it up. "Your family is Catholic?"

"Yes," I told him as I dropped toiletries in the bag. "My mom's family anyhow. Not sure about my dad."

He didn't comment on that as he brought everything he'd collected to me. "Anything else?"

I had clothes and essential toiletries together by this point so I shook my head as I zipped it closed. "Just my songbook. That's in the living room. Anything else I can come back for."

"All right." He picked up the bag and followed me down to the living room and waited for me to grab my book. Once I was all set, he led the way to the door, making sure I set the alarm before leaving.

## Chapter 3 - Sebastian's House

"Have you ever invited a stranger to come inside?"

P!nk  
"Glitter In the Air"

Sebastian's house was a bachelor pad, a tastefully decorated and fairly clean bachelor pad, but a bachelor pad. He gave me a brief tour, which included his impressive, state of the art music room/recording studio, then he took me to the basement bedroom he intended for me to use, pointing out that his own was just a few feet away. Then he left me to get settled in.

The bedroom reflected the same style as the rest of the house. The bed was made up with a beautiful dark green print bedspread and lots of black and green pillows. There were matching bedside tables and dresser in the room as well and the closet was a good size, even though the few belongings I'd brought didn't come close to filling it.

I quickly unpacked and went in search of Sebastian. I found him in the living room on the main level and he was on the phone with, it seemed, Tristan. It didn't take long for him to finish his conversation.

"Your boys seem to have gone to ground," he informed me. "No sign of them at Trent's or Scott's place. Raleigh and some others are going to Tony's, but I doubt we'll find them."

"Oh no," I replied, wrapping my arms around my torso nervously. "What happens now?"

Sebastian came over and put his hands on my shoulders. "Don't worry, Ariel, you're safe here until we find them. We'll take care of this."

I made an attempt to smile, but his words only soothed so much. "Thank you. I appreciate that. You have to let me help with this."

"Of course," he said firmly. "You've been a big help already, with all the information you had. Now if we can just get you a holster," he teased.

I gave him a rueful smile. "Haa. Haa. What about Beck? Is he okay?"

"I'm not sure. Tristan called Regina and she's looking for him to make sure he's okay. He'll call as soon as he knows."

I nodded, looking around the house restlessly, unsure what to do next. "I like your house," I said in an attempt to make conversation. "I've never been here before."

"No," he said with a smile. "I don't bring too many people here. I like my privacy." He waved his hand in the air slightly, adding with a shrug, "Serena did the decorating. She said the house needed to reflect my station, whether or not I ever brought anyone here."

"Serena is Tristan's ghoul, right?" I asked with a smile, turning from him and walking around the room a bit to take in some of the details. "His sister?" I added over my shoulder.

"Yes, she is his sister," he replied, his voice a low rumble. "And you know that Mateo is their brother. They've been together a long time."

I felt his eyes on me as I looked around the room and even though I hated to admit it, I really liked having his full attention. "It's good to see that not all families are completely dysfunctional," I said, noticing the books on coffee table and the German movie posters that were hanging on the walls. "I've been with my sire since she made me. She's the most stable thing I've ever had in my life, besides my mom."

"That's good." he said, his lips curving in an easy smile. "Tristan and his family took me into theirs, and I have never regretted it."

I gave him a tentative smile, his attention a little unnerving because it looked like he wanted to eat me or something. I bent to retrieve one of the books from the coffee table and looked at the title, *The Korean War*, then I opened it and flipped through the pages.

"Have you talked to your sire tonight to let her know you're all right?" Sebastian asked from where he was standing the doorway to the kitchen.

I closed the book again and carefully replaced it on the table before looking over at him. "I talked to her before meeting Nathan at The Iron," I informed him, turning to face him. "I was kind of hoping this would be taken care of before I had to tell her." I shrugged. "She worries. Maybe we could see what happens tonight and I can call her later?" I asked, hopeful.

"It's your choice, of course," he replied. "Why don't we see if we can't find you a holster that works so you're ready when Raleigh calls?"

I nodded. "Good idea." I went over to my purse and pulled out my gun. "This is what I have."

It was a Glock 17 and from the limited knowledge that I had about firearms, it was a pretty basic weapon. Sebastian came over and took the gun from me and started to examine it. Then he motioned for me to follow him and he led the way back into his music room.

After seeing the rest of the house and coming back to this room I realized that it had a very different personality from the rest of the place, much more personal. There were half a dozen very good guitars on stands sprinkled about the space, an upright piano, and lots of other musical stuff like sheet music and a bowl full of picks.

Sebastian went to a panel in the wall and flicked a switch to reveal a hidden 6' x 4' room lined with weapons. There were some drawers lining the bottom of one side and he opened one that I saw was filled with holsters.

"What kind of holster do you want?" he asked. "Small of your back, under the arm, on your hip?"

He might as well be speaking French for all the sense any of that made to me. "Well, I'm not sure," I replied coming up to stand next to him. "What would you suggest? I tend to wear dresses a lot of the time so it seems like one at the back might not always be a good idea. And wouldn't a hip one just get in the way?"

His eyes moved along the length of my body in a long appraising look, something he'd been doing a great deal in the months since Duncan's death. His eyes were warm and liquid and I had to lower my gaze, reminded again that we were all alone here.

"This gun's a bit too big for a thigh holster, and I don't have one here at any rate," he said with a grin, then he bent to reach into the drawer and pulled out what looked like a tangle of leather. "Why don't we try an under the arm holster? You can wear it over your dress and conceal the weapon with a jacket."

"Is it hard to get into?" I asked, nervous that I was about to embarrass myself being so completely scrutinized by him like I was. "I mean, I wear a jacket often, but sometimes when I perform I take it off so can I get in and out of it quickly?"

"Yeah, it's not bad, once you get it adjusted. Take off your jacket, we'll see what we can do for you."

I slipped the garment off and moved to stand in front of Sebastian so he could help me put the holster on and then he adjusted it until it felt comfortable. I had to close my eyes to keep from reacting every time his hands brushed against me as he made the adjustments and I tried to ask questions about how to do them myself, hoping I didn't sound like an idiot. Once he was done, Sebastian had me take the holster off and put it back on so I could see how easy it was.

"And you won't be able to tell I have it on?" I managed to ask when I finally had the contraption settled on again.

Sebastian shrugged. "Depends on the jacket and who's looking, but for the most part no one will notice."

"Good. Should I put on my jacket and see?"

"Yes," he replied with an easy smile as he picked it up and held it out for me.

I slipped it on then turned to face him again. "Well? Can you see it?"

Again his gaze moved slowly up and down my body and I felt the beginnings of something warm spark in my belly. "Well, I can tell, but I know its there and I know what I'm looking for," he said. "I doubt many people would realize you're armed."

"That's good. I was worried because I know many of my jacket's are tailored," I told him with a slight smile. "Thanks."

He reached out to adjust my jacket a little. "You may have to have a few of them altered, but for the most part you should be fine."

I laughed a little. "You gonna be around to check my ensemble before I go out every night in the meantime?" I teased.

Sebastian caught a piece of my hair in his fingers as his gaze met mine. "As long as you're here, I will be," he said in a low voice.

I caught my bottom lip between my teeth and watched him for a minute, trying to figure out if he was teasing me again, or was he flirting? I wasn't at all sure and figured that even if he was flirting I was too out of practice to do anything about it.

"Um, didn't you say something about having some blood here?" I asked in a half whisper, looking for a way to break the... whatever this was kind of moment. "Raleigh could call at any moment and I probably shouldn't go out again without replenishing at least a little bit."

Sebastian smiled at me and stepped back. "There's some in the fridge. Let me just close this back up." We moved out from the secret room and into the studio and he closed the panel in the wall, then he led the way back into the kitchen, where he pulled a crystal pitcher of blood from the refrigerator and retrieved a glass from a cupboard before pouring. He gestured for me to sit at the table and then sat across from me, handing me the glass and placing the pitcher to the table.

I thanked him as I sat and took a long drink, noticing an open book on the table that looked like it had lyrics and guitar tabs covering the pages. "So how will this work if Raleigh finds them?" I asked Sebastian. "We meet up with them and go in?"

"We'll see what he finds out," he answered with a shrug. "If it's only two of them, we'll go see what we can do. If there are more, we need to call in some more help."

"Do you have any idea how Trent could have burned me with a touch?" I asked as I looked down at my arm that thankfully hadn't been scarred from the injury.

"Um, not sure. Some Tremere could have done it, and I've seen a priest set a vampire on fire, but a random Joe Normal?" He shook his head. "That's new to me. I mean, I've heard rumors, but I've never seen it happen or talk to anyone who did."

"I can't believe he would hurt me," I said, my arms crossing my abdomen defensively. "He called me a witch at first then after he saw my fangs he called me a leech."

Sebastian leaned over the table and angled his head so that our gazes met. "Yeah, that's disturbing. He must be a hunter of some sort, but I was under the impression that we'd neutralized the main group of hunters in this area. We may need to talk to Johnson, see what he knows."

My brow furrowed, thinking I'd heard the name before. "Johnson?"

"Glenn Johnson. He ran a group of very good hunters, before his wife found out her brother was one of us."

The name was familiar to me. "I remember him. He was called in during all that crap with Duncan." I then remembered Sebastian's involvement in that situation and quickly changed the subject. "Isn't he a Mage or something?"

"Yeah, he uses magic, so do most in his group," Sebastian explained while I drank. "He cooperates with us, on occasion, but mostly they stay away from our kind."

I made sure that no blood lingered around my mouth before I spoke. "You know, I don't think that I hang out with anyone but our kind. Isn't that funny?"

"Not so funny," he replied with a smile. "Many Kindred do the same."

I took another drink and watched this man I'd felt drawn to for so long. "Not you though, right? You know many supernaturals, don't you?"



He shrugged. "I know a fair number in town. I don't usually spend time with them, however."

I smiled at him, humming a little as I finished the glass and searched for something else to talk about. "So, you're a history buff?"

Sebastian smiled. "Not history so much as the art of battle. There's a lot to be learned from wars that were fought in the last two hundred years."

I propped my chin on my hand and watched him. "Really? Like what?"

School had never been my thing. Don't get me wrong, I'd graduated with decent grades and all, but I was always more interested in music and had never had aspirations for college, much to my mom's dismay. History was a subject that I'd especially despised, but I was willing to open myself up to it again if Sebastian was the one teaching.

He poured me another glass then started to tell me stories of battles that he found interesting and ways of fighting he thought were better than others. He told me some of what he'd applied when it came to keeping the city safe, both with rebel vampires and other supernatural creatures. It was interesting and completely foreign to me at the same time. But it was fascinating to watch him talk about it and I actually learned something.

When his phone rang he excused himself to take the call, but he didn't leave the room. It was Raleigh again, and Sebastian was asking questions about a location where the other man was. Based on what I could hear I anticipated the need to leave when Sebastian was finished so I quickly moved to the sink to rinse my glass and put the pitcher back in the fridge.

As soon as Sebastian hung up his gaze fell on me. "Raleigh has scouted the area around Tony's house and it looks like no one's there either. He's going to meet us at Trent's place, I'd like to go through it and see if we can find any information on other places we can look."

"Sounds good. Let me grab my purse."

## Chapter 4 - Running Down Leads

"When it's you that helped me put up all these walls I've built  
Shadows stir at night through a crack in the door"

Christina Aguilera

"I'm Okay"

Raleigh was waiting outside Trent's apartment building with Sebastian's child, Joan Smith, when we got there. Luckily Trent lived on the ground floor, so breaking in unseen was easy for Sebastian. Once we were inside Sebastian moved to make sure all the blinds were drawn, then Raleigh turned on a light.

I'd been here once before when Trent and I had dated and as I started to look around the place I quickly realized that it really didn't look like I what I remembered. It was dirty and littered with takeout packages and there were weapons tucked in the strangest of places, almost like Trent had expected someone to break in at any moment and he wanted to be prepared.

I was the most surprised by the several large symbols that were painted on the walls. They were roughly drawn and it didn't look like anything someone would intentionally decorate with. After looking at them for a long moment, trying to figure out what they were, I remembered seeing something similar on the sidewalk outside the building.

After getting a look cursory around the place I said, "This isn't really how I remember it." I pointed to the symbols and added, "Those are new, so is the one outside. He wasn't as messy either, and I don't remember him ever carrying any weapons." I moved my gaze to Sebastian and asked, "Do you know what those symbols mean?"

Sebastian shook his head. "I have no idea. Seems like I've seen something of the sort around town, but I've not paid them much mind. There are some near The Iron."

I frowned. "Around The Iron? Anywhere near that alley where they were beating up Beck?"

"Not in the alley, specifically, but as close to The Iron as that, yes."

"I wonder if there is a safe house for them there," I suggested, grabbing a piece of paper and a pencil from the desk to sketch a drawing. "Raleigh, how far were you able to track them?"

"I wasn't, really," he told us as I attempted to draw the symbol. "Had a couple of contacts tell me their car was headed roughly in this direction, but I never caught up to it."

I held out the sketch and compared it to what was on the wall and in no way did the two look even remotely the same. "Okay, I'm no Monet, but I should be able to sketch this," I said out loud and mostly to myself, then I thought about what Raleigh said. "Maybe we should check out that place by The Iron."

"Good idea," Raleigh said as he and Joan moved deeper into the apartment and Sebastian came over to look at what I'd sketched over my shoulder. "We can check it when we're done here," Raleigh called out from another room.

I held up the paper so Sebastian could see it better. "I wanted to get a sketch so we had one to compare," I explained. "I didn't think I was that bad of an artist. It's completely different!"

Sebastian looked from the paper to the symbol on the wall. "Try it again," he suggested in a soft voice. I turned to a fresh piece and set about drawing the symbol again, this time being very careful to break it down into pieces in an attempt to get it right. I thought I had it, but when I finished and compared the two, they didn't match.

Sebastian, who had watched me silently, said, "Let me give it a try." I handed the paper and pencil over to him and watched as he attempted to draw the symbol. At first it looked like he was getting it, but in the end when he'd finished drawing, it was all wrong. He flipped the page and tried again, and this time it was even further off than his first endeavor. "Damned strange, this is," he muttered.

"Is it possible there's some kind of spell on it so we can't duplicate it?" I asked, knowing that there could have been a thousand possibilities to explain the strange situation. "What if Raleigh tries? Maybe it's because we're vampires?"

"That's a good idea." Sebastian called Raleigh in, but after a couple of tries it was clear that he couldn't do it either.

"Just another thing to ask Johnson about, I suppose," Sebastian said.

"I wonder if a camera would capture the image," I wondered out loud. I knew that I didn't have one with me so it didn't really help now, but it was something to think about.

"We'll have to bring one back and take a look," Sebastian agreed. "Let's take a look around, see if we can find any information on Trent's other friends, or an address they might have gone to."

We spent the next twenty minutes looking for anything helpful. I managed to find the addresses of all the guys in the band. While Raleigh found an additional address with no name listed. Joan found a cache of weapons in the bedroom and Sebastian found a larger than normal stash of medical supplies, first aid and painkiller type stuff in the bathroom. Nothing seemed disturbed enough to indicate that the medical supplies had been accessed recently so that was a pretty good indication they hadn't come back here.

"So what's our next move?" I asked Sebastian when we were done.

"Well, we take the weapons," Sebastian said. "Then I think we should check out this additional address. I'd think since Trent knows you know him, he'd stay away from people you know he associates with."

I nodded my head in agreement. "We're staying together, right?"

"Mostly." He turned to Raleigh. "We'll come at the location from two directions so we can scope the place out real well before going in."

While Sebastian and the others divided up the weapons we'd collected to hide on their persons for removal, I did one more cursory look through the apartment. In the bedroom I noticed a number of pictures that were stuck in a mirror over the dresser and I went over to check them out. I was a little surprised to find that there were several pictures of Trent and I that made me think about our time together and what had caused our split.

We'd dated for several months and had just gotten to the point where I'd thought the relationship was actually going somewhere. Then Trent started arriving late for dates, then not showing up at all, and he had no good excuses. After about a month I'd had enough and finally I broke up with him despite that fact that he seemed genuinely interested in continuing to date me.

Now I wondered if his tardiness and no shows were because he was too busy killing others like me. What if I'd told him what I was? Would he have hurt me like he'd done earlier? Or would he have killed me as well? The thought left an unsettled feeling in my belly and what was worse was that I might never know the truth.

I scanned the other pictures for any clues we might have missed. There were snapshots of Trent with his bandmates and other friends I'd met in our short time together. There was even one of him and his mother.

His mother...

I remembered that he'd talked about her several times as we were getting to know one another, had even talked about me meeting her, but that was just as everything was starting to fall apart between us, so I never did get the chance.

I knew her name, though, and I remembered that she lived in the city so that was definitely a place we needed to check out if Trent didn't turn up. I hadn't run across an address while going through his papers, but I roughly remembered the neighborhood that Trent had mentioned growing up in and it might be easy enough to look her up in the phone book or maybe Sebastian had other contacts who could get it.

I came out of the bedroom and immediately started looking for a phone book. It didn't take long to find Maureen Diesel in the white pages so I copied the address onto a piece of scrap paper and tucked it into a pocket for safe keeping.

Now we had multiple addresses to look into. Sebastian wanted to check out the place with the symbol near The Iron first. He'd talked to Raleigh again about approaching the building from two directions while I was in the bedroom, Sebastian and I from the back and Raleigh and Joan from the front. Plan in hand we left Trent's apartment and headed out.

\* ~ \* ~ \*

By the time we wrapped things up at Trent's it was about three o'clock. Nashville traffic was light for that time of the morning on the main streets, and there was little to no foot traffic.

Even though it was close to The Iron, the building we were checking out was in a crappy part of town and as it turned out it was an old car repair shop that looked like it should have gone out of business years ago.

Sebastian drove by the front and turned at the next corner to pull around toward the back and as he did I saw that there was a light on in the garage part of the building, but it was hard to tell if it was a light left on for security, or if someone was actually there.

The red Mustang Trent and Scott had been driving was parked on the side of the building and I immediately pointed it out to Sebastian. "Should I call Raleigh to let him know?" I asked.

"Yeah, good idea," he told me. "Let him know we're parking on the block behind it and will come in on foot."

I dialed Raleigh's number and let him know about the Mustang as Sebastian parked. As we made our way to the alley behind the garage Sebastian told me to stay close to him and to keep an eye out as he led the way between two buildings. I felt clumsy as I watched him ahead of me. The way he moved was practically silent and he was on full alert, sticking to the shadows. Luckily I was wearing pants tonight, but since I was on the short side I still wore three inch heels. I was as quiet as I could be, but there was no way to be as silent as Sebastian.

The area behind the garage was littered with car parts and junk, but we managed to walk through it, guided only by the light coming from a back door to the garage that was open a few inches. As Sebastian and I got closer, we could make out voices inside, but we couldn't quite make out what they were saying.

I caught Sebastian's attention and gestured that I was going to move closer to the open door and he silently agreed, cautioning me to move slowly. I nodded in assent and when I got close enough I could make out the conversation.

"... be more careful," a gruff voice I didn't recognize said. "Just 'cause they got teeth and claws, doesn't mean they'll use 'em."

"We'd have been alright, if the other leech hadn't shown up," Scott grouched, sounding worried. "He came out of nowhere."

I quietly turned toward Sebastian and nodded to indicate that it was them and he cautioned me with a hand gesture to not move.

"Gotta remember the monsters can use guns too," the gruff voice said. "Reckon your boy will remember that, next time."

"Yeah, if he lives through this," Scott replied in a low voice.

Sebastian moved just in front of me so that he could get a look inside and I leaned close to him, putting my hand on his back to stabilize myself. Doing so put me in a position where I could see Trent lying on a cot to one side of the room. Blood was on his clothes and there were bloody rags in a trash container nearby. An old man with a scruffy beard was drying his hands near a laundry tub style sink and Scott was sitting on a tool box. We hadn't heard anyone else, but I didn't want to assume that these three were the only ones in the building.

"I can try singing to captivate them," I whispered to Sebastian very, very quietly.

Sebastian looked at me for a moment, then nodded. "But if it doesn't affect them, make sure you get out of the line of fire, all right?"

I nodded back. "I'll try to put them to sleep," I whispered, recalling the words to, Brahms's Lullaby, the song I remembered my mother singing to me as a child.

Trent was already out of it because of the gunshot wound and after just a few notes of the song Scott yawned and slumped a bit. "Damn, I'm tired," he murmured, his eyes drooping.

The old man blinked sleepily, then jerked suddenly and looked around. "What's that noise?"

I watched as Scott's form slumped to one side in sleep and the old man walked to a bench and picked up a shot gun, then turned to face the room, looking around for something.

Well, one active man was better than three. I turned to get Sebastian's attention and waved my hand in front of my throat in a 'cut' motion to see if he wanted me to stop. I also started thinking of the lyrics to a calming song in case I needed that next. There was no way of telling how this was going to play out and I wanted to be as helpful as possible.

Sebastian gestured for me to stop, and when I did, the old man inside looked around quickly. "Who's there?" he demanded.

I was still prepared to sing a calming song if I needed and kept an eye on Sebastian for what I should do next. I pulled my gun out slowly and quietly and checked to make sure Trent and Scott were still sleeping as I switched the safety off. They were.

Sebastian spoke, but his voice seemed to come from somewhere on the left side of the garage. "Put the gun down."

The old man spun around and pointed his gun in that direction. "Fuck you. Show yourself."

"Put the gun down," Sebastian said, his voice seeming to come from a different direction now.

The man turned in that direction, his gun high. "Bastard!" he shouted.

Sebastian moved to one side of the door, his gun trained on the man.

I started to lowly hum the song as I lifted my gun and prepared to shoot the man. I used my second voice, making it sound like it was coming from above. "No harm will come to you. Put down your weapon."

The man raised his weapon and fired at the ceiling.

"No harm will come to you, child," I said, attempting to sound nurturing so he would trust and hopefully listen to me. "Lay down your weapons."

The man spun and shot off to my right.

Using my second voice, I continued to sing and asked Sebastian, "What should I do now?"

"Only one thing to do," he said softly, raising his gun and aiming it at the old man.

Sebastian squeezed the trigger, the bullet speeding directly toward the old man's heart. The man looked in Sebastian's direction and to my utter amazement, the bullet stopped about a foot from his chest, spinning in space.

Sebastian cursed and this time when he fired, I did as well. I wasn't sure how many rounds either of us shot, but at least one of the bullets hit the old man squarely in the chest. The gun jumped in his hands as he reflexively pulled the trigger, the bullet hitting the wall to our left as the man fell back against a tool bench.

I paused to make sure that no one else entered the backroom. "We need to hurry before someone calls the police," I warned Sebastian. "Do you want me to stay here?"

"Keep an eye out," Sebastian said, moving to enter. "I'll-- what the hell?"

My eyes narrowed, wondering what the problem was and not readily seeing one. Sebastian was stopped in the middle of the doorway and from what it looked like he wasn't moving any further inside the building, like something was blocking his entrance completely. I watched as he looked down to see that a set of symbols similar to the ones at Trent's apartment were etched into the concrete.

I wasn't that far from Sebastian so I moved up behind him and reached out to see if I was stopped as well. Sure enough, there was some kind of invisible wall that wouldn't let my fingers past the doorway. How had the bullets gotten through?

Sebastian cursed under his breath in German, then tried again, but to no avail.

"What are those things?" I asked in frustration, not really expecting an answer. "I wonder if Raleigh can get in."

Just then Joan came around the corner of the building, keeping to the shadows, a gun in her hand. She looked Sebastian over, then nodded toward the building. "No luck getting in?"

"No," Sebastian growled. "Raleigh?"

"Watching the front," she replied. "Damned symbols are on every door and window."

In the distance the sound of sirens penetrated the alley and we all exchanged questioning glances.

Joan moved closer to the doorway to get a better look inside. "How many are alive still?"

"Maybe two," Sebastian replied. He brought his gun up again, I assumed to try to shoot Scott and Trent so we could get out of here. After a bit he dropped it again with a low growl. "I can't get a good enough shot on either of them."

"What if we wait for an ambulance to show up?" I suggested. "Do we have people in the hospital?"

"I think the cops are gonna show up first," Sebastian pointed out. "We don't wanna be here when that happens. We can get to them in the hospital." He looked at the old man lying on the floor, bleeding. "The ones that make it there, in any case."

I put my hand on his shoulder. "Maybe a crowd will gather out front and we can keep an eye on the place without standing out."

"Yes, but I'd really like to know why we can't get in," he replied moodily. He stepped back from the door and looked at Joan. "Let's get out of here. Get Raleigh and meet us down the block. A crowd will form soon enough." He took my arm and guided me away from the building. "How long with the other two sleep?" he asked in a low voice.

"I'm not sure," I told him. Normally, given that both men were injured, it would be hours before they woke, but these two had already proven that I couldn't rely on what normally happened with my ability. Trent probably wouldn't wake until he received medical attention because of the gunshot wound. Scott I wasn't sure of. I told all this to Sebastian and by the time I was finished we could hear sirens getting closer as we continued to make our way out of the alley.

"Let me make a few calls," Sebastian said. "We'll head over to the hospital; see if we can intercept them there."

## Chapter 5 – Hospital Visit

"That my hope was dying, so sick of trying"  
Christina Aguilera  
"Understand"

"There's a nurse in the coronary unit that comes into The Masquerade quite often," I told Sebastian as we made our way back to the car. "Her name is Karen Reece. I've had 'dinner' with her a few times and I have her number. I can try to contact her."

"You think she can get us into the building?" he asked.

I shrugged. "With the right story, maybe."

I got her voicemail when I called, which didn't worry me too much because I knew that she worked second shift, so that meant she was most likely at the hospital now. I left her a message, asking her to call me as soon as she got a chance and after I hung up I turned to Sebastian. "Should I try the hospital? Have her paged?"

"Why don't we head for the hospital," he suggested. "If she hasn't called you back by then, we can try paging her."

I agreed. "She works second shift, but there's no way of knowing whether she's working tonight."

"If she's not, we'll find a way in. Question is, what do we do when we get there?" he asked as we arrived at his car and he opened the passenger door for me.

I murmured a thank you as I slipped inside and pondered his question. By the time Sebastian was seated in the driver's side I asked, "I know that you wanted to talk to them initially, but what about now? Would it be better to just kill them? There are other members to Tristan's group of friends and we have no way of knowing for certain if any more of them are involved."

Sebastian glanced over at me as he pulled away from the curb. "I'd like to take them out, if we can. Pick up his friends later; see if they know anything about what's going on."

I nodded in understanding and had to admit that I felt a little guilty. Talking about killing Trent and Scott didn't come easy, but I knew the situation needed to be contained as quickly as possible. "I haven't dealt with anything like this before," I confessed. "What's the best way? There's going to be security cameras in the hospital so we'll have to be careful."

"We'll handle it. Not likely to be cameras in the patients rooms," Sebastian pointed out. He pulled out his phone and called Raleigh, instructing him and Joan to meet us at the hospital.

As he was finishing up his conversation my phone rang. It Karen returning my call. "Hello."

"Ariel? I got your message. Sorry I didn't answer, but I'm on shift today."

"Karen, hello. Thanks for calling me back," I said, glancing toward Sebastian to find that he was just finishing up with Raleigh. "I was actually hoping you were working. I could use your help."

"Um, sure, I mean, I'm at work," Karen was saying, "but if you need something..."

"Karen, just a second." I pulled the phone from my ear and quickly hit the speaker button so Sebastian could hear as well. "I was hoping you were working because I might need your help. I just found out that a friend of mine was hurt and is on his way to the hospital."

"Oh, I'm so sorry, honey," she said solicitously. "I hope it's nothin' too bad."

"I don't know how bad it is Karen," I told her, trying to sound anxious, but not making a big production of it on the phone. "I'm just not sure what the staff will tell me when I get there. I thought you could help me out."

"Yeah, we're not really supposed to give out information to non-family members," Karen explained slowly. "But if he's a good friend of yours, I may be able to let you know what's going on."

"I'm on my way there now," I told her. "Should I have you paged when I get there?"

"Um, come up to the Coronary floor," she told me. "Why don't you give me your friend's name, I'll see what info I can find out before you get here."

I gave her Trent's name and she promised to do what she could. When I was off the phone I turned my attention to Sebastian. "We're going to need to figure out how I know about him being hurt. Do you know anyone with the police? Maybe we can say we heard something on a scanner?"

"Raleigh's contacting our man on the force," Sebastian replied. "Should make things a little easier for us once we hit the hospital."

"Oh, good. I was hoping you had someone in the department. How do we handle any questions about how we knew something happened? Say we were with your person and heard something on the scanner? I'd rather have a story in place before we get to the hospital."

"She may not even ask, you know," Sebastian said calmly. "Plenty of friends and family members hear their loved ones are on the way to the hospital from gawkers at the crime scene." He glanced over at me. "If she does ask, just say that a friend heard it on the scanner and called you. Sometimes too many details makes it obvious you're lying. Keep it simple."

I nodded. "You're right. Simple. That's good. Sorry, I don't spend much time with humans."

"And probably not a lot of time lying, I imagine," he said with a smile.

I looked away in embarrassment. "No. Not really." My eyes slowly moved back to watch him. "I'm sorry you have to deal with this, Sebastian. I'm sure there are things you'd much rather do with your evening."

"It's fine. We do need to take care of this... hunter issue. Besides," he glanced my way again quickly, "I enjoy your company."

"I... I enjoy yours, too," I admitted, remembering how often I'd seen him since Duncan was no longer in the picture. "I'm glad I've been able to get to know you better lately."

Sebastian hesitated a moment, then said, "I have been isolating myself for some time," he admitted, making me think he meant since Duncan's betrayal. "You-you remind me that there is still light and warmth left in the world."

His words made me smile widely, but with a touch of shyness as well. "That's very beautiful," I said quietly. "Like a lyric to a song. No one's ever said anything like that to me before. Thank you." I was itching to reach out and touch him, but this probably wasn't the time or the place.

"Perhaps we could do something fun together," Sebastian suggested. "When this mess is cleared up."

My smile grew wider. "I would like that very much."

Sebastian returned my smile and I had to look away from him. He was so handsome. It was hard to believe that he'd want to spend more time with me. I looked at the buildings as we moved through the city streets and realized that we were about three blocks from the hospital.

"We're almost there," I said lowly, almost to myself. "Here's hoping we can get in and out without any problem." I started to hum.

"Oh, I'm sure between my abilities and yours, we should be fine," Sebastian assured me.

\* ~ \* ~ \*

Sebastian pulled into the emergency room drive of Centennial Hospital, which was located not far from downtown Nashville, and parked in the adjacent lot. The hospital was a multi-building complex, but I explained to him that Karen worked on the fifth floor of the



same building as the emergency room so we shouldn't have to navigate to any other building once we were inside.

Raleigh and Joan weren't far behind us and parked near the other end of the lot. We met in the middle and Sebastian instructed them to see what they could find out in the emergency room area while he and I went up to the cardiac ward to meet Karen.

Because of the late hour there weren't that many people roaming the halls, mostly just doctors and nurses. It didn't take long to get to the fifth floor and Karen was sitting at the nurses' station, writing in a patient's chart, as we approached. When I saw her I quietly said her name and she glanced up, then motioned with a finger for me to wait while she finished.

"Ariel, you made it," she said, reaching for my hand when she was done.

I took it and forced a tentative smile on my lips. "Yes. Have you been able to find out anything?"

She glanced at Sebastian, then led the two of us further away from the nurses station. "You knew he'd been shot?" she asked.

"I know he'd been hurt," I said. "That's partly why I called you."

"He was shot," she repeated in a low voice as she continued down the hall, leading Sebastian and I into some sort of waiting room and closed the door. "It's very serious," she informed us. "The doctors, well, Ariel, if he lives through the night, the doctors are only giving him a twenty percent chance of survival."

I feigned shock. "Do you know if there's anyone here with him? I'd like to see him if that's possible."

Karen hesitated a moment, glancing over at Sebastian again, "I'm told that another man died on the scene, but a third came in with your friend. He's very upset, they had to sedate him."

I assumed that the man Sebastian had shot was the one who died and that Scott was the one that had been sedated. "Can I see him?" I asked again.

"He's going into surgery very soon," she said. "Once he comes out of that, they'll move him to Critical Intensive Care on the eighth floor. It will probably be a couple of hours, but you might be able to see him then. I can show you to the surgery waiting room, if you like. That way the staff will keep you informed of his progress." Karen took my hand again and patted it. "I know this is very difficult for you, honey. I'm sorry I don't have better news."

Simply asking to see him wasn't getting the results we needed. I decided to switch on my vampire abilities to make her more inclined to do as I asked. "Is there any way I can see him?" I asked, using my blood to coerce her as she looked into my eyes. "Just for a moment."

She hesitated, then nodded and I knew it had worked. "Yes, of course," Karen told me with a smile. "Let me make a quick phone call and I can take you down." She moved away to a phone on the wall and picked it up.

My gaze shifted to Sebastian and I mouth silently, "Should I stop her?"

He shook his head and leaned close to whisper in my ear. "Make sure she doesn't come down with us."

I nodded, listening to Karen as she made arrangements with someone on the surgery floor for me to see Trent while he was being prepped for surgery.

When she was finished she came back over. "Dr. Garret wants to take him into surgery soon, but if you get down there quickly, you'll be able to see him, just briefly. I would take you down, but I have patients to check."

I reached for her hand. "That's fine. Thank you so much, Karen. I owe you one. Where should I go?"

"The second floor," she said, then gave us directions to get there and a room number. "One of the nurses will be able to direct you to your friend's room."

I squeezed her hand, thanking her again and turned to Sebastian. "We should hurry," I suggested in a quiet tone.

Sebastian thanked Karen as well and she wished us luck then left to make her rounds. Sebastian led me toward the elevators and leaned in close to speak. "When we get to the surgery area," he said in a low voice, "I'll need to talk directly to the surgeon."

I nodded. "Okay. What are you going to do?"

He gave me a level look. "Take care of the problem." He pushed the button for the elevator then returned his gaze to me. "I'm not sure how we can get to the other guy, especially if he's been moved to the psych ward."

"Maybe that's enough for tonight?" I asked, afraid we were going to get caught. "Can you arrange for someone to get to him tomorrow? Maybe bring him in for questioning?"

"We can try," he agreed. "On the other hand, didn't you say these guys had more friends? We need to get a handle on this now, before they decide to break the guy out of the hospital."

I hadn't thought of that. "I agree. There's at least three more in the band," I told him. "The last I knew anyhow. There's no way of knowing if all of them are involved or not, but I would rather work with the assumption that they all are for safety's sake."

"Then it's best to take out the ones we can find, while we know where they are," Sebastian pointed out. "We'll see if Raleigh and Joan can get to him."

I nodded. "Good idea." I once again felt a pang of guilt about the idea of killing the young men, but deep down I knew I had it had to be done to preserve The Masquerade. Besides, Trent hadn't hesitated to hurt me earlier and would have done worse if it hadn't been for Sebastian.

The elevator doors opened onto the second floor and Sebastian led me down a hallway clearly marked as the Surgery Ward. It only took a couple of minutes to get to Trent's room, and when we arrived we found a nurse there, checking his vitals.

I acknowledged the nurse with a nod and a small smile as I moved to the opposite side of the bed from her and looked down at Trent. He was pale and gaunt and part of me couldn't help but remember the young man I'd spent so many happy evenings with. Then I remembered the cold person who had been so quick to consider me an enemy rather than a friend and I knew this situation had to be contained.

When the nurse had finished what she was doing she stepped to one side to write in Trent's chart, giving me time with my 'friend' and Sebastian stepped closer to talk to her.

I tried to take in all the equipment that he was hooked up to. It was fairly overwhelming, and gave me flashbacks to when my mom died. The information on the displays was confusing, and I could smell blood quite strongly. Trent looked pale and weak, like he was dying.

I heard the nurse leave the room and I turned to look at Sebastian. "What's the best way to handle this?" I asked him in a whisper. Getting involved in security or city/political issues wasn't my forte so I had to rely on him. I was a singer and songwriter, not the Sheriff.

"She's getting the doctor," he told me. "I'll handle it from there, you just keep her distracted."

I nodded. "Okay."

The nurse came back with a doctor a minute later, who introduced himself as Dr. Garret. He quickly explained to us what he planned to do with Trent, and his odds of survival. The surgery would apparently take many hours and just as he was wrapping up his explanation, I quietly asked the nurse what each of the monitors did that Trent was hooked up to and pulled her away so Sebastian could have some time alone with the doctor.

I half listened as Sebastian asked several questions of the doctor, then his voice dropped and I couldn't make anything out. Several minutes later Sebastian was by my side again and the doctor told the nurse he wanted to get started in fifteen minutes, then he left

and the nurse told us it was time to go.

## Chapter 6 - Results

"Because we know the future is our dark  
'Til the end I'll be waiting"  
Christina Aguilera  
"Little Dreamer"

Sebastian put his arm around me and led me from Trent's room. Once we were in a waiting room close by, he pulled out his cell phone and called Raleigh, asking for an update on Scott and letting him know where we were.

I stayed close to him and tried to listen in on his conversation as much as I could. Part of me wanted to ask what he'd told the doctor to do and part of me didn't. I was barely aware of the melancholy melody I started to hum.

Once he hung up, Sebastian led me to a couch and faced me as best he could. "I'm afraid the doctor's knife will slip," he informed me. "It will be most unfortunate and you will be very upset when they come out to tell us what happened."

I nodded, the gravity of the situation pressing on my conscience. "What about Scott?" I asked, my fingers twisting nervously.

"I'm not sure just yet. It may be that he is overcome with his illness and does something... unfortunate to himself."

The waiting room was empty this time of night, but I made sure to keep my voice down regardless. "How long should this take?"

Sebastian looked at the clock on the wall. "Fifteen minutes to get him prepped, another ten to get him into surgery, maybe a half an hour before something goes wrong, so maybe an hour or a little longer." He reached over to take my hand and I held onto his fingers tightly. "I'm sorry if this is hard for you."

"Takes me back to when my mom died," I said in a quiet voice. "It was really bad because it was just her and I. My brother was never around."

"I'm sure that was difficult," he soothed and there was a hint of discomfort in his eyes that he quickly blinked away. "We'll try to keep this as short as possible, but it would look strange if you left now."

"I know. I'll be alright." I attempted to smile at him, then his comment made me worried that I wasn't acting like I need to. "Sorry. Am I being too jumpy?"

"No, you're fine," he assured me. "Gives credence to being worried about your friend."

I nodded. "Okay. Just let me know if I'm not doing something right. I would hate to be the reason this didn't work."

"You'll be fine," he assured me. "If you doubt your reaction to the news, just turn to me. I will get you out of the situation."

I started humming an empowering song and tentatively met his gaze, thinking how powerful he seemed and how badly I wanted to please him. "I can do that."

"Why don't you tell me what you know about this guy and his friends, all right? Maybe it will keep your mind off where we are."

I shifted in my seat and thought. "Okay. Umm, let's see," I said, thinking. I knew that I'd already given him this information before, so I understood that he was just trying to distract me.

"Well, they have this band, the five of them." I proceeded to tell Sebastian everything that I could remember about Trent and each of his friends. Their likes, dislikes, allergies, family. I remembered where two of the others lived and what Tony's girlfriend's name was and where she worked. I was also able to recall their agent's name.

Sebastian listened and asked questions that helped me recall more details than I'd originally remembered. Before I knew it, a half and hour had passed and Joan rejoined us,

taking a seat next to me. She told Sebastian that Raleigh was finishing up and should be down soon.

"Everything go alright?" I asked her.

She looked at me for a moment, then answered, "We'll find out when Raleigh gets here. Have you heard anything?" she asked, her features uneasy.

"Not yet," Sebastian replied, looking at the clock. "I expect it may take another half hour, depending on what goes wrong."

I reached out to touch her arm when I noticed her troubled expression. "You okay?" I asked quietly. "What is it?"

Joan shook her head. "They're cells, you know? A little more padding and better lighting, but they're still just cells."

I realized she must have been having flashbacks to Duncan's death, when she and Sebastian had been held in The Pens so they wouldn't inadvertently intervene in the Blood Hunt. I'd gone to spend time with her afterward, to ease her suffering at the loss and feelings of betrayal when she learned it had been Sebastian who has forcibly turned her. That had been when our tentative friendship had started.

I moved to put an arm around her shoulders to comfort her. "Oh, honey. I'm so sorry. That's all done now. You have to remember that."

I was grateful that she took the comfort I was offering, but I could tell she wasn't used to this kind of thing. She looked at Sebastian briefly, then tried to smile like everything was all right. "I'm fine, Ariel. I just hate hospitals," she said, trying to shift her unease. "My mom died a couple of years ago, and it just..."

"We'll be out of here soon," Sebastian cut her off. "We just need to see what happens with Trent before we can go."

I understood that Sebastian felt guilt concerning Joan's embrace, but sometimes I didn't agree with how blasé he was when it came to her. "I understand completely," I told her, ignoring Sebastian's attempt to change the subject. "My mom went through a pretty lengthy illness after being shot. She was in the hospital more than she was home in the last few years she was alive."

"It was sudden, with my mom," Joan said softly, then after a moment she glance up at me and added, "I'm sorry about your mom."

I hugged her to me. "I'm sorry about yours, too. Were you an only child?"

She shook her head stiffly. "No, I have--had a sister."

I glanced over to Sebastian quickly before returning my attention to Joan. "Younger or older?"

"Younger," she said sadly.

Sebastian was a bit stiff in his seat next to me, clearly uncomfortable with the topic and I squeezed his hand that I still held, hoping to give him some comfort as well.

I'd learned about the circumstances surrounding Joan's embrace when everything came out about Duncan and Sebastian. Joan was really a Slayer, Charisma Therin, one of a long line of young women who hunted supernatural creatures to keep humanity safe. Duncan had used his influence over Sebastian to get him to turn the young woman and then cover up who'd done the deed while getting Lachlan to cover her true identity.

I gave Joan another brief hug and said, "I think that some evening soon the two of us need to get together and share stories." I looked to Sebastian again with a soft smile, understanding his discomfort and hoping he wasn't angry with me. "She does get a night off, right Sebastian?" I teased him.

He smiled, but it seemed a little forced. "Absolutely."

"Well, good. That's settled," I said tentatively, looking for another topic to talk about. "How long has it been?"

Sebastian glanced at the clock. "Should be soon, I think, but it's hard to say." He looked over at Joan. "Any idea on how long Raleigh will be?"

She shook her head. "Depends on the nurses."

"How long should we give him before someone goes to check on him?" I asked.  
"Let's give it a bit more time," Sebastian suggested. "At least until--ah, here we are."

Across the room, the doctor entered the waiting area. He seemed a bit shaken as he looked about the room and headed toward us as we stood. Using all the medical jargon he possessed, he spent the next ten minutes explaining that something went wrong during the surgery and that Trent died on the table fifteen minutes ago.

I pretended to be appropriately shocked and saddened by his explanation. "Has anyone contacted his family?"

"Um, I'm not sure," the doctor answered, seeming a bit out of it. "I'd have to check with the nurse, but I'm sure it will be done if it hasn't already. I'm really very sorry."

I quickly turned to Sebastian and put my head on his chest, as if I were crying. I hoped that this didn't continue for too long because I wasn't sure how great of an actress I was being.

I felt Sebastian's arm enclose me as he pulled me close. "I'm sorry, I think this is a bit much for her," he told the other man. "Thank you for letting us know what happened, Doctor. We'll just take her home now."

I watched through my hair as the doctor nodded, then headed back out of the waiting room.

Sebastian started moving toward the door, keeping me pressed to his side. "Stay close," he said in a low voice as he led me toward the elevators and I nodded into his chest. "Joan, text Raleigh and have him meet us in the parking lot."

I let Sebastian lead the way, holding onto him tightly and trying to keep my face hidden as much as possible until we got to the elevator.

When the doors were closed, Sebastian shifted his hold on me, but kept me by his side. "You did good, Ariel," he told me in a low voice.

"Thank you," I whispered, looking anywhere but at him. He smelled really good and I felt a little guilty that I'd enjoyed being so close to him while we waited to learn that two young men were now dead.

"I'm sorry you've had to go through this," Sebastian said just as Joan's phone beeped.

"Raleigh's finishing up now," she said, checking the screen. "He'll be down in less than five."

"Don't be sorry," I told Sebastian. "It's my fault you have to deal with this in the first place. I'm sorry."

"Not your fault, *prinzessin*," he replied, smoothing down my hair and I had to bite my lips to keep from smiling at him. "Your quick thinking brought this problem to light, yes, but I would have had to deal with these men eventually. Better sooner than later."

I wasn't sure what to say to that, but I did know that I liked being this close to him. I started humming the chorus of '*I Will Always Love You*' as I looked at him, then broke it off to ask, "Now we go searching for the others, right?"

"It's a bit late for that," he said. "Only a couple of hours until dawn. It's best if we head back to my place and wait for more information."

By the surprised look on Joan's face I figured that Sebastian taking me to his place was something that didn't happen often. I was sure that he'd mentioned it himself earlier, but I'd figured it wasn't a big deal, now I was changing my mind.

"That's probably best," I murmured, wondering again why he'd offered to have me stay with him if he liked his privacy. "Start tomorrow when we have a chance to plan."

## Chapter 7 - Andy and Phil

"Trying to hide, can't make it all right  
It's overkill, now I'm ready to fight"  
Christina Aguilera  
"Make Over"

The elevator doors opened and as Sebastian started to lead me out, I realized that Andy Sommers and Phil Perry, two members of Trent's band, were waiting to get onto it. Both men looked anxious and upset, and surprise registered on their faces when they recognized me.

I heard myself gasp a little when I saw who they were and I blindly reached for Sebastian, not taking my eyes from the two men. Pure instinct had me using vampiric powers to influence them before I even realized what I was doing.

Sebastian pulled me closer and turned a little to put himself between me and the elevator doors.

Joan seemed to take the situation in very quickly and took a step toward the doors nonchalantly. "Excuse me," she murmured.

Phil stepped back a little out of politeness while he shook his head as if he were trying to clear it. Andy narrowed his eyes and watched me closely.

"Phil. Andy. What are you doing here?" I asked with a small smile. I readied the lyrics of a calming song in my mind and started to hum it. I quickly decided to take cues from Sebastian in this situation since I knew he would know how to handle it best. We were in a very public area, with security cameras, and I didn't know what these two knew and what they didn't. Regardless, an altercation here wouldn't be good.

Joan moved to one side as if to flank the two men and waited. Once she was out of the elevator, Sebastian moved me forward, trying to keep himself between me and the two newcomers.

Andy took a step back and warily watched as we stepped out of the elevator. There was a hesitation as Phil seemed to get his head clear. "We got a call that Trent and Scott were hurt," Andy said, focusing on me for the first time. "Did someone call you?"

"Hurt?" I asked, acting like I didn't know what he was talking about. "No, I'm here to visit a friend who works here. Had to drop something off to her. What happened?"

Phil started to say something, but Andy quickly spoke over him, "Are you sure you don't know?" he asked in a low, dangerous voice.

"Ariel," Sebastian warned in an equally low voice, pulling me back further from the two men while Joan moved around behind them, unnoticed.

I looked to Sebastian as my nervous humming continued, not sure how to handle this. "H-how would I know?" I asked Andy.

Phil put a finger against his ear and rubbed it briskly, as if he were trying to make some sound stop.

Andy frowned as he looked at me. "Stop it," he growled.

Sebastian moved me even further back away from them, planting himself firmly between me and the men. "Look, I'm sorry your friends have been hurt, but it's late, and you should probably go check on them."

The elevator doors started to close and Andy put his hand out to block them without looking away from Sebastian. His gaze warily rested on what he could see of me, then moved to Sebastian. His eyes darted around the hallway and when they fell on Joan they narrowed slightly. "Let's go," he barked at Phil.

I felt like a coward for hiding behind Sebastian, but it wasn't like I had any fighting skills for goodness sake. I watched them get onto the elevator silently.

Phil seemed unsure as to what was happening and as he stepped into the elevator he said, "See you later, Ariel."

Andy followed, his expression reminding me of how Trent and Scott had looked at me earlier in the alley. "Yeah," he said in a low, dangerous voice. "Later."

The doors closed and Sebastian gently grabbed my arm and started to pull me toward the nearest exit, careful not to hurt me, as Joan followed quickly.

"Two more of that group, I assume?" Sebastian asked. I nodded mutely and he added, "We have to take them out. I won't risk anything happening to y-to anyone in the city."

The encounter with Andy and Phil left me on edge and I remembered Trent burning me with his bare hand. What if Andy could do that? Or what if he could do something worse?

"I didn't think it was a good idea to let on we knew about Trent," I said as we made our way toward the parking lot. "I used presence. Only Phil seemed effected."

"They might figure it out soon enough," Sebastian said. "We need to get out of here, now. We'll deal with them later." He looked around, but apparently didn't see what he was looking for as he pulled out his phone. "Get out now," was all he said when the person on the other end answered. Probably Raleigh. "I'm taking the girls back to my place, meet us there."

When we got to his car Sebastian opened the passenger side door for me, his attention on high alert as Joan and I got in. Inside the car was silent as he started it and we left the parking lot. I was especially nervous about the fifth member of the band that was still unaccounted for.

"I'm worried that they might go into hiding if they suspect we had anything to do with the deaths of Scott and Trent," I said after a few blocks, my eyes continually sweeping the area for possible threats.

"Yeah, that's not what I'm worried about," he said in a low voice, keeping an eye on the streets.

"What are you worried about?"

"They're hunters, *prinzessin*," he reminded me. "And we--"

He broke off abruptly as lights from an oncoming car lit up the interior. The next few seconds stretched as I saw the large vehicle headed straight for the driver side of Sebastian's car from a cross street. Sebastian tried to avoid the impact, but it was too late.

I felt my head hit the passenger window hard. Luckily, I wasn't knocked unconscious, but as the car came to a stop in the middle of the intersection, I felt blood streaming down the side of my face from a nasty cut on my head. My right leg was either broken or sprained, I wasn't sure which, and sharp stabs of pain radiated up and down the limb.

I blinked a few times, trying to clear my vision. Broken glass was everywhere, and I felt a weight in my lap that I wasn't sure should be there. Whatever it was I felt wetness seeping through my pants underneath it.

I manipulated the blood in my body to stop the bleeding from my head wound and to partially heal my leg. Doing that much left me low on blood so I didn't want to fully heal yet in case I needed the blood to defend myself. This was no accident. We'd been intentionally hit and there was no telling what shape those in the other vehicle were in.

I was still a bit dazed as I looked down and found that the object in my lap was Sebastian. His hair covered his face so it was difficult to see how hurt he was, but even as I used careful fingers to brush it aside he started to stir.

"Joan?" I called out bending down to get a closer look at Sebastian. "Sebastian? Can you hear me?"

There was blood on the side of his head and his left arm looked broken and bloody. His eyes were open, though, and he moved to sit up, then stopped, biting back a moan.

I heard a growl from the back seat that let me know Joan was still with us as well. I took a quick look around us, wondering what happened to the driver of the other car. What I found left a cold feeling in the pit of my stomach.



Two men were moving toward my side of the car. One was Tony, the missing band member. The other one I didn't recognize.

"Joan," I called out again without looking in the backseat. "Can you hear me?" The growling in the back seat got louder but I couldn't take the time to look back. I had to warn Sebastian. "Where's your gun?" I asked him quietly. "We have company."

"Behind my back," he groaned, trying to sit up again, but unable to. "Get it for me."

I reached for the weapon that was tucked in the waistband of his jeans and handed it to him. "I'm going to try singing," I told him, fear growing inside me as he grunted in response.

What if Sebastian wasn't able to heal himself? I could only hear growling from Joan in the backseat. That meant she wasn't unconscious, but I wasn't sure how coherent she was either. If I was our last line of defense I wasn't sure how effective I would be. I pulled my gun out with my right hand and quickly transferred it to my left as I began to sing the opening strains of a song meant to make the two men want to help us, not do harm.

As the song began to unfold Sebastian tried for the third time to sit up and was successful this time, moving a great deal easier now. He must have used blood to heal like I had. Thank goodness. I only hoped that he wasn't dangerously low.

The man I didn't know stopped, looking confused, which meant that my song was taking hold of him. Tony, on the other hand, hesitated for only a moment, then tightened his grip on the tire iron he was holding and stepped forward again.

I heard the back window where Joan had been sitting shatter, then the growling I'd heard back there moved to outside the vehicle. Something in the pit of my stomach told me that the other woman had lost control of herself. It was something that could happen when a vampire became low on blood, our inner beast took over and everything became about survival. If that's what had happened then there would be no stopping her until the beast was satisfied.

I fumbled for the door handle and tried to push my door open as I continued to sing, but the crash must have bent the frame too badly and it wouldn't budge. Not that the song was doing any good. Both men were almost on top of us now.

Sebastian swore from beside me, then his arm was in front of my face as he pointed his gun through what had been my window, and fired. I watched as Tony jumped to one side to avoid the bullet. I'd lost sight of the other man, who'd been heading toward the back of the vehicle. I thought I heard him swear.

I let the song I'd been singing die in the air as I brought my gun up to shot at Tony as well. I was pretty sure I didn't hit him, but it was hard to tell because in that instant Sebastian was climbing over me and out the window, moving faster than I would have thought he could. I tried to follow, but I was a great deal clumsier and by the time I was on my feet outside the car Sebastian and Tony were facing off as I caught a glimpse of the other man running away, Joan closely following.

I brought my gun up to fire again, but I didn't have a clear shot. I wasn't about to put Sebastian in danger.

Tony swung the tire iron and Sebastian blocked it with his still bloody left arm. There was some sort of flash when the iron hit Sebastian, and I could tell that it caused some sort of damage. Sebastian didn't seem effected, though, and shoved his gun into Tony's stomach, pulling the trigger. The young man collapsed to the ground, bleeding out and forgotten as our attention was pulled in the direction where we could hear a man screaming.

I was at Sebastian's side in an instant and immediately noticed that his left arm was hanging limp at his side. He was pretty bloody, so it was hard to tell just how injured he was. He put the hand that was holding his gun over the ribs on the left side of his body and turned to look at me, his eyes searching for injury. He frowned, probably at the amount of blood in my hair and on my clothes.

"Are you all right?" he asked in a low, rough voice.

I nodded putting a hand on his injured arm and the other on his ribs. "A little banged up, but I've healed. You need to as well. Do you need blood?" I looked around desperately for Joan, but I was very concerned about Sebastian as well.

He put the arm holding the gun around me and pulled me close to him. A second later I heard a crack in his injured arm as he healed it and I hoped he had it set correctly. "I think we both do," he murmured, looking around the area. "Can you get my phone out of my pocket?"

"Of course," I said as I started to pat his front pants pockets to locate it. "I'm worried about Joan. I don't see her." My voice was shaky and I knew it, but I also knew that I had to hold it together for Sebastian. "We're going to have clean up issues. The police are probably on their way." When I found the phone in his left front pocket I pulled it out.

He moved to take the phone with his left hand, but it wouldn't respond, and he winced. "Call Tristan," he said softly. "Let him know what's going on while we try to find Joan." With that he started to move toward where the screams had come from.

I had the phone in my right hand so I could keep my gun in my left one as I followed him. I located and dialed Tristan's number as fast as possible. Sebastian made sure that I stayed close as he headed down the street.

After a couple of rings, Tristan answered the phone. "Sebastian, *mijo*," he greeted warmly.

"It isn't Sebastian, my Prince," I answered, keeping up with the man in question. "It's Ariel Espenosa. He asked me to call you. We have a situation, sir. We need blood and clean up."

Tristan's voice became very serious, very fast. "Where are you? How badly is Sebastian injured?"

I told him where we were. "I'm not sure how bad his injuries are, but we're looking for Joan." My voice dropped. "I-I believe she's frenzied. Men ran into the car we were in."

"You were attacked?" he asked, clearly surprised. "Where are you?"

I gave him the location again. "They were human, but I couldn't affect them with any of my abilities. One is dead for sure and Joan was chasing the other. He may be dead as well. Sir, Raleigh is in the area close. I should call him. Can you send help? Blood?"

"Yes," he said firmly. "Call Raleigh. You're not far from Alexander's. Help will be there soon." Then he hung up.

In the darkness between two buildings I could just make out a woman slumped against the side of a building and I stopped. "Sebastian," I said, grabbing for him with one hand as I pointed with the other. "There. That might be her." He started in that direction and I hit speed dial for Raleigh.

"Stay here," Sebastian told me as he continued toward the shadow.

Raleigh answered on the first ring. "Yeah."

I nodded to Sebastian and motioned for him to go ahead, but I didn't take my eyes off him and I kept my gun is raised and ready to shoot. "We've been attacked," I told Raleigh as Sebastian cautiously moved forward. "We're okay, but injured and need blood. Tristan is sending help, but we need you." I told him where we were and watched as Joan looked up, her face streaked with blood. My eyes had adjusted to the darker area of the alley and I could now see the body near her on the ground.

Raleigh started to swear, but then stopped himself. "Was there a car accident?" he asked. "I think I see a wreck just ahead."

"Yes, they hit the car. Joan went after one of the men and I think we've just found her." I gave him the direction that we'd left the wreck to look for her. "There should be one dead man at the scene. We're going to need a connection with the police department to cover this up."

"I'll handle it," he told me. "I'll be right there."

"I'll watch for you." I hung up and tentatively approach Sebastian and Joan. "Raleigh is close. Is she okay?" I asked.

Joan had looked up at me when I started speaking and I could see that she had a wrecked expression on her face.

"She will be," Sebastian answered. "We need to get out of here before any more of the hunters show up."

I nodded in agreement. "Raleigh should be here very soon and Tristan is sending people from Alexander's." I came up next to them, not sure if either wanted me too close. "Should I check the body for identification?" I asked, not really wanting to, but knowing it needed to be done and Sebastian should be thinking of himself and Joan.

"Yeah." Sebastian stood. "Come on, *schnecke*," he said to Joan. "Let's move away, all right? Raleigh will be here soon."

As I searched the body Joan pushed against the building to get to her feet and moved with Sebastian a few feet away. He raised his good arm and she fell against him, holding onto him tightly as he put his arm around her. He was still holding his gun as he talked to her softly.

## Chapter 8 - Backup

"All you desire is yours if the asking is right"  
Christina Aguilera  
"Desnudate"

I tried not to pay attention to the condition of the body as I searched it, but it was kind of hard to miss that the throat had been torn out or the two broken arms that lay in odd angles on the ground. I found a wallet and a set of keys in the pants pockets. The name on the license was Daniel Putnam. I didn't know him.

Sebastian was still talking softly to Joan. He quickly turned to look back the way we'd come just as I heard running footsteps. My gaze followed his and I was relieved when I saw that it was Raleigh. Sebastian said something close to Joan's ear and she straightened to look at Raleigh as well as she nodded.

Raleigh came to a stop near me, his steady gaze taking in the situation quickly, then he crouched next to me. "Are you okay?" he asked and I was moved that he was just as concerned about me as he was about the others.

I nodded, grateful that someone more useful to Sebastian than myself was here. I wasn't sure what state Joan was in and I wasn't as good in a fight as she was. "For now, at least," I assured Raleigh. "Check with Sebastian. I'm not sure how hurt he is."

Raleigh looked past me to Sebastian, then back. "How badly do you need blood," he asked in a low voice.

"I'm okay for right now, see to Sebastian."

He laid his hand on my arm for a moment, then stood and went over to Sebastian and Joan.

I stood as well and approached the little group to assess Sebastian's injuries. I wanted to stay alert to what was happening around us while Raleigh was busy with Sebastian. I didn't want anyone to sneak up on us.

Raleigh examined Sebastian's arm as Joan moved away from her sire's side to come stand by me. It was obvious that she was still pretty shaken up and I quickly pulled her against me. I was relieved that once again she took comfort from me, but her eyes never left Sebastian and Raleigh.

After a moment of Raleigh looking at his arm, Sebastian said something in German and Raleigh shook his head as if Sebastian was being unreasonable. "At least drink, Bastian," I heard him say in a low voice.

Sebastian frowned, but after a long moment wrapped his arm around Raleigh's waist and pulled him close. It was rather erotic to watch him sink his fangs into Raleigh's neck, and it was apparent that despite the still precarious situation, Raleigh thought so as well. When a vampire feeds it can be a very pleasurable experience for the person they are feeding from. Almost orgasmic some have said.

My mouth suddenly went dry watching them and seeing the obvious bond that existed between the two men. It made me feel like I was spying on them somehow and I tore my eyes away. I had to stop my mind from wondering what it would be like to have Sebastian's fangs pierce my skin. To have him feed from me. To feel those sensations course through my body and to know that he was the one who'd made me feel them.

I couldn't think about it, though, because it would never happen. Couldn't happen. Not after Duncan.

Besides, there were more serious things to worry about. There was something very wrong with Sebastian's arm that he either couldn't or wouldn't heal for whatever reason and I was terrified that it had something to do with when he was struck by Tony. I remembered the flash I'd seen when the crowbar connected with his arm and my arms instinctively tightened around Joan. Maybe he didn't have enough blood left to heal it.

"Others are on the way," I told her, needing to break the silence. "Are you okay?"

Joan nodded. "They're always like that," she said, her gaze still on Sebastian and Raleigh, a hint of longing in her voice.

I cleared my throat hesitantly, once again feeling my own sense of longing. "Um, may-maybe we should give them some privacy," I suggested in a low voice as I turned my face aside, feeling awkward like I usually did around Sebastian.

I'd been half in love with him for so long, but how could I expect him to want someone like me in return? I couldn't fight. Forgot my gun when I really needed it. I was more of a liability to him. He'd be better off with Joan. At least she could pull her own weight.

She gave me a sideways glance. "Or you could go join them," she suggested in a low voice.

I was relieved that I didn't get a chance to respond because just then I saw several people walking down the sidewalk toward us. As they got closer I recognized Nathan Montgomery and Toya Packard, two members of Clan Brujah, the later being a close friend of Joan's. With them were two ghouls, Leilah Stein and Billy Williams, both of whom I knew or had worked with in the past.

As they approached, Sebastian and Raleigh broke apart and Sebastian licked the wound closed. Raleigh was breathing hard and clutching at Sebastian's shoulders tightly. Sebastian kept his right arm around Raleigh's waist as he took in the newcomers and carefully flexed his left, which appeared to be moving better.

Toya came over and touched Joan's arm and the other woman turned to hug her. They moved away a few paces, quietly talking.

Since there were more people on the scene I felt a little safer so I holstered my weapon for the time being. Afterward I realized that Sebastian had silently moved next to me and he wrapped his arm around my lower back as Nathan stopped in front of us.

"Ritter," Nathan said respectfully, then he turned to me, "Senorita Espenosa."

"Montgomery, good," Sebastian replied as I smiled in greeting to Nathan. "We've got one body here, and another by the car crash."

Nathan nodded. "Ray and some of the others are taking care of that one. Any more?"

Sebastian glanced my way quickly, then said, "There were two more at Centennial when we left. We should be prepared for them to show up at any moment."

Nathan nodded and pulled out his phone.

Sebastian looked down at me, then gestured for Leilah to come over. "I want you to drink a little," he told me as he took Leilah's wrist and offered it to me. "Heal the rest of your injuries, all right?"

Leilah wasn't at all surprised by the idea and readily offered her wrist to me. I positioned my body so that I was half leaning back against Sebastian and felt his hand move around my body so that his palm rested on my stomach. I took Leilah's wrist in my left hand and slipped my other arm around her waist to support her. Then my fangs extended and I gently pierced her skin and drank.

I felt Sebastian's eyes on me, watching me carefully as I fed. My gaze locked with his over Leilah's wrist and I couldn't help the feeling that despite the fact that he had just been in what had seemed like a passionate embrace with Raleigh just moments ago, his body language said that he would love to be in a similar one with me. Well, maybe not the feeding, but the pleasure that one could experience while being fed from.

I drank enough to heal the rest of my injuries and was aware the entire time that Sebastian was focused on me, despite the stressful and potentially dangerous situation around us, and I didn't know what to make of it. I also couldn't help but notice that he offered me the female ghoul, not the male. I wasn't sure what that meant. Hell, I wasn't sure I wanted to know what it meant.

When I was done I licked Leilah's wrist to close the wound and almost moaned at the look of desire in Sebastian's clear blue eyes. I released my hold on the ghoul and as she

moved away my eyes flashed to Raleigh and found that he was looking at me in much the same way that Sebastian was, but he wasn't as overt about it as his master.

I turned to face Sebastian, keeping my body close to his as I watched his face intently. I had to wonder if what I was sensing from him was really true and if it was really aimed toward me. "Are you okay?" I asked quietly, reaching out to touch his injured arm. "Do you need more blood?"

"Yeah, just give me a minute," he said, his voice low and gravely. He gestured to Raleigh, who moved to stand near me. Then he and Leilah crossed to where Billy was crouched near the body. Billy stood and I watched as Sebastian said something to him in a low voice. Billy pulled back the sleeve of his jacket and offered his wrist to Sebastian, who took it and started to feed.

This feeding was very different than when he fed from Raleigh. It was very functional, at least on Sebastian's part. Billy seemed to like it, but it was like he knew better than to come on to Sebastian.

"Better?" Raleigh asked in a low voice, putting his hand on my lower back in almost the same place that Sebastian had done so.

I found myself wondering again what Sebastian's teeth would feel like on my skin. "For now," I assured Raleigh, putting a hand on his chest. "What happened to his arm?"

He glanced over at Sebastian even as he pulled me a little closer to him. "It was some kind of aggravated damage, almost like a burn, and it didn't want to heal the first time he tried," he explained in a low voice. "The accident looked pretty bad, he was hurt badly, wasn't he?"

I nodded, thinking about it for the first time. "They hit his side of the car," I choked out, covering my face in horror just thinking about it. "There wasn't time to avoid it."

Raleigh pulled me even closer and held me gently. "He'll be fine," he assured me, stroking my back soothingly. "So will you."

I took a couple deep breaths, knowing that this was no time to completely fall apart. I forced myself get it together, wiping my eyes as I looked up at him. "N-neither of you leave me alone," I said quietly. "Thank you. You make me feel safe."

He came very close to touching the side of my face, but stopped himself short. "You're welcome," he said. There was a great deal of emotion in his voice, but it was hard to know what kind of emotion. I found myself wishing I knew him better to read his body language.

I glanced over at Sebastian, confused by what I felt for these two incredible men. "How long will we need to stay here?" I asked Raleigh, just wanting the craziness of this night to be over.

"It's cleanup," Raleigh said as Sebastian finished feeding from Billy. "We're the ones that usually do--"

He was cut off by the sound of gunfire coming from the direction of the wreck.

## Chapter 9 - Showdown

"When the static clears  
And all is said and done  
I will realize  
That we all need someone"  
Christina Aguilera  
"Lift Me Up"

"We need to help them," I called out enough for the others to hear. I backed away from Raleigh to pull my gun then started to run toward where the wreck was located.

Raleigh stayed close, his own gun in hand and the others coming up fast. Sebastian, Nathan and Billy passed us quickly, but Joan and Leilah stayed with Raleigh and me as we heard more gunfire coming from ahead.

We were only about a block and a half from the site of the wreck and by the time we got there Sebastian and Nathan were already dividing up the group.

I took in the site. Sebastian's t-boned car and the car that hit us were in the middle of the intersection where we'd left them, along with a van that I assumed belonged to Nathan and the others. Ray Kennedy and Carl Spencer, another vampire and ghoul from Clan Brujah, were pinned down behind the wreck by gunfire coming from Andy and Phil, who were using another car as a shield. Unfortunately, the car where they were hiding was on the other side of the wreck, so our group needed to find a way around the jumble of metal to get to the other two.

Nathan, Toya and Joan attempted to flank the car, but they were pushed back by gunfire from Phil. Raleigh pulled me behind the corner of a building so that we had some sort of shelter as Billy and Leilah took off to see if they could get around the block to come up behind the hunters.

"Go with Sebastian," I urged Raleigh, trying to push him toward the man. "He needs you. I'll stay here and if I can get off a decent shot I will. None of my abilities work against them well enough to even try. Go."

Raleigh looked from me to Sebastian, who was several feet away, then shook his head. "No way I'm leaving you alone." He quickly scanned the area, then took my arm and pulled me down the block a little to a door that he kicked in. "Come on," he said, leading me into the building.

"Where are we going?" I demanded. I hoped he had an idea to help everyone and not just hide me away somewhere.

"To see if we can come out the front, get behind them," he explained as he pulled me through what looked like a storage room.

"Good idea," I said, doing my best not to slow him down.

Blindly we moved through the backroom of the building and into a store area. Through the big front windows I could see Andy and Phil crouched behind their car.

"Can you do that voice throwing thing?" Raleigh asked in a low voice.

I nodded. "What do you want me to do?"

"Distract them," he said as he unlocked the dead bolt on the front door. "Maybe you could try singing again. It might work if they're distracted."

I took a minute to center myself as I brought to mind the lyrics to Brahms's Lullaby. I started to sing and almost instantly Phil sunk down behind the car, then fell over, sound asleep. Andy went to one knee, then seemed to shake the effect of the song off. He turned toward us, but before he could do anything, Raleigh fired and Andy fell back against the car as blood started to seep out the wound in his chest and into his clothing.

I continued to sing, not sure how long my ability would keep Phil out. Using my second voice I told the others that the two men were contained. I raised my gun in case either moved and when they didn't I finally let the song drift off.

"Sebastian may want to question Phil," I told Raleigh as the others started to make their way over to us. "We should locate something to bind his hands."

Raleigh looked past me into the store. "See if you can find something in there," he suggested, still holding his gun on the two men.

I went back inside and looked around. Raleigh and I had come through so fast the first time that I hadn't even taken the time to see what kind of a store it was. Now I saw that it was a clothing store and I quickly located a handful scarves then headed back outside.

Raleigh was waiting just outside the door for me. Sebastian and Nathan were kneeling next to Phil and I quickly moved to Sebastian's side with the scarves, Raleigh close behind me. Sebastian reached for them, giving me a once over to make sure I was okay before tying the man up.

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"Where will you take Phil?" I asked Sebastian a little later when we got a moment alone.

"Lachlan has a few holding cells in the basement of his house," he informed me. "Dillan will be here soon to take control of him." He checked his watch. "Give me ten minutes and we'll be able to get out of here."

I put my hand on his injured arm that he was still favoring. "Are you alright? Your arm?"

Sebastian smiled down at me. "Yeah, it'll be alright. Still a bit sore, but it'll heal. You okay?"

I nodded. "Yeah, I'm okay." I looked around at the work still being finished. "I hope this is all over."

Sebastian put an arm around me protectively. "There's no way to tell just yet. I want you to stay with me until we find out for sure."

I watched him for a long minute, wanting to take a chance that maybe the flirtation we'd been playing around with was something real. "Only if you do something for me," I said. I took a steadying breath as he tilted his head questioningly. "Teach me to fight. Like Joan. I didn't feel very useful tonight and I don't like that feeling. I spend all my time writing, lost in a world of music. I need to be able to take care of myself better."

Sebastian smiled at me. "I planned to do that in any case, Ariel."

The way his eyes looked at me made me hope that this thing between he and I really wasn't a flirtation. His eyes said that I was important to him. That he was afraid I wouldn't take him seriously. That he was afraid to do something wrong that would drive me off. That he didn't deserve me.

What he didn't understand was how very important he was to me. How I was the one that didn't deserve him. I smiled and reached up to touch his cheek tentatively. "Go finish up then so we can go back to your house," I whispered.

Sebastian nuzzled my fingers a moment, then moved off. As he did, I caught a glimpse of Raleigh's face as his gaze met mine, something between longing and jealousy flashed in his light eyes before he turned away that made me wonder about him and his motives.

All night I'd noticed how protective he'd been toward me and originally I'd thought it was because Sebastian had wanted him to. Now I wasn't sure. Raleigh was an attractive man, but he was Sebastian's ghoul. Sebastian, who I'd been attracted to for so long and was now showing signs of a like attraction.

Great, just when things seemed to maybe be working out with him I had to start developing an attraction to someone else? How was this possible?

\* ~ \* ~ \*



When the clean up was finally finished Sebastian came to find me, saying it was time to leave. We were going back to Sebastian's house in Raleigh's car which was parked nearby and the other man met us there, keys in hand. Joan was no where to be found. Apparently she was going to spend the day with the others.

Both men were dirty and bloody, Sebastian from his injuries, Raleigh from the cleanup. I looked down at myself for the first time since the crash and realized I was pretty filthy as well. My clothes were utterly ruined and my hair was caked with dried blood from my head wound. I'd retrieved my purse and a few personal things from Sebastian's car before it had been taken away, so I had them in my arms as I climbed into the backseat and we were off.

The ride to Sebastian's was filled with the sound of his voice as he talked to Tristan on the phone, telling him what occurred at the accident site and during the clean up. He kept emphasizing my role in the capture to his sire, as if he was proud of me.

I noticed that Raleigh kept an eye on me in the rear view mirror as he drove. It was hard to tell if he was worried about me, or perhaps he just couldn't keep his eyes off me. It was nice regardless.

I smiled at Raleigh, not sure how to deal with the attraction I seemed to have for the both of them. It couldn't be right, but for some reason it seemed natural.

## Chapter 10 - Back at Sebastian's House

"My body's longing to hold you  
So bad it hurts inside"

Ricky Martin feat. Christina Aguilera  
"Nobody Wants to Be Lonely"

Once in the house, Sebastian escorted me to my room so I could clean up. Raleigh followed, saying something about grabbing a shower himself, and before Sebastian left the room to do the same, he asked again if I was all right.

"Yeah, I'm okay. I'll need to feed more, but I've been able to heal," I told him, once again feeling awkward at being alone with the man. "What about you? Is your arm good? Do you - um, need any help cleaning up?"

Something ghosted across Sebastian's face that I couldn't read. It was like his mind went somewhere because of my offer that he wasn't sure I meant it to go. He smiled and I couldn't help thinking that he was so beautiful like that.

"I, too, need to feed," he told me. "We'll see how well I can move the arm when I've had a chance to heal it more." His eyes moved over my bloody hair and he smoothed a lock of it back. "Do you need help, perhaps in washing this mess from your hair?"

I *really* liked the idea of showering with him and with the exception of all the blood that covered both of us, it was a really nice thought. All the flirting we'd been doing, coupled with what he'd just said made me feel courageous. "Um, maybe you could help me with this holster?" I asked, taking a chance at seduction and silently wishing he would just make a move already. "I forgot how to get it off."

"Slip off your jacket then," Sebastian said, his voice getting lower and rougher.

He helped me remove the garment, but I could tell from his movements that his left arm still wasn't working properly. He was trying to hide it, though, and worked around it easily enough. Once the jacket was off, he ran his fingers across the straps of the holster on my back, then quietly talked me through how to take it off again. He was standing very close behind me, his hands on my upper arms.

"Oh, right. I remember it now," I said, almost at a whisper. I leaned back into him slightly and looked up over my shoulder at him. "Thank you."

Sebastian slowly lowered his head and kissed me, giving me plenty of time to pull away if I wanted, which I didn't. I met his lips tentatively as I brought my hand up to touch his cheek. His lips were soft and gentle, and after a moment, his arms moved around me, pulling me against his body as he deepened the kiss, allowing his tongue to push past my lips.

I turned in his arms so that I was facing him and pressed my body against the length of his, grabbing onto his shirt tightly with both hands. The kiss turned passionate and one of Sebastian's hands slid up my back and beneath my hair to cup the back of my head.

I smoothed my hands up his chest and around his neck and into his hair. When I did my fingers caught in the tangled mess of blood crusted hair, reminding me just how dirty both of us were after the accident. Sebastian didn't seem to notice, however, and kept kissing me passionately, as if he'd waited all his life to kiss me just that way.

"We... Shower," I managed to pant into his mouth, not wanting to break the contact, but trying to be practical. "Blood."

"Shower," he murmured against my lips. "I could wash your hair for you."

I moaned, the thought so very appealing to me. "God, yes, please."

I kissed him briefly once more, then pulled away, reaching for his hands and leading him toward the bathroom. My eyes were locked with his and I knew that I couldn't think about what was going to happen much because I would chicken out. Seduction wasn't a strong suit for me, but Sebastian was what I'd wanted for so long.

"I'll wash yours, too," I promised him, my voice low and full of longing.

Sebastian followed me eagerly, his eyes burning with desire as he moved. Once in the bathroom, he let go of my hand long enough to turn on the water in the large shower and then he was facing me again.

I pressed my palms against his chest, then slid them up and under his jacket to push it off his shoulders. "You have no idea how often I've thought about doing this," I told him, going to work on the buttons of his shirt next.

Sebastian reached behind him and pulled the gun from the small of his back then laid it on the sink. He pulled me close again for a demanding kiss as he started gathering the material of my shirt in his hands. "Really?" he asked, his lips hovering over mine. "How often?"

"More than I should have," I admitted shyly, then I remembered that we weren't the only ones in the house. "Wait. What about Raleigh?"

Sebastian's hand had been on its way under the bottom of my shirt, but at the mention of his ghoul he paused, confusion, hesitation, or perhaps yearning shone in his eyes. "He's probably already in the shower in my room," he said in a raspy voice, considering. "We could clean up in there, if you wanted," he suggested. "He-he'd be happy to give us a hand."

I was more than a little surprised at the invitation, but surprisingly not at all turned off by it. "You... you would do that?" I asked breathy. The idea of the two of them... together...

"Ariel, I-" he paused again, then reached up to smooth my hair back from my face. "I certainly don't want to push you into something you're uncomfortable with, but you are a beautiful woman, strong and talented, and you can't for one moment think that I am the only man who would want to be with you."

"S-Sebastian," I spluttered, the idea so appealing. "I've never..."

He nodded and cupped the side of my face. "I've seen the way you look at us, Ariel," he said in a low voice. "It's okay if you don't-if you'd rather choose between us, but you need to know that you don't have to choose."

I searched his gaze for confirmation of what he was proposing and found it. "Yes," I found myself saying, throwing caution to the wind, a wide smile pulling at my lips. "Yes."

Sebastian smiled back at me and quickly turned to shut off the water in the shower. "You won't regret it, I promise," he vowed, stealing another quick kiss before grabbing his gun and my hand and leading me from the room.

His bedroom wasn't far away and he led me through it and into his bathroom, where the water was already running in the shower, the mirrors steamed up and the air humid from the hot water. Sebastian laid his gun on the sink, then turned to pull me into his arms again, kissing me briefly before pushing the hem of my shirt upward again.

I lifted my arms and the shirt was off, then I reached for Sebastian's shirt to finish unbuttoning it. "Can't believe this is really happening," I practically whispered, as I pushed the material off his shoulders.

He shrugged out of it, then put his arms around me to undo my bra. "We will make your every dream come true, if you let us," he promised, his lips hovering over mine as he pulled the bit of lace and satin off. Then he backed away enough so that his eyes devoured my skin as it was bared to his gaze.

I grabbed his head and pulled it down for a hungry kiss, unable to fully comprehend that I was here with him and that Raleigh was just on the other side of the glass door. I could finally admit to myself that I was attracted to both of them and I was going to have them.

Sebastian's mouth barely left mine as his hands deftly moved to strip off the rest of my clothes, then his. His injured arm was still a bit uncoordinated, but he managed and I helped as much as he let me. Once we were both naked, he opened the door to the shower then steered me inside, never once breaking the contact of our lips.

Raleigh was facing the wall under one of the two shower heads and when the door opened and he looked up in surprise. "What-?"

I broke the kiss with Sebastian and turned to look at Raleigh. "H-hey," I stammered. "Sebastian said that... well, that you might want some company."

Raleigh's gaze moved to Sebastian and something unsaid must have passed between them because without another word Raleigh reached for me and firmly pulled me against his warm body, his mouth descending on mine for a scorching kiss.

I was vaguely aware of the shower door clicking closed before I felt Sebastian pressed behind me, his cool skin such a contrast compared to Raleigh's warmth as his hands found my hips, the hard length of him pressing into the flesh of my lower back.

Raleigh's fingers danced along my arms where they were loosely wound around his shoulders until they reached my wrists. His fingers encircled them and lifted my arms away from him and backward until they were around Sebastian's neck.

"Gorgeous," Raleigh breathed, his eyes sweeping down my body appreciatively, his hands running down my torso and over my breasts lightly.

"*Vorsichtig*," Sebastian warned him in a low voice, his mouth close to my ear as his palms flattened against the skin of my belly, keeping me firmly against him. Raleigh nodded, wetting his lips a little as he looked up and over my shoulder at his master.

I looked up at Sebastian questioningly, wondering what he'd said to Raleigh as the other man reached for one of the shower heads. He pulled it from its holder and handed it to Sebastian, whose mouth claimed mine with little nips of lips and teeth.

Warm water ran deliciously over my head, wetting my blood crusted hair and body, then I felt Raleigh's warm fingers, slick with soap, massaging over the skin of my neck and shoulders, then traveling lower to my chest. Together they bathed me, Sebastian washing his hair and mine, while Raleigh used copious amounts of soap to clean my body and stir my desire even further, especially when his fingers found my breasts and teased my nipples until they were hard peaks.

One of them was constantly kissing me and my lips tingled with delicious sensation from their attention. I tried to touch them as well, but whenever I did one of the men would return my hands to Sebastian's neck. It was like being tied up, but with no rope.

Once Sebastian was finished rinsing our hair clean from the shampoo, Raleigh pressed in close for a deep kiss, his fingers slipping between my legs to stroke my inner core. I clutched at Sebastian's shoulders, my breath coming hard and fast as waves of pleasure neared the point of spilling over in my belly.

I whimpered in frustration when Raleigh's fingers moved away, but Sebastian was hooking one of my legs over his arm and then Raleigh was on his knees, his mouth taking the place of his fingers and his tongue was dancing across my most secret of places, leaving me needy for more. I arched my back in pleasure, my eyelids drooping closed as Sebastian's mouth latched onto the skin of my neck, sucking tantalizingly.

It didn't take long for the orgasm that shot through me like an electrical current. I cried out as liquid heat pumped through me and if it weren't for Sebastian's arms I would have toppled to the shower floor.

Sebastian urged Raleigh to his feet and once there the other man pulled me against his chest for a wet kiss as Sebastian left the shower for towels.

\*~\*~\*

The three of us were only partially dried when we left the bathroom. Raleigh carried me to the bed, our tongues tangled in the sloppiest of kisses. He half climbed onto it and laid me on the cool sheets as if I was something precious.

I pulled Raleigh down beside me, aware that Sebastian had just entered the room and would soon join us. My fingers were in Raleigh's blonde curls, holding his head close so that the kiss didn't end. I couldn't get enough of his lips, the feel of his teeth when they

caught my bottom lip in them and pulled. His fingers were so warm as they danced across my skin.

I felt Sebastian's hands on my calves, pulling my legs apart so he could climb on the bed between them. Then his lips brushed my knees as his palms slid up my thighs and Raleigh moved to one side of my body as he kissed along my jaw and neck.

Sebastian mouthed his way up my body, stopping to suck at the skin of my hip and lap his tongue at my belly button. Then his lips were on my breast, pulling and tweaking, and my back arched in an effort to bring him closer.

"So *schön*," Sebastian murmured against my skin, his breath warm on my nipple.

Raleigh took my other nipple in his mouth and a low moan escaped my lips as sensation rippled through me. Then I felt fingers once again at my core, Raleigh's since they were warm, gently exploring where his tongue had been and my hips tilted to give him better access.

It was like I was being worshipped by these two gorgeous men. My fingers caressed their skin, learning their lines, and the difference between warm and cool was a thrilling dichotomy. It was all I could do to experience what they were doing without screaming out in joyous pleasure.

"*Sie ist so perfekt*," Raleigh said. He was speaking in German, same as Sebastian, and my addled brain wanted to scold them because I didn't know what they were saying. Not that I was able to get anything coherent out.

Sebastian smiled and leaned toward Raleigh and then they were kissing. It was a thrilling sight. So hot to watch them spar for control with their mouths above me and my fingers tightened where I was clutching at them.

Raleigh's fingers continued stoking me, slipping two long fingers inside and my hips bucked, wanting more. I was panting mindlessly and then I felt Sebastian's hips move with mine, his hard length pushing near my entrance.

"Bastian," I pleaded, needing more, needing him inside me.

Sebastian pulled back from Raleigh and he nodded to his ghoul, who pulled his fingers from inside me. Then he was guiding Sebastian inside me and everything stopped as my body went on sensation overload.

"Mmm," I purred, pushing my hips up to meet Sebastian's.

Raleigh's hand moved over Sebastian's chest then mine, the warmth of his palm causing my skin to pebble.

"So *dicht*," Sebastian gasped through clenched teeth, his hips moving in even thrusts. Raleigh smiled, dropped a kiss to my chest and then he and Sebastian were kissing again.

It wasn't long before that familiar heat neared spilling over inside me. Sebastian was whispering God only knew what in my ear as his thrusts wrought moans and pleas for release from the back of my throat that were swallowed by Raleigh as he fed from my lips ravenously.

Raleigh was stroking his length in time with Sebastian's thrusts and I snaked my fingers over to join his, causing his ragged breath to catch and his teeth to clamp down on my shoulder.

His moan was low and guttural. And Sebastian echoed it as he brought me over the edge. Sebastian soon followed and collapsed on top of me in exhaustion. Seconds later I felt the telltale wetness on my fingers that signaled Raleigh's release as well.

I was beyond satisfied as I combed the fingers of my other hand through Sebastian's dark hair. Raleigh cleaned all of us up with a corner of the sheet then settled next to me, dropping random kisses on both Sebastian and me.

It was nearly dawn by then and Raleigh urged Sebastian and me to drink our fill to make sure our injuries were healed before we slept. As the sky started to turn pink the three of us were curled around each other and as sleep claimed me there was a blissful

smile on my lips. I wasn't sure what had happened in the universe that I was able to be with two such amazing men, but I knew that I would enjoy them for as long as I could.

## Chapter 11 - The Night After

"Something about you caught my eye,  
Something moved me deep inside!"  
Christina Aguilera  
"Ain't No Other Man"

I felt what had to be Sebastian's cool body pressed behind mine as my mind woke. He'd pulled me to him spoon fashion as dawn lulled us to our daytime slumber and his arms around me made me feel safe and protected for the first time ever.

Memories of the previous night played through my head as I looked at his strong hand where it was holding my arm in front of me. Had I really slept with both he and Raleigh? What did all of this mean? I hoped that it was more than just a one night stand but I had to be prepared for just that.

Sebastian started to stir and I willed myself to stay still until he was fully awake. I didn't know where Raleigh was. There hadn't been time to really talk about anything before dawn and I felt doubt creeping in.

Sebastian inhaled deeply as he woke and his arm pulled me closer.

There was the sound of movement from the hallway, then Raleigh entered the room wearing only a low slung pair of jeans. He smiled when his gaze hit the bed and I wanted to reach for him. "Good morning," he said, looking edible.

"Morning," Sebastian replied from behind me.

I smiled at Raleigh then looked over my shoulder at Sebastian. "Morning," I said, trying very hard not to be shy. It was hard though. I was naked, Sebastian was naked, and Raleigh was nearly naked...

Raleigh came over and sat on the edge of the bed. "You two getting up, or should I come back to bed?" he teased.

I chuckled a little and looked toward Sebastian, who was just staring at his ghoul with a naked hunger in his gaze. "Well?" I whispered.

"We didn't have a lot of time last night," Sebastian said in a low voice, his gaze moving slowly from Raleigh to me. "I'd like to spend a bit more time on pleasure before focusing on work."

I reached up to touch his cheek with my fingertips. "I think I like the way you think, Mr. Ritter."

\* ~ \* ~ \*

When we finally left the bedroom I was completely sated and ready to start the evening. Sebastian still needed to heal his arm a bit more, so it was decided that he and I would feed again from his supply of blood in the refrigerator while Raleigh made breakfast for himself. Then we were going to see if there were any other leads to follow up on.

I knew that I really needed to contact Vanessa to tell her about what was going on. I didn't want her to hear about the situation from anyone other than me and sometimes the rumor mill in the city moved faster than you might think.

Sebastian and I were sitting at the table in the kitchen, glasses of blood in front of us when I called her. I caught her on her way to the club for the evening and I gave her an abridged version of the events of the previous night. The last thing I wanted was to alarm her, but Vanessa managed to pull all the details out of me in no time, including the fact that I was staying with Sebastian for the time being. This last part really surprised her and I explained that it was just easier to stay with him.

"I'll be fine," I assured her as Sebastian got to his feet and wandered over to watch Raleigh at the stove. "Sebastian has been very cautious. He knows I'm no fighter."

"Well, maybe you can learn some skills to take care of yourself," she suggested. "Will you be home tonight?"

I hesitated in answering, not wanting her to worry. "No," I told her, trying to sound like it was no big deal. "It may not be safe."

"You could stay with me, if you wanted."

I smiled as I watched Sebastian try to distract Raleigh from making his breakfast by dropping kisses along the back of his neck and I knew I wouldn't be taking my sire up on her offer. "Thank you, but until this situation is resolved it's just better if I stay with Sebastian."

"If you change your mind, dear, you know I always have room for you."

"I know. Thank you. I'll keep you posted." We said our goodbyes and after I disconnected the call I put my phone on the table and took the opportunity to watch the two men.

After a few moments of continued teasing, Raleigh elbowed Sebastian away playfully. When he noticed I was off the phone Sebastian returned to the table to give me a kiss. "Everything all right?" he asked.

"Yes, fine. Vanessa is concerned about my safety and suggested I learn some skills to take care of myself," I reported with a smile.

"We can certainly help with that, if you want," he offered, sitting down beside me.

"It's probably a good idea after last night," I said, reaching over to play with his fingers. "I know that I wasn't much help with the physical stuff, but I'm warning you, I'm pretty uncoordinated." I looked up at Raleigh, whose look said he thought I was coordinated enough last night, and I had to shyly return my gaze back to Sebastian. "I want to learn though."

"We'll see what we can do," Sebastian said, "but your singing thing works pretty well too, at least, when we're not working against this particular breed of hunter."

"I don't understand why it didn't work on them," I told him with a frown. "I guess I should have asked Vanessa about it, but I kind of want more information first. I didn't want to cause her any more worry than she needs."

"Don't feel bad," he told me. "I tried to dominate the one by the elevator at the hospital, and that didn't work either. I think this is some new type of hunter that is somehow immune to our abilities. It's going to make them hard to stamp out."

His words made me feel better and I was able to smile. Some vampires like Sebastian had the ability to get others to do what they wanted by giving verbal commands. It was a really helpful ability to have and if it wasn't working for Sebastian against them I didn't feel so useless. It was different than the ability I possessed. I would only make people more inclined to do what I said, while Sebastian could actually get someone to follow commands.

"I'm really hoping that there aren't any more of their group out there," I said. "It would be a very bad thing for our people."

"We can check out the family and friends of the ones we know about," Raleigh suggested as he brought his food to the table and sat down. "See if we can come up with any leads from there."

"We can add that to our list of things to do," I agreed. "First we need to check their apartments and see what that brings to light. Hopefully we can get in them though."

"Oh, we can get in them," Raleigh said. "It's just a matter of whether or not we're heard doing it."

"No, that's not what she meant," Sebastian replied. "I wasn't able to get into that garage, couldn't step foot over the doorway."

Raleigh frowned thoughtfully. "I was in the front office area." Then he shrugged, "Maybe we got all of them. That would be nice and easy to tie up."

"Yes, it would be," Sebastian agreed. "I'd like to think we got all of them last night, but somehow I doubt that's the case."

"We need to find out what those symbols were," I said. "Do you know anyone we could ask?"



"We need to get pictures of the symbols," Sebastian added. "Maybe Lachlan can identify them for us."

"Do you have a camera then?" I asked.

"It broke, remember?" Raleigh said. "That vampire south of town last week."

"I have a digital camera at my apartment," I offered. "We could swing by to get it."

"We could," Raleigh agreed. "Give you a chance to pick up anything you may have forgotten."

I smiled at him and tried to think of anything else that I might need right away. There was no telling how long this investigation would take and I'd only half paid attention to what I grabbed last night. Should I get more clothes? "Good idea," I agreed.

"We'll head out as soon as Raleigh's done," Sebastian said. "We've got a lot of road to cover."

"I'll make sure I have my keys," I said, moving to stand. "Actually, do you want to take my car in case we need speed?"

"Might be a good idea to take two cars again," Sebastian agreed. "You and Raleigh can go to your apartment while I pick up Joan and start checking out addresses."

"Do you think it's a good idea to split up?" I asked, very uncomfortable with the idea of us separating. "We don't know if there's anymore of them out there. There's safety in numbers."

"That's a good point," Raleigh said. "Joan can catch up with us when we figure out what place we'll hit after her apartment."

Sebastian nodded. "That's fine. Did you talk to Fly today, see what he found out about these guys?"

"Yeah, he sent me over a list of addresses and possible acquaintances." Raleigh left the table long enough to retrieve a piece of paper from the counter and lay it on the table in front of Sebastian. The list included all the addresses of Trent and his friends along with six others, two of which were marked as the unfamiliar men we'd encountered the night before.

"Who's Fly?" I asked.

"A, ah, friend of mine," Sebastian said, which I assumed to mean another ghoul. "He's good with computers, tracks down stuff like this for me."

I hadn't been aware that Sebastian had another ghoul besides Raleigh. My mind ran crazy and I couldn't help but wonder if another ghoul meant another bedpartner... Yes, I recognized that I was being a little presumptuous, but I really couldn't help myself. I knew so little about Sebastian and even less about Raleigh, yet I felt a deep attraction and affection for both. Could I share them with yet another person?

"I-I should get m-my gun," I stammered a little, stepping toward the door. "I'll be right back."

Neither of them said anything as I left the room and headed downstairs to the room Sebastian had given me the night before. All sorts of crazy thoughts ran through my head as I located the holster that Sebastian had dropped on the bed the night before.

*What am I really doing here?* I asked myself as I started to hum an unknown melody. *Sebastian is so out of my league and even though he's a ghoul, so is Raleigh. These guys are much worldlier than I could ever be and even though they seem interested enough in me now, they will soon get bored with me and cast me aside. Is this a pipe dream? What am I thinking!?!?*

I tried to get the stupid holster on and got it tangled a couple of times before I had it on right.

"Ariel?" Sebastian said from the doorway, his sudden appearance startling me. "Do you need a hand?"

"Um. No," I said, turning quickly to face him. "I got it. I think," I mumbled under my breath, silently cursing myself for once again letting him see how helpless I was. *Can't even put on a stupid holster.*

Sebastian moved closer and took a look at how I had the damnable contraption on. "Yeah, mostly," he said, smoothing the straps into place. "Takes a bit of practice to get it down. Don't feel bad about asking for help." He cupped the side of my face and tilted my head up to look at him. "You okay?"

"Yes," I answered quickly, looking down, but not moving my face from his touch. "Sorry. I won't take so long next time."

"You weren't taking too long," he soothed softly. "Raleigh's gonna be a few more minutes yet." He let his thumb caress my cheek. "Things went pretty quickly last night, you sure you're all right?"

I nodded, giving him a small smile. "Yes. I-I mean, everything was okay, right?"

"It was perfect," Sebastian said with a smile as he bent to kiss me. "I've watched you a long time, Ariel, but I didn't want to move too soon."

"You have? Why?" I asked, surprised by his confession.

"You're kidding, right?" he asked, as if it should have been evident. "You're beautiful, Ariel, brave, and loyal, and when you sing, you're like an angel. I'm not the only one who watches you."

"Beautiful, brave and useless maybe," I replied. He couldn't be serious. Sure, I could sing, but that wasn't a very good survival skill. "But I can change, Sebastian. I can learn to fight. I don't want you to regret having me around."

"I don't need you to change for me," he said firmly. "I mean, I want you to know how to protect yourself, but I like you just the way you are."

*He won't think that when he gets to know me, I thought to myself.*

"I will learn," I assured him, standing up on tiptoe to kiss his lips soundly. "I have the best teacher, right? Well, teachers. You and Raleigh."

Sebastian pulled me against his body. "We'll take good care of you, Ariel. You won't regret being with us, I promise."

I wrapped my arms around his neck and tucked my face into the crook of his neck. Maybe I'd be the one who caused regret. Or maybe I'd be the one to regret what we were doing when it was over.

Sebastian held me close and buried his face in my hair. "I'm glad we didn't scare you off last night," he murmured.

"No, not at all," I replied as I pulled back enough to look up at him. "I'm, well, I've been... alone... for a long time. I don't know how to do... this."

"We'll figure it out together, all right?" he said as he smoothed my hair back.

I nodded, humming that melody again. I really wanted this, him and Raleigh. I didn't quite understand how much until just now. "I'm sorry. I know I'm not- I want this. I want to be... I don't know. Just don't let my weirdness push you away, okay?"

Sebastian shook his head. "No," he breathed, leaning down to kiss me again, then his blue eyes met mine for a long moment. "No, but don't be afraid to tell me if it's too much, okay? I know we can be a little overwhelming some times."

I nodded and took a deep breath. "I think what we need to do is talk to each other. All of us, Raleigh, too. We kind of jumped in feet first last night- not that I regret it, but we didn't have a chance for that 'get to know you' phase."

"We'll get there," Sebastian said. "But I already feel like I know you."

"I feel like I know you, too," I replied with a smile. "I guess we just need to be open and honest with each other. Fair?"

"That's fair," he said softly.

I felt a little better about the situation, but I still had doubts about how long this would last. "Good." I lifted up again to kiss his lips and had a wide smile on my face when I pulled back.

Sebastian returned the smile and took my hands loosely in his. "All right. Now I've got to get my gun, and then Raleigh should be done. We've got a lot to cover tonight."

"Give me another minute and I'll be right out."

"All right." He gave me one more kiss, then left me to finish getting ready.

Luckily I'd had enough foresight to bring another jacket with me since the one I'd worn the night before was completely trashed. I quickly pulled some cash, my license and my debit card from my wallet and stuffed them, along with my phone into my pockets. Then I donned my sturdiest pair of shoes and grabbed my car keys before heading back upstairs.

Raleigh was just putting on a jacket when I rejoined them, his eyes looking me over approvingly.

I smiled at him and dangled my keys in the air. "Who wants to drive?"

Sebastian snagged the keys before Raleigh could react. "That'd be me, darlin'," he drawled, mocking Raleigh's accent.

## Chapter 12 - Marked

"It's going too far don't know where it began"  
Christina Aguilera  
"Cease Fire"

Sebastian parked the car across the street from my apartment building and cursed softly, bringing our attention to the front door.

"Glad we didn't let you come back here last night," Raleigh said softly from the front seat.

"What is that?" I asked, leaning across the backseat to get a better look. Painted on the door was a rough symbol that looked like a table with a barbell running diagonally through it. It was the same type of symbol that we'd seen last night in Trent's apartment and at the garage where he and Scott were getting patched up. For some reason I wasn't able to recall what those other symbols looked like now, but I knew this was the same style.

"I guess we didn't get them all," Sebastian muttered in a low, dangerous voice.

"I wonder if they got inside," I murmured as I thought what I might have in my apartment that I couldn't replace. I'd taken my mom's picture and rosary the night before, but my laptop was still inside and there was music stored on it that I'd been working on. The guitar that my mother had given me for my sixteenth birthday was still in there as well. I didn't care about anything else, but the laptop and guitar were pretty important. "I have to go check."

"Let me go in first," Sebastian urged. "I'll let you know if it's all right."

"Sebastian, no. We don't know if-" I couldn't even think about what might happen if he went in there by himself.

"I'll be careful," he assured me. "Stay here with Raleigh, okay?"

I didn't like it, but I knew that I couldn't stop him from doing his job. That didn't mean that I wouldn't feel responsible if he got hurt going into *my* house. "Do you remember the code?" I asked quietly, determined not to act clingy. Whatever was going on between us was too tenuous for that.

Sebastian nodded then looked over at Raleigh. "Take care of her."

"Be careful," I told Sebastian as he reached for the door handle.

"I will," was his response as he got out of the car and crossed the road at a brisk pace, his head moving from side to side as he took in the soundings. The front door of the building opened easily for him and he cautiously stepped inside.

As the door swept closed behind his master, Raleigh got out of the car as well and moved to stand on the driver's side. I got out as well and moved to stand next to him. "How long do we wait?" I asked.

"We'll give him ten minutes," Raleigh said, eyes on the building. "But I think we'll know pretty quick, one way or another."

"Does that ten minutes include the time it takes to cross the street?" I asked, feeling antsy.

"From when he went in the door," he answered with a half smile, but I could tell he was anxious for Sebastian, too. "Is your apartment on this side of the building?"

It was. I pointed out which set of windows to watch for and as I did I saw movement inside. "That's enough time," I insisted, moving to cross the road, but Raleigh grabbed my arm.

"It hasn't even been five minutes yet," he pointed out. "Give it a-"

Just then the lights flicked on in my apartment, then Sebastian looked out a window and down at us.

"All right, all clear," Raleigh said, letting me go.

I started toward the building again; making sure Raleigh was behind me. "Did you lock the car?"

He nodded. "Yeah. Do you remember seeing that symbol last night?" he asked as we got to the other side of the street.

I shook my head. "No. If it were I would have remembered it being there."

"No, I mean at Trent's place," he corrected as we neared the door, "Or the garage."

"There may have been something like it in the alley near The Iron, but not at the other places," I told him, coming to a stop as a thought hit me. "Wait. Call Sebastian and ask him to come back outside. "

Raleigh looked at my questioningly. "What is it?"

"We couldn't get into the garage," I explained. "What if that one lets him in, but not out?"

"Well, there's more than one way out of the building," Raleigh pointed out, looking upward. "If nothing else, he could come out the fire escape. I don't see any symbols painted there."

I looked as well to be sure. "So you think its safe?" I asked, not seeing any other symbols beside the one on the door, but I wanted to be sure.

"Only one way to try it." Raleigh opened the door and stepped inside, then turned and came back out. "Seems safe enough," he said with a shrug.

"Let me try," I said, moving past him to walk in, then out. No problem. I breathed a sigh of relief that it wasn't a trap. "Why put it there then?" I asked, not expecting an answer.

He looked at the symbol. "A way of marking the building maybe?" he said thoughtfully. "Look," he added, pointing to the symbol. "Doesn't this sort of look a body coming out of a casket?"

At that moment the door opened and Sebastian looked out, relaxing when his saw the two of us. "You guys all right?" he questioned.

"Just taking a closer look at this symbol," I told him. "I was concerned that it might be a trap, but it doesn't seem to be." I took another look at the roughly drawn symbol as I thought about what Raleigh said. "I see what you're saying Raleigh. It does look like a body coming out of a casket."

Sebastian stepped out of the building to look at the door as well.

"Maybe it's a way to mark places where vampires are," Raleigh suggested in a low voice. "I don't remember what the one looked like near the club, but if we can get pictures, we can compare them, see if I'm right."

"Good idea," Sebastian said, looking from the door out over the street. "It may not be safe here. Let's get what you need, Ariel, and get out of here."

I nodded and slipped past him through the door. "I will find my camera first and if you want Raleigh, you can try to get a picture while I decide what else to grab." Regardless of what happened between Sebastian, Raleigh and myself, I didn't think I would ever be able to come back here to live. Now that it was a *'mark'ed* place it would be suicide to live here even if we did eventually get all of Trent's group. There was no telling who else they may have told about me.

It was a hard realization because I really loved this apartment. It had been my home ever since I felt ready to live on my own after my change. Now my skin crawled just thinking about walking in.

When I got inside the apartment I looked around to see if anything had been disturbed. Everything looked just as I'd left it the last time I'd been there, but I still worried that someone would jump out at any moment.

"You'd better grab enough for at least a week," Sebastian told me, ever aware of his surroundings. "And anything that's important to you. There's no telling what they'll do to the place. You might want to think about clearing everything out, just in case."

"I don't have any intention of ever coming back after tonight," I replied in a quiet voice, completely creeped out. I moved over to the drawer where I kept my camera and handed it over to Raleigh. I gave him a quick instructional in how to use the power, zoom

and shutter buttons, then went about quickly figuring what to take as he headed back outside.

"Sebastian, will you put my guitar in its case?" I asked, pointing toward the corner where the instrument was sitting while I went in search of my laptop case so that I could pack that up, along with the piles of sheet music next to it and all the cording, including the for the camera.

Sebastian moved to take care of my guitar then helped me pack up the computer and other things I'd gathered. "I'll send someone to pack the place up," he said. "I've got room in the garage to put it until you figure out what you plan to do, if you'd like."

I stopped what I was doing and turned to him. "Thank you," I told him slowly, certain that surprise was in my voice, but I was grateful for his offer. "I want to grab the essentials now. Clothes and furniture are replaceable, but my music isn't."

It was kind of nerve wracking trying to decide what was absolutely going now and what wasn't in the span of a few minutes. I didn't want to risk being here too long and putting all of us in danger, yet I needed to make sure I didn't lose anything that I couldn't live without.

Sebastian placed a phone call and made arrangements for my apartment to be packed up and moved to his place while I continued to organize sheet music. As we were finishing up, Raleigh came back in.

"Well, the picture idea is a bust," he announced in frustration.

I'd been worried that the camera wouldn't work. "Great. How are we supposed to figure out what they mean if we can't draw them or take a picture of them?" I asked no one in particular.

"There's got to be some sort of magic to it," Raleigh said. "Maybe we should call Johnson, see if he knows anything."

"He may be a part of it," Sebastian replied in a low voice.

"He hasn't hunted in Nashville since Tristan took over," Raleigh pointed out. "Not even when the Tremere went after that rogue ghoul."

"It can't hurt to try talking to him," I added. "Let's get out of here first, though."

Sebastian agreed and the three of us left a few minutes later. We were all on alert as we traversed the short distance from the front of the building to my car and none of us relaxed until we were blocks away.

## Chapter 13 - Sharing Information

"Imma need somebody  
To help somebody  
Do ya need somebody"

Christina Aguilera  
"Make the World Move"

"Raleigh, why don't you call Johnson?" Sebastian suggested once we were clear of my neighborhood. "I'm gonna run us by The Iron so we can take a look at the symbols painted near there. See if they're the same as at Ariel's."

"Anything you want me to do?" I asked from the backseat as Raleigh pulled out his phone. It occurred to me that I didn't have Sebastian or Raleigh's number in my phone. "Oh, and I realized earlier that I don't have either of your numbers in my phone, we should correct that in case we get separated for some reason."

Raleigh reached back for my phone and quickly programmed not only his and Sebastian's numbers, but also Joan's, then Sebastian asked me to call her and have her meet the three of us at Trent's house.

Joan's phone rang a couple of times before she answered. "Hello?"

"Joan? It's Ariel. Sebastian wanted me to call you and ask if you would meet us."

"Um, sure. When?"

"We're on our way over there now. We're looking into some of the addresses of those guys from last night."

"All right. I won't be long behind you. Should I bring some of the Brujah?"

I looked up to meet Sebastian's gaze in the rear view mirror. "She wants to know if she should bring some of the Brujah?"

"I wouldn't say no to Toya or Billy," he said. "Or Nathan, if she can pull him away from his wife. We don't know what we might come up against."

"I don't think Toya or Billy will be a problem," Joan replied after I relayed Sebastian's request. "I'll have to see if I can pry Nathan away. We'll meet you there."

"Thanks Joan. See you there."

"Later."

I hung up about the same time that Raleigh did, his expression sour. "Johnson's an ass," he muttered.

"He give you anything?" Sebastian asked.

"Said he'd meet us at The Iron to take a look at the symbol there, but he's still an ass."

I'd met Glenn Johnson once, not all that long ago, while we were dealing with Duncan Masters. I didn't comment on Raleigh's view of the man since I hadn't had much interaction with him, at least not enough to form an opinion. He hadn't seemed fond of Raleigh and hadn't taken much notice of me. He was a Mage, which was all I knew for certain about him.

"He's all right, if you know how to handle him," Sebastian said. "You just have to be nice." He shot Raleigh a devilish look from the corner of his eye.

"Not too nice, I hope," Raleigh replied, half amused, half disgruntled.

Sebastian laughed. "I doubt that would work with Johnson, but it doesn't hurt to be polite."

I watched the two men interact with each other fondly. It was so obvious that they had a long history together and I couldn't help but wonder if it was going to be possible for me to mesh with them. I desperately wanted to.

They continued to tease each other until Sebastian pulled into the alley near The Iron where the symbols were located. Raleigh still had my camera and when the three of us

got out to study the symbols he tried once again to document the markings. And again he couldn't get a clear picture.

This symbol was different than the one at my apartment. It looked like a blocky 'M' inside a box with circles in each corner. I had no guess as to what it meant and before I had a chance to ask Sebastian and Raleigh what they thought a male voice sounded behind us.

"Camera's don't work," the man said from back near my car. I turned and saw that it was Glenn Johnson, watching the three of us with bored disdain.

"Johnson," Sebastian said in neutral greeting. "You've seen these before?"

"A few times," the other man answered, moving closer casually.

"Do you know what they mean or who's using them?" I asked.

Glenn's gaze moved to me and his eyes softened a little. "Miss Espenosa. It is good to see you again, though not necessarily in your current company."

His greeting surprised me, but he showed no outward signs of noticing as he looked back at the symbol and took a couple of steps closer to it. "Last week one of my people was found dead a few blocks from Shelby Park," he continued. "A symbol something like this one was painted nearby. I'm told something similar happened last month to one of the werewolves south of town." He glanced at Sebastian, then back to me. "We're being hunted."

"Do you have any idea how big of a group we're dealing with?" I asked, remembering the conversation between Sebastian and Raleigh in the car. Since Glenn seemed a little more accepting of me I figured things might go easier if I took the lead in questioning. "There were a series of attacks last night and we managed to eliminate seven of their number, but it was our first encounter with them and we have very little information. They're human, but with some kind of special powers that keep them from being affected by our gifts much of the time."

"That seems to be a problem for more than just vampires," Glenn admitted. "They're not afraid of the larger werewolf forms, like most humans. Nearly every form of supernatural power that affects the mind tends to be ignored by the stronger of their numbers, and is of limited use on the rest. And they have abilities that effect their prey as well," he continued. "The only good news is that they seem to be poorly organized and have limited funds."

"Why didn't you bring this to our attention?" Sebastian asked, obviously irritated.

"Until your shoot out last night, I had no idea they were affecting your kind," Glenn replied coldly. "For all I knew you were behind it."

I positioned myself so that Glenn was looking at me and not Sebastian. We'd been communicating really well so far and I didn't want to blow it. "I can assure you that we have nothing to do with them," I told him sincerely. "But if we're all at risk then maybe we can agree to share any information amongst ourselves to keep all of our people safe. Sound fair?"

Glenn's eyes traveled from Sebastian then to Raleigh before his gaze settled on me again. "Fair enough," he acquiesced, then gestured toward the symbol. "No one seems to be able to duplicate these symbols in any way. It's impossible to describe them accurately, and nearly so to remember one well enough to compare it to another right in front of you, so we don't know how many of these symbols exist, or what they mean."

"Have you been unable to enter a building with one at the entrance or tried to remove them?" I asked.

"From what I understand, there have been a few areas that one type of supernatural or another can't enter," Glenn answered. "There was an apartment in Hermitage that I couldn't step foot into, but Bobby had no problem getting in and out of. I tried to remove that one, but didn't have any luck. Bobby tore the symbol out of the wall, but it didn't help, I still couldn't get in. I don't know if anyone else has tried to destroy them. It could just be that I couldn't remove that one because it was geared toward magic."



I had no idea who this Bobby person was, but he had to be a supernatural of some kind. I nodded, thinking as I turned to Sebastian. "Maybe we should ask him to look at that garage? See if he can remove that symbol?" I asked.

"That's a good idea," Sebastian said. He then turned to Glenn, "There's a garage that I couldn't get into last night, had a symbol on the door."

"Would that be the one where a man died with a bullet in his heart?" Glenn asked dryly.

"That's the one," Sebastian replied with a grim smile. "Would you be willing to see if you can remove it?"

Glenn gave him a long look as if he were going to refuse, then glanced at me. "I suppose it wouldn't hurt to find out for sure."

"We can meet you there," I suggested.

"Fine," he said. "I'll see you there." Then he turned to go.

I assumed that being a Mage meant that he had his own method of transportation so I didn't offer him a ride. He probably wouldn't have taken it anyhow. I turned to the guys. "Shall we?"

Sebastian nodded, still watching Glenn walk away until he was out of sight.

"I hope it was okay that I did the talking," I said to Sebastian as we got into the car. "I remembered that you suggested being nice to him worked."

"You did well," Sebastian replied with a small smile. "I doubt he would be so cooperative if not for you."

"You were right," Raleigh told Sebastian, disgruntled. "It wouldn't have helped at all if I had been the one to be nice to Johnson."

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All three of us were on the look out for anyone tailing us on the way to the garage. Raleigh called Joan to let her know that we'd be delayed in getting to Trent's because of our detour and she suggested that since we still couldn't take any pictures of the symbols that we meet at the next address on the list instead. Sebastian agreed and told her to be careful.

Sebastian ended up parking a half a block away from the garage and we walked the rest of the way. He explained that we needed to be ready for any hunters that might have been lingering after the activities of the night before and I understood his thought process. Glenn was waiting for us behind the garage and was already checking out the symbol that had blocked our entrance. There was police tape on the ground that I assumed had once covered the doorway.

"Looks like someone was inside recently," I commented quietly, indicating the tape.

"That was me, actually," Glenn confessed. "I wanted to see if I could get inside."

When he didn't elaborate, Sebastian asked, "Well, could you?"

"Oh, sorry, yeah, no problem, in and out."

I glanced up at Sebastian, then over to Raleigh. "We should check to see if we're still blocked." I moved toward the door to test it.

Glenn stepped back to give me room, but Raleigh put a hand on my arm to stop me. He moved past me to try first, pushing the door open and stepping into the garage. Beyond him, I could see signs that the place had been processed the scene. Little tents with numbers and outlines where the bodies had been found stood out even in the dark interior.

Raleigh took two steps inside, then walked back out to stand next to me again. "No problem," he told Sebastian.

Sebastian eyed Glenn a long moment, as if wondering if the Mage had done anything to be wary of, then he stepped forward and paused at the threshold. He lifted his palm toward the doorway, testing the opening. His hand stopped dead.

"Interesting," Glenn murmured.

"So what's the best way to destroy the symbol?" I asked him.

Glenn crouched next to the symbol, then bent to touch the paint of the doorway they'd been drawn on with his fingertips. The symbol rippled slightly, then looked like waves in a pool of water as the mark turned liquid, then moved together into a ball that then compressed into a ball of white light and disappeared.

"Showoff," Raleigh muttered under his breath.

"Be nice," I mouthed to him, trying to suppress a grin as I reached for his hand.

He winked in return and turned his hand to hold mine as Glenn stood and stepped back. Sebastian lifted his hand once again to press his palm into the empty space, but he was still stopped at the threshold.

"It seems to be some sort of ward against vampires," Glenn told me. "We have something similar around our house and business. One for your servants, as well, though," he glanced at Raleigh, "this place does not."

I studied the space where the symbol had been. "And it seems that once the, did you call it a 'ward'? Once it's created it's there for good."

Glenn nodded. "Maybe. Most of the wards I create have a... shelf life, of sorts, unless I tie them to a source of energy. The ones created by your Tremere certainly do. I'm not sure what these would be tied to, certainly not the owner's life," he explained, looking at Sebastian, "as that was ended last night."

"So there's no way to break it down then?" Sebastian asked.

"Yeah, there's a way, we just gotta figure it out," Glenn said, watching Sebastian. "If I may?"

Sebastian nodded and motioned for him to go ahead.

Glenn removed a piece of chalk from a pouch on his waist and drew an archway on the cinderblock wall that made up the back of the building. Next he scribed a symbol in the center of it and tapped it with his finger. The wall within the arch slowly faded away. Glenn walked through it into the garage, back out, then looked at Sebastian expectantly.

Hesitantly, Sebastian walked to the arch and put his hand through it, then stepped through and back out.

"Voila," Glenn said with a smile. "This ward is on the doorway, not the building."

"Fascinating," I breathed, letting go of Raleigh's hand so that I could attempt to go through myself.

"Did you try to do this where the symbol was a ward against magic?" Sebastian asked Glenn from behind me.

"No magic I tried worked on the building," the Mage said. "I assume no vampire magic would have worked on this one."

I walked through the new opening and into the garage, then started to look around, aware of Raleigh's presence near the doorway.

"I wouldn't, Miss Espenosa," I heard Glenn call out suddenly and I turned to look out at him. "It takes an effort to hold this gateway open, and I'd hate to see you stuck in there."

"Ariel," Raleigh urged from the outside of the archway, holding his hand out to me.

"Sorry," I replied quickly and moved back outside the building. "I guess I should have asked first, Mr. Johnson. Forgive me." When I was close enough I took Raleigh's outstretched hand and remained near him after I was once again outside the building.

"Please," Glenn said with a charming smile, "call me Glenn."

"Looks like these people have to specify who they're keeping out," Sebastian said, his voice low and irritated, though he was trying to hide it. "We'll have a better chance at stopping this, if we work together."

Glenn looked over at me. "I suppose I can deal with that, if you can."

"We would appreciate that, Glenn," I was sure to add. "And you must call me Ariel."

"We have a list of places to hit tonight," Sebastian said, his voice a little deeper than normal. "Addresses for the hunters that were killed. You have time to look them over?"

Glenn's smile faded as his gaze moved to Sebastian. "We should probably get a diverse group to check them out," he said. "I could probably get one of the Changelings to help us, and Bobby."

"I'd prefer a different shifter," Sebastian replied. "Lonetree's a bit... temperamental."

So Bobby was a werewolf. I'd heard that one had hunted with Glenn and his group, but I'd never heard his name.

"Temperamental?" Glenn murmured. "I suppose that's one way of putting it. Darin might be a better choice."

"It's too bad Kiran isn't in town still," I commented to Raleigh. I liked the werecat. He'd been very easy going and helpful in dealing with Duncan and my brother.

Raleigh looked down at me. "No one's seen him since he left town," he said, sounding a bit sad.

"Darin would be fine," Sebastian was telling Glenn. "Raleigh, can you give him the list?"

Sebastian and Glenn spent the next ten minutes going over the list of addresses. One of them was actually someone that Glenn's group had been watching, and he knew of two more possible hunters. It seemed that for the time being Glenn was willing to work with us to collect more information on these new hunters and he made arrangements to meet us at the next address, after he picked up his werewolf friend and a member of the fae.

As the discussion continued I realized that Glenn being especially nice to me wasn't sitting well with Raleigh or Sebastian. It was strange actually. I could tell that Glenn wasn't attracted to me, in fact I was pretty sure that I'd heard that he was married, but he was kind of flirting with me and I think he only did it because he knew it pissed the other two men off.

The idea was unsettling, but Glenn never pushed it too far. I figured that as long as it didn't get in the way of what we were supposed to be doing I couldn't really say much. Maybe if I ignored it Sebastian and Raleigh would as well and Glenn would stop trying to push their buttons.

Once Glenn left us, promising to meet up at the next location, Sebastian and Raleigh exchanged a look I didn't understand before we headed back to the car. After opening the driver door, Sebastian waited close by as I moved to climb into the backseat, but he stopped me with a hand on my arm. Without a word he leaned down to drop a brief kiss on my startled lips, then smiled as he motioned for me to get in. While the gesture wasn't an unwelcomed one, I figured it was Sebastian's unconscious way re-staking his claim or something, which was nice.

## *Chapter 14 - Revelations from Joan*

"So say what you will  
Time will reveal  
In the end that I will be here still"  
Christina Aguilera  
"Here to Stay"

We spent the next few hours with Glenn and his friends, working our way through the list of locations. What we found, or should I say didn't find, left only more questions. Other than the five members of Trent's band, we found no evidence of any connections linking any of the deceased hunters, which didn't make sense. How did they come to know one another? Where had their knowledge come from? How many of them were there?

Every location showed signs of being recently fortified with some sort of weapons and food cache inside. We found books on survival, camping and the Occult. It was like these people were preparing for the Apocalypse, or maybe they thought they were already in one.

All the addresses were warded in some way to keep out at least one kind of supernatural creature, so it was kind of good that so many of us had come together. We had the ability to identify which symbols blocked which species, not that it did much good since no one could remember what they looked like from one location to the next. That's what continued to allude us, the ability to catalogue the symbols in any way since no one could draw or photograph them.

Stranger still was that now that we were aware of the symbols they seemed to be everywhere. In the neighborhoods around the locations we were checking out, warding the locations from the outside and still more inside. It was very frustrating.

We hoped to find some kind of a code book, dictionary, or reference material that would tell us what the symbols meant, but so far we'd found nothing. Sebastian ordered the Brujah to take whatever computers were found to Fly to check their hard drives. I had a feeling there wouldn't be anything there, though.

Thankfully everyone seemed to be at least tolerating each other. Glenn treated all of the vampires and ghouls the same way he treated Sebastian and Raleigh, aside from his continued flirting with me, which kept the other two men on constant edge. The only other difference was that it appeared that Glenn had a genuine respect for Joan, almost as if he pitied her.

I remembered who Joan had been before being made a vampire and I realized that Glenn seemed to have sort of idea who she was as well. Joan's appearance had been altered somehow to keep her safe from her old hunting group so he wouldn't have recognized her that way. Only a few people knew her real identity, so I couldn't help but wonder if Glenn actually knew, or if he was merely guessing.

For her part, Joan did her best to stay away from Glenn, as if he made her uncomfortable, but the Werewolf and the Changeling didn't seem to bother her one bit. I was able to pull her to one side when we were at Phil's apartment to ask how she was doing after last night. I didn't want to make a big deal about it, but I hoped to become friends with the other woman and I wanted to let her know I was concerned about her.

"I'm fine," she assured me, looking a bit embarrassed about her frenzy the night before. "Did you really stay at Sebastian's house over the day?" she asked, changing the subject.

I nodded. "Yes, I stayed there. He didn't want me to stay at my place because Trent knew where I lived. It was a good thing he did since they were obviously there during the day."

She gave me something of an unreadable look. "Did Raleigh stay there too?"

I nodded again. "He was there when we went to sleep and when we rose, but I didn't ask if he stayed there, why?"

"Oh, just wondering," she said lightly.

Her response had me a little weirded out so I had to ask. "Is... is there a reason I shouldn't be staying with Sebastian?" I asked. I couldn't help but remember that last night she made it sound as if she wouldn't mind having sex with the two 'hot boys' and that I should go for it or something to that effect.

"Oh, no," she said quickly. "It's just, I thought it would take them a little longer to talk you into it, that's all."

"Talk me into what?" I asked, offended. Of course my mind went right to sex, which is what happened, but I'd made sure to keep my answers to her vague on purpose.

"Oh, don't get offended," she said quickly, taking my arm and pulling me a little further from the group. "Don't tell me you didn't see this coming."

"See what coming?" I glanced quickly to where Sebastian and Raleigh were. "I don't understand what you are talking about?"

Joan stared at me for a moment as if she didn't believe me. "Ariel, the only reason Sebastian didn't throw you over his shoulder and tie you to his bed his first week in Nashville was because Duncan said it was a bad idea," she said in a low voice. "Raleigh didn't do it because he knew how badly Sebastian wanted to do it."

I stared at her in stunned surprise. I couldn't stop my gaze from moving over to the two men again, thinking about all the time that had been wasted because of Duncan.

"How do you know all this?" I asked Joan.

"How could you not?" Joan shot back, shaking her head. "Maybe I know because I've spent a lot of time with Sebastian, since-since my embrace. I've never heard them talk about it, but I could see it. I just thought it would take Sebastian longer to get over the shit with Duncan and ask you out." She smirked. "Or, you know, whatever."

"Joan," I choked in disbelief, trying to digest what she'd said. Sebastian had said something about wanting to be with me for a long time, but I never expected it to be this long. Hell, for all I knew it was just something he was saying and didn't mean. There was so much I didn't know at this point.

I was humming the melody that had been floating in my head as I thought. I hadn't been able to work the notes out completely, much less write anything down, but it was persistent enough that I was sure I wasn't going to forget it. "You're sure about this?" I asked her.

"Well, I half thought Raleigh would ask you first," she confessed, "but he's got this hang up about him being a ghoul making him not worthy."

"Not worthy?" I echoed as I started to pace a few steps around her, needing to move a little. "This cannot be- You're serious about this, aren't you?"

"Yeah, it's kind of annoying, really," she said. "Just because he's not a blood sucking fiend-- oh, you mean-- Ariel, it's as plain as the nose on your face, or it should be after last night." She stopped as if she thought of something she hadn't considered, then asked, "Or, well, didn't they both, you know, last night?"

I'd covered my eyes with my hands while she spoke, trying to get any of this to make sense. "Oh my goodness," I said very slowly, a warm feeling of happiness growing inside me so I couldn't suppress the smile on my face. "Oh, Joan, thank you," I told her, wrapping my arms around her in a hug. "Thank you so much."

"Whoa, don't thank me. I didn't do anything," she replied, returning the hug hesitantly, as if she wasn't used to getting them. She was smirking when she moved back quickly. "At least, not at Sebastian's."

I smiled at her and looked back toward Sebastian and Raleigh again, thinking that maybe there was hope for this thing we plunged into after all. "I know. Thank you." My gaze came back to her and I added, "I'd really like the chance to get to know you better. I spend

so much of my time with my sisters, and I love them, but I realized I've just limited myself by doing so."

"Yeah, I guess," Joan replied, sounding a little hesitant. "I mean, there's always room for one more on patrol, right?"

I frowned. "Your life is more than patrol, isn't it?"

She shrugged. "There's Alexander's."

"Oh no," I shook my head. "This isn't all you do with your time? We'll have to fix that. Have you ever been to The Masquerade?"

"A couple of times. I don't really fit in there. And I like patrolling," she continued. "Plus, it's not like I never have fun. Have you ever been to Alexander's?"

"A few times," I replied. "Maybe we could just hang out sometime? Watch a movie or something?"

She looked for a moment like she was going to refuse, then she shrugged. "Yeah, I guess."

I smiled. "Good."

My gaze moved back over to the guys yet again. Raleigh had his back turned to me, but Sebastian was looking in our direction as if he was wondering what Joan and I were talking about. I smiled widely at him as Joan and I moved to rejoin them.

"What was that about," Raleigh asked in a low voice when I stopped next to him.

I looked into his clear blue eyes, surprised he'd seen Joan and I talking. "What?"

"You and Joan," he elaborated.

I leaned on his arm and smiled again. "Just talking. How's it going here? Anything new?"

"Not really." He let the subject drop for now. "More ammo and foodstuffs."

I sighed. "Can't they just have an address book with a big X on it already? This is frustrating."

"Fly got us some phone records, but most of the calls from these guys either went to each other, or work," Raleigh informed me. "He's chasing down a few leads for us, hopefully he'll give us something new pretty soon."

I looked over to Sebastian, but posed my question to Raleigh. "How many more addresses are there?"

"Just two more, unless we get more leads."

"What happens if we don't get anymore leads?"

"Found something," Darin, the werewolf, called out. All eyes shifted to where he was holding up a notebook with one of the symbols on the cover.

Glenn walked over to him. "What is it?"

"There's a bunch of shit in here about survival and weapons and crap, but there's also a list of addresses. Most of them we already have, but there are three here that aren't, and a name."

Sebastian moved to join them and the three men huddled over the book.

I looked up at Raleigh and slipped my arm through his. "Looks like we found another lead."

Sebastian spent the next ten minutes or so in a discussion with Glenn and a few of the others, figuring out what the best way was to divide up the group to check out the three new addresses. The idea was to break the group up to spread out the various species so we had a better chance of figuring out what we were dealing with. In the end, it was decided to have three groups, one consisted of the lone werewolf with a vampire and ghoul. The second would be made up of the fae and two vampires. The last group would be Glenn, two vampires and the remaining ghoul.

Glenn suggested that Joan and I should go with him. Joan was clearly uncomfortable with the idea and so were Sebastian and Raleigh.

I turned to Sebastian and asked, "What would you rather me do?" I wasn't sure I liked the implication that I had to get permission from him to do something, but I wasn't about to call either of them out about it in mixed company.

"It's up to you," he told me, then to Glenn he said, "I think Joan would work better with Darin, if you don't think you can work with me, I'm sure Toya would be happy to go with you."

"Glenn, why don't you just ride with Sebastian, Raleigh and I," I suggested. "We all came together anyhow."

"Sure," Glenn answered after a long minute, giving at Sebastian a knowing look as he did.

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There was a lull in the action when various members of the group took a few minutes to report in so I pulled Sebastian aside to ask, "I hope my suggestion was okay."

"Yeah, it's fine," he replied, taking my hand. "Johnson's just trying to get a rise out of me."

I squeezed his hand. "I know. I'm not sure why, but the fact that he's goading you is apparent. Just don't let him get to you."

Sebastian smiled. "It takes more than that to get to me. I'll be fine."

I returned his smile and gave him what I hoped was an appreciative look. "I know you're fine." I prayed that I didn't sound too awkward, but my conversation with Joan had left me feeling a little more courageous when it came to Sebastian.

He cupped the side of my face and tilted my face up so he could kiss me. "I will," he breathed against my lips, his voice full of promise. "We all will."

I reached up to touch his hand with my fingertips. "There are things we should talk about," I said, trying not to get lost in Sebastian's blue eyes that were so much like Raleigh's. "When all this is done, or we have a break, or whatever. I feel like I need to know what I should and shouldn't do."

I knew I was changing the subject and I hoped that Sebastian understood what I meant. I had no idea if he wanted other Kindred or supernaturals in the city to know we were... close or whatever. I mean, he just kissed me in front of everyone, but was that going to be the norm? How did Raleigh and PDA's work in? I wasn't sure what to do most of the time.

Sebastian caught my fingers loosely in his and brought them to his lips for a kiss. "We'll talk," he murmured in a low voice.

I nodded. "Okay. I know it's not the best time to bring it up but..."

"We'll get there," he said with a smile. "Come on, let's get our work done so we can play."

We started back toward Glenn and Raleigh and I saw that Sebastian's childe had positioned herself well away from the Mage. "Joan seemed really uncomfortable about going with Glenn," I commented. "Why?"

Sebastian cleared his throat as he looked to where the two men were quietly talking. "She knew him, before," he explained.

"Oh, I see. Does he know who she is?" I asked in a very low voice.

"He shouldn't, but he does."

"Well that sucks."

"It makes her feel very uncomfortable."

"Well I'm glad you spoke up then." I leaned into him. "I know there's some shaky ground between you, but I hope your relationship is a good one. I like her."

His expression turned sad as he glanced at Joan. "She didn't deserve what we-what I did to her."

I moved to stand in front of him, my face set with determination as our gazes met. "I don't ever want to hear anything like that come out of you again. It wasn't your fault. Okay?"

I'd told him as much before, right after Duncan's death as a matter of fact. I understood the shame that Sebastian probably felt about being in the situation he'd found himself in. But that didn't matter anymore. Duncan was dead and Sebastian was no longer under his influence.

"Yes, it was," he insisted. It was obvious that he blamed himself.

I looked around to see exactly who might be listening to us then met his gaze again. "Look, I don't understand exactly how that all works, but what I do know is that you were taken advantage of," I said, my voice low again. I understood that his station in the city meant he had a different set of rules to live by and I knew that it couldn't become common knowledge about the bond or people would stop respecting him. "Crap, this is really something we can't talk about now."

Sebastian's expression was stony. "No, this is not the time or place and in any case, the past cannot be changed."

I nodded. "Let's find Raleigh and Glenn and get going."

He nodded and a short time later we had collected the other men and were on our way, Raleigh and I in the backseat while Glenn sat up front with Sebastian.



## Chapter 15 – Warehouse

"I know there's hurt, I know there's pain"  
Christina Aguilera  
"Blank Page"

The address we were going to was just north of town in a commercial district. On the way, Raleigh received a text with information on the place. Apparently the owner died just before Christmas last year in an 'animal attack'.

"Animal attack? Why does that sound like a convenient excuse?" I asked.

"Sounds like a werewolf," Sebastian pointed out.

"It's common for hunters to begin when someone close to them dies," Glenn explained. "I wonder if this guy was a hunter or if his heirs are the hunters."

Ten minutes later we pulled up in front of a rundown warehouse that looked like it hadn't been used in a couple of years. Tall tufts of grass and other weeds filled the gaps in the drive and sidewalks and trash littered the yard. Surprisingly, all of the windows were still intact and the locks on the door were shiny and new. Two symbols were painted on the side of the building.

"I thought the person who owned this died a couple of months ago," I said as Sebastian parked.

"Yeah," Raleigh said, looking around carefully. "Before Christmas."

"Looks like this area sees a lot of traffic for an abandoned building," Glenn commented as we all piled out of the car and he pointed to the area near a door where no weeds grew in the cracks and the trash that had been kicked away.

"Do you think it's still active then?" I asked, looking around for any signs of life.

The Mage looked back at me and smiled. "Probably. If the guy's family isn't using it, someone else is."

I drew a deep breath. "Should we see if anyone is home then?" I moved toward the nearest window to look in and Sebastian followed me over. It was dark inside, but I could see a red led light about ten feet inside.

"There's no one inside," Glenn said after a moment. "A few rats, nothing more."

"The red should be an exit sign, right?" I asked Sebastian.

He nodded slowly, not moving his eyes from the window. "Could be, or it could be from a camera or motion sensor. We won't know until we get in there."

"It's a motion sensor," Glenn reported, a smug tone to his voice. I figured he was using magick of some kind since he was no where near any window to look in. It was like I could feel him trying to push Sebastian's buttons from where I was standing.

"Does anyone know how to turn it off or should we look for another way inside?" I asked.

"I can block it," Glenn offered. "And unlock the door, if you'd like."

I turned to face him. "Might be the best idea."

Glenn reached into the pouch at his waist again and pulled out a black stone. Holding it in his palm, he concentrated and after a moment the light inside went off and the door clicked open.

I moved over to the door and tried the handle. It opened easily. I turned to Sebastian and nodded and he gestured for me to see if I could walk in. I stepped over the threshold without any problem.

Inside the building was very dark and I noticed a really bad smell, like spoiled food or dead rats. I covered my nose, even though the smell didn't have a physical effect on me and carefully walked in further.

Sebastian followed me in and switched on an overhead light to reveal a 20'x40' room. One side was all shelves that were filled with storage boxes, rolls of things I couldn't identify, and trash. On the other side was a fork truck that looked like it hadn't moved in

years, and a door. It was obvious by the layers of dust that everything had been undisturbed for a long while with the exception of a cleared path to the other door.

I moved toward it, being careful to make no noise just in case we weren't alone. As I neared the door the smell got worse and I saw that there were more symbols painted on the wooden surface.

I reached for the knob and found it unlocked and when I opened it, the smell was overpowering. "Ugh! What is that?" I asked, covering my face with my hand.

Sebastian was right behind me. "Smells like someone died."

"It really does," I answered, tentatively moving forward into the space.

There wasn't much light spilling in from the room we were leaving, but it looked as if there were several long rows of shelves in this room as well, only these were covered with supplies. Everything from toilet paper and food to what looked like weapons further in. Some of the supplies had been knocked off the shelves on the left side of the room, as if a struggle had taken place. There were lots of dark shapes at the edge of the light, some small, like cans, some larger, like boxes, and then there was one that was a little too large to be supplies. I feared that it was a body.

I felt the wall just inside the room for a light switch and once I found it the light confirmed the signs of a struggle. And the large shape that I'd feared was a body, was in fact a man from the looks of it, but my mind was processing things very slowly.

I heard Glenn swear behind me.

There was a great deal of blood and gore covering much of what was on the floor. It looked like the stomach of the man had been cut open by a machete that was lying on the floor not far from it.

"You know him?" Sebastian asked, moving around me to get closer to the body as I recoiled from the sight.

"Werewolf," Glenn replied. "Went missing a few months ago. We thought he'd just left town."

I wanted to run, get away from the body and the obviously horrible way he'd died. The only thing that stopped me was the knowledge that if I wanted to be with Sebastian then I would have to get used to this. Get used to the blood and crime scenes. I had to become stronger.

"Looks like these hunters got a hold of him," Sebastian said. "Or maybe he came here to take them out and got surprised."

Raleigh walked up beside me and put his hand on my lower back comfortingly. I leaned into his touch, the contact helping to keep me from getting overwhelmed by the grotesque display. "But why leave this like it is?" I asked. "All these supplies. The body? I can see abandoning the place, but it must have taken a while to accumulate everything here."

"A lot of the weapons are gone," Sebastian said, now standing near the body. "Maybe whoever did this was so disgusted they didn't want to come back."

"Or they were killed before they could come back," Glenn suggested. "Maybe the hunter was the owner who died in December. The timing might be right. Maybe whoever inherited this place hasn't wasted their time to get back here and check it out."

"What should we do about the body?" I asked.

Sebastian looked around. "Burn it. Just because hunters haven't been here since this guy was killed doesn't mean they won't be back. Burn the building, burn the supplies."

"I agree we should burn the building," Glenn said, "but I'd like to take the body. His tribe would like to know what happened to him, perform the necessary funeral rites."

Sebastian nodded in agreement and Glenn pulled out a cell phone and walked back out into the other room.

"You all right?" Raleigh asked me in a low voice close to my ear.

I nodded. "Just... it's nothing. I'm fine." I gave him a small smile to put him at ease, but stayed where I was. I had to show Sebastian that I could handle this, handle being a

part of his life. I had to show Raleigh that I had strength as well. I could be their partner, an asset to them, if they let me. I just had to fight the revulsion that made me want to gag.

I watched as Sebastian started looking through the stuff that had been left behind. "We should help," I told Raleigh, knowing that it would be better to occupy my mind with something other than the dead werewolf. I moved away from Raleigh's warm length and started to look for any clues, steering clear of the body.

Again I was struck by the notion that all these provisions reminded me of someone readying for the Apocalypse. Food, non-food, you name it, it was here. There were even cans of gas, oil, and other mechanical type necessities. Did they know something that we didn't?

"Looks like whoever put this together was preparing for the end of the world," I commented as I looked around at the supplies. I spotted a large piece of ripped denim that was made up of a back pocket with a wallet half hanging out of it. I bent to retrieve it and pulled the wallet out to see who it belonged to. Inside was a license that belonged to Shane Thomas. An older man, though not the owner of the building if our research was correct.

I called Sebastian over to look at the license. The address given wasn't on our list so I made sure to point it out after he took it from me. The rest of the wallet's contents were pretty standard. Some cash. Bank information and credit cards. Then I found a picture of a teenaged boy.

"A son?" I asked showing Sebastian the picture.

"Probably," he replied. "We'll have to see if we can track him down, find out what he knows about this place."

"Should we ask Fly to look into him?" I suggested. "See what he can come up with?"

He smiled as if he was pleased that I'd thought of it. "I planned to. You'll have to meet Fly, he's... interesting."

I nodded. "I would like to meet him very much. Have you known him long?"

"Yeah, a while," he said. "I used to get most of my intel from Masters, and after he was gone, I wanted someone I could rely on. I found Fly, and he's been very useful."

"I'm glad you have someone you can count on," I told him honestly, reaching out to touch his arm. "You want me to hang onto this for now?"

"Yeah. We get back to the house, I'll scan the picture in and send it to Fly. He'll take it from there."

I put everything back into the wallet and slipped it in my jacket pocket. "Should we look at the rest of the building?"

"Sounds good."

"Marty and Peace will be here soon to collect the body," Glenn told Sebastian when he rejoined us a few minutes later. "Marty's not happy about this whole mess. He wants to be involved in hunting these hunters."

Sebastian nodded. "I think we've got it handled for tonight, but I won't say no to more help," he told the other man. "As long as he agrees to work with us, sharing information and such. We don't need a lone vigilante after these things."

Glenn nodded as well. "Marty's pretty level headed, and his pack aren't warlike as a rule. They should cooperate."

"Then there's no reason to turn them away," Sebastian agreed. "Hopefully by the end of the night we'll have more information. Maybe we should call a meeting tomorrow evening to discuss everything that we've found and devise a plan to go on from there."

Glenn grinned. "Not a bad idea. We might need a pretty big area for everyone who's gonna want to be involved."

"I'll make a couple of calls," Sebastian said. "I know a place we can probably use."

I wondered what place Sebastian had in mind, but didn't voice anything. Most of this room had already been searched so I moved back into the room where we had come in as Glenn went outside to wait for Marty and Peace.

I heard Sebastian on the phone, talking to Nez Smith to see if he could use Burn, one of Nez's bars, for an inter-species meeting the next night. Nez was my friend Nathan's sire and he helped Nez run both Burn and his other bar, Crash. I was glad that Sebastian was going to them for the meeting place.

A few minutes later Glenn returned with two large men, one with longish blonde hair and the other with short brown hair and piercing brown eyes. He didn't stop to make introductions and I was glad of relieved since they were werewolves. The blonde glanced at me briefly, but didn't pause. But the brunette man, Peace, did stop long enough to look me over, obviously interested. A sharp word from his friend got him moving again.

The wolf's odd attention made me vow to keep a safe distance from the two men. I knew that I passed for human so I didn't want to run the risk of starting anything between them and Sebastian because of me. I decided to stay closer to Sebastian or Raleigh.

The two werewolves emerged carrying the body several minutes later that they'd wrapped in blankets. Again the blonde dismissed my presence, but the other one looked me over as if he thought I was lunch. I didn't meet his gaze as they left.

Sebastian joined us in the outer room as Glenn followed the wolves outside, and once they were gone, Glenn came back in. "I think we're done here," he said.

"I think you're right," Sebastian replied.

Glenn told Sebastian to let him know if he learned anything new and he would do the same. I moved closer to Raleigh and in a quiet voice told him about the werewolf looking at me like I was lunch or something.

"I'm pretty sure it wasn't lunch he was thinking about," Raleigh said, obviously sounding displeased as he looked over my head at the departing group.

"Then I definitely don't want to know what he was thinking about," I said, moving even closer to him.

Raleigh pulled me close to him and looked down at me. "You really have no idea how beautiful you are, do you?"

I looked down at his chest, embarrassed by his words. "What will we do now?" I asked, changing the subject.

"We should head to Tristan's," Sebastian answered for him from a few feet away. "Have everyone meet us there and go over what we found out, fill him in, too." He came over to us, smiling as if he liked seeing me in Raleigh's arms. "Then we head home for a little relaxation. Unless you need to go somewhere, Ariel?"

I bit my lip, watching two men carefully. "I'm okay. Will... will Vanessa be included as well? At the Prince's?" She was my sire and I knew she was concerned about me. I wanted to make sure she was in the loop so she didn't worry too much.

"Certainly," he said. "If that is what you wish. Why don't you call her while Raleigh and I call the Brujah and Tristan?"

I nodded as I pulled away from Raleigh enough to retrieve my phone from my pocket. "What time should I tell her?" I asked as I dialed.

"Tell her we'll be discussing the information we've gathered on these new hunters. I'm sure she's been worried about how it will affect you, seeing as how you knew several of them without realizing it. Tell her an hour."

We all had phone calls to make then Raleigh and Sebastian carefully set the warehouse up to burn. Once the fire was started we headed for the car, but Sebastian went only a couple of blocks away to make sure it really caught before we headed to Tristan's.

\* ~ \* ~ \*

On the way Raleigh mentioned that he had talked to the people who were packing up my apartment and he said that they should have everything to Sebastian's in a couple of hours.

I was sure that surprise registered on my face. "Ah... thank you. That was fast."

"It's a small apartment, Ariel, and we've got half a dozen people on it," he pointed out.

I tried to picture that many people in my apartment. I never did a great deal of entertaining at my place because of its size. "Still, that's fast," I replied with a smile.

I thought back to the day I'd moved in and how empty the space had been. Ten years later I knew how much that had changed. "Thank you so much for taking care of everything, Sebastian. There's no way I could ever go back there." I shivered slightly just thinking about the possibility of hunters being there. "Is there any word from Joan and the others? Are they all okay?"

"Everyone's fine," Raleigh told me. "Joan's group ran into one of the hunters, but they had the element of surprise and were able to take her out very quickly, no one was really hurt. The other groups ran into wards, but they managed."

"Were they able to capture the woman so she can be questioned?" I asked, leaning forward between the seats, hoping there would be more information in our future.

"No, but we can see if Lachlan was able to get any information from the one at Tristan's."

I leaned my head on Raleigh's shoulder and my left hand on Sebastian's shoulder. "So we've looked into all the leads we had with the exception of the wallet we just found, right?"

"We may have a couple more leads," Sebastian said. "We'll know more once we gather all the information and compare notes."

I watched his profile closely, wondering about the man beneath the persona I'd been drawn to for so long. "Is this how most of your investigations go?"

He laughed softly. "No, they don't usually go this well."

I began to hum slightly as I continued to look at him. "You call this well? We've barely had places to check out!"

Sebastian's gaze darted my way, a faint smile on his lips. "It's way more than we usually get. Sometimes it takes weeks to find one place to check out."

I rolled my eyes. "Ugh, how frustrating. How do you do it? I mean, how do you keep going? I would - I don't know. I guess I'm into results."

"I get results, darling," he replied. "Sometimes results take patience."

I smiled widely, humming still as I thought about what he said. "I know you get the job done, Sebastian." I tightened my hold on his shoulder slightly. "I just don't think I could."

He grabbed my hand and kissed it. "Good thing it's not your job then," he said with a smile, "though from what I can see, you do the job just fine."

"I'm sure you're being very kind," I told him fondly. I knew what my limitations were, the pretty girl who could sing. But I planned on working to change so that I would be valuable to him and Raleigh. I didn't know if I could go back to being the person I was just the night before. I'd been given a glimpse of what I could have with Sebastian and Raleigh and I didn't think I would survive being rejected by them.

"Don't sell yourself short," Sebastian replied. "It's not all about the muscle. You've done a great deal to make this city what it is today. Not to mention the way you have us all wrapped around your little finger."

*It's all for you,* I thought to myself and leaned forward to kiss his cheek. "You have that backwards, Sebastian. I-I would do anything for you. Have done." I glanced over to Raleigh. "Both of you."

"If only we were deserving of your devotion," Sebastian said softly, sounding only half teasing.

Raleigh looked at Sebastian in mock offense. "You may be unworthy of such a beautiful woman, but I am not, I deserve every bit of her attentions."

I laughed a little and dropped my head to Raleigh's shoulder again so I was looking at Sebastian. "I'm the one who doesn't deserve you. Thank you for letting me in your world."

That familiar melody was dancing in my head again as Sebastian turned his head to look at me briefly. Before he had a chance to reply, his cell phone rang.

From Sebastian's end of the conversation it became apparent that one of the other groups had been attacked when they were leaving their address. No one had been killed, but Toya had been injured pretty badly and the others with her were wounded. They managed to fight off the hunters and get away, but they didn't manage to capture anyone, or kill any of the hunters.

"I hope Toya will be alright," I said to Raleigh in a quiet voice so as not to distract Sebastian.

"She's tougher than she looks," he said in an equally low voice.

Sebastian finished on the phone and hung up. "You catch that?"

"Yeah," Raleigh replied.

"The Brujah are taking Toya back to Alexander's before one of them will join us at the Prince's." He hesitated a moment, then added, "I really hoped that we'd gotten them all."

"How many hunters were there?" I asked, worried about those who'd been injured.

"Four," he reported. "If they'd been normal humans, they would have been able to take them out, no problem."

"What happens now?" I asked. "We still have to go to the Prince's to share information, right?"

"Yeah, the trouble's over, for now, and we don't have any leads," Sebastian said, working his fingers through his dark hair. "We need to regroup, find out where to go from here."

I laid my hand on his shoulder again, hoping to give at least a small amount of comfort. "We will find them Sebastian. We'll figure this all out."

He didn't answer and I could see his mind was going a mile a minute, trying to figure everything out. Not long after he pulled into the drive at Tristan's. There were several other cars already parked, but I only recognized three. Joan, Lachlan and Vanessa.

I exited the vehicle and stayed close to Sebastian and Raleigh on the way in, all three of us ever watchful for symbols or anything out of the ordinary.

## Chapter 16 - The Prince

"I don't need try to control you"  
Maroon 5 feat. Christina Aguilera  
"Moves Like Jagger"

Sebastian headed for Tristan as soon as we walked in the room where everyone was gathered. Mateo and Lachlan were with the Prince as well as Tristan's sister and ghoul, Serena. Joan was kind of hanging back from the others, but listening intently. She smiled at her sire as he approached and Sebastian nodded at her in greeting. There were a few others around that I nodded to respectfully as Raleigh took my arm and led me over to Vanessa, whom he greeted politely, before going to join Sebastian.

Vanessa smiled at me and in a low voice asked, "Something you want to share, my dear?" She glanced between the two men I arrived with. "Or have you been sharing already?"

If it were possible to blush then I had to be as I turned to face her. "Please Vanessa, don't tease," I begged, looking around us. "Is it that obvious?"

"Only to me, dear, only to me," she said with a smile, patting my arm.

I smiled in return and turned so that I was standing next to her as I looped my arms around one of hers. I looked around the room and caught Joan's gaze from where she was standing near Sebastian and we exchanged smiles in greeting.

One of the Prince's house ghouls came by with a tray of glasses filled with blood and I took one as I slowly processed the scene around me. This was the first time I'd ever attended a meeting at the Tristan's house and the atmosphere was more informal than I would have thought it would be. We were in a long room that had an outdoor balcony running along each side and subtle lighting so that you could easily see if you were walking along it. The room was tastefully decorated, with dark brown accents and beautiful artwork. It reminded me a bit of Sebastian's house so I was sure that Serena had been in charge of decorating.

The Ventrue Primogen, Zeke Mann, was the last to arrive with another of his clanmembers, Hank Montgomery, and their ghouls. At the Prince's invitation, everyone moved to take a seat at the large table that stood at one end of the room near a curved window that looked out over the backyard. Tristan sat at one end of the table with Mateo and Zeke on either side of him. Sebastian sat next to Mateo and Hank next to him. Vanessa and I took the two remaining chairs on that side of the table, while Lachlan, Joan and Max sat on the other side.

Sebastian began the meeting by going over all the hunters that we'd killed the night before, reading from a folder of information that Raleigh gave him. He was halfway through the file by the time Nathan Montgomery and Jax Alexander entered. They nodded in greeting to Tristan and quietly slipped into the two empty chairs across from Vanessa and I.

Sebastian continued as blood was offered to the newcomers. When he was done, Lachlan began to talk about the hunter he'd been questioning and I leaned forward to listen intently.

"Apparently the man is deeply religious or he is schizophrenic," Lachlan reported. "He claims that voices showed him monsters and gifted him with powers to destroy them."

"Could it be that we have so many of the *faith* in Nashville?" Tristan commented, sounding skeptical.

"I don't believe it to be the same type of faith that we have seen in centuries past," Lachlan replied, "but it is a type of faith nonetheless."

I wasn't entirely sure what Tristan or Lachlan were referring to. I looked to Sebastian to see his reaction, but all I caught was a frown. I knew that he wasn't old enough to have experienced the 'centuries past' that Lachlan had been talking about, but something in his

expression said the concept of a hunters faith enhancing their abilities to hunt our kind wasn't new to him.

"I was not able to gain any information about the symbols," Lachlan continued. "No matter what methods of persuasion I used, the subject would not reveal any of the meanings or the methods by which they have made it impossible for us to duplicate the symbols. My best guess is to find a human who is completely unrelated to any supernatural creature and ask them to study the symbols."

"Not a bad idea," Tristan replied. "I'm sure we can find someone to fill that purpose."

It sounded like a good idea to me. I didn't know any mortals well enough for something like that besides Karen, so I kept quiet, knowing that there had to be someone else in the room that had a better suggestion. A few names were tossed around and Tristan determined that the specifics would be better determined later.

The meeting quickly moved on to the locations that were investigated earlier that night. Sebastian began with the warehouse that we'd checked out and what we found. There were questions from the others and even a few aimed toward me concerning the wallet and the picture that I answered quickly, thankful that I didn't stammer too badly.

Joan described the location her group had been assigned, explaining how they'd been attacked but were able to kill their attacker quickly. Unfortunately they'd found no further information from that site that we didn't already have.

Then Nathan filled the group in about the location he and Toya had visited, explaining how they'd gotten into the building with no problems, but the fae with them couldn't enter the apartment. They found an address book and some of the names had symbols next to them that everyone was eager to have a look at.

As they were leaving, a group of hunters attacked. Somehow they'd managed to freeze Lan, the fae with them, leaving him unable to fight. One of them hit Nathan hard enough to cause serious injury that he was still having a hard time healing. Most worrisome was that another hunter had been able to run a piece of wood through Toya's chest, thankfully just missing her heart, but causing a great deal of damage. It would be at least a week or so before she would be back on her feet.

Luckily all of them had escaped while the hunters had walked away with no injuries at all. The news caused everyone around the table to become very grave. Nathan was a well-known fighter, and for mere humans to nearly take the group of them down... well, it was unheard of.

It sounded as if the hunters who had attacked them were even more experienced than the ones we encountered the night before. I understood all too well the frustration that came from powers not working the way they were expected to and I made a mental note to ask Sebastian about finding ways to work around that for the future. Like how Raleigh suggested that I tried singing when Phil and Andy were distracted.

"What can we do to combat these new hunters?" Zeke questioned Sebastian.

"Bullets work," Sebastian pointed out. "I shot two of them last night with no greater difficulty than shooting a regular human."

"I agree," Nathan added. "We were able to shoot one or two as well. Unfortunately, none of the bullets hit a kill spot, but they were wounded."

"The werewolf that was with my group had no difficulty sinking his claws into the one that attacked us," Joan added.

"Yet somehow they are able to imbue mundane objects with the power to cause greater wounds," Tristan murmured.

I thought about getting Raleigh's attention to have him bring up the distraction technique we'd used, but quickly realized that as a ghoulish he probably wouldn't be comfortable suggesting it. If anyone were going to share the idea it would have to be me. I didn't feel very confident speaking in front of all these powerful Kindred in the city, but I knew the idea was a good one. I waited for a break in the conversation and then quietly said, "E-excuse me, my Prince."



Tristan seemed a little surprised that I spoke up, but the small smile on his face told me that my opinion was welcomed. "Yes?"

I knew it was obvious that I was uncomfortable and I glanced nervously around the table before speaking again. "I think that... I think that what's been one of the most frustrating things about these new hunters is that our powers don't seem to affect them like they do other humans." I looked around the table again and hoped like hell that I didn't sound stupid. "One thing that I witnessed was that my singing ability worked better if they were distracted. Perhaps what we need to consider is re-strategizing how we use our power."

"She's right," Sebastian said. "I tried several of my abilities to no effect. Ariel wasn't always successful either, but several times last night she was able to affect some of the hunters, though many could resist her."

"I had limited effect on the one that attacked us tonight," Joan added.

"If physical weapons are working, why not stick to them?" Zeke asked.

"We don't fully know what they are capable of," I said. "I wonder if maybe we continually shake up what we're doing we'll have a better chance of getting through their defenses."

"Did you have something in mind?" Sebastian asked.

"Um, well," I stumbled, looking around the table and wishing my chair would disappear into the floor already. "What ... what if we worked in pairs or teams?" I looked over at Raleigh as I continued, and he smiled at me encouragingly. "Raleigh and I were able to get to that pair at the wreck by going through a storefront and I used my singing ability to try lulling them to sleep while he was able to shoot one."

"The Daughters certainly have an unusual talent," Jax said, speaking up for the first time and eying me thoughtfully. "Perhaps if we were to utilize their abilities along side members of the more physical clans."

"I'm sure the clan would be happy to help wipe these hunters out of the city," Vanessa offered. "You would have my full cooperation, as well as Ariel's, I believe, but Henrietta would have to confirm any one else."

Tristan sat back. "I will speak with her this evening," he said, then turned to Zeke and Jax, then Mateo. "In fact it would be best to call a meeting of the Primogens," he continued. "Events such as this affect all of our people. It's possible that other clans may have abilities like that of the Daughters and can help us in this matter." He looked at me and smiled approvingly.

I nodded slightly and looked to Sebastian, hoping that I did well in his eyes. I wanted to be valuable to him so I was relieved when I saw the appreciation in his gaze when he looked my way.

"We will call a Primogen Council meeting for 2:00 a.m.," Tristan said, looking at Zeke and Anna. "Mateo will contact the other Primogen. If no one else has any further ideas, we can adjourn."

Oh good, that meant we were almost done. My nerves were totally shot after talking to the entire group and I stood as soon as everyone prepared to leave, looking to Sebastian and hoping that we could leave soon, too.

"Will you be staying with your young men, or would you like to come home with me?" Vanessa asked.

"I... need to stay with them," I told her, sitting back down so that I could explain about the symbol on my building and how I was no longer going to be living in my apartment. I told her that my things were being taken to Sebastian's for now and that I would have to figure out what my next move was.

With a sly smile on her lips, Vanessa advised me to enjoy myself then gathered her purse to go. She left me with a kiss on my cheek and I realized as she was left the room that only a handful of people remained. Tristan, Mateo, Lachlan, Joan, Sebastian and Raleigh were all gathered near the end of the table where the Prince had been seated during the meeting and Sebastian gestured for me to join them. When I reached his side,

he put his hand on my lower back and while no one commented on his telltale gesture, it did not go unnoticed.

"Ariel will be staying with me," Sebastian said, continuing his conversation. "Her apartment is being packed up and the contents stored until she has need of them."

"Your singing affected some of the hunters." Lachlan said, one brow lifted in thought. "Was the effect as strong as it would have been on a normal mortal?"

I shook my head. "N-no, it wasn't." I found myself wanting to reach for Raleigh's hand to have some kind of contact with him as well, but I settled for a look in his direction. "I tried it several times with the same inconsistent results."

"Fascinating," he murmured, thinking.

"Is our guest in any condition for her to try with him?" Sebastian asked.

"Perhaps," Lachlan replied. "It may be better to give him a few nights rest, to recuperate a bit further, before we attempt experimentation. After all, a hunter one meets in the field is hardly going to be in that kind of shape."

I looked up at Sebastian. "You want me to try singing on the captive?"

"It may help us figure out a few things," he replied. "Do certain emotions work, and others not? Does your abilities work better on hunters of lower... faith or whatever it is they have? I'm not sure what else we could figure out, but that would be a good start."

I nodded in agreement. "Whatever you think will be helpful."

"It will have to wait, I'm afraid," Lachlan said. "Perhaps tomorrow night."

Sebastian then explained about the inter-species meeting he'd set up at Burn the following night. Lachlan and Mateo agreed to attend and Tristan suggested that some of the other clans should send representatives as well. Tristan then reminded Sebastian that he was expected to attend the Primogen meeting later, but for now, the three of us were dismissed.

## Chapter 17 – Downtime

"When you put your hands on me  
I feel ready

And I lose my self-control"

Christina Aguilera

"When You Put Your Hands On Me"

We had roughly three hours until the Primogen meeting so on the way out I asked Sebastian if he minded stopping by his house. We'd been in some sticky situations in the last twenty-four hours and I wanted to drop off my guitar and laptop so nothing happened to them.

"Good idea," Sebastian agreed as we made our way to the car. "I want to make sure that the rest of your things arrived safely."

I was still a bit shell shocked by the idea of my apartment being packed up so quickly. It was all a little too much to think about so I was relieved when Raleigh took my hand and held it loosely in his the rest of the way to the car. He then held open the door for me to get inside, a small reassuring smile on his face.

It wasn't that far from the Prince's house to Sebastian's, and the first thing I noticed as we pulled up was a large moving van parked in the driveway. Several men were moving boxes and furniture into the garage and my heart did a little leap when I recognized some of my things. I got out of the car and moved into the garage for a closer look.

It looked as if the larger furniture was being stored in the garage for now, but the men informed us that some boxes had already been taken inside, per Sebastian's orders. I wondered why Sebastian would have had them do that, but I didn't voice the question for now. Once I was assured that all of my belongings had survived transport I returned to the car to get my guitar and laptop. Sebastian remained in the garage to supervise where everything was going while Raleigh followed me and took my guitar case.

I followed Raleigh inside the house and to Sebastian's music room. "Is it okay if I leave my laptop in here as well?" I asked from the doorway.

"Yeah, sure," Raleigh said as he put my guitar down. "We can get you a little desk for it, if you like, or if there's something of yours you want to use, we can bring it in here."

I stashed the case out of the way for now. "We'll have to see. Do you think Sebastian is going to want to leave right away? I think I'm going to grab my songbook because there's some thoughts that I've got to get down. They're driving me crazy."

"He'll be a few minutes, at least," Raleigh said with a fond smile. "Take however long you need. I'll go make sure he's not unpacking for you."

*Unpacking?*

Raleigh's comment made me laugh nervously. "H-he wouldn't be doing that," I said, straightening from where I'd stowed away the case and I turned to Raleigh. "Would he?"

"Not tonight, we've got too much to do," he assured me. Then he gave me a soft kiss. "Come find us when you're ready."

His answer alluded to the fact that at some point there would be unpacking. Did Sebastian really mean for me to move in here? The idea was crazy, wasn't it? It was far too soon to even think about something like that. I headed downstairs to the room Sebastian meant to be mine to retrieve my songbook, humming as I went. No, that couldn't be right. I was letting my imagination get away from me, that was all. My wishful imagination. Of course I would love nothing more than to be with them forever, but the fact was we'd slept together once. Okay, twice. But I couldn't make life-changing plans after one night. The idea was crazy.

There were several boxes stacked near the closet and a few smaller ones on the dresser. I didn't really have time to think about unpacking anything, but I did take a

moment to peek inside. As I'd expected, the contents of the boxes were all from my bedroom area and in the bathroom there were a few smaller boxes with all my toiletries.

I didn't know what to feel. My entire existence had so quickly been relegated to a truckload of furniture and boxes. But now wasn't the time for serious reflection on my personal life, so I quickly located my songbook and headed back upstairs.

I found the two men in the kitchen. Raleigh was making himself a sandwich while Sebastian was typing on a laptop.

I stopped by Raleigh to kiss his cheek then moved over to the table to kiss Sebastian's, who tilted his head and lingered after I moved away. "What are you doing?" I asked as I slipped into a chair next to him.

"Just sending more information to Fly," Sebastian reported. "Hopefully he can come up with something by the Primogen meeting later."

"Did you need that wallet?" I asked, pulling it from my pocket and handing it to him.

"Yeah, thanks. I just need to scan the license and that picture in."

He had a small scanner attached to the laptop, the kind that could take up to a 4x5 sheet of paper. He scanned both items as I opened up my book to a clean page and started writing the lyrics that had been dancing in my head and a few possible note combinations, humming as I worked.

A few minutes later Raleigh sat down next to me and began eating. I was aware of the two men discussing the events of the last few nights, but I wasn't paying much attention to what they were saying. There was a counter melody I was having a hard time working out in my head and found myself wishing that I had my guitar or a piano. Then I remembered that my guitar was in Sebastian's music room and there just so happened to be a piano there as well.

I picked my book and wandered out of the kitchen, lost in my music and only vaguely aware that Sebastian and Raleigh were talking.

\* ~ \* ~ \*

After a while, I wasn't sure how long, I realized that both men were standing near the piano, watching me play. "Sorry," I said quickly in embarrassment as my fingers stopped on the keys. "Are you ready to go? Am I holding you up?"

"No, it's all right," Sebastian assured me, sitting beside me on the bench. "Joan is patrolling, there is no hurry." His blue eyes met mine with a soft expression. "You play beautifully."

I looked down shyly as I moved my hands to my lap. "Thank you," I told him quietly, not used to such praise from anyone but Vanessa. "If you need to go I can be finished for now." I glanced up at him, then quickly down again, wondering if he was annoyed by how easily I got lost in my music. "I forget where I am sometimes. Sorry."

Sebastian put his hand under my chin and lifted my face to look at him. "Don't ever apologize for making beautiful music," he said seriously. He looked as if he was going to say something else, then he just leaned in to kiss me.

His mouth was wet and possessive and I was quick to kiss him back as I leaned into him. The kiss deepened passionately for a long moment, then Sebastian pulled away. I realized that Raleigh had moved around the bench and was kneeling on my other side. Once my lips parted from Sebastian's, Raleigh leaned in for a scorching kiss of his own.

A small moan escaped the back of my throat as Raleigh's hot tongue thoroughly invaded my mouth, threatening to drown me in sensation.

"So beautiful," I whispered against Raleigh's lips, the fingers of one hand playing with his curls briefly before he took my hand in his. He brought it to his lips and bit my fingertips gently as I turned hazy eyes to Sebastian. "Both of you, so beautiful." I reached out to touch Sebastian's lips with the fingers of my other hand. "Like Gods."

Raleigh's lips were now on the inside of my wrist. "And you're our beautiful *Göttin*," he murmured against my skin.

"What's that?" I asked Sebastian, thinking it must be German.

"Goddess," he replied, leaning in to kiss me again.

My fingers that were on his lips slipped into his hair as I kissed him back hungrily. I felt Raleigh's mouth on my neck and I grabbed a handful of his shirt, tilting my head to give him better access as I started to kiss along Sebastian's jaw.

Despite how incredible their attention felt, I knew that what we were doing could really lead to places, right here on the piano bench. But we only had a few hours before the meeting. Not enough time by far for what I knew we all wanted.

I rested my forehead in the crook of Sebastian's neck and panted for a moment. "We don't have... time for this now, do we?" I asked, my voice full of regret.

"No," he sighed as Raleigh pulled back as well.

I lifted my head, my eyes filled with desire for them still. "Um, we can pick this up later, right?"

Sebastian smiled. "Absolutely."

I looked over to Raleigh with a smile then pulled him toward me for a brief kiss. "You both have this effect... I get breathless sometimes."

"That's my line," Raleigh said with a smile.

I smiled back. "You're such a flirt," I teased, running a finger down his nose as I leaned into Sebastian. "You are incorrigible."

Sebastian snuggled into my neck and moaned. "If we don't go now, we'll be in trouble when the hunters kill everyone in the city."

"Almost be worth it to stay here though," Raleigh grinned.

I shook my head at Raleigh and laid a hand on Sebastian's knee. "We should go... patrol, right?"

"Yes," Sebastian agreed, then he disentangled himself from me to get up. "I doubt Tristan would like it much if we didn't show up for the council meeting."

I reluctantly stood as well. "Probably not." I offered a hand to Raleigh, not like he needed it, but he took it anyway. "I'm ready when you are," I told them.

## Chapter 18 - Primogen Meeting

"Just keep going, don't let it slip away  
There's no stopping till the break of day"  
Christina Aguilera  
"Just Be Free"

Tristan usually held the Primogen meetings at the Hermitage Hotel, a luxurious hotel he owned in downtown Nashville. Sebastian informed me that they kept a well-appointed meeting room on call for the Prince's use. The meeting was set for two, but Sebastian wanted to touch base with the Tristan before hand, that was why we were there a half an hour early. We'd done some patrolling after leaving Sebastian's house and the two men had sighted nearly half a dozen buildings with strange markings on them that Sebastian wanted to talk to Tristan about.

Once Sebastian parked the car Raleigh headed inside to find a computer to get some information from Fly via email. Sebastian held open the door for me, then offered his arm.

"I won't have to talk, will I?" I asked him. I hated being the center of attention unless I was performing and since this meeting was all the Primogen I was even more anxious about it.

He smiled at me indulgently. "Not if you don't want to, but some of the Primogen might want to ask you questions."

"That's okay," I told him, silently praying no one did. "I'm just uncomfortable with the idea of talking to them. They're Primogen."

Sebastian smiled as he covered my hand with one of his. "You talk to the Prince just fine," he pointed out.

"He's your sire," I said. "It's a little different. But I'll get better about this, promise."

"You're fine, *prinzessin*," he told me, our eyes locked for a long moment as we walked. "No one expects you to be perfect at this stuff."

"I expect me to," I replied as we came to a stop in the middle of the hotel's foyer.

"For you. I don't want to be an embarrassment for you." I tightened my hand on his arm.

"I'll get it. I just need time to figure them out."

"You're still young," he murmured. "You'll get it. I'll help."

I smiled at him wordlessly and leaned up to give him a brief kiss. Sebastian returned the kiss, but just as it started to get serious he pulled back. "I'll take a rain check on that," he purred in a low sultry voice.

"How long until you collect?" I teased, wanting nothing more than to be back at the house.

"Not long if I can help it," he grinned down at me.

"You're early," Mateo's voice rang from down the hall, forcing the two of us back to reality. "Good."

Mateo led us into the conference room and asked what we'd found. Sebastian started to give him an overview as the Prince and Lachlan joined us. A few minutes later, Raleigh came in and handed Sebastian a folder with several pieces of paper in it.

As the men continued their discussion and I took the time to check out the room. A single, long table with chairs all around it dominated a large part of the space. Large flat screens covered one wall and there was a wireless keyboard and mouse on a small table nearby. On the other end of the room was a dark wood buffet with a built in bar.

Sebastian was looking through the file and he drew my attention back to the conversation when he invited me to look through it with him. The information was about the locations the three groups had visited tonight, mostly who owned them and the persons connected to the properties. It looked as though some of them were connected to the people we killed the night before, but nothing really stood out as a solid lead.

"Doesn't look like there's anything there to go on," I commented.

"No. Maybe one of the others will have come up with something, I know Jax was planning on checking into it," Sebastian informed Tristan and the others.

"I can't think anyone could find something Fly couldn't," Raleigh commented.

"What do we do if there's no other leads?" I asked.

"I'm pretty sure sooner or later, a lead's gonna find us," Sebastian assured me.

*Ugh. More waiting*, I thought. "Is that how it usually works?" I asked. "More waiting."

"Patience, *prinzessin*," Sebastian said with a smile. "All the good hunters have patience."

I smiled at him, thinking how he was probably the best of all hunters. "Yes, I suppose you're right," I told him. "We'll have to see. Maybe you can give me a lesson in that later."

He gave me a smile that said he was clearly thinking naughty things then glance around the group. "We'll work on that."

About that time, Faith Scott and Keri Bowers, the Tremere and Toreador Primogens, entered the room. They greeted Tristan politely, then I watched as their gazes fell on Sebastian and I, questions clearly written in their eyes. "Crap," I muttered quietly. "It's starting already."

Sebastian patted my arm comfortingly, but said nothing as the two women moved off to the other end of the table. The rest of the Primogen were trickling in, each greeting the Prince before noting my presence with Sebastian. No one commented, but they formed a group with Faith and Keri and I was sure they were trying to figure out what I was doing there. Henrietta, the Primogen of my own clan, actually talked to me for a moment, asking after my health given the problems of the last few days. I thanked her for her concern and assured her that I was fine, then she moved away.

Most of the Primogen as well as Rita, the city's Scourge, had arrived by the time Sebastian finished reviewing the file with Tristan. I found myself covertly studying Rita because I knew very little about her. As the Scourge, she was the one that covertly delivered the Prince's justice. Sebastian was the face of our kind's safety in Nashville, while Rita was its shadowy assassin.

Sebastian had mentioned in the car on the way over that Rita had been away and had just returned this evening. I hoped that meant that Rita would also take some of the burden of dealing with these hunters off Sebastian, but that remained to be seen. Sebastian seemed like the kind of man who didn't pass off much responsibility.

The Prince glanced around the room and called for everyone to take a seat. Henrietta requested that I sit next to her during the meeting and I nodded in agreement. Sebastian sat next to the Prince and Raleigh moved off to man the visual part of the presentation.

Tristan didn't mince words as he laid out the situation to everyone. As he spoke, Raleigh brought up pictures and documents that depicted what information had been found so far. Tristan got about halfway through everything when Arlis, the Malkavian Primogen, strolled in, wearing a fur coat over an outdated nurses uniform. Tristan didn't pause as she quietly meandered to an empty chair and sat.

Tristan handed the meeting over to Sebastian, who talked about the new information he'd received when we arrived. Then a thorough question/answer session started where Sebastian answered most of the questions. Rita especially wanted to know about each of the encounters we'd had in detail. She asked questions about how the hunters had fought and how our people had been effected. She seemed to have a good knowledge of fighting, much like Sebastian himself had.

As I'd expected the general reaction of the Primogen was one of concern. Not all of them seemed to understand the seriousness of the situation, but they were willing to listen to Sebastian's advice. The others that did understand, like Jax and Zeke Mann, the Ventrue Primogen offered opinions as well.

Arlis was the only one who seemed completely unconcerned; but then again who really knew what she thought half the time. Malkavian's weren't known for being anything other than crazy.

What was important was that everyone all seemed willing to work together to find ways to combat these hunters. Zeke suggested that a regular human might be able to figure out what the symbols meant and be able to catalog them. Tristan assured everyone that he already had people working on it, but he also said that additional help wouldn't be turned away. What everyone had to remember was that the humans couldn't be influenced by our kind in any way. They couldn't be ghouls. He said that they shouldn't even be anyone we'd fed from or alerted memories. They couldn't be touched by the supernatural world in any way. Keri and Regina had a few ideas on how to bring humans in to help and said they would check back with Tristan and Sebastian later if they had any success.

After some discussion about the Daughters' abilities and how I'd used them so far, Henrietta told the group that all of the Daughters to help with routing out the hunters. The Brujah were next to offer any help Sebastian required, as did the Ventrue. Rita was the only Gangrel to be offered, but their numbers were relatively small in the city. Faith offered a couple of the Tremere, expressing an interest in how their abilities would work on the hunters. By the time Arlis volunteered to help as well, Tristan assured her that there were plenty of volunteers and that he would call upon her if necessary.

Tristan informed everyone of the interspecies meeting the following night, which put Regina and Keri on instant alert and irritated Faith and Zeke. None of them gave more than a token protest and Sebastian reiterated that mixed groups had been very effective so far in combating the hunters and finding new information, which silenced the doubters.

Tristan dismissed those of us who weren't Primogen so they could continue their meeting. Once we were in the hall, Rita told Sebastian that she would be at the meeting the next night. She was a bit abrupt, like she didn't deal with people much, and I noticed for the first time that she had pointed ears like a cat that were only half hidden by her hair. Sebastian thanked her and she headed off without looking at or talking to me or Raleigh.

"Sorry about that," Sebastian said as he offered me his arm. "She's more used to running the hills than coming to these meetings."

I took his arm and watched as Rita departed. "It's fine," I said, wondering what the woman was like once you had a chance to know her. I'd only seen her once or twice at important meetings that involved all our kind in the city but this was the first time I'd ever been close to her. She seemed like a fragile, wild creature and it was so different from who I was. "What do we do now?" I asked Sebastian when my gaze met his.

He started to lead me toward the exit, Raleigh trailing just behind us. "Now, we check in with Joan and head home."

"Has she been on her own since earlier?" I asked. "When was the last time anyone talked to her?"

"She's with Max," he assured me. "I think Nathan went with them, she'll be fine. She knows better than to engage any hunters without a lot more back up. We'll call her once we get in the car."

I nodded. "Good. I'm glad she wasn't on her own."

"I wouldn't put her in danger," Sebastian said, something of guilt in his voice. "Though she can take care of herself, most of the time."

Oh no. He was going to start beating himself up again for Joan's embrace. I had to change the subject before he became too maudlin. "Of course. And then back to your house?" I asked with a wide smile, elbowing him with the arm linked with his.

"Yes, back home," Sebastian looked down at me with a smile.

Crisis averted. I continued to smile as I lay my head on his shoulder.



## Chapter 19 - *Baring of Hearts*

"And I know, that with your hand in mine  
There's not a goal, we can't reach in time"  
Christina Aguilera  
"Dream a Dream"

Raleigh called Joan to check in with her while Sebastian drove back to the house. It gave me the opportunity to really think about everything that had happened in the last few nights and what it all meant. It was still hard for me to wrap my head around how enmeshed I'd become in dealing with the threat that these new hunters represented. This wasn't something I normally did. I lived in my music. In it's creation. That was my passion, not roaming the streets looking for trouble. But I had to admit that I was now looking at it with different eyes. Because of Sebastian and Raleigh.

Sebastian and Raleigh.

Then there was the fact that they were both attracted to me. Talk about mind blowing. So much had happened and now I found myself nearly at the end of a second long night of crazy events. All I could think about was the promise of spending more time with these two amazing men. I still wasn't sure I deserved the attention they were showing me, but there was no way that I could walk away from them.

Once we were back at the house I announced that I was going to take a shower. I wanted to wash off the dirt of the night and come to them clean and ready for whatever new experiences they wanted to share with me. I caught Raleigh's unease as he quickly glanced in Sebastian's direction, but the other man simply said if I needed anything to let him know.

"I'll only be a minute," I told them, then headed downstairs. There was something about the look that passed between the two men that made me want to hurry, but I couldn't explain where the feeling came from.

Once in my room, I located a simple tube-style dress then took a quick shower, not bothering to waste time washing my hair. The dress was the only thing I put on before heading back upstairs. I didn't see or hear Raleigh anywhere on the first floor, but I found Sebastian in the music room, playing something low and mournful on his guitar.

I leaned in the doorway and listened to him play for a minute, wondering why he was being so melancholy all of a sudden. He looked up after a few moments and when he saw me standing in the doorway his fingers let the melody trail off. His eyes traveled down my body, taking in what I was wearing, as well as what I wasn't wearing, but his features remained unreadable.

"Hey," I said quietly. "That's beautiful. Sad, but beautiful."

"Thanks." He continued to hold the guitar against his chest, cradling it as if he was hiding behind it, and I wondered why he was acting so strangely. "Everything okay?" he asked with a gravelly voice.

"Yeah," I answered with a slight frown, taking a few hesitant steps into the room and looking around. "Where's Raleigh?"

"I asked him to give us a couple of minutes," Sebastian admitted. "I-I wanted to make sure you're all right with what's been happening."

I nodded, wondering where this was coming from. "I'm okay. I mean, it's..." I took a deep breath, then added, "It's a lot to take in, I'm not going to lie." I moved to stand in front of him, then dropped to my knees and sat on my feet. "But... it's what I want. Sebastian, I didn't think I'd ever be attracted to two people at the same time. Its not who I've ever been."

Sebastian finally set the guitar to one side then rested his elbows on his knees. "I don't want you to feel pressured, Ariel," he said softly. "We both want you, but if it's too much..." he let the rest trail off.

"It's not," I insisted, inching closer to him. I reached out to touch him, but stopped myself and Sebastian quickly took my hand in one of his. "Sebastian... I know that I'm, well, I know that I'm probably not the best..." I turned my head aside in frustration. "I don't know. What I do know is that I've wanted you for so long."

My gaze returned to his and I was elated to find hunger in his blue depths. It gave me the fortitude to continue. "And I've gotten the chance to work with Raleigh in the last few months and he's amazing. But you have to understand... I'm not the girl who gets pursued. It's... well, it's a little crazy to think that you both..."

"I can't think why," Sebastian countered in a low sexy voice. "You are stunning, Ariel. A man would have to be crazy not to want you."

I held onto his hand tightly. He can't... not want me anymore. I would die.

"Sebastian," I started, desperation in my voice as I looked down into my lap. "I get that this is going to be complicated in so many ways. I'm... I'm beyond terrified that I'm going to disappoint you in some way." I looked up at him. "But that doesn't mean that I don't want whatever this is. You. Raleigh. Me."

Sebastian looked at me a long moment as if he were trying to read something in my body language. "You will tell me if something we want or do is too much for you," he said firmly.

I nodded and tried to relax. "And you have to tell me what you want. What you need from me," I told him, still holding onto his hand tightly. "Here and outside these walls. Sebastian, I don't know what to do sometimes and I need you to help me figure it out."

Sebastian used my hand to pull me closer to him and I started to hum nervously, as I waited for him to respond. "I will not dictate your life, *prinzessin*," he said tenderly, "but I will help you find your feet, if you feel swept away."

I nodded and moved even closer to him, putting my other hand on his thigh. He wasn't rejecting me. That was all that really mattered. "I just... okay," I gave him a shaky smile. "Yes."

He cupped the side of my face. "*Eres tan bella*," he murmured in Spanish, telling me that I was beautiful.

I rose up so that I was on my knees and moved in between his legs, bringing my mouth close to his ear then I whispered, "*Usted tiene posesión de mi corazón, por favor, no rompe.*" *You have possession of my heart, please don't break it.*

"Ariel," he breathed, pulling his head back enough so that he could capture my mouth with his for a passionate kiss that had me pressing my body into him and threading my fingers into his hair.

Sebastian put his arms around me and pulled me against him as he abruptly stood, taking me with him so that I had to grasp onto his shoulders in order to not break the kiss. "Raleigh waits in my bed," he said in that low sexy voice that did crazy things to me. "Shall we join him?"

I nodded, biting my bottom lip. "Yes."

Sebastian swept me into his arms and carried me down to his bedroom where Raleigh was waiting. The other man was lying across the bed, wearing only a pair of flannel lounging pants, and his hands were behind his head as he stared up at the ceiling. His blue eyes were full of surprise when Sebastian carried me in, but he seemed more than pleased to see us.

Raleigh moved to a sitting position when Sebastian moved the few feet to the bed and gently laid me on the blue comforter. The two men exchanged a look and Sebastian leaned toward the other man for a brief kiss as I reached up to run a hand down each of their chests. I was again reminded of how different, yet similar they were.

One blonde. One brunette. One warm. One cool, like me.

Both were incredibly handsome. Frozen forever in the prime of their lives with hard muscles and smooth skin that I was beginning to know as well as my own. Raleigh pulled

back from Sebastian's kiss and his liquid gaze moved to me as Sebastian started to remove his clothes.

I pushed Raleigh back so he was once again lying flat and climbed on top of him. Our lips met in a passionate kiss and I felt his hands slip under my skirt, caressing the skin on the backs of my thighs. We kissed for what seemed like forever, but I felt the need to taste more of him. I worked my way to his neck, using my lips and teeth to bring out little noises from the back of his throat, then I moved down his chest to suck at his nipples.

Raleigh's moans of pleasure encouraged me and his hands worked the fabric of my dress up my body with both hands. I felt the bed dip under Sebastian's weight, then his hands were on the bare flesh of my bottom. His hands were quickly replaced by his lips as Raleigh continued to inch the dress up my body.

I stopped my exploration of Raleigh's body long enough to help him get the garment over my head. I could feel Sebastian's body along the entire length of mine as he settled behind me so we were both over Raleigh. The blonde grinned up at us as Sebastian's palms flattened on my belly and before I knew it both men were teasing my breasts, their fingers working my nipples to hard peaks.

"So damn gorgeous," Raleigh whispered, sitting up enough to take a nipple in his mouth.

I was quickly getting washed away with sensation as Sebastian's lips made contact with my neck and I felt his hips begin to move behind me. The long, hard length of him was brushing the insides of my thighs, teasing wetness from my willing opening.

"I want you to take both of us," Sebastian said in a seductive tone, his mouth close to my ear. "Can you do that, *prinzessin*? Can you take us both at once?"

I couldn't see Sebastian, but Raleigh had heard his master's request and I could tell from his reaction that he liked the idea. I felt chills run up my spine at the thought. Could I take both of them? The idea was hot for sure. I found myself longing to feel them both inside me at the same time. Filling me up with everything they could give me.

"Yes," I choked out, reaching back to grasp at Sebastian's thigh behind me. "Oh, God, yes. Please."

Raleigh was desperately trying to wiggle out of the lounging pants he still wore, but it was difficult with Sebastian and me hovering over him.

"Help him," Sebastian purred. "I need to get supplies."

It didn't take long to rid Raleigh of the pants and then I was on top of him again. I loved feeling the length of his warm body underneath me, his hands on my back, pressing my chest closer to him.

When Sebastian came back to the bed I saw a small bottle land near Raleigh's shoulder where Sebastian had dropped it. Lube. A shiver of delight ran through me as Sebastian used one hand to move all my hair over to one shoulder.

"It'll be a little cold," he said, his mouth close to my ear again. "Ready?"

I looked down at Raleigh and there must have been doubt in my gaze because he reached up to cup the side of my face. Concern was in his eyes, but I smiled down at him.

"Yes," I told Sebastian, turning my head so I could kiss Raleigh's palm.

Sebastian gently eased a finger into me, the digit liberally covered in the lubricant. I hissed in a breath I didn't need, but I was quickly distracted from any discomfort when Raleigh once again started teasing a nipple with the fingers of one hand, then his other hand moved down between us.

Pleasure built inside me quickly as Raleigh and Sebastian both played with my openings. I was panting with need in what felt like seconds, vaguely aware when Sebastian added a second, then a third finger, scissoring me open.

Sebastian's fingers left me suddenly and I cried out at the loss, but I saw Raleigh nod up at him so some kind of silent conversation was apparently going on between the two men. Raleigh used his hands on my hips to guide me over his hard cock. I had no sooner sank down onto him then I felt the tip of Sebastian at my other hole.

There was a bit of fumbling at first, but it didn't matter once they were both inside me. My skin was alive with sensation, my entire body on alert because of these two gorgeous men who made me feel like something cherished. Our lovemaking was slow and sweet, our movements languid and concerned only with the giving and taking of pleasure.

I wasn't sure how many times orgasm rocked through me before Raleigh finally lost all sense and came, a roar of release tearing from him before his body went still underneath me. Sebastian's movements became quick and jerky after that, his teeth clamping down on my shoulder until I thought he was going to break skin. Then he shouted something in German that I couldn't make out and his orgasm rocked through his body.

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Dawn was fast approaching by the time we were done and once again I found myself wishing for more time alone with the two men. The three of us were spent, lying together in a pile of sweaty limbs. Sebastian was on his back while Raleigh and I had our heads pillowed on his torso, looking at each other and smiling small smiles of satisfaction.

Raleigh reached out to smooth a stray lock of hair away over my shoulder and I remembered Sebastian's mood from earlier. I didn't understand why he'd felt the need to make sure I was okay with what we were doing. Did I do something to make him think that I didn't want him and Raleigh? I thought back to the events of the night and nothing sprang to mind.

I lifted my head to look at Sebastian. "I need to ask you something."

He tensed a little beneath me, but opened his eyes to meet mine. "All right."

"Did... did I do something to make you think I didn't want," I glanced toward Raleigh then back to Sebastian, "this?"

"If either of us had thought you didn't want to be here with us, *prinzessin* you wouldn't be here," he said softly, reaching up to touch my cheek with the back of a finger.

I watched him for a long moment, wondering what all the questions were about earlier, then I smiled. "I... I'm glad that I am," I said nervously. "Thank you." The last part was a whisper against Sebastian's skin as I leaned down to kiss his chest, then I leaned toward Raleigh to kiss his mouth. "Thank you."

Raleigh returned my kiss gently as Sebastian spoke, "It is we who should thank you, Ariel."

I pulled away from Raleigh with a smile. I couldn't help but wonder how long this was going to last, but I knew I had to go with it for now and enjoy it while it lasted. I just couldn't let myself make any long term plans. I needed to live one night with them at a time.

I rested my head on Sebastian's chest again, looking toward Raleigh. "I hope you don't mind being the source of my music for the next long while," I told them happily as I felt Sebastian's fingers slide into my hair where it fell on my upper back. I felt him pushing through the strands until I could feel the callused pads on my skin.

Raleigh smiled with a mix of happiness and relief and he tucked my hair back from my face. "I like hearing you sing," he said softly.

"We both do," Sebastian agreed.

"I'd like to hear you both sing sometime," I told them, wondering what it would be like to sing together, all three of us.

"Yes," Raleigh replied with a shrug as if it were a given. "We'd be happy to sing for you."

I turned my head to look at Sebastian and he let my hair run through his fingers as he smiled at me. "You have but to ask," he said

I smiled at him, thinking about the hour again. "Do we have time before dawn?"

"It takes but a moment to sing," Sebastian replied, "but if you'd like, we could fetch a guitar."

My smile grew bigger. "Yes, please," I answered eagerly as I moved to sit up in the bed. I was only vaguely aware of the fact that none of us were taking any precautions to cover our still naked bodies and I found that I didn't really care. They made me feel comfortable around them and the more time I spent with them the easier I felt.

Sebastian moved up in the bed to sit against the headboard as Raleigh went to get a guitar. Both men were so beautiful. I loved to watch them move. My eyes met Sebastian's once Raleigh was out of the room and I saw that he seemed to be watching me with just as much appreciation as I watched them. I liked that they made me feel beautiful. I sat close to Sebastian once he was settled and he reached out to lay a hand over one of mine, our fingers intertwining while we waited for Raleigh's return.

When the other man came back he sat cross-legged on the bed and grinned at me. "Any requests?" he asked.

"Anything," I answered, bringing my knees to my chest and resting my chin on them. "It doesn't matter. Just sing."

Raleigh looked to Sebastian, who gestured for him to go ahead. Raleigh picked out an opening chord, then launched into a song about racing home to see his 'pretty little lady'. His voice was smooth with just a touch of sultry raspiness that I found alluring.

Music was like blood for me, necessary to live. I smiled at Raleigh, enthralled, as he sang and I found myself humming along even though it was the first time I'd ever heard the song. I clapped enthusiastically when he was done, then he played while Sebastian sang a song about a girl that was as 'pretty as a picture' and streets that were lined with diamonds. His voice was different from Raleigh's, grittier, and I felt Goosebumps on my arms by the time he was finished.

After Sebastian's song Raleigh quickly moved into something a little more popular and familiar to me. The three of us ended up singing the tune together and it was thrilling to find how easily we worked the three-part harmony together. It was so good that I wished we'd been recording it. We did two more songs like that then Raleigh sang a tender love song that moved me to tears.

"That's beautiful," I told him when he was done and I was wiping the wetness from my eyes. "Did you write that?"

"Yeah," he said a little sheepishly, uncomfortable with my praise.

He was really very talented and I knew at least a dozen agents who would pay great sums of money to get their hands on material that good. "Have you written more?" I asked, wondering if he'd consider selling his work.

"A few," he admitted with a casual shrug.

"Raleigh is a bit shy about his writing," Sebastian spoke gently, drawing my attention to him briefly.

"I don't know why," I said, looking back to Raleigh and adding, "You're very good. Do you have more?"

"Sebastian and I write a lot of stuff together," he said, looking pointedly at Sebastian.

I shifted my gaze to Sebastian. "Really? When do you have time?" I was very excited to have a common interest with both of them and I wondered if it would be possible to work with them on something. Our styles were a little different, but that could make for some interesting music.

"I'm a bit older than I look, *prinzessin*, and I haven't always been the sheriff," Sebastian told me with a small smile. "Though I have to admit we've done more writing in the last few months than the last twenty years."

"Well, that's great," I said with a smile, figuring that the increase in creativity had to be because Duncan was now out of their lives, which was a good thing for everyone.

I had so many questions. I wanted to ask about their process when it came to song writing, but I didn't want to get wrapped up in that discussion now. I leaned closer to

Sebastian and grinned teasingly. "You've mentioned being older a couple of times. Can I ask how long?"

"Older," he said, "not old, definitely not by Tristan's standards. I was born a few years before the Second World War." He nodded toward Raleigh. "We're nearly the same age."

I'd figured that Sebastian was older than myself, but the 1940s? Wow, that was impressive! Learning that Raleigh the same age as Sebastian had me looking to the other man as well, trying to imagine either of them in clothing from that era. A soldier in a crisp uniform or in a bomber jacket. Sexy. But then again neither would have been old enough to serve during World War II. The Korean War maybe.

"Well, it seems that we all have a few years on us," I commented with a smile.

Sebastian smiled. "It tends to happen when one becomes involved with the Kindred. You live long, or you die. Tristan and his siblings are well over four hundred years old."

"Four hundred?" I asked, truly surprised. "I had no idea. I mean, I knew they were older, but..."

"It shows when he tries to use electronics," Raleigh said with a grin. "He can barely use his cell phone."

I chuckled at Raleigh's comment. I'd never really spent time with anyone who knew the Prince so intimately before and it was nice to see a 'human' side to him. "I can understand the difficulty for him. But he's a good man. I was so glad he came to Nashville. There were nights where I didn't want to leave my apartment under some of the other Princes reigns."

"Tristan does know how to keep a handle on things," Sebastian said almost proudly. "But then, he learned from the best."

"Your Grandsire?" I asked, once again bringing my knees to my chest. "What's he like?"

"Tristan is strong, but Stewart is a force of nature," Sebastian said proudly. "And he does know how to use his cell phone," he grinned at Raleigh.

I smiled again. "Sounds like a powerful man. Have you spent a great deal of time with him?"

Sebastian nodded. "Yes, off and on. We lived in Flint for a while, before we were called to pave the way here for Tristan."

"Sounds like you've traveled a great deal in your life."

"A bit, mostly for Tristan," he agreed. "Raleigh tends to roam a little farther."

I smiled as I turned to Raleigh. "You'll have to tell me where you've traveled."

I listened to them tell stories as the discussion turned toward travel. I'd never left Nashville since I'd arrived here over ten years ago, so I didn't have much to share, but it was fascinating to listen to them and to watch how easily they complimented each other. It was obvious that they had been together for a long time.

As the conversation continued Raleigh ended up propping the guitar next to the nightstand and we eventually maneuvered until Raleigh and I were snuggled up on either side of Sebastian. As dawn neared I felt the pull of the sun and I drifted off to sleep in the protective circle of their arms after a languid kiss to each of them.

## Chapter 20 - One One One

"Good morning  
Time to get ready for work  
I've been waiting  
Get up, morning love, time to get ready for work"  
Christina Aguilera  
"Morning Dessert (Intro)"

Raleigh was gone when I awoke. Sebastian was still asleep next to me and I lifted my head to watch him, thinking how peaceful he looked when he wasn't worrying about his job. He began to stir after only a few moments and I smiled as he rolled his head toward me, a chuffing sound escaping his parted lips.

I heard music playing softly somewhere in the house. It sounded like a radio, not Raleigh on the piano or playing one of the guitars, and it somehow made me think of how happy I was. I was filled with joy and wanted to write music about it. I wanted to put pen to paper to get down the melody that was forming in my head as I hummed it lowly.

I wanted to go find Raleigh and for the first time I found myself wondering what it would be like to have a ghoul of my own and how hard it must be for them sometimes to have their masters sleep so soundly during the day. I was saddened by the thought that Raleigh was left by himself while Sebastian and I slept. Did he get lonely? I realized that I didn't know what he did with his time outside of vampire matters. Yes, he ran The Iron, but what else did he do? There was so much I didn't know about both of them.

I carefully started to pull away from Sebastian, trying very hard not to disturb the man. I only managed to put about a foot between us when I saw his eyes flutter and I stopped. "Hey," I greeted him with a smile. "Good evening."

Sebastian said something in German, then seemed to catch himself. "Good evening, *prinzessin*."

I chuckled a little and leaned down to kiss him. "You know, you can always teach me German if you want."

"If you wish it," he agreed with a smile. "I should be used to English by now, but sometimes I forget."

I was still leaning over him so I gave him another kiss, then said, "*O forse l'insegnerò l'italiano*." Or maybe I'll teach you Italian.

He wrapped his arms around my middle and pulled me down on top of him. "Italian, I like it."

"It's the perfect language for singing," I told him, enjoying how easy it was to be with him. I got comfortable on top of him and ran my fingertip along his collarbone. "*È la lingua perfetta per cantare*."

Sebastian groaned. "Oh, no. Too early in the night to try and teach me anything," he purred. "But you can keep talking all you want."

His playfulness made me giggle a little. Since he acted like he didn't know the language I figured that I could say anything I wanted and he would never know the difference. "*Ho atteso la mia vita intera per lei. La sua forza mi fa vuole diventare più poi sono*," I told him. *I've waited my entire life for you. Your strength makes me want to become more than I am.*

"Something about life and strength, I think," he murmured, looking into my eyes. "Italian isn't close enough to Spanish for me to get anything more."

I nodded. "It's easier to learn Italian if you already have Spanish," I admitted. "That's what I did. I started learning to sing arias in Italian and then I had to know the language."

His gaze warmed me as Sebastian looked up at me. "I have heard arias sung in Rome, but they were not as beautiful as your voice."

His praise came so easy and I loved it, I just wasn't good at taking compliments. "Thank you," I whispered.

Sebastian raised his head to kiss me and I eagerly returned it, feeling really good for the first time about the possible relationship that could be forming between us.

His hands moved down my body, stroking my skin with sure fingers that reminded me that we were both still naked from the night before. Sebastian's lips became demanding as his hands stopped on my hips and he settled my lower body over his quickly hardening cock. I had my hands on his shoulders to steady myself as I thought about being filled by him again.

"You drive me crazy," he murmured against my mouth, then his teeth caught my bottom lip for a playful nip.

"So do you," I moaned, feeling brave by how turned on he was. We'd never been alone, just Sebastian and I, not sexually, and briefly I wondered again where Raleigh was, but as Sebastian's hand slipped between our bodies and his fingers found that secret part of me all thinking stopped.

"Need you," I panted, moving my hips to make it easier for his fingers to dance magically inside me. "Please."

"So gorgeous like this," Sebastian said, his lips moving to my neck to bite teasingly at my flesh. "So wet for me aren't you?"

I could only give a strangled cry of longing in return. I needed Sebastian inside me. Now. I reached down to take his hardened flesh carefully in my fingers and guided him to my opening.

Now it was Sebastian's turn to moan as I sunk down the length of him. It felt so right to be here with him. His hands came to my hips again to guide me down and Sebastian whispered words I didn't understand. German again. I would really have to get him to teach me the language if that's what he reverted to all the time.

I leaned down to kiss him again, his lips hot and controlling. I moved my hips up and down and heat pooled in me, making the pleasure build inside me. Sebastian's hips started to move faster and I knew this wasn't going to take long.

"So beautiful," Sebastian grunted through clenched teeth. "Want to see you come apart, baby."

"Se... bas... tian," I managed, pleasure taking over and making it hard to think past it. "Yes. Oh, God."

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"We really should get up," Sebastian said thickly just a few minutes later. "There's a lot to do before we have to be at Burn."

I moaned playfully. "Don't want to move," I whined, my face buried in the skin of his neck. "Slave driver."

"I would like to say that we are not usually this busy, but that would be a lie," he replied softly, his hands smoothing the skin of my back. "Unfortunately, neither Joan nor Raleigh can do my job for me, if we linger."

"I know," I said, lifting my head to look at him with a small smile. His mention of his ghoul made me realize that what he and I had just shared had been done without Raleigh and I missed the other man's presence. It was odd, how attached I'd become to both men. And in such a short time. "It's just... it's easier here. When it's just us. And Raleigh. Out there I'm... well, I'm waiting to do the wrong thing and embarrass you."

"You shouldn't worry about that, you're doing fine," Sebastian assured me, his strong fingers pushing my hair back from my face then he held my head in his hands so that he could look into my eyes. "As much as I'd like to say you could bow out of tonight's meeting, we do need you there. Once things settle down a little you can," he hesitated briefly, I almost didn't catch it before he quickly added, "return to your usual pursuits, if you wish."



"No," I said quickly, taking his face in my hands. "I want to be with you. To work with you. I just don't want to be a detriment to you." I leaned in to kiss him briefly.

"I don't see how you could be," he said with a smile. "Unless you trap me in this bed and have your wild way with me again..."

I laughed at his teasing. "You better go get a shower then."

Sebastian kissed me once more then left the bed to get cleaned up. I lingered a few moments longer, a silly grin on my face. When I heard the water start I got out of bed as well, stripping the sheets to put in the laundry before going to get ready myself.

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Raleigh and Sebastian were in the kitchen going over some things on a laptop when I reached the main floor. Papers were spread on the table around them and their heads were close together as they talked. Sebastian looked up when I entered, his gaze moving up and down my body approvingly, but Raleigh seemed focused on his work and remained silent.

"Is this okay?" I asked the two men when I entered. I'd been hesitant to put on the gray band-styled dress at first, but I was used to wearing dresses and feeling girly and the last few nights in jeans had been odd. "I figured since we're not doing any searching anywhere..." I indicated the three inch heels I was also wearing, then added, "I can bring some flats in case I need them."

Raleigh glanced up then to take a look, but quickly went back to his work without meeting my eyes. "It's fine," he said. "It might help if some of the others think you're harmless. Some of them are way too paranoid about Kindred."

Okay, something was up... I wasn't sure what, but it wasn't like Raleigh to be this aloof. I looked from Raleigh to Sebastian with a questioning frown. "Everything okay?" I asked slowly, my eyes stopping on Raleigh.

"Yeah, it's fine," Sebastian said almost absently, looking up from a sheet of paper in his hand. "Sit down and have a look at this stuff, will you? See if you recognize any of the names and addresses." He pushed a few papers toward the seat on the other side of Raleigh and I sat down. I picked up the papers and started to look through them distractedly, worried about Raleigh.

It didn't take long for me to recognize one of the addresses, but I didn't point it out right away because just then I also noticed that Raleigh kept looking my way when he thought I wasn't looking. He was acting like he wanted to kiss or touch me, but stopped himself, like he wasn't sure if I'd allow it, which was of course ridiculous.

I laid the papers on the table and leaned toward Raleigh. "I missed you when we woke up," I told him then moved even closer to kiss him when he turned his head my way.

Raleigh was a bit surprised at the kiss, but he recovered quickly and kissed me back, tangling a hand in my hair. I let the kiss go for a long moment, then I pulled back a little and cupped the side of his face. I smiled at him then looked to Sebastian. "I know there's things we need to do, but I really think the three of us need to have a discussion about ground rules."

"Ground rules?" Raleigh asked in confusion.

Sebastian simply watched me and when he didn't voice anything I added, "For us. I know I'm... well, an interloper into your... relationship. And if this is going to have a chance of working we need to communicate."

"Interloper?" Sebastian asked, surprised. "Ariel, you're not--"

He was cut off as Raleigh got to his feet, giving Sebastian an apologetic look. "I'll meet--"

Sebastian cut him off by grabbing his arm. "Sit back down. Ariel's right, we need to talk about this."

I reached out to take Raleigh's other hand. "Raleigh," I said quietly. "Please."

Raleigh looked between the two of us and slowly sat down again.

I shifted my gaze between the two men before I spoke. "I'm not sure how to start this but..." I took a deep breath and plunged in. "I-I like being with both of you. But... I can understand that you... well, might want time apart from... well, from me. You know, just the two of you." I was completely mortified with embarrassment and trying to hide it, but we really did need to figure all this out. The sooner the better.

Raleigh looked at me in surprise, then turned to look at Sebastian who nodded. "Just as the two of you might want time apart from me," Sebastian added softly.

"Is that okay with all of us?" I asked. "Honestly."

Sebastian looked between the two of us. "I can't say I wouldn't wish to be there if the two of you take private time, but I... I think we can work this out. I enjoy being with both of you, and I enjoy being with both of you, separately."

Raleigh glanced at Sebastian, then back to me. I knew he was reading our reactions so I let my eyes show that I was really okay with them wanting time apart.

"I agree with Sebastian," I said, looking at the other man. My gaze then slipped to back to Raleigh and a smile tugged at the corners of my lips. "I... I would really like to watch the both of you..." I was breathless just thinking about the two of them together. Each of them was so powerful in their own right. I was trying to picture them together and got warm thinking about it.

My words made Sebastian smile and Raleigh flush. I ran my hand up Raleigh's arm and touched his face. "You're pretty quiet," I said, running my thumb across his bottom lip.

He smiled a little. "I'm just, I-" he sighed. "I think you're right, we all have to be okay with this and," he looked at Sebastian, then back to me, "as long as you are both okay with it, I am too."

"You're not just agreeing because we are?" I asked, watching his face closely. "Do you want time alone with either of us? Are you okay if we are intimate without you?"

"Yeah, I'm okay with it, and I wouldn't turn down alone time, with either of you," he said looking at Sebastian.

I believed him so my gaze moved to Sebastian as well. "What do you want anyone outside this house to know about us?" I asked him, knowing that Sebastian had the most to lose if anyone didn't agree with what we were doing. "I will admit that Vanessa guessed that something happened between the three of us all ready."

Sebastian shrugged. "I don't think we have anything to hide, but it's up to you, *prinzessin*. We can keep it quiet if you want."

I shook my head. "I don't mind. I was only worried about your standing in the city. What will Tristan think?"

"Tristan doesn't care," he said with a smile. "He has more important things to do than look after my love life."

I smiled at him, then at Raleigh. "Is there anything else we should cover?"

"We need to cover this information before we go to the meeting," Raleigh said, sounding and looking a bit more relaxed. "Maybe we can get out of there before midnight."

I nodded in agreement. There was still the little matter of my living situation lingering in the back of my head, but that could wait for now. Being done before midnight meant that maybe we could have a little more downtime this evening and I liked that idea.

I picked up the papers again and announced, "I recognized one of these addresses." Trent had talked about a friend of his living in that neighborhood while we were dating and we had actually dropped something off at that address on one of our dates.

I told the men about it and they asked some questions that I couldn't really answer. I'd only been there once and I'd waited in the car so I couldn't even tell them what the friend had looked like.

"Did you want to swing by there after the meeting?" I asked after I'd told them everything I could remember.

"We should," Sebastian admitted reluctantly. "All of these need to be checked out, but maybe we'll have a number of volunteers tonight. Depends on how the meeting goes."

"Are you ready to leave then? I need to grab another pair of shoes and my gun."

"Yeah, pretty much," Sebastian said. "Let me know if you need help with your holster."

I smiled at him. "Might not be a bad idea. I'll bring it up. Do you think this sweater will cover it enough or should I get something else?"

"I'm sure it will be fine."

I headed downstairs to quickly collect what I needed then returned to find that the guys were nearly ready to go. Raleigh had the laptop packed in a bag and Sebastian was putting on his jacket, so I dropped my purse on the table and removed my sweater so I could don the holster. Raleigh came over to give me a hand.

"One day I'll get this without help," I told him, a little frustrated.

"It takes time," Raleigh said and I could hear the smile in his voice. He then bent to kiss the side of my neck. "Patience."

"That's what I keep saying," Sebastian added with a smile.

"I should have it by now," I countered with a determined expression. I looked over my shoulder at Raleigh and leaned back to kiss him. "Thank you."

"You're welcome," he murmured in a husky voice. "Any time."

I reached up to touch the side of his face briefly, then moved away to make sure the gun was seated correctly and slipped my arms into the sweater that Raleigh held up for me.

Sebastian picked up a set of keys from the counter. "Your car is cute, but we need something with a little more room," he told me. "Raleigh picked up a loaner for me until we can find something I like."

"Good idea," I replied, quickly moving the few feet that separated us to point at his chest with a teasing look on my face. "And my baby isn't cute, she's fast," I informed him with a grin.

Sebastian caught my hand, his blue gaze dancing with mischief. "Yes, your baby is fast, but she's small," he grinned. "Kinda like you." He bent to kiss me with a loud smack before heading for the door, Raleigh and I right behind him.

## Chapter 21 - Inter-Racial Meeting

"And when I need a friend,  
You're always on my side"  
Christina Aguilera  
"I Turn to You"

The loaner was a beautiful, black Chrysler 300M, four door. It screamed luxury and power. Actually, it screamed Sebastian and I wondered if he wouldn't just have Raleigh buy it by the end of the night. Raleigh led me out to the sleek machine and opened the front passenger door for me as Sebastian locked up the house.

I shook my head with a smile. "You go ahead. I'll sit in the back. Your legs are longer."

"Have you seen the back seat of one of these things?" he teased, leaning on the open door. "Big enough for Kiran in big damn kitty form. You get the front."

He was being polite, probably because I was a vampire and he a ghoul, but I was still unsure. What if Sebastian needed protection? Raleigh was much better prepared for that than I was. "Are you sure?" I hedged. "I don't mind. I may want to jot down some lyrics if I come up with something. And what if..." I cast a quick look toward the other man as he headed toward us. "What if Sebastian needs you?"

"I'll be right behind him," Raleigh assured me, then he reached out to tuck a lock of hair behind my ear with a grin. "And if you're in front, you control the radio," he teased.

I rolled my eyes, fighting a grin, and moved to get in. "You might not think that's a good thing," I retorted and he chuckled as he closed the door.

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We arrived at Burn with plenty of time to spare. Sebastian parked down the street from the bar and my friend Nathan met us just outside the main door.

"Hey there, lady," Nathan said, leaning down to kiss my cheek.

I kissed Nathan back and smiled up at him. It had only been a couple of nights since I'd last seen my dear friend, but it felt like years in terms of how my life had changed. "It's good to see you," I told him sincerely.

Nathan tucked my hand into the crook of his arm to escort me inside, then looked toward Sebastian for the first time. "We've got everything set up, just waiting on our company."

"Good," Sebastian replied, looking around to make sure no danger was lurking. "Any of us show up yet?"

"Just Nez and Max," Nathan replied as we turned toward the doors, "but Max says the Brujah should be here soon."

Sebastian opened the door and Nathan led me inside. Sebastian and Raleigh immediately headed over to Nez and Max, where Raleigh started unpacking the laptop and hooking it up to an AV system.

"I knew you were going to be here," Nathan said in a low voice as he turned to face me, "but I didn't expect you to come in with those two."

I glanced over to Sebastian and Raleigh and fought back the warm smile that was tugging on my lips as Raleigh glanced up. Our eyes met and his gaze soften slightly, making my stomach flutter. "They saved my life the other night," I told Nathan when I returned my attention to him. "After we met? I saw Trent. He and a friend of his were beating up Beck in an alleyway and I went to see what was happening. Sebastian and Raleigh came to help me."

"Yeah, I'd heard that," Nathan said, watching me closely. "But that was a couple of nights ago, and Trent's dead, isn't he? Are you worried about his friends coming after you?"

"They kind of did," I explained. "Trent knew where my apartment is and Sebastian was concerned so he asked me to stay with him until this is all figured out. We went back to my place last night and there was one of their symbols on the door." The subject still gave me the creeps and I crossed my arms over my chest unconsciously in a protective gesture. "I'm not going back there again."

Nathan reached out and rubbed my arm comfortingly. "You don't have to stay with him, you know," he said, keeping his voice low. "I've got plenty of room at my place, and Max has all kinds of real estate contacts. We can find you a house, or another apartment real quick, if you want."

"No, I'm great where I am," I assured my friend with a smile. "Thanks for the offer, but I'm helping with this and it's..." I looked over to Sebastian and Raleigh again, "It's better that I stay with Sebastian."

Nathan followed my gaze, then looked back at me with a small frown that he quickly hid. "Well, if you change your mind, let me know, all right?"

I smiled wider. "Of course. Thank you Nathan. You're such a good friend."

Just then Glenn Johnson walked in with two other men, a woman and a young man that looked to be in his late teens. I'd met Darin the night before and remembered that he was a werewolf. I wasn't sure about the others, but at least a few had to be Mages if they were friends of Glenn.

The young man seemed a bit wary, but the woman kept him close to her as Glenn crossed the room to where Sebastian and the others were. Nathan put a hand on my shoulder and guided me that way as well and I wondered if he was uncomfortable being that close to people who'd hunted vampires not that long ago. I understood that it was a prickly situation for all of us, but it was important that we worked together before we lost any more of our people.

I said hello to Glenn and offered him my hand, which he took with a quick glance in Sebastian's direction to make sure the other man was watching as he kissed the back of it. I knew that Glenn was only trying to get a rise out of Sebastian so I rolled my eyes knowingly and winked at Sebastian. He in turn gave me a slightly stiff smile but was distracted by the arrival of Lachlan Nash.

After that, more people started to trickle in, some seeming confident as they entered, others not so much. I knew many of the vampires that arrived, like Ray, Billy and Leilah of the Brujah, who all came in with Joan. I excused myself from Nathan to go greet Sebastian's child and visited with her a few minutes until my sire arrived.

Vanessa was very happy to see me. We watched the group grow as more people continued to arrive and I did my best to tell her anything I knew about the newcomers as I also kept an eye on Sebastian and Raleigh in case they happened to need me. I recognized a few faces, but didn't know what many of them were, with the exception of the two werewolves who'd picked up the body the night before, Marty and Peace. I remembered the lingering looks Peace had given me when he continued to show an interest and I decided to maintain a distance from him.

The room was set up with rows of folding chairs in front of a stage area that faced the back wall with the AV system pointed to flash images on it. Eventually, Sebastian got everyone's attention and asked them to be seated so we could get things started. Reluctantly everyone moved to take seats and I wasn't surprised to see that the little groups of like creatures stayed together. I sat with Vanessa near Joan and the other vampires.

In an instant replay of the Primogen meeting, Sebastian started going over the information that had been collected so far about the hunters. He talked about the symbols that had been spotted all over town and how so far no one had been able to duplicate them.

Then he started talking about the deadly fighting abilities that these new hunters possessed and the different ways we'd been able to effectively combat them so far. On our way to the bar Sebastian had asked if I would be willing to showcase how my singing ability

worked. I had reluctantly agreed, nervous because I didn't want to embarrass him in anyway, especially in front of such a mixed group. I wasn't surprised when he asked me to come to the front.

I sang a soothing Sarah McLachlan song and instantly all the fae were enthralled, along with half the vampires and werewolves. The rest either shook the effects off, weren't affected at all, or hid either very well. I glanced sideways at Sebastian and his face said that he was pleased and I gave him a small smile as I took my seat again.

It was then Glenn's turn. He shared all the information he'd been able to piece together on the hunters, which confirmed much of what Sebastian had already presented. I thought it was a good idea that he did this since it gave the supernaturals in the room who might not trust the vampires someone else to believe. Glenn's information included two additional names and addresses that were outside the city limits that he thought merited checking out.

After that there was a great deal of discussion as to how to proceed. We still needed to figure out how many of these hunters were still in the area. The general consensus believed that it was a good idea to divide into groups that included people from the various classes of supernatural creatures like we'd done the night before. We had other places to check out, including the address that Fly had found. Sebastian, Raleigh and myself would go to that one, along with Tyana, a werecat and Mateo's ghou, Alicia. Rita volunteered to go as well and Sebastian nodded to her in agreement.

There ended up being three groups put together. Everyone liked the idea of having at least one Daughter with each group because of our unique abilities so it was determined that Vanessa would go with Glenn and his group. Nathan volunteered to go with her so I wasn't nervous about her safety. Vanessa also offered to call in one more of our sisters to go with the other group.

The meeting broke up soon after and all the groups prepared to investigate their addresses. I got the chance to talk to Vanessa and Nathan before they left and I urged them to be careful, making sure that they knew the distraction technique that Raleigh had come up with.

They both advised me to be careful as well. Nathan's warning was followed by a cautious glance in Sebastian's direction, but he didn't say anything more, just kissed my cheek before leading Vanessa out.

I was curious by Nathan's wariness concerning my involvement with Sebastian. I was sure that it had something to do with the fact that as sheriff, Sebastian was in danger so much of the time that Nathan was worried about my safety, but I wasn't certain. Once we were in the car and on our way I asked Sebastian how well he and Nathan knew each other.

"Not that well," he replied with a shrug. "He helped out with a couple of things early on."

Okay, so it couldn't be that Nathan didn't like Sebastian, which was a relief. I didn't have many close friends in town and I didn't look forward to losing one because of my involvement with Sebastian.

## Chapter 22 – Teamwork

"That burns with a need to know  
The reason why"

Christina Aguilera  
"Reflection"

I changed into my flats then checked my gun as Sebastian easily maneuvered the car through the dark city streets. I was humming one of the songs that the three of us had sung together in bed the night before while Sebastian and Raleigh discussed how well the meeting had gone. Soon even their conversation lapsed and I heard Raleigh start to hum along with me as I watched buildings flash by us.

I looked back at him with a warm smile that he silently returned and I reached out to touch his knee affectionately. Raleigh laid his hand over mine as we entered an older commercial area of Nashville. I remembered it being trendy once when I'd first come to the city, but now it had fallen from popularity. The shipping store we were looking for was in a strip mall where several of the storefronts now stood empty. In fact the only other space that was currently occupied in the multi-store building was a video rental place on the opposite end.

"It's still the same place Trent stopped at that night," I informed Sebastian. "Do you want to try to get in and take a look around?"

"I don't see any symbols painted anywhere," Raleigh said from the back seat.

"Let me pull around back, we can try to get in from there," Sebastian suggested, as he directed the car around the building.

I was carefully watching for even the smallest hint of a symbol as we made our way around the building so I saw the ones on either side of the back door as soon as the headlights hit them. There was also one on the door itself.

"Well, there's symbols," I said with a sigh as Sebastian pulled the car closer to the back of the building. "Guess we add this to the places to have humans try to log the symbols. Do you want to try to go in?"

"Yeah, we should," Sebastian said as he parked the car and got out.

Rita pulled up next to us with Tyana and Alicia and after everyone was out of the vehicles I pointed out the symbols to them as well. We all approached the building cautiously and Raleigh pulled his lock picks from his pocket. He had the door open in seconds and Sebastian grabbed the doorknob to open it, immediately yanking his hand back, hissing in pain.

"Are you alright?" I asked, moving to his side in an instant and taking the hand in mine to examine it. The skin was raw and red everywhere he had touched the knob. It looked as if he'd been burned.

"I'll be fine," he said, trying not to be irritated as he examined the building, looking for another possible way in.

Raleigh carefully reached out to touch the door and nothing happened. "Must be warded against vampires," he said.

"You're sure?" I asked Sebastian quietly as Raleigh eased the door open, not wanting to make a big deal about his injury. We still didn't know enough about what these hunters were capable of so even the slightest appearing injury could turn life threatening before we knew it.

Sebastian looked down at his hand. "Yeah, I'll be fine. It feels like a burn."

"Can you heal it?" I asked, again speaking quietly so that just the two of us could hear. I was looking down at his hand again and watched as the red slowly went away.

Sebastian grunted slightly. "Yeah, but it wasn't easy, like an aggravated wound."

"We should have brought extra blood," I commented. "In case we needed it."

He sighed slightly. "I can hunt if it comes down to it."

He was fine now and I wasn't going to be overprotective so I turned my attention back to the door and watched as Tyana, the werecat, slipped inside. I moved closer to Raleigh. "Should I try to go in?"

"No, we don't know if the ward was just on the door." Sebastian said quickly.

Raleigh hesitated, then followed Tyana inside with no difficulties. Rita approached the door next, closely inspecting the frame, then carefully avoiding the door, attempted to step through. She didn't get far though because she was stopped at the door, similar to some of the other locations we'd been to.

"Have you tried scraping away parts of the symbols," Rita asked. "See if that breaks the ward?"

Sebastian explained our experiences with Glenn and what we'd learned about the symbols and while they talked I decided to check out a garbage dumpster that was nearby. I was barely able to look over the top of it, but it was easy to see that someone had started a fire in a bag of garbage that had then been deposited inside. There were other bags on top of a burned one, but I could still see some of the charred contents.

I called Sebastian over and pointed out the burned bag, "Do you think it's worth retrieving?"

"We'll find out. Good eye," he commended as he began moving bags around. Eventually he had to get into the dumpster to retrieve the remains of the original burned bag and he dropped it on the ground then climbed back out.

I immediately noticed a small notebook with charred edges that I pulled out and started leafing through. It was half burned, but inside I found a list of compiled information about 'monsters', complete with the names and locations of several that were 'eliminated'

I showed the book to Sebastian and as we looked through the remains we both recognized many names from Nashville and a few from neighboring cities. There were a couple of vampires and ghouls who lived on the fringe of our society whose disappearances had been explained away at the time. The rest were probably Mages, wraiths, shapeshifters, mummies or even demons. Of course, this was just what we could read since the notebook was half burned.

As we looked at the names I became aware that I was humming something low and mournful. "We need to let their people know," I told Sebastian, meaning the other supernaturals. "They need to know what happened to them."

"Yes, we do," he agreed, meeting my eyes with understanding.

Raleigh came out of the store. "Looks like they cleaned out of here," he told us. "Yesterday, maybe, in a hurry."

Sebastian held up the book and the others quickly gathered around to listen. I asked Tyana if she could identify any of the names or how to get a hold of their next of kin. She gave the book a quick look through and recognized a few of the names, but she wanted to make a copy to bring back to the shifters. She said that there was a copier that still looked operational inside the store. I handed the book to Raleigh and he headed back inside with the werecat to make copies.



## Chapter 23 – I Got This Feeling

"What is this feeling coming over me?"  
Christina Aguilera  
"Makes Me Wanna Pray"

As we waited for Raleigh and Tyana to make copies the rest of us hung out quietly in the darkened space behind the building. Sebastian was by my side while Rita and Alicia stood nearby, talking in near undecipherable tones. I moved my gaze across the small field that separated the back of the building area from a residential neighborhood behind it when I got the feeling that something was wrong. Very wrong. I wasn't sure what it was, or how I'd gotten the feeling, but I knew there was going to be trouble. Something was coming. Someone was watching us. Somewhere close.

I reached for my gun and as I did I said, "Sebastian, something's wrong." I continued to sweep my eyes from side to side, searching for the threat.

Sebastian pulled his gun as well and started to scan the area around us. Rita's hands sprouted inch long claws on each finger as she too looked for trouble.

"Go inside and get the others," Sebastian softly told Alicia, who had also pulled her weapon. She nodded as she turned silently and moved toward the door. Sebastian then pushed me behind him until I was sort of wedged behind the dumpster. I went where he directed for the moment, but I had my gun out and ready to shoot as I strained see any movement.

Something shifted in the backyard of one of the houses and I reached out to touch Sebastian with my empty hand. "Backyard," I told him in a low voice. "Eleven o'clock."

I watched as his eyes scanned the entire area, then he nodded, signaling to Rita as well. She had taken cover near Sebastian's rental car and I saw her slip into the shadows there, fading out of sight.

Whatever was in the yard moved and I heard a gun go off from that direction. From my position behind the dumpster I could see more movement in the shadows on my right, down near the end of the strip mall as the sound of glass breaking came from inside the shop.

I lifted my gun so that I could shoot at anything that came close enough. I could feel the adrenaline building in anticipation and I recalled the lyrics to a lullaby that I might use to distract our unwelcome guests, preparing to sing.

Sebastian returned fire toward the backyard as I started to sing, pushing my voice toward where I'd first seen movement and hoping that it reached whoever was out there. Sebastian fired again and I heard additional gunfire from inside the shop, followed by a loud growl.

I glanced at the shadows at the end of the building and watched as it morphed into two men heading in our direction, hugging the side of the building as they advanced. Then I saw more movement in another backyard near the first one. We now had three different points of attack, four if I counted whatever what happening inside the shop. I prayed that Raleigh was okay, but I couldn't get inside to check even if I wanted to.

As the gunfire continued I started to worry that my singing wasn't helping and thought of changing tactics. Then I realized that there hadn't been another gunshot from the first location we'd picked up movement. Either Sebastian's shot had hit true or maybe the singing was working. Either way I decided it would be better to change the direction I was concentrating on, being careful not to project my ability onto any of the members of our group. I focused on the newcomers from the other end of the building.

As I sang I heard more gunfire from inside the building then someone screamed. "Raleigh," I said in my regular voice, not letting my song stop. I was even more worried for his safety now, but we had to deal with the hunters out here or none of us had a chance.

From this distance it was hard for me to determine exactly how effective my song was, but I got a sense that it was doing something so I just prayed that it slowed them down enough that they could be easily dealt with by one of the others.

A man's scream ripped through the night from one of the backyards, probably Rita one of them since I hadn't caught sight of her since she slunk off. I heard something inside the building roar as Sebastian fired in the opposite direction of where I was throwing my voice.

"Should I keep singing?" I asked Sebastian.

Sebastian fired again and didn't look my way. "No, don't stop," he ordered.

I sang like I'd never sung before, pouring all the emotion I could into the lyrics of the lullaby. I kept my gun raised and ready to fire at any unfriendlies that got too close to us as Sebastian covered our other side.

From the corner of my eye I saw Raleigh move into the doorway of the store. He was using the door as cover as he carefully looked around, assessing the situation as sounds of things falling came from inside. He took aim and fired in the same direction as Sebastian.

Shots continued to ring out from both sides. One of the hunters got a little too close for comfort and I was taking aim to fire at him. Before I could pull the trigger Rita snuck up behind him and I watched as she pounced and when the man cried out I looked away, not wanting to witness the carnage.

Suddenly the night fell silent. Adrenaline was still coursing through me as I turned to Sebastian. He had blood on the sleeve of his jacket, and even though it was a small amount I was still alarmed. When I touched his arm just below the wound and asked if he was all right he nodded, assuring me he had already healed it.

My gaze then moved toward Raleigh. He was still in the doorway, leaning against the frame. My mouth gaped open in horror when I saw the amount of blood on his shirt.

"Raleigh," I called out desperately before I ran to him. Sebastian had been walking down to check the bodies of the hunters, but he turned to follow when he heard me call out.

There were at least three wounds, almost in a line, up Raleigh's torso. One in his side, one in his upper arm, and one in his shoulder. Raleigh looked at me questioningly, then down as if he were just realizing that he'd been shot.

I knew nothing about medicine that would help, but it somehow made sense that the first thing to check was whether the bullets had exited his body. "Raleigh, talk to me," I demanded, trying to feel around for exit wounds but he was still in the doorway of the building and I couldn't reach them because of the symbols. "Can you heal? Do you need blood?"

"Shit," he gritted out in a pained voice as my touch jostled his wounds.

"Can you heal?" I asked him again. Without looking away from him I called out, "Sebastian!"

Sebastian hurried over to us, helping me get Raleigh away from the door so we could actually check out his wounds. We eased him to the ground next to the dumpster where I was then able to pull the fabric of his tattered shirt and jacket away from his body.

"I have no idea what to do," I told Sebastian and I silently berated myself for being so useless. There was so much that I didn't know. I spent my life doing nothing but living in my music. Seeing Raleigh this hurt was a daunting jar of realization. I examined the wounds and it looked as if he had partially healed them, but not enough, they were still bleeding.

Sebastian bit into his wrist and offered it to his ghoul. "Raleigh," he said softly, "Drink."

Raleigh closed his eyes and did as he was bid, the fingers of one hand coming up to wrap around Sebastian's arm.

"I can give him more if you want," I told Sebastian in a low voice. I had no idea what else to do for Raleigh, but I was willing to do whatever I could.

Sebastian nodded, and after a moment he pulled away from Raleigh, who looked up at us, blood on his lips. I looked at the wounds again and found them still open. "Can you heal?" I asked him, moving my mouth closer to his ear.

"Trying," he said in a rough voice.

I brought my wrist to my mouth and bit, then moved it to Raleigh's mouth. "Drink," I urged him, smoothing his hair back with my other hand.

I heard his gun as it softly hit the ground between us, then Raleigh took hold of my arm gently. He fastened his mouth around the wound I'd created and sucked. This was the first time anyone had fed from me since Vanessa when she made me a vampire. Tendrils of sensation rocked through me, causing me to gasp as erotic waves of pleasure nearly overtook me.

My eyes moved to Sebastian's, my mouth open in shock. He paused in checking out Raleigh's wounds to look at me, then smiled knowingly. "Alicia, check the two down there, will you?" he directed, indicating Rita and Tyana.

The ghoul nodded and moved away and I was glad that Sebastian had sent her off. I was pretty sure that I was about to moan with pleasure and didn't want to do so in front of her.

Raleigh continued to drink for several minutes before he pulled away with a gasp. The loss of sensation made me gulp back a moan as I used a finger from my other hand to touch the wound, closing it instantly. "Better?" I asked, a little breathless.

"Better," Sebastian answered, still looking at Raleigh's wounds.

Raleigh nodded, a little dazed. "Much better, thanks."

I leaned down to kiss his temple. "Good." I looked up to Sebastian. "Everything okay?"

"Yeah," he replied, smiling at me. "Sorry about that, but it took more than I thought to heal that burn on my hand."

I returned his smile. "It's okay. Glad to be able to do it." I looked down to Raleigh. "Want to sit up?"

"Yeah." He attempted to stand up, pushing against the dumpster to get to his feet. I stayed close to him in case he needed support and while he was a bit wobbly at first, after a minute he seemed better.

Once he was assured that Raleigh was all right, Sebastian moved off to make sure the area was secure. "Do you want to sit in the car?" I asked Raleigh, not sure how long it would take for him to be a hundred percent again.

He bent to pick up his gun and put it in his holster, then rubbed his side. "No, I'm good. Thanks."

I hugged him close. "I was so scared. I-I don't like seeing either of you hurt," I said, my face against his chest.

"Hey," he said, putting his arms around me. "I'm okay, Ariel. Everything's all right."

"I know," I told him, keeping my voice low. "This is just all so new to me. I just got you both... I can't imagine something happening to either of you."

"We've been doing this a long time, honey," he said soothingly. "We know what we're doing. We'll be all right."

But he couldn't promise that and I didn't voice my opinion to the contrary. "I'm just glad you're okay," I told him. I drew in a deep breath then pulled away a little, not wanting to smother him with my concern. "What should I be doing now?"

"We should check the bodies for ID," he told me. "Make sure to round up any weapons that might be lying about."

"I can do that," I said, pulling away from him a little more. "You're sure you're okay?"

"I'm fine," he assured me. "A little sore, but that will ease." He looked around. "Let's check the guy in that yard there." He motioned toward the first guy that had shown up.

I nodded in agreement and we headed in that direction. "I'm not really sure because it all happened so fast, but it almost seems like my singing worked better tonight," I mentioned.

"Did it?" he asked. He was still moving carefully, holding his arm against his side. "Did you do something different tonight?"

I shook my head. "I don't think so. I was singing a lullaby to put them asleep like I did those two that showed up at the wreck last night."

He glanced back to where Rita and Sebastian were standing near the two bodies near the other end of the strip mall. "Did it put them to sleep?" he asked.

"It seemed to slow down a couple," I explained. "But this one I couldn't really see so I'm not sure. He might be asleep now so be careful."

"Okay."

When we got closer to the body I noticed that it looked like his throat had been ripped out by a set of claws.

"Well, he's definitely not sleeping," Raleigh murmured as I kneeled down beside the dead man and started to go through his pockets.

There was a gun near my feet that I moved out of my way and a big knife strapped to the man's leg. Raleigh dropped to his haunches across the body from me to help with the search. He was going through the man's wallet when I felt a lump in the front pocket of his jeans.

"I found keys," I said as I pulled them out. After checking the rest of his pocket's I removed the knife from the man's belt and picked up the gun.

"Good." He closed the wallet and put it into his back pocket. "Can you help me carry Neil Drummond here over to the back of the store?"

"Sure," I answered; wondering where to put everything I'd accumulated from the body since I had no pockets. The knife was pretty long so I laid it across the man's abdomen for the moment then tucked the keys and gun into the bodice of my dress, much to Raleigh's amusement. We deposited the body near the dumpster at the back of the store. Sebastian informed us that a clean up crew was on the way.

"Do you need blood?" I asked him quietly.

He shook his head in reply, still very much on alert. "It can wait until we get back to the house," he assured me.

"What else do you need me to do?" I asked, removing the man's gun from my cleavage.

Sebastian watched me closely, amusement clearly written in his gaze as his eyebrow quirked up a little. "I think we found all we're gonna find," he commented. "We just need to clean up. Raleigh, did Tyana make copies before she ate the hunter?"

"I'll go see," the other man said before heading back inside.

I retrieved the knife from the body and held both weapons up for Sebastian to see. "Where do you want these?"

"Trunk of the car," he said, pointing to the back of the vehicle where the trunk stood open.

I started over to it, then stopped to look at him over my shoulder. "Oh, we found a set of keys as well," I added with a secretive smile. "Did you want them?"

"Sure," he said, smiling down at me.

"You'll have to get them then," I told him with a slight shrug of one shoulder, smile getting bigger. "My hands are full."

Sebastian ran his eyes down my body. "No pockets?"

I just shook my head and sighed in mock dismay. "Nope."

He put his hands on his hips and leaned in close to me. "This isn't the place for me to put my hands down your dress," he growled in a low rough voice.

I laughed out loud and rearranged the weapons in my hands to fish out the keys. "Too bad," I told him when I held the keys out to him, still grinning widely.

He grabbed a hold of me then and pulled me up against his hard frame. "Later," he promised before he gave me a quick kiss. Then he let me go, taking the keys from my fingers.

I was still chuckling as I deposited the weapons in the trunk and noticed Rita approach Sebastian. She appeared to be irritated about something so when Raleigh came out of the building, a sheath of blood splattered paper and a shotgun in his hands, I went over to join him.

"How well do you know Rita?" I asked him, nodding to where she and Sebastian were still standing.

Raleigh handed me the papers, then glanced over at Sebastian. "Um, a bit," he replied hesitantly. "She doesn't come into town much, unless we call her in." He looked like he wanted to say something else, but he held back. I glanced to where Tyana was laying on the ground and bathing blood from her claws in cat form and figured he didn't want to say too much with her so near.

"She looks irritated about something," I commented, moving back toward the car and hoping he followed. He did.

"She's... not fond of Sebastian."

I frowned and turned to face him. "Why not?"

He glanced at the cat and shrugged. Apparently we weren't far enough away from her so I let the subject drop for now. Alicia stopped by to hand us package of baby wipes to clean up with and I thanked her. It was nice to get the blood of my hands and arms but no amount of wipes would get me totally clean. Only a shower could do that. Unfortunately my dress was a complete loss.

"At this rate I'm going to be out of clothes in a month," I told Raleigh, giving up on salvaging the dress. Damn, I really liked this one, too.

He gave me a look that said he wouldn't mind when that happened. "Maybe we can go shopping this weekend," he suggested.

"Don't tell me you like to shop," I answered wryly, unable to picture either of the two men in a mall.

Raleigh shrugged casually. "Depends on who I'm shopping with."

That earned him a soft smile. "We'll see what the weekend brings."

"Joan likes to shop," he added, but before I could reply our attention was drawn to Sebastian who was now stalking our way. He was obviously irritated about whatever Rita and he had been talking about, but before he could reach us the clean up crew arrived and he diverted his course to talk to them.

## Chapter 24 – Lessons

"I am a fighter and I  
I ain't gonna stop  
There is no turning back"  
Christina Aguilera  
"Fighter"

"What do we do after we get cleaned up?" I asked once we're on our way back to Sebastian's. The scene at the store took a while to clean up and all three of us were sporting varying amounts of blood on our clothing and skin. We were in desperate need of showers. It wasn't even ten o'clock yet so there was plenty of night left and I knew we wouldn't be at the house for long.

"I'll need to check in with Tristan, and call Johnson before it gets too late," Sebastian said from behind the wheel of the Impala.

"I should probably stop in at The Iron before closing," Raleigh added from the back seat.

"We need to let Glenn know about the names in that ledger," I reminded Sebastian.

"Yeah, I can scan it in and email it to him," Sebastian agreed. "We've been pretty busy the last few nights, is there something you need to do?"

I shook my head. "Not really. I can keep myself busy, though, so you can do that. Or I can help?"

"You can help," Sebastian agreed, casting a half smile my way.

Now seemed like the perfect time to bring up whatever happened with Rita. I hadn't been around Sebastian enough to know how well the two got along in the past so the trouble was how to broach the subject.

"I don't know Rita at all," I said after a minute. "She seemed irritated about something."

"Rita," Sebastian scoffed in a careful voice, "is of the opinion that I need to keep my hands to myself."

I glanced in the backseat toward Raleigh, then back to Sebastian. "Wh-what is that supposed to mean?" I asked tentatively, a sinking feeling in my belly.

"I am not worthy of your beauty," he said with a self-deprecating smile. "She's not a fan, of me, at any rate."

"Did she say that?" I asked, outraged.

"That she wasn't a fan?"

"The whole thing?"

"She did say I'm not worthy of you, if that's what you're asking, but I've been aware since we came here that she doesn't like me."

I was completely shocked. "Who the... I can't believe she said th... Sebastian," I sputtered. "Why would she say that?"

"She wanted to be Sheriff," Raleigh added, leaning up between the seats. "Plus, she has some kind of obsession with your clan."

"But she's the Scrouge," I countered. "And she doesn't like being in the city. How on earth was she going to be Sheriff?"

"A very good reason for not making her Sheriff," Sebastian pointed out.

I looked back to Raleigh. "What do you mean by obsession?"

Raleigh shrugged. "She just does, like no Daughter can do anything wrong, no matter what."

I frowned again. "You do realize how strange that sounds, right?"

"Yeah, she's good at her job though," Sebastian said. "We take care of the city, she keeps the surrounding area clean. It works well, but she still chafes about it, especially when we have to work closely together."

I looked down in my lap. "I wondered, at first, if her irritation was aimed toward me."

"No, sweetheart," Sebastian assured me, reaching over for my hand. "She was very adamant that I was not worthy of your attentions and that I shouldn't be putting my hands on you."

I glanced over at him. "I hope... I hope you told her it was none of her business."

"I did. She thinks it is. We agree to disagree."

My gaze moved down again. "I don't want to cause you trouble Sebastian."

He laughed softly. "Rita's not trouble. She's a dog with an attitude."

"She could make trouble for you." I glanced back to Raleigh. "Both of you. I don't want that."

"She's been trying to make trouble for me since the day I set foot in Nashville," Sebastian told me. "Tristan doesn't care who I date."

I lifted our joined hands and kissed his knuckles. "Okay. I can't help but worry sometimes."

"Rita is not something to worry about, *prinzessin*," he said, smiling at me.

I wanted to ask him who was, but I was afraid of what his answer might be. Instead I lowered our hands to my leg and put my free hand over them. Then I turned to look out the window as the two men started to talk about The Iron.

It wasn't long before we arrived back at the house. As the garage door opened I saw all my furniture and boxes that were neatly stacked in half of the remaining space. When I got out of the car I eyed the pile with concern. "I can get a storage locker if you want," I told Sebastian as he exited the vehicle as well. "I didn't realize how much stuff there'd be."

He looked at me in surprise. "I guess, if you want."

"Is it in the way here?"

"No, I don't even have a car, remember?" he teased with a smile. "I just, I thought you might start, you know, integrating."

Raleigh made some sort of sound behind us as he closed the car door.

I turned to face Sebastian. "Integrating?" I asked in confusion.

"Yeah, you know," he said with a shrug as he watched Raleigh head into the house. "Put stuff... where you want it and all."

I crossed my arms over my torso and continued to watch him closely. "Sebastian," I said carefully, unsure I wanted to ask the question that was forming in my head and even more worried to hear the answer. "What are you saying, exactly?"

"Look, I'm not... good at this stuff, Ariel. I just, I don't..." he sighed and looked at me. "You don't have to find another place to live. You could stay here, with me."

Whoa. I felt like all my dreams were coming true in one forty-eight hour period. I felt a little overloaded as I gapped at him. "Y-you're... asking me to... live... here with you?" I asked slowly, making my way around the car to stand in front of him.

I was sure I'd never seen him look so uncertain. "Yeah," he shrugged, "if, you know, if you want."

I smiled and moved closer to him. I wanted to squeal with delight, but I knew I had to make sure he was certain. "Are... are you sure?" I asked, reaching out to lay my palm on his chest. "This is a... well, it's a huge step."

We'd only been sleeping together to two days for God's sake!

"Yeah, I know," he said in a low voice as he put his hands on my hips. "And you'll probably get sick of me real fast, I'm hell to live with."

"What about Raleigh?"

"Raleigh has an apartment, but he doesn't really stay there much."

I remembered that Raleigh had been in Sebastian's shower that first night, not one in any of the spare rooms, so I guessed that when he was here he was with Sebastian in his space as well. I moved closer to him and put both my hands on his chest, moving them up and down a little. "O-okay. We can do this."

Sebastian wrapped his arms around me and pulled me to him. "I hope so."

I reached up to touch his lips with the tips of my fingers. "I can make you happy, Sebastian. You and Raleigh." I leaned up on tiptoe to kiss him.

He kissed me softly, then pulled back to take my hand. "Come on. Let's go assure Raleigh that I haven't driven you away."

"Is that what he's thinking?"

Sebastian smiled wryly. "I'm not very good at this kind of thing."

"Sebastian, all you have to do is ask," I assured him. "We have to be able to talk or this isn't going to work. You get that, right?"

"Yeah, I get it, I'm just not very good at it." He held my hand against his chest and pulled me toward the house.

I didn't press him any further, too excited by the knowledge that he'd asked me to live with him! I was freaking out on the inside, but I couldn't let it show.

Raleigh looked up warily from where he was making a sandwich when Sebastian and I came in the kitchen and I made sure to smile at him to show that everything was fine as I went to his side to kiss his cheek.

"I'm going to get cleaned up. Are we headed anywhere anytime soon?" I asked as Sebastian continued on to the basement himself.

Raleigh put his arm around me; visibly relaxed now that he was assured all was well. "I'm just catching a bite before I clean up. I want to be at The Iron by midnight."

"How long will you be?"

"Probably 'til close," he said regrettably.

"You're coming back here though, right?" I asked, laying my hand on his chest.

"I planned to."

I smiled at him brightly then I gave him another kiss. "I'll see you then."

I headed downstairs to get cleaned up and by the time I was done Raleigh was in the shower. Sebastian was on the laptop in the kitchen so I joined him to see what help I could be. He quickly drew me into conversation, discussing what had happened earlier tonight as he slowly typed up a report for Tristan. I was all too eager to talk about how things went down and I asked his opinion on what I should have done differently. I was relieved when he said that I'd done just fine.

"So, when are you going to teach me to fight?" I asked when there was a lull in our conversation.

About that time, Raleigh entered the kitchen again, looking freshly showered and hot, his hair still a little damp. "I'm headed for The Iron," he announced. "I'll be back about three."

"Be careful," I told him as I stood to kiss him.

He pulled me into his arms as his lips claimed mine in a long, wonderful kiss. When he finally pulled back he was breathing a little hard. "Always." He glanced over at Sebastian, who was grinning at him. Raleigh walked over to him, bent down and they kissed as well, not as thoroughly as Raleigh had kissed me, but it was more than a peck and I watched them fondly as I came back to the table and sat.

They both had goofy smiles on their faces when Raleigh left and I marveled at how absurdly happy I felt being with them.

Sebastian turned his attention back to me. "What were we saying?"

"I asked you when you were going to teach me to fight," I reminded him.

"Whenever you want," he told me with a quick grin. "It's not something you learn overnight, but we can get you there, if you want."



I reached for his hand. "I want to be useful to you. It's not fair that you or Raleigh feel that you need to hang back to protect me during a fight."

He looked down at our joined hands. "I don't want you to take this the wrong way, Ariel, but I don't need you to be 'useful' to me. I appreciate you, just the way you are. I want you to know that, but if you want to learn to fight, if it's what you truly want to do, I will teach you."

"I want to learn," I told him honestly. "I need to be able to protect myself."

"Then you will learn," he replied with a smile. "Raleigh and I can teach you, and so can Joan, and maybe a few of the Brujah women. It would help for you to learn from people built small like you."

I nodded. "I'll do what you ask, but I'm not very athletic. I've never done anything like this before."

"That doesn't mean you can't learn," Sebastian assured me with a small smile. "You were never a vampire before your embrace, right?"

"I know it's going to be a long process. I just want you to understand that I've never taken on anything like this, but I really want to."

"We'll be there," he assured me. "We'll help you every step of the way."

"Okay. How do I start? Can we do something now?"

"We can, but you might want to fill up first," he cautioned, getting up and going to the refrigerator.

"Okay."

We both drank from Sebastian's supply of blood in the fridge and then Sebastian suggested that I put on something loose before we got started, sweats or something. He had a small gym in the basement and that was where he wanted us to go.

"Um... It's going to take me a minute to find something," I warned him. Sweats weren't something I normally wore but I could tell that I'd need to invest in some if I planned on living with Sebastian. "Let me see what I can dig out and I'll call you in for approval," I said. "I don't know where half my stuff is, not to mention if it's appropriate."

He grinned. "Just another reason for you to unpack."

I smiled back at him, reminded again of how lucky I was that he wanted me. "I know. Gimme a few minutes, okay?"

"Sure."

He had to change as well so we headed downstairs together. It took a bit of searching, but I managed to find a tank top and a pair of shorts that would have to do. Of course, locating them meant that I now had clothes all over the room.

"I can make room next door, if you want," Sebastian's voice came from the doorway, startling me. "The closet's huge, I don't have nearly enough clothes to fill it."

"Are you always so quiet?" I asked teasingly.

"Part of the training, I'm afraid," he said with an easy grin. "Plus, I like to watch you."

I gave him a warm smile as I crossed the room to stand in front of him. "This is the best I can come up with," I told him, holding up the garments I'd found. "I'm going to have to do some serious shopping."

He tried not to grimace. "I'm sure Joan would love to go with you."

"Raleigh said he would go with me, too," I said with a grin. "And maybe I can find something online as well. Did you say something about closet space?"

He took my hand and led me into his bedroom, then into the closet. Well, one of the closets. This was one of those houses that had his and hers walk in closets. The mostly empty one held a gun safe and some boxes, and that was about it.

"It's all yours," he offered. "We can move the safe and this other stuff out some time this week."

It was more room than I had in my apartment and I looked over to him in amazement. "I can have all this?"

"If you take Raleigh shopping too many times, you may have to give up part of it to him," he teased.

I'd always felt that closet space for a girl was a great deal like chocolate, meaning you couldn't ever have enough. I squealed in delight and jumped up and down a little in excitement then threw my arms around his neck. "You're amazing," I said then pulled him down for a kiss.

Sebastian was more than willing to accept my thank you kiss, which quickly turned into a very thorough one. He lifted me off my feet and pressed my back against a nearby wall as his hands moved up my torso. I lifted my legs to wrap them around his waist and my hands dropped the clothing I'd found to change in to so that my fingers could bury themselves in his hair.

It was so easy for me to get lost in him. I forgot about fighting in favor of loving. Loving him. A long moan escaped the back of my throat when his hands moved over my eager body and I felt no need to ever leave this room. Never leave Sebastian. Part of my mind was overtly aware of Raleigh's absence and I knew that we'd have to arrange for something special that included him when he returned.

It was quite some time before I learned anything that didn't involve Sebastian's naked body, not that I was complaining. I looked at it as a warm up, something we needed so we didn't get hurt during training.

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Sebastian didn't plan to teach me any fancy sparing. He wanted me to fight, and fight hard. Self Defense. Attack. The whole nine yards. I did whatever he told me, figuring he knew what was best. I knew not to expect any miracles in a few hours, but I felt like I was at least holding my own. I knew Sebastian was holding back so he wouldn't really hurt me, but he definitely wasn't taking it easy on me either.

We were still at it when Raleigh came home and he watched from the doorway for a few minutes until Sebastian broke off what he was showing me to greet the other man.

"Looks like you guys are havin' fun," Raleigh drawled as he approached us.

I smiled as I brushed a lock of hair back from my face. "Hey! How's everything at The Iron?"

"Fine. I'll need to stop in for a couple of hours tomorrow afternoon, but it's surviving without my constant attention," he answered with a smile before turning to Sebastian. "You teaching or learning?"

I laughed, glancing at the other man. "As if."

"Yeah, it's pretty hard to teach that old man anything," Raleigh teased as he pulled me close to his side.

"You should be careful," I warned Raleigh. "He might be looking for a more experienced partner."

Sebastian joined us and put a hand on Raleigh's shoulder. "Nah, this one's a keeper, no matter how disrespectful he can be."

"Good to know," I said, laying my head on Raleigh's shoulder. It felt complete when we were all together like this, intertwined together so that you didn't know where one person ended and the other began.

Sebastian leaned in to kiss Raleigh and I felt the other man's arm tighten around me, pulling me a little closer as he returned Sebastian's kiss. I reached out to lay a hand on Sebastian's chest as I watched them, thinking how much I loved seeing them together like this.

Sebastian slipped his arms around the both of us, pulling Raleigh and I closer and I watched as their mouths hungrily devoured each other's. I thought again what it would be like to watch them together. Naked and hard. It would be like two primal forces coming together.

All too soon Sebastian was breaking away, but his eyes lingered on Raleigh's mouth and I knew he was thinking about neglecting our training session in favor of a workout that would be just a rigorous, if not more so. But Sebastian redirected our energy back toward teaching me how to fight and invited Raleigh to join in.

And just that quickly we were back into fighting mode. This time Sebastian focussed on two against one techniques and somehow I managed not to get hurt as Raleigh and I took Sebastian down. A couple of hours before dawn Sebastian called a halt for the night.

Sebastian and I didn't sweat, but we were both dirty from rolling around on the ground. In contrast Raleigh did sweat, but it was an intoxicating smell, one that made me want to keep him that way for a while. Someone suggested a shower. Mmm. Wet, hot men... I could get behind that.

Taking a shower with Sebastian and Raleigh was always a very sharing experience. You never washed your own hair or cleaned your own body. It was always done for you and you always did it for someone else. Now that Raleigh was with us again I recalled missing him earlier and I took special care in soaping his body while Sebastian lathered his hair. With still soapy hands, Sebastian claimed Raleigh's lips, tipping his head back so the water pouring out of the showerhead started to rinse out the shampoo.

Raleigh clung onto Sebastian, his arms moving around the other man's torso to pull him closer. I was standing near them, watching for the moment, and I wondered where they were going to go with this. So far neither had penetrated the other during our lovemaking, much to my dismay, and I wondered if I was finally going to get my wish.

Once the soap was clear from the other man's hair, Sebastian kissed his way down Raleigh's torso, pausing to lick and bite at his nipples and belly. He pushed Raleigh back against the wall as his mouth traveled lower. He bit the skin at Raleigh's hips and the other man moaned with pleasure as his head fell back against the tile.

Raleigh's eyes opened slightly and his head tilted as if he were looking for something. His gaze found me and he reached out to take my hand. I pressed myself close to his side as Sebastian took the length of him into his mouth hungrily, eliciting more moans of pleasure from Raleigh.

I took Raleigh's face gently in my hands and guided his mouth to mine. His kiss was hot and hungry, mirroring the intensity of Sebastian's mouth on his cock. The tips of my fingers danced across his skin, teasing his nipples then moving lower to the tight curls of his groin so I could help Sebastian bring him closer to the edge.

Raleigh's hand found its way to my breast and he played with my nipple until it was hard and needy. It wasn't long before Raleigh threw his head back, an intense cry of release erupting from his throat as Sebastian milked an orgasm from him.

Raleigh dropped to his knees, spent and boneless from the force of his release, and Sebastian caught him, easing him down to the floor of the shower.

I was ready with a cloth to clean Raleigh up as he caught his breath. I watched Sebastian as he smoothed hair back from his ghoul's face. "You're both so beautiful," I whispered to Sebastian.

He leaned in to kiss me lingeringly. "Let's take him to bed," he said softly, his voice a low purr.

I nodded in agreement and helped Raleigh to his feet. I needed Sebastian to steer him since Raleigh was so much larger than I was and the other man was right there. I quickly turned off the water, then got out of the shower to grab towels, wrapping one around my middle before holding one out for Raleigh.

Raleigh was a little more with it by the time he stepped out behind me and he kissed me as the offered towel made contact with his chest.

I kissed him back then touched the side of his face when I pulled back. "Dry off," I soothed him. "Time for bed."

## Chapter 25 - *Perseveres and Mummies*

"Make me wanna run when you coming around  
Because it's a frightening sound"  
Christina Aguilera  
"Bobblehead"

Raleigh was sleeping on the other side of Sebastian when I awoke the next night. He hadn't done that before so I sat up slowly as Sebastian started to wake, wondering if Raleigh had been with us all day. I quickly saw that he was dressed in a pair of jeans and a polo shirt. He must have gotten up as usual during the day and had come back to bed for a nap.

Sebastian looked up at me, then over at Raleigh without sitting up. "Morning," I said, rubbing sleep from my eyes then I leaned down to kiss him.

Sebastian brought an arm up around my back as we kissed. "Morning," he whispered sleepily.

I glanced over at Raleigh, who was still asleep and smiled fondly. "Looks like someone had a long day."

"Yeah," he replied, looking over at his ghoul again. "He's not usually sleeping when I get up. I wonder if he had to get up early."

"Didn't he say something about going into The Iron during the afternoon?"

"Yeah, but he wasn't planning on going until the afternoon. He's done it before and had plenty of sleep." Sebastian's gaze returned to me. "Of course, we may have tired him out last night."

I smiled and propped myself on Sebastian's chest to watch Raleigh sleep. "You knew him when you both were mortal right?" I asked Sebastian, resting my head on my hand. "I can't help but wonder what you both would look like in the light of day."

"I've got a box of pictures around here somewhere," he said with a smile. "Probably a few from when he was stationed in Berlin."

I turned my head to look at him. "I would love to see them sometime."

"I'll be sure to pull them out then, assuming I can find them."

I glanced to Raleigh quickly, but focussed on Sebastian again when I asked, "What's on the docket for tonight? More patrolling?"

Sebastian grinned, knowing how little I enjoyed it. "Maybe a quick one. I need to talk to Johnson, maybe schedule some sort of weekly meeting of all the different species in town. We need to figure out if there are any more mummies in the area."

I knew little about mummies, but from what rumors I'd gathered I knew that not all were Egyptian in origin and that they were long lived like vampires. There was a man who came into The Masquerade from time to time that I'd once heard another vampire call a mummy. I'd talked to this man a few times, and while he didn't have an old worldly demeanor, he seemed to know things and I'd always wondered if the rumor was true.

I'd last seen him a couple of weeks ago at The Masquerade and I remembered him mentioning that he appreciated the fact that Alexander's was back to its old splendor. I quickly told Sebastian all I could remember about the man, including what he looked like, as Raleigh continued to sleep peacefully next to us.

"I know who you're talking about," Sebastian replied. "I've seen him around, even at The Iron a couple of times."

"I've never picked up anything from him other than he seems like an old vampire," I said. "Do you think he could be someone you're looking for?"

"Well, he's not a vampire, that's for sure," he said thoughtfully. "It's certainly worth a try to find out what he is. You said you've talked to him before?"

I nodded. "He's really nice."

Sebastian hesitated a moment. "What do you think about talking to him again?"

"If you think it'll help," I said with a shrug. "I can introduce you." From what I remembered the man visited The Masquerade at least once a month, but it sounded like he visited Alexander's more often.

Sebastian tucked some of my hair back from my face. "He might be more willing to talk to you."

I shrugged again. "What would I ask him? I mean, I can't just say 'hey, excuse me, are you a mummy by chance?'"

"No, but you could start out asking him if he's seen the weird graffiti around town," he pointed out. "If he is old like a vampire and knew Alexander's before Jax left town, he might know that you're a vampire. He might talk to you."

I thought about it. "Okay, I can do that. Did you want to stop in to Alexander's after patrolling and see if he's there? We could check The Masquerade as well. I'd like to see Vanessa."

"Yeah, you know, if you want, Raleigh and I can run a quick patrol while you go to The Masquerade. I know you usually spend a lot of time there."

I tried not to be disappointed about splitting off from him and Raleigh because I knew that it might save time. "If... if you want, that would be fine."

"No, *prinzessin*, it's what you want. I'd love for you to come with us, but I know patrol can be boring."

Honestly I knew that it was probably best to spend some time apart so that we didn't get sick of each other. "No, it's okay, really. It will give me a chance to check in with Vanessa and if that man isn't there I can work on the song I started the other night." I looked down to his chest. "I... I want to finish it. It's a gift."

Sebastian reached up and pulled me down onto his chest. "I'd love to hear more of your songs," he whispered against my neck.

I smiled against his cheek. "I will sing for you whenever you ask," I whispered back, an idea forming in my head. I would need to check Vanessa's schedule for the club first and see if I could get her to close for a private concert. Limited seating.

Raleigh started to rouse next to us, moving closer to Sebastian sleepily as his eyes peeped open.

"Ah, Prince Charming," Sebastian drawled, leaning over to kiss him.

I watched the two of them and reached out to brush hair back from Raleigh's face as they parted, then Raleigh rolled up on his side to kiss me as well.

"Mmmm," I half moaned as he broke the kiss. "Morning."

"Morning." He pulled back enough to look down at Sebastian then back to me quickly. "Not to ruin a good moment, but Johnson called this morning. They found a shifter dead."

I sat up alarmed. "What happened?" From what I understood about werewolves they were some pretty tough creatures. It would have to be something seriously strong that took one down.

"Looked like he was hit by a red hot poker about twenty times," Raleigh explained. "It wasn't pretty."

I covered my mouth in horror. "Why would anyone do that to another person? Hate can't run that deep."

"There was more symbols nearby."

"What did Glenn say about it?"

"He thought some sort of magic had been used, but it wasn't anything he'd seen before."

I looked to Sebastian. "Maybe we can talk to another Mage."

"Johnson's the best I know of, but maybe the fae can help." Sebastian mused.

"They were there," Raleigh put in. "They didn't recognize it either."

"So what happens next?"

"We need to make sure all the supernaturals know about this threat," Sebastian explained. "And we need to try to find a way to counter it."

"I don't know how we can counter something that can take out a werewolf without help," Raleigh said.

"I think you'll need to brainstorm as a group. Maybe you can come up with something together."

"Yeah, we do," Sebastian agreed. "I need to call Tristan."

I started to get out of bed. "I'll go get your phone. Raleigh when was the last time you ate?"

"Um," he started sheepishly. "Maybe noon?"

"I'll see what I can put together for you," I said, finding Sebastian's robe hanging on the back of a chair and slipped it on.

Sebastian dialed as soon as his phone was in his hand and once I knew that Raleigh was eating the scrambled eggs and toast I made him I headed for the shower. Not sure how the evening would pan out, I went ahead and dressed as if I were going to The Masquerade and hoped nothing too crazy happened.

Sebastian was still on the phone when I returned to the bedroom. He was sitting up in bed with a notepad on his lap, writing notes. Raleigh was working on the computer near him.

I moved over to Raleigh and leaned against his side. "What's going on?" I asked as he reached up to take my hand and kiss the back of it.

"Just trying to put together a list of supernatural creatures in town," he told me, going back to the computer. "See if we can get a list going to make sure we've covered everyone."

"Anything I can help with? Sebastian and I were talking earlier and he's looking for a mummy. There's a man who comes to The Masquerade sometimes that he wanted me to talk to."

Raleigh looked up in surprise. "Really? I mean, I've heard of mummies, but I don't think I've ever come into contact with one."

"Me either, well, not knowingly anyhow. I've talked to him a few times but I'm not sure if he is one or just a really nice older man."

"I suppose mummies don't have their status tattooed on their foreheads any more than Kindred do," he said with a smile. "But if he is one, and admits it, he may know of others in the city."

I nodded and looked over to Sebastian. "I wonder if he still wants me to try to make contact."

"He's been on the phone for a while, should be done soon," Raleigh assured me.

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I excused myself and went to retrieve my cell phone to call Vanessa from upstairs so I didn't disturb the guys. It was going on seven o'clock and she answered the phone on the second ring. "Ariel, dear, how are you?"

"I'm well, Vanessa. How are you? How did your address pan out last night?"

"Completely empty," she reported. "Whoever lived there left suddenly a couple of days ago. I understand you had a bit more trouble at yours?"

"Yes. Everyone is okay, but we were attacked. We found a partially burned notebook with what appears to be a list of kills."

"Oh? I know that Kindred disappear from time to time, was there any confirmation they were killed by this hunter group?"

"There were Kindred names on the list as well as all the other supernatural races, which is why I wanted to talk to you. Do you remember that older gentleman who comes into the club from time to time? Middle eastern man named Nesir or Nemet maybe?"

"Mmmm, dark skinned, very short hair, wears the black and silver mask with the filigree on top?"

"Yes, that's him. When was the last time you saw him? Would he happen to be there tonight?"

"It's a bit early for him to show up tonight," she reminded me. "The last time I saw him... I think it was a couple of weeks ago, I'm not sure."

"Will you call me if you see him?" I asked her. "I need to talk to him."

"Of course," she said, and I could hear the smile in her voice. "But I'd think you'd have your hands full with those two men you're with already."

A warm smile tugged at my lips. "It's not like that, Vanessa."

"Oh, don't tell me that, Ariel," she pouted in a low, velvety voice. "If you haven't taken those boys to your bed, I may have to deny you're my child..."

I couldn't help but laugh. "Well, technically it's not my bed," I told her, quickly looking around to make sure neither of the men were in the room with me before adding. "Oh Vanessa, I'm so happy."

"I'm glad," she said, sounding like she meant it. "It's about time you stopped mooning over Sebastian and did something about how you feel. His man is a good bonus, isn't he?"

My smile couldn't get any wider. "He is." Of course in my head I was still worried about how long this was going to last and how devastated I would be if it ended, but I didn't voice that. "It's new, I get that, but... well, it's amazing."

"I'm happy for you, Ariel. It's good to see you following your heart."

"Thank you. Listen, I need to get back, but you will call me if you see him?"

"Yes, I will. Take care of yourself, Ariel. I don't want to hear that those hunters got to you."

"You be careful too. Don't go anywhere by yourself. "

"I won't. Call me later."

"I will."

Sebastian looked up as I returned to the bedroom. "Any news from Vanessa?"

"He's not at the club now, but she's going to call if he shows up." I also told him about the address that Vanessa's group checked out the night before.

"Do you still want to go to The Masquerade tonight?" Sebastian asked.

I shook my head. "I don't need to. I could go to Alexander's instead if you're going to patrol? See if I can find him there."

"All right," he agreed. "We can meet up with you there later, if you want."

## Chapter 26 - Alexander's

"I need you to help"

Christina Aguilera  
"Mercy On Me"

It was going on eight by the time I arrived at Alexander's. It was a Saturday night, so there would be a band in about an hour and there was already a pretty good crowd going. I found a few tables that were still open when I got inside but I wanted a better vantage point to see better.

I got a seat at the bar and saw that Billy was tending the bar. He was one of the Brujah ghouls who'd come to help the night Sebastian's car was wrecked. He came over to get my drink order, flashing me a friendly grin as he did so.

I greeted him warmly and ordered something fruity to pretend to drink. "Been quiet tonight?"

"Well, busy, but no problems, if that's what you mean," he said with an easy smile. "The crowd will probably kick up a notch when the band comes in at nine. Ritter and Raleigh coming in?"

"Later. They're patrolling."

He got serious. "I heard they found another one. Jax is worried, she's insisting no one go out alone, and wants us to stick to groups of three or more."

His warning made me frown a little, wondering why Sebastian had agreed to let me go out alone. I quickly wrote it off by telling myself that he and Raleigh were planning to meet up with me so as long as I stayed here there wouldn't be any problems.

"Good idea," I said, hoping Billy didn't comment on me being on my own.

As if on cue, he looked like he was about to ask, but before he could utter a word Joan slid onto the stool next to me.

"Hey, sorry I'm late, traffic's a bitch," she said. "Hi, Billy, I'll have the usual."

"One Yellowjacket coming right up," he told her with a wink before going off to get our drinks.

I turned to smile at her. "Sebastian sent you, didn't he?" I asked, my voice flat.

She smiled back. "Yeah. I wanted to make it to the house before you left, but it just didn't happen. What're we doing?"

"There's a man that sometimes comes to The Masquerade and here that just may happen to be a mummy. I've talked to him quite a bit at The Masquerade so Sebastian wants to see if I can figure it out for sure."

"And yet, this is Alexander's," she pointed out.

"I already talked to Vanessa and she's going to let me know if he shows up there. That's why I came here instead."

"What's he look like?"

I described him with as much detail as I could remember. Joan didn't recognize him, but Billy came back with our drinks and overheard me.

"You talkin' about Nemet?" he asked, setting the drinks down in front of us.

"You know him?" I asked. "Does he come in often?"

He shrugged. "Couple of times a week. He likes this band, I think, so he should be in tonight."

The band was set to start in about an hour. Convenient.

"Good," I said with a smile, then thanked Billy for his help. "In the mean time, how are you?" I asked Joan after taking a sip from my glass.

"I'm good. How do you like staying with the boys?"

I couldn't help the stupid grin that grew on my lips. "It's amazing."

She smiled back. "I'm glad you're enjoying it. I'm sure they are too."



Was it possible to blush? For me it wasn't supposed to be but my cheeks still felt hot. "I think it's safe to say it's a very mutually beneficial arrangement for everyone," I told her meekly, looking into my drink while I gave the straw a swirl.

"It's good to see 'Bastian happy again. He spends too much time brooding."

"Do you really think he's happy?" I reached out to touch her hand. "I'm ... well, let's face it, there's so many other people who would be better for him."

"What, someone like me?" Joan scoffed. "That's not what he wants."

"I ... I just don't want ... I don't know. I want to be good for him. For both of them."

"Then be good for them," she said, lifting her glass to her lips. "Just don't try to change who you are because they like who you are."

I thought about what she said a moment. "Joan, can I ask you something?"

"Sure."

"Do... what do you think about the three of us... Sebastian, Raleigh and me... together. An equal relationship."

She eyed me thoughtfully. "Why would I think anything of it? If it works for you, it works."

"But Sebastian is the Sheriff. I don't want anything I've done to make things hard for him."

"Are you planning on breaking Tristan's rules?"

I shook my head quickly. "No. I would never to that."

"Then I wouldn't worry about making things hard for him."

"Am I being stupid about this?" I asked, watching her impishly.

She grinned back. "A little."

I groaned and looked down into my drink. "God, I know I'm going to do something stupid to mess this up, Joan."

"You keep saying that and you might," she warned. "A friend of mine said that if you put power to something it will happen, good or bad." She took a sip of her drink then added with a sigh, "I wish we could get drunk."

I turned my head to look at her with a small smile. "That would be nice every once and a while, wouldn't it?" I thought about it a moment then added, "I don't think I've ever been drunk."

"I was once," she mused, picking up her glass to eye it wearily. "It wasn't great, but sometimes..."

"Sometimes the release would be nice?"

She put the glass on the bar again and looked at me. "Yeah. Guess I'll have to settle for sex."

"Been working great for me lately," I told her with a grin.

She grinned back and leaned in close to confess, "Billy is real good for that."

I watched her a moment, thinking again how I would love to have her as a friend.

"Good. I'm glad." I took a sip of the drink, then said, "I like you Joan. You're a good person."

She sobered so fast I was afraid I'd offended her. "Maybe once," she replied gravely, pulling back and looking away from me. "Now I'm... just a person."

I thought that maybe she was thinking about her life before she was made a vampire and the circumstances that were involved in her change and I reached for her hand. "You are good, Joan. Different from what you were, but still good."

But our moment of budding friendship had been shattered. Joan pulled her hand away from mine, a gesture she tried to hide by waving at one of the Brujah across the room, but I understood it for what it was. She changed the subject to something neutral and I went with it.

\* ~ \* ~ \*

About ten minutes after the band started a man entered the bar that physically looked like the man we were waiting for. It was hard for me to fully identify him since I was used to him wearing a mask so I motioned for Billy to join us. It only took a moment for him to confirm my suspicions and we watched as the man took a seat at a table where he could watch the entire bar.

I waited about ten minutes and then I asked Billy to send over a drink on me.

Billy took the drink over himself and stayed a minute to talk to the man. Billy returned behind the bar and told me, "He asked you to come over, if you want."

I thanked Billy, then looked at Joan. "Want to come with me?"

"He may respond better to just one of us, plus you're way better at being diplomatic than I am. But hey, if you want someone to beat the crap out of him, let me know."

I tried not to roll my eyes or laugh as I got to my feet and grabbed my purse and drink. "I'll be back."

Joan adjusted herself on the stool so she could keep an eye on me as I headed over to Nemet. As I approached he got to his feet and when I smiled in greeting. "Good evening," I greeted when I stood in front of him.

"Good evening, Miss. I'd like to thank you for the drink."

"Thank you for inviting me over. I remember you from The Masquerade. We've talked a few times."

"Yes, I remember you," he replied in a deep voice. "I'm surprised you recognize me without the mask."

I smile warmly, hoping that this would work and that he would help us. "Do you mind if I sit with you a while?"

"I would be delighted." He moved to pull out a chair for me and I sat. "I'm surprised to see you here this evening," he said as he took his seat again. "I was under the impression that The Masquerade was your preferred place of relaxation."

"It usually is, but I'm actually looking for you."

"Oh?" he said, eyeing me with interest.

"Yes. I'm working on something and I was wanting to ask you about it."

He was surprised. "I'm afraid I'm not much of a musician."

"No, not about music," I told him as I leaned forward. "Have you seen any strange symbols around town?"

He tilted his head as he studied me a long moment. "Our modern age has many strange symbols. Perhaps you can be more specific?"

I cleared my throat nervously, then said, "Rough symbols, ones that... well, ones that look simple, but you may not be able to draw."

"Graffiti, perhaps?" he suggested slowly. "Do you have an example of these symbols?"

I shook my head. "I... can't draw them."

"Or take pictures of them?"

Another shake. "Can't. I'm not... well, I have the wrong... I just you'd call it DNA."

"Because you're a girl?" he mused with a slight grin.

"Because," I hesitated, not wanting to give away too much in case he wasn't a supernatural of any kind. "Because I'm not exactly human."

Luckily Nemet wasn't at all surprised. "And no one who is not 'exactly human' can duplicate the symbols."

I nodded, relief letting me relax momentarily. "Yes. I've been asked to speak to you because there are some that think you... well, that you may not be exactly human either." I added quickly, "I mean you no disrespect, but if you can be of help with this matter it would be so welcome."

Again, he didn't seem surprised by what I had to say. "What kind of help are you looking for?"

"All the races are working together to stop these..." I looked around to make sure no one was listening, then said, "hunters. They are killing all of us."

Nemet thought about what I'd told him, his head nodding slowly. "If this is true there are many, more able than I to fight them, even among your own race."

"But there aren't any with your... talents among us," I told him. "We recently found a list of kills the hunters made, so now we're trying to put together a list of all supernaturals in the city. If you would be willing to aid in any way... information, investigation... it would be welcome."

"I offer no offense, but most of my kind want nothing to do with yours, my dear."

"I understand. But all of our lives could be at stake. Even the children of the moon are cooperating," I told him, knowing that it said a lot if the werewolves were working with us.

"What are you doing with this list you are accumulating?"

"We want to make sure that everyone knows what's happening so they can protect themselves and so we can make sure they are all accounted for."

Nemet thought about what I'd said for a moment before he spoke. "I don't know that others of my kind would appreciate sharing the knowledge of who and what they are with your people. If I were to do so, it would cause problems for me. I can, however, contact my people, check on their welfare, and ensure they are aware of the situation."

"If you are willing to do that then I must accept it," I said, disappointed at not having gotten more from him. "May I ask for a form of contact so we can at least share updates?"

"Certainly." He pulled from his wallet a business card for a rare bookstore that he owned. "You say that the various species are working together on this. Is there a formal council that has been formed to work on this problem?"

I nodded. "There is talk. Nothing formal as of yet."

"I would be interested in joining such a council, should one be formed. I doubt you would find another of my kind willing to do so."

"I will let Sebastian know."

His expression turned to one of interest. "Mr. Ritter is leading this initiative?"

His reaction made me nervous, especially since he knew Sebastian's name. "Y-yes," I told him slowly.

"Interesting." There was a wealth of meaning in that one word and it didn't sooth me at all. "Tell me, do you know what happened to Mr. Ritter's friend Duncan Masters?"

"Mr. Masters is no longer in the city," I said tightly, suddenly very alarmed. Why would he ask about Duncan? "Were you friends with him?"

"Oh, I'm sure Duncan Masters has no friends." There was something about the way he said that that made me think he didn't like Duncan much and that he knew Duncan was not a nice man. "I am simply wondering if we could expect him to return."

I made myself relax a little and shook my head. "No. No, I don't believe he will." I didn't want to explain anything about Sebastian and Duncan with Nemet. He wasn't a vampire and therefore didn't need to know any of the details.

"Ah," was all he said and there was something in his tone that told me he suspected that Duncan was dead. "I'm sure he won't be missed."

"It's my belief that he won't," I replied. "He... well, he wasn't a very good man." I drew in a deep breath in the hopes of appearing calm and changed the subject. "I'm sorry, I've been incredibly rude. I know we've talked in the past but I don't think we've really been properly introduce." I held out my hand. "I'm Ariel. Ariel Espenosa."

He reached out to take my hand and I noticed right away that his skin was unusually warm. "Nemet Ghazni," he replied. "It is my pleasure to make your acquaintance."

"The pleasure is all mine. I won't take up anymore of your time, Mr. Ghazni. I will give your card to Sebastian." I slowly rose to my feet and picked up my drink and purse. "Enjoy the band."

"Should I contact you at The Masquerade when I have information?" he asked. "Or Mr. Ritter's friend at The Iron?"

I took a piece of paper and pen from my purse and wrote my number down. "I will give you my number, but you can contact either of us," I told Nemet as I handed it to him.

He slipped paper in the pocket of his pants and thanked me. "Enjoy your evening with Miss... Smith."

I gave him a small smile. "Thank you. Enjoy the rest of your evening." As I returned to the bar I couldn't help but fret a little over how much he seemed to know about us. I wasn't sure if this was to be expected or if it was something to worry about. I needed to talk to Sebastian.

When I got to the bar I asked Billy if it would be possible to use the backroom to make a phone call. He glanced at the clock. "Yeah, it's a bit early for it to be occupied, go ahead."

Joan got up from her stool. "I'll come with you."

I thanked Billy and smiled at Joan. "Thanks. I was hoping you would." I led the way back to the room and tentatively opened it in case it was occupied and looked in. Luckily the space was empty and we slipped inside.

"Any luck?" Joan asked as we entered the room.

"Kind of." I pulled out my phone and started to dial. "Just a minute. I want to call Sebastian so I only have to cover this once."

He answered on the second ring, sounding distracted. "Ritter."

I hit the speaker button so that Joan could hear the conversation as well. "Hey, it's me. Everything okay?"

"Yeah, how are things going?"

"I'm here with Joan on speaker. I just talked to Nemet and got some contact information for you. He's not committing to helping with anything just yet, but he is interested in sitting on an inter-racial council."

"Did he have any information about mummies in town? Hell, did he even admit he was one?"

"Not in as many words," I admitted. "But he referred to his people and that he would probably be the only one of them to talk to us. Sebastian, he seems to know a great deal more about us than I would have guessed he should. I mentioned you by first name only and he knew your last name, knew about The Iron and about Raleigh being a contact to get to you." I glanced up at Joan before adding, "He asked about Duncan as well, not as if they were friends or anything though. I told him that Duncan was no longer in the city and wouldn't be returning. I really think you need to talk to him."

He was silent for a moment. "Are you still at Alexander's?"

"Yes. Joan and I are in the backroom"

"I can be there in.... half an hour."

"What's happening with you and Raleigh?"

"We're at The Iron, just got done with Johnson."

"Everything okay?"

"For now, yes."

His clipped tone said that there was a story there, but I decided not to press him about it now. "We can talk more then you get here," I said. "Be careful."

"I will. Stay with Joan."

"I will. See you soon." I disconnected the call and slipped the phone in my pocket again, then turned to the other woman.

"Sebastian said there was another murder earlier today," Joan said.

I nodded. "Yes, a werewolf. Raleigh said it was pretty bad."

"I haven't seen many things be able to take out a werewolf."

"I definitely haven't either. Do you want to head back out to the bar and wait for them?"

"That's a good idea."

We headed back out to the main floor of the bar and found that our seats were still open. I glanced at Nemet's table and saw that he was still there. He gave me a small smile that I returned when our eyes met, but his attention quickly returned to the band onstage.

As we waited for the guys to get there, Joan and I talked about how Sebastian was teaching me to fight. I told her that I was going to need some appropriate workout clothing if I wanted to continue and she offered to let me borrow some until I had a chance to go shopping. She even offered to go along if I wanted. She was more relaxed than she'd been earlier and I thanked her for both offers, enthusiastic about spending time with her.

"What do you think is going to happen with this in the end?" I asked her, having no idea how this stuff usually turned out.

She shrugged. "Hunters hunt. Monsters kill. The hunters get more dangerous and so do the monsters. The cycle never ends, Ariel."

"That sounds so bleak, Joan" I replied, wondering if her opinion was just a jaded comment from a jaded young woman.

She shrugged again. "It is what it is. We have to learn to adapt, or die. It's survival of the fittest, you know?"

"I... I guess you're right," I told her, uneasy with the thought.

"We just have to make sure we're the better hunters," she continued with a shrug of indifference. Then she looked at me and she must have seen how her words affected me because she added, "You've got skills, Ariel. We'll help you get other ones."

"Well, I guess I was doing okay for a first session," I said, thinking back to how I'd done. "I just hope I can remember it when it counts."

"You have to keep at it until it becomes muscle memory," she told me. "It takes time, but you can do it. You're very graceful."

I remembered Sebastian saying something to that effect as well, but I hadn't believed him. "But I'm kind of short," I pointed out to her. "That's got to be unhelpful when it comes to hitting someone, right?"

"You're what, an inch shorter than me?" she scoffed. "Please. It's not how big you are. It's how hard you fall."

I gave her a slow smile. "I like you Joan," I told her honestly. "Thank you. You make me feel like I can do this."

She grinned. "Because you can."

## Chapter 27 – Introductions

"That will guide your way  
If you will learn to begin"

Christina Aguilera  
"The Voice Within"

When Sebastian and Raleigh arrived they were only a few minutes later than the half and hour Sebastian had promised. An irritated Glenn Johnson and Darin Brocks closely followed them, the later man cautiously looking around as if he'd never been to Alexander's before. Sebastian and Raleigh came directly to where Joan and I were sitting, while the other two men found a table across the room.

Unlike the way he'd sounded on the phone, Sebastian didn't look particularly irritated on the outside, but there was something about the set of his shoulders that screamed he was. Probably because Glenn had obviously followed them here.

I turned on my stool to face the two men and Sebastian bent to kiss my cheek when they reached us. He then nodded to Joan as Raleigh scanned the crowd around us.

"What is it?" I asked as Sebastian pulled back.

"Johnson insisted on coming," Sebastian said in a low voice. "He thinks I'm going to offend the mummy. Claims they don't like vampires."

I reached out to touch his arm, knowing how the Mage grated on Sebastian's nerves. "He seemed eager enough about the council when he found out you were trying to put it together," I assured him with slight smile, trying to be positive. I glanced again to Nemet's table to see that the man was still there. "Would you like me to introduce you?"

Sebastian followed my gaze, trying to identify which one in the crowd was Nemet. "You said he knows a lot about us," he muttered in that low voice that always made him sound dangerous. "I'm not sure how safe it is for you to talk to him again."

"It's fine," I assured him. "He wasn't threatening at all." I stood and glanced at the Mage. "Is Glenn coming too?"

"He said he'd give me a chance to prove myself," he growled. He hadn't moved back and now he put his hands on my upper arms as his penetrating gaze caught mine. "If anything happens, I want you to get out of there, you understand? I don't want you hurt."

I laid my hands on his chest and nodded, even though the last thing I'd ever do was leave him when he needed me. "Nothing is going to happen, Sebastian. Come on, let's go talk to him."

He glanced at Raleigh quickly and all the other man did was nod. I got the feeling that if things went south, Raleigh would be making sure that I was out of harms way, whether I wanted to go or not. Part of me felt treasured that they would be more concerned with my safety than their own, but another part of me balked at it. Now just wasn't the time to make a fuss about it so I let it go.

Sebastian stepped back, motioning for me to take the lead, and I started across the room toward Nemet's table. As I made my way through the crowd I became aware that Nemet wasn't the only one watching me. Glenn and Darin were watching closely from their table, which I'd expected. What I hadn't anticipated was another man I didn't know was tracking my progress as well. He was an African-American, in his mid-30s and was sitting in a shadowy corner of the room so that I could barely see him.

I was used to being watched by men. I got that I was attractive. But there was something about this guy that made my skin crawl. I hadn't noticed him the first time I'd talked to Nemet and I couldn't really point him out to Sebastian without being really obvious about it. I decided to keep an eye on him and see what happened.

Nemet watched our approach with interest and got to his feet once we reached his table. I quickly made the introductions between the two men, adding, "I told Sebastian about our conversation and suggested that he should talk to you."

Nemet looked pleased by Sebastian's presence. He offered his hand to the other man and said something in German. Sebastian seemed surprised, but replied in kind. Nemet glanced at me and must have understood that I didn't know the language because he was quick to say, "I apologize, *Senorita* Espenosa. It is not often that I have a chance to practice my German. Please," he said to both of us, "have a seat."

"It's fine," I assure him with a smile as Sebastian held a chair so I could sit. "I've been meaning to make an attempt to learn it myself."

Sebastian took the seat next to me and Nemet settled himself into his across from me.

"Ariel was telling me that you might be interested in joining an... inter-species council, Mr. Ghazni." Sebastian said.

"Yes, I would," Nemet replied. "Unlike my brethren, I see the benefit of working with those of other... viewpoints."

"I was... surprised by the amount of information you seemed to know about us," I commented, feeling more confident about talking with Nemet because Sebastian was now with me.

"Oh?" he asked pleasantly. "I was under the impression that what we spoke of was common knowledge."

I tilted my head to study him a moment. "Common in our circle," I indicated Sebastian and myself. "I was just surprised that you knew certain things as well. Not that anything we spoke of was secretive, it just surprised me."

Nemet took a slow drink from his glass as he studied both of Sebastian and me. "I like to stay informed. It is... safer that way."

"Some might say it was more dangerous," Sebastian commented.

"Perhaps," Nemet replied, "but I have never found information to be dangerous."

I smiled at him. "I'm beginning to think the same thing."

Nemet returned my smile, looking pleased that I agreed with him. "Are you a scholar, *Senorita* Espenosa?"

I glanced between the two men. "No, I'm a musician, but I may look into becoming one. Please, call me Ariel. "

"Ariel," he repeated, his deep voice caressing the word. "And you must call me Nemet. A strange name, I'm told, but common once, where I was born."

I smiled widely at him. "I think it's beautiful."

"Thank you, my dear."

"As you know," Sebastian began, pulling the conversation back to the reason we were here. "We are contemplating forming an inter-species council to combat the recent problem sweeping through the city."

"Yes, these hunters," the other man replied.

"You expressed an interest in participating in this council," I commented and Nemet moved his gaze between Sebastian and myself as if he were debating something in his head.

"Yes, I am interested," he said finally. "And I doubt you would find another of my kind willing to do so."

"Excuse me for being frank," Sebastian said, "but we have only speculation as to your kind. Can you clarify that for us?"

Nemet smiled. "I am... Resurrected. What you might call a mummy, however the term is not a correct one."

"What would be a more appropriate one?" I asked.

"Most of the language has been lost over the centuries," Nemet lamented, "and what has not does not translate well. I myself prefer 'Resurrected' or 'Reborn'."

I nodded in understanding and looked to Sebastian for his response. This was his show after all and I wasn't about to make any promises for him.

"We understand that most races have their own terminology," Sebastian told him simply. "We will call you whatever you like."

Nemet nodded his head reverently. "Is your council still in the planning stages, or are you gathering members?"

"Both," Sebastian replied, looking relaxed as he moved his arm so that it rested along the back of my chair. "We have representatives for the Mage, Vampire, Changeling, and now Reborn. There is some contention as to who will represent the others."

I noticed that he hadn't mentioned werewolves in his list and I wondered if they were giving him or each other trouble when it came to picking representatives. Then again maybe they didn't plan on being part of the counsel at all.

I glanced over my shoulder discreetly at Glenn to see what he was up to. He was watching our table closely but I didn't know him well enough to read any of his emotions.

"Yes, I can see where that might be a problem," Nemet was saying. "Do you have a neutral location to meet?"

Sebastian shook his head. "Not neutral, no."

"May I recommend the Hutton Hotel?"

I turned to Sebastian. "Are you familiar with the location?" I asked him. I'd heard of the place, but I'd never been there. It was located downtown and as far as I knew had no vampire connection at all.

"I am," he said. "I think the location would work."

"I am acquainted with the owner," Nemet told us. "Given that the meetings would take place at night..."

"Yes," Sebastian agreed.

"... I am sure it would not be a problem to book the conference rooms."

"Do you think the others will agree?" I asked Sebastian.

"I think so," he said, looking across the room toward Glenn. "Those who are willing to join the council, at any rate."

"Should we introduce Nemet?" I suggested, knowing it would have to happen sooner rather than later.

"To Johnson?" Sebastian asked.

Nemet was following our conversation closely, so I explained, "Glenn and Sebastian don't always see things the same way."

"Glenn Johnson," he said thoughtfully. "Married to Siofra Johnson, nee Brennan."

"That's right," Sebastian replied, his eyes narrowing a bit.

I glanced back to Glenn again, thinking that at least Nemet seemed to have knowledge of the other species besides vampires. Across the room, I watched Glenn lean over to say something to Darin before he stood and started across the floor toward our table.

"Do you gather information about all of the supernatural races in Nashville?" Sebastian was asking Nemet.

"Not as such, no," the other man replied pleasantly. "But I find certain information very interesting, and therefore make the effort to learn as much as I can."

"Glenn's on his way over," I informed Sebastian, knowing he hadn't seen the other man get to his feet.

Sebastian glanced toward Glenn and smiled wryly. "Well, perhaps you'll have a chance to learn more this evening, Mr. Ghazni."

"Nemet, please," Nemet told him. "May I call you Sebastian?"

"Of course," he replied, still watching Glenn, who was about halfway across the room now.

When the Mage was close enough I stood and held my hand out to greet him, "Glenn, good to see you again."

Glenn took my hand as the other two men got to their feet as well. "Ariel, a pleasure, as always," he said charmingly.



"Nemet, this is Glenn Johnson," Sebastian said, his voice falling to a low rumble. "Johnson, Nemet Ghazni."

"Mr. Johnson, I have heard so much of your family," Nemet told the other man, holding his hand toward Glenn. "I'm pleased to finally meet you."

Glenn eyed him warily, but shook his hand. "I'm afraid that I had not heard your name before this evening."

"Oh, I'm not surprised," Nemet replied congenially. "Please, have a seat with us."

"I assume Sebastian has been talking to you about the proposed council," Glenn began after we were all seated.

"Yes, a very interesting idea," Nemet replied. "I've suggested we use Hutton Hotel for the meetings. To my knowledge, it is a neutral location."

Glenn seemed surprised and tried to hide it. "I believe you are correct," he managed.

"When would you like to set up a first meeting?" I asked Sebastian.

"I think tomorrow night," he replied.

"That's too soon," Glenn protested. "We still don't have delegates from half the species in town."

"We have enough to begin," Sebastian countered. "Better to have an incomplete council than not have one at all."

"I have to agree," Nemet added.

Glenn looked at the other man quickly, surprised that Nemet would agree with Sebastian.

"I would have to agree as well," I said. "You can begin circulating information and co-ordinating what needs to be done. It might help show the seriousness of the situation to those that are leery. It should help them decide to participate if they can see that there are members from the various communities that are putting animosities aside to deal with something that affects us all."

Sebastian smiled at me with approval and Nemet was nearly beaming with it as well. "I couldn't have said it better myself," Nemet said with a broad smile.

The conversation turned to the logistics of setting up the meeting and within a few minutes the three men had agreed on a time. Nemet even offered to contact the owner of the hotel and make the arrangements.

I listened to them as they planned, but had nothing to offer so I scanned the crowd, my gaze falling on the man I'd noticed on the way to Nemet's table. He was still pointedly watching us, the entire table in fact.

Now that the men seemed to be making nice with one another I leaned toward Sebastian and asked if he'd noticed the man watching us.

He looked around nonchalantly. "Where?" I discreetly gave him the appropriate direction, using the 'o'clock' method and after covertly checking the guy out he said, "I see him now. Do you know him?"

I shook my head. "No. You?"

"No."

"I noticed him on our way over here," I informed him in a quiet tone. "But I didn't want to say anything. He's been watching us the entire time I think."

Sebastian scanned the room. "He's not the only one watching," he said softly. "Text Raleigh, let him know."

I pulled out my phone and sent a text to Raleigh saying that there were numerous people watching us, pointing out the African-American man I'd first noticed in the corner in particular.

## Chapter 28 – Bait

“Give back to the ones who struggle”  
Christina Aguilera  
“Sing For Me”

“Not to stop what’s proving to be a very fruitful conversation,” Sebastian started after clearing his throat, “but do either of you know the black gentleman who appears to be watching us from the far table to my right?”

I looked up from my keypad to see Nemet discretely glance in that direction and after a moment he shook his head. Glenn was sitting with his back to the man so instead of turning around, he reached over to turn Nemet’s glass slightly.

“Has he been watching us long?” Nemet asked.

I quickly finished typing the message to Raleigh in case something happened that needed my attention more.

“Since we sat down,” Sebastian answered for me.

“I don’t recognize him,” Glenn said slowly. He hadn’t turned his head to look in that direction but I saw that he was peering at Nemet’s glass so he probably used that instead.

“Nice trick,” Nemet commented, looking at the glass as well and sounding impressed. “We shall have to discuss such things, when things calm down in the city.

“If we live through this,” Glenn murmured. “His aura is... fuck.” Glenn closed his eyes and rubbed them with the fingers of one hand.

“Glenn, what is it?” I asked.

He looked up at me and for a moment his eyes flashed gold, like a cat in the dark, which cause me to lean away from him. He blinked quickly and his eyes returned to normal. He shook his head. “Never seen anything like that.”

“Are you injured?” Sebastian asked in a low voice.

“No, I’m fine,” Glenn replied curtly. “We should go.”

I looked to Sebastian. “I will go get Joan and Raleigh and meet you at the door if you want to go.”

“Wait a minute,” he said, putting a hand on my arm. “If this guy is dangerous, we can’t just leave him here.”

“I don’t... know if he’s dangerous,” Glenn said slowly, sounding as if he was gritting his teeth. I’d never heard him unsure before and I wondered what he wasn’t telling us.

“He’s something I’ve never seen. If you can’t leave with him here, you’d best lure him out. Maybe the four of us can take him down.

“Six,” Sebastian corrected. “Raleigh and Joan are at the bar, remember?”

“Seven,” Nemet put in.

“Do you want me to see if the backroom is still free?” I asked. I thought that maybe if I went back there on my own I could lure the man into following me.

“It’s better if we lure him outside,” Sebastian said. “There’s a door down that hall into the kitchen, and one from the kitchen to the alley. Have you gone that way before?”

I shook my head. “I haven’t, but it can’t be that hard to figure out, right?”

Sebastian quickly described the layout for me, then looked at Glenn. “Can you have your friend circle around outside and meet her in the alley?”

Glenn nodded in agreement and I prepared to stand. “I’ll let you know if there’s any problems,” I told Sebastian quietly.

He nodded then turned to say something to Nemet and I saw that his entire body was rigid, as if he were about to stop me from going. I was grateful that he was worried for me, but I knew that I had to prove to him that I could handle myself. I wanted to be with him and Raleigh and because of their jobs they were in harms way more often than not. I had to be able to be there with him.

As I crossed the room I saw Darin get to his feet and head out the front door as if he were anticipating what was happening and positioning himself for a fight. I covertly looked toward our stalker and found that his attention was all on me as I wove my way through the crowded room.

I took the route that Sebastian had described, careful not to look back at the man even though I desperately wanted to know if he were following me. I caught Raleigh's eye on my way and winked at him. He winked back.

Instead of turning left and entering the backroom again, I turn right into the kitchen. As the door closed behind me, I heard a surge in sound as the door at the far end of the hall opened and I smiled a little. Looks like he'd taken the bait.

A little ahead and to the left was the door to the alley that Sebastian had described. The kitchen was nearly empty, the only person was far away from the doorway and they didn't see me as I slipped inside.

Once I was outside I kept my back to the door and put my phone to my ear, pretending to make a call as I scoped out my surroundings. I was standing in a corner of an indentation made by the walls of the building near the door. The indentation was large enough for probably four cars to park comfortably and about twenty-five feet to my right was a large dumpster at the other corner of the indentation. The indentation opened up into the alley and on the other side of that was the wall of another building.

I moved away from the door, trying to leave myself and anyone else who came back here enough room to maneuver. I checked my gun in the holster to make sure the safety was off, but I didn't pull it out yet.

I noticed movement in the shadows down the alley to my right. It was about the size of a large dog. An overhead lamp that hung above the backdoor dimly lit the space. There was another light down the alley to my right above a door in the building across the way. Streetlights at either end didn't add much illumination, but any little bit helped considering how little we knew about these hunters and their abilities.

I knew I was assuming the man was another hunter but frankly it could be fatalistic for me to not think that way given the circumstances. I moved further away from the door, maintaining the act of being on the phone. I half-turned my body away from the exit so that I didn't have my back completely to it and waited.

The door flew open seconds later and the black man stumbled out as if he were drunk, a cigarette in his hand. He fell back against the door, holding it wide open for a moment, and then he took a step away from it, letting it shut behind him.

I crossed my arms over my chest, slipping my hand in my jacket to wrap my fingers around my gun.

"Hey," he said in a slurred voice, waving the unlit cigarette and taking a step toward you. "You wouldn't happen to have a light, would ya?"

"Just a minute," I said into the phone, then to the man, "Sorry, I don't. You could check with the bartender. He may have something."

The door behind the man hadn't closed all the way behind him, and now it pushed outward a bit. I could see Sebastian in the opening and a glance down the alley let me know that Darin was nearby as well.

It wasn't hard to discern that the man wasn't drunk at all, as he took another stumbling step toward me. "You sure?" he slurred. "Just need a light for my smoke."

I took another step away from him, wanting to draw him out as far as possible so that Sebastian had room to get out without the man knowing. Time now for a little seduction...

"Let me call you back," I said into the phone, then I pretended to hang up as I turned to face the man. "I'll double check," I said with a slow smile, slipping the phone into my cleavage before patting my breasts as if I was checking my bra for a lighter.

His eyes followed my hands, leaving him sufficiently distracted as I watched Sebastian then Glenn slip into the alley behind him. I shrugged prettily and shook my head. "Nope, sorry."

The guy patted his own pockets. "Maybe I have somethin' here," he replied, his voice gravely as he slipped his hand into his pocket. Before he could pull anything out, Sebastian grabbed his arm from behind.

The man started to struggle and something skittered to the ground at their feet. I pulled my gun, ready to take a shot if one presented itself, but knowing I would never put Sebastian at risk. Glenn hung back, ready to be of assistance if Sebastian needed him and the wolf stopped short as well, waiting for an opportunity to strike.

I looked to see what the man had dropped and saw what appeared to be a collapsible club on the ground.

"Let go," the guy said in a loud ringing voice.

To my horror and surprise Sebastian did. I remembered Trent doing the same thing to me just a few nights ago and fear gripped my heart. I quickly pointed my gun at the man, ready to shoot, and kicked the club away from the two men before the hunter had a chance to retrieve it.

"S-Sebastian?" I asked tentatively, praying that the hunter's power didn't have any further control over my lover.

Sebastian didn't answer. Instead he reached back and punched the guy in the face, sending the other man stumbling back.

A yell sounded down the alley to my left and I swiveled my body at the waist, keeping my gun ready to fire. I saw another man, tall and older, a little on the heavier side, was holding what looked like the remains of a tire iron. There were crumbles of what looked like metal on the ground at Nemet's feet and I watched as he stabbed the older man under the ribcage, shoving it upward fiercely. Nemet then stepped away from the hunter, who clutched weakly at his wound as he dropped to the ground in a heap.

I heard several people moving toward us from my right while sounds of a struggle and a wolf growling came from behind me. I turned my gun toward the incoming voices and saw a man and a woman coming up the alley. The woman was carrying a big shotgun so I figured I was safe to assume they were with the other hunters.

"Stop right there," I called out authoritatively.

The man paused, but the woman lifted her gun toward me. I heard a man scream from near the doors into the kitchen and other sounds of fighting as I pulled the trigger. The woman stumbled back against the man, nearly dropping her gun. I shot again and hit her square in the chest. She collapsed against the man and he guided her to the ground.

I heard Joan yell something and I moved my head to see how everyone else was fairing in the fight. My thoughts went to Sebastian first as I scanned the area for him. I caught sight of the wolf as he headed down the alley toward the opening to my left and then I caught Billy and Ray as they came out the kitchen door.

Then my gaze fell on Sebastian in relief as he and Glenn made their way toward me. He was still holding his gun to his side, his entire being on full alert, ready to respond to any threat that arose.

I swung my gaze back to the man and woman I'd shot and found that the man was now holding the gun. Thankfully I hadn't lowered mine. "Put the gun down," I told him.

From the corner of my eye I watched as Glenn lifted his hand toward the guy. His fingers twittered and the man fell to the ground, unconscious, as Sebastian stepped up to my side. "Are you all right?" he asked, his eyes quickly sweeping up and down my body, looking for injury.

I turned to him and looked him over as well. "Yes. You?"

"Fine," he said, looking back over his shoulder at the alley to the left where there were still sounds of fighting. "Shit," he muttered, then moved in that direction.

I looked around for Raleigh and saw that he was backed against a wall of the alley, one hand raised to catch an attacker's arm on a downward swing of what looked like a stake. His gun was on the ground at his feet. This was what Sebastian had seen as well, because that was where he was headed and I quickly moved to follow.

A little further down the alley, Joan was fighting off two women, both armed with knives while Nemet was stepping away from another man, his knife bloody.

Raleigh's opponent was too close for Sebastian to shoot without running the risk of hitting his ghoul so he was running full out to get to them. Before he could reach them, however, the wolf jumped from the other side of the grappling pair and knocked the hunter off of Raleigh. I barely registered the sound of Joan finishing off the two women as the wolf yelped, teetering back as if he were hurt.

Thankfully he'd done what had been necessary to keep Raleigh from getting seriously hurt. The guy that had been knocked away was now getting to his feet and completely open so I stopped running and shoot him. The bullet hit him in the chest and he cried out as he fell back, gasping wetly for air as his body went slack on the ground. He didn't move again.

I quickly looked around us and found that all of the hunters had now been dealt with. Sebastian was at Raleigh's side and he was trying to check the other man over, but Raleigh was waving him away as I approached the two men.

Raleigh bent to retrieve his gun and didn't appear to be hampered in any way. "Are you okay?" he asked when he saw me.

I nodded. "You?"

"A little bruised," Raleigh replied, looking around.

Sebastian was watching him closely to make sure he was okay. Nemet was a few feet away, watching everything intently as Joan, Ray and Billy started to search bodies. Glenn was kneeling next to the wolf, his palms hovering over the furry torso.

"Sebastian," I said to get his attention and pointed to the wolf. "Is he alright?"

Sebastian moved toward Glenn and the wolf, but Darin started to growl, so Sebastian stopped.

"Don't take it personally," Glenn said, his hands running over the wolf's ribs. "He gets cranky when he's hurt." To the wolf, he said, "Just a few broken ribs, you'll be fine in a few minutes."

"Joan," I called out. "You alright?"

"Yeah, I'm fine," she called back, as she got to her feet from searching one of the bodies. "Everyone else okay?"

"I think so," Sebastian said, looking at Nemet, who nodded in agreement.

I stayed close to Raleigh, both of us holstering our weapons as Sebastian pulled out his phone and started to make the call that would begin the clean up process. Raleigh reached out to put his arm around me protectively and I settled against his warm frame as we waited for Sebastian to finish. The call only took a couple of minutes and as he hung up I notice the wolf getting to his feet. Glenn told Sebastian that they were going to do some reconnaissance in the neighborhood.

"What do you want me to do?" I asked Sebastian.

"Help Joan gather their IDs," he told me. "We need to figure out where all these bastards are coming from."

I nodded, gave Raleigh a small smile and pulled away to do as Sebastian asked.

Clean up seemed to take forever. Probably because I was involved in way more of it than I was used to, but it still wasn't fun. Luckily my clothes didn't get ruined this time and I was careful during clean up so I kept that way.

I noticed that Nemet didn't help much with the clean up. He spent more time watching avidly, taking note of everyone and our relationships. I couldn't help but wonder again if it were safe to include him in what we were trying to accomplish.

## Chapter 29 - Mother-In-Law

"You're the only one who's ever passed every test"  
Christina Aguilera  
"Ain't No Other Man"

Nemet excused himself to go clean up and make arrangements for the meeting tomorrow night when everything was finished. As did Glenn and Darin. When it was just the four of us Sebastian came over to me and took me in his arms.

"I need to go see Tristan. Do you want to come with me, or go back to the house with Raleigh?"

"I can go with you if you'd like. I don't like the idea of any of us traveling alone right now."

His gaze was troubled as he looked around the scene of the latest fight with hunters. "Yeah. Four attacks in four nights. This is getting out of hand."

"What about Joan?" I asked as the other woman exited the bar with my purse in hand.

Sebastian looked toward her but she replied before he could say anything. "I'll stay here with the Brujah," she told him. "Make sure no more of the bad guys show up."

Sebastian nodded his approval and I smiled at her, recalling our conversation from earlier and knowing her real reason for staying. "Work on your tension like we talked about earlier, right?"

She gave me a slow grin as she handed me my purse. "Exactly."

Sebastian pretended like he had no idea what we were talking about. He gave Joan a few more instructions, then led the way back toward my car. I unlocked it and threw my purse in the backseat. "Are you going to ride with me or go with Raleigh?" I asked him.

"I'll leave the car here for now and send someone for it later," he replied, holding his hand out for the keys.

Part of me wanted to be sassy and tell him that I would drive, but I didn't. I handed over the keys, gave him a quick kiss then climbed into the backseat.

On the way to Tristan's I asked the two men if they got the same impression of Nemet that I did, that he wanted to learn whatever he could about us.

"Yeah, not sure that's a good thing," Sebastian pondered. "Johnson claims most mummies hate vampires with a fiery passion, something about the god Set really having been a vampire."

"He seemed helpful enough tonight," I observed.

Sebastian nodded thoughtfully. "Yes, he did."

"I'm not sure how helpful he'd be in the future, though. He didn't sound to open to that."

"We'll have to see what happens. Maybe his thirst for knowledge will make him want to volunteer, just to be close to us."

I thought about what I'd been able to observe about the man. "I didn't get to watch him the entire time, but it seems as if he has some incredible powers."

"Some strange kind of magic," Raleigh added. "None of the hunters could get near him with iron, it just melted like butter. Did you see his knife? It was made from bone."

I leaned forward between the seats. "Really? I noticed that he had one, but didn't see what it was made of."

"Strangest thing I've ever seen," Raleigh told me. "I'm sure it was bone, but I've never seen anything like it. There was some sort of carving on the blade, cuneiform maybe. I didn't get a real close look at it. As good as he was with it, I'm not sure I want to get a better look."

I nodded in agreement. "I thought the same thing." I glanced over to Sebastian timidly. "I... I think I did okay during the fighting."

"You did fine," Sebastian assured me, smiling into the mirror at me. "Kept your head and made a couple of good shots. Couldn't have asked for more."

"Good," I said, beaming with approval.

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Serena was waiting in the foyer for us when we got to Tristan's. She told Sebastian and Raleigh that the Prince was in the salon and they each gave her a nod and headed in that direction. The other woman then turned to me and asked if I would join her in the parlor for a drink.

I thanked her for the invitation and followed her into a beautifully decorated room just off the foyer, nervously smoothing the skirt of my dress down over my thighs. I was uneasy about spending time with the other woman. Though she was a ghoul, Serena retained nearly the status of any other vampire in the city because she was the mortal sister of the Prince and Seneschal. I was pretty sure that put her in a higher status than myself and I had no idea why she'd want to spend time with me. Maybe she was just keeping me busy while Sebastian talked to Tristan.

There was a tray on a low table in front of a damask covered couch that held a tall, skinny pitcher of blood with a crystal goblet, along with a glass of wine. She gestured for me to sit on the couch, then sat down next to me before pouring blood from the pitcher.

It was the first time that I'd ever been in this part of the house so I looked around the room slowly. It was very tastefully decorated in cool colors and with comfortable, delicate looking furniture. It looked like a woman's room, with an antique desk against one wall and a pianoforte on the other. Serena handed me the glass of blood then sipped at her wine as she struck up a pleasant conversation about nothing in general.

I tried very hard not to be nervous as we talked. I found Serena to be very personable and witty. She knew exactly how to put a person at ease, so my nervousness didn't last long. It appeared that she didn't necessarily have an agenda in talking to me, except perhaps to get to know me better so that helped my nerves as well.

I settled back and focused on getting to know the other woman. Like many of the vampires in the city I'd been curious about the d'Castilla family ever since they'd come to town. She asked about my mortal family, where I grew up and what my relationship with Vanessa was like.

By the time the guys came to get me, I felt like I'd been put through the ringer, yet amazingly enough, I thought that I'd done pretty good. I thanked Serena again for her hospitality and gratefully got to my feet as Sebastian smiled warmly in my direction. Serena insisted that the two men should stay for a drink, but Sebastian insisted that we really needed to go.

"How bad was it?" Sebastian asked after he'd pulled out of the driveway.

"It was like... like meeting a potential mother-in-law," I answered in a quiet voice, feeling a little dazed by the entire encounter. I realized what I said and blinked quickly, meeting Sebastian's eyes in the rearview mirror with a tentative smile. "I think I made a good impression though."

He looked amused and Raleigh scoffed. "Serena has a way of putting one through the wringer. I spent hours with her before I figured out what she was doing. If I hadn't passed her muster, I doubt I'd be here now."

I felt my brow crease slightly with worry. "D-did I pass?"

"She didn't make up some excuse to send us off without you," Sebastian assured me. "I'm sure you did fine."

I had to ask. "What would have happened if she did?"

"She'd have found you a nice apartment on the far side of town complete with a handsome ghoul to keep you occupied," Raleigh said with a grin that made my heart sink.

It was hard to tell if he was teasing or being serious. Would they really cast me aside if Serena hadn't approved of me? I quickly looked down and away from the mirror, not wanting either of them to see the hurt I was sure was shining in my eyes until I could get control of my emotions. After all, that wasn't what happened, right?

"Hey," Sebastian said, getting my attention with his low voice.

I bit my lip and slowly looked up again.

"I never had a doubt you would pass her test, *prinzessin*," he said very seriously, his voice full of meaning. "If for some reason I was wrong," he glanced at Raleigh. "Stewart Williams has often told me there is a place for me in his city."

Raleigh nodded in agreement and I swallowed hard. Sebastian would leave Nashville for me? The very thought said so much that he hadn't said out loud and I desperately hoped he was serious.

I nodded silently, not able to trust my voice enough to speak and I turned my head to look out the window, covering my mouth with my hand so they couldn't see my quivering lips.

Raleigh turned in his seat and reached back to take my other hand. I squeezed his fingers slightly and looked down at my lap. "Sorry," I whispered. I took a deep breath to finish getting myself together and looked up. "It's all been... a little much. I'm... I'm okay."

"You sure?" he asked gently.

I nodded and attempted a tentative smile. "Sorry to be a freaked out baby."

"You're not a baby," Raleigh said firmly. "Serena can be overwhelming, believe me, I know."

I watched him a moment, trying to determine if he was telling the truth or just trying to pacify me. He really did seem to know so I nodded again, feeling foolish for letting the whole thing get to me. Damn, it just went to show that I was only waiting for them to realize what batcase I really was.

I cleared my throat and asked, "What do we do now?"

"Now we head home," Sebastian said, keeping an eye on me in the mirror. "I need a shower and I can hear Raleigh's stomach from here."

I gave Raleigh a small smile. "Do you want us to stop somewhere so you can get something besides a sandwich?" I asked him.

"Is that all night Chinese buffet still open?" Sebastian asked.

Raleigh wrinkled his nose. "There's a Thai place still open," he suggested. "It's kind of on the way home."

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Less than an hour later we were back at Sebastian's. I sat with Raleigh while he ate and Sebastian showered. I worried that I may have over reacted in the car, but I didn't get much of a chance to fret about it because Raleigh kept me completely distracted. He asked about my music and I became totally immersed in the subject, hinting that there was something special that I'd been working on.

He tried to charm more information out of me, but I shook my head. "When it's done," I promised him. "There's plenty others to choose from anyhow if you want."

Raleigh wouldn't let it go, though, and once he was done eating he came around the table to kneel in front of my chair, playfully kissing my hands as he begged.

I laughed at his antics and shooed him away. "No, you can't get it out of me yet." I reached out to touch his face and added, "When it's ready, you and Sebastian will be the first to hear it."

"Hear what?" Sebastian asked as he returned to the kitchen.

"She's teasing me," Raleigh pouted.

"I'm not," I insisted with a casual smile. "I told you I will sing it for you both when it's ready. It's not ready."



Sebastian came closer and put his hand on Raleigh's head. "You could sing to us now," he said smiling at me. "Doesn't have to be your surprise."

I smiled up at him. "If you'd like."

Raleigh beamed. "We'd like."

We relocated to the music room and spent the rest of the night there. We took turns singing and playing for each other, then we made love and fell asleep in a tangled mass of limbs in Sebastian's bed as the sun rose. It was perfect.

## *Chapter 30 - Inter-Racial Council*

"Made me learn a little bit faster  
Made my skin a little bit thicker  
Makes me that much smarter  
So thanks for making me a fighter"  
Christina Aguilera  
"Fighter"

I wasn't surprised that Sebastian was still fast asleep when I woke the next night. What did surprise me was finding Raleigh sitting up against the pillows with a notepad, writing away furiously. I leaned over to kiss him in greeting and saw that he was working on notes for the upcoming council meeting. When Sebastian woke Raleigh informed us that Nemet had scheduled a conference room at the Hutton Hotel for nine o'clock.

Sebastian said that I could come if I wanted to. Each 'breed' was only allowed two representatives and one observer. Sebastian and Lachlan were the vampire representatives, which was more than fine by me since I didn't want to have to be in the spotlight. I was happy to observe and told Sebastian so. I then asked who the other representatives were and Raleigh started shifting through his pages for names.

We already knew that Nemet would be the Resurrected's one and only representative. Aside from him, Glenn Johnson and a woman named Deandre would represent the Mages. Glenn's wife, Siofra would be observing.

Raleigh explained that apparently there had been some contention with the werewolves over who would be on the counsel. A man named Ted Allen seemed to have come out on top. Marty, one of the wolves we'd already had some dealings with would also attend and Glenn's friend Darin would observe.

Kim Rapier and Michael Keogh were the wererat representatives and Donny Malone their observer. As far as I knew, I didn't know any of the wererats in town and their names weren't familiar to me. At the very least I figured that attending this meeting would help me to identify more of the supernatural creatures in Nashville.

By the same token, I'd had no idea that other werewolves were in the city besides Tyanna, but a man named Red Sun Rising and a woman, Theresa Ford, would represent them. I found myself wishing once again that Kiran were still here. At least if he were on the council we'd know there was another person we could trust implicitly.

The fae were sending Aster and Gaylord. They had given no other names for the two, but I wasn't entirely surprised. I'd heard a little about the fae and they were never really known for being cemented into reality.

The last two representatives intrigued all of us. Harold was a werespider. I didn't even know werespiders existed before Raleigh told Sebastian and me, but we were going to meet one tonight. Finally, Raleigh told us that some guy named Oscar had called Nemet and insisted on being involved, though he wouldn't identify his species. Sebastian was a little concerned about not knowing much about the man, but if Nemet was okay with him then Sebastian was willing to be a little lenient. After all, there were going to be supernaturals there from so many races that we could probably handle anything unexpected that might be thrown at us.

I asked Sebastian how formal the meeting would be. I was already trying to form the best outfit to wear that would help me to use my assets to be helpful. Raleigh had once made a comment that if I looked helpless that was a good thing. I wasn't a negotiator and I held very little sway among my kind, but if I could use my looks to help Sebastian I would. Raleigh suggested one of my dresses and I agreed.

Once all three of us were ready for the night we spent some time reviewing all the information that Raleigh, Glenn and Nemet had gathered on the hunter attacks. We had

information on about twenty individuals so far and a pattern seemed to be emerging. Of the twenty people, they had grouped themselves into roughly three groups. Some of them hadn't known each other, but at some point members of each group began to work together. The obvious exception was Trent's band that had already been a group and the one to alert us to the situation in the first place.

So far there hadn't been any clear indication on how the members of one group had come to find out about the another, but there was still some cross checking of dates against possible causes from police reports and the like that needed to happen.

The only date that stood out to me was a full moon that I pointed out to the guys.

"Was there a werewolf attack during that time?" Sebastian asked.

Raleigh shrugged. "I don't have that kind of data, but it's an idea."

"Do you think they are trying to use myths from old stories?" I threw out.

"It's hard to say," Sebastian said. "Maybe the werewolves tonight will have some ideas."

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Nemet was waiting for us in the hotel lobby.

Sebastian had wanted to be early so he could check things out before anyone else arrives and Nemet took us right up to the conference room. On the way I asked Nemet if he had suffered any ill effects from the previous nights activities and he was quick to assure me that he was fine once he had a chance to rest, then he asked after my health.

"I didn't get close enough to worry this time," I told him, glancing to Sebastian. "I'm still learning hand to hand."

"And you, Sebastian?" Nemet asked. "Do you have any ill effects from last night?"

"I'm fine," the other man replied easily. "I believe the only one seriously hurt, other than our opponents, was the wolf, and he healed quickly, from what I understand."

I smiled at Nemet. "Thank you for your aide last night."

"It was my pleasure, my dear," he said with a smile as we reached our destination. "It is not often one witnesses so many races coming together in one cause."

I nodded in agreement as Nemet reached to open the door and we continued into the room. "Well, if it would ever happen, it would be for this kind of problem," I commented.

Nemet nodded thoughtfully. "Very true, but I have seen a situation like this go badly," he said in a solemn voice.

"Toledo, 1580," Sebastian said, taking a look around the room. "Many of the shapeshifters turned on the other races, hoping to avoid their own destruction."

"You were there?" Nemet asked, his eyes lighting up as if he'd been waiting a long time to find someone who had been there.

"No, not me," Sebastian denied. "But I have spoken to several people who were there."

Nemet tried not to look disappointed as his gaze dropped to the floor. "I would give much to hear their accounts of the era."

I knew that Sebastian's grandsire was an elder to our kind and I wondered if he had been there, but I didn't want to voice any questions now. Not in front of Nemet. Yes, I was grateful that he'd helped out the night before, but I wasn't eager to share too much with him just yet.

"I'll see if they're interested in talking about it," Sebastian mentioned carefully. "It was a terrible time, after all. The Inquisition destroyed many lives."

"Yes, we'll have to make sure that this recent phenomenon doesn't do the same," Nemet replied. He then took a few minutes to point out things in the room that might come in useful during the upcoming meeting, including the multimedia equipment along one wall. By the time he was wrapping up Glenn walked with a lovely dark haired woman and Darin.

I went over to greet them and Glenn introduced the woman as his wife, Siofra. She was truly a beautiful woman with large, dark eyes and milky white skin. I greeted her warmly, offering her my hand. "It's a pleasure to meet you."

Siofra glanced at my hand, then at Glenn, before she reluctantly took it. "Ariel, I've been hearing a lot about you," she said evenly.

I glanced at Glenn. "We're happy you came. Would you like me to introduce you to the others?"

Siofra agreed and I ushered her across to where Nemet was still talking with Sebastian and Raleigh. She was pleasant enough, but I could tell that she didn't like vampires any more than her husband did, maybe less. She was just better at hiding it than Glenn was.

When I introduced her to Nemet he took her hand and kissed it. "I was sorry to hear what happened to your brother," he said gravely. "His... associate, she is well?"

Siofra stiffened noticeably and glanced at Sebastian before answering. "She is fine," she said curtly and I hoped the meeting wouldn't dissolve into a fight before it even began. Who was her brother? And why would Nemet asking about him put her on edge so quickly?

Thankfully, before Nemet could continue a tall man with short, dark hair entered the room, quickly followed by Lachlan and Marty. Sebastian invited everyone to take a seat at the long conference table that dominated the room and asked that everyone hold off their introductions until everyone else had arrived.

Seats started to fill as more people arrived and Raleigh escorted me to a seat near one end of the table where Sebastian would sit before he moved a few feet away to where a small desk and computer had been set up. He would use it to connect to the Internet so Fly could listen in and contribute information where he could.

Nemet came to sit next to me, while Lachlan moved around the table to sit on Sebastian's other side. I remembered the interest our newest ally had about our kind and I wondered if he would try to learn anything from Lachlan. What surprised me was when both men appeared to be equally interested in one another as they bantered across the table to each other.

I quietly watched as an almost continuous stream of people entered the room. I tried to figure out what race of supernatural creature each of them were, but it seemed like there were more people here than I'd originally thought there would be. Each group was allowed two representatives, plus one to consult, but by the time most of the chairs were filled there were nearly twenty people there. I silently wondered what other races I would learn existed within the city.

Glenn moved to the other end of the table from where Sebastian would sit, Siofra taking the chair on his right and Darin the one on his left. Darin's friend Marty, whom I'd met the other night, sat next to Darin and the four of them exchanged a few pleasantries that I couldn't make out from where I sat.

I watched as a grey haired man who looked to be in his early fifties moved toward Glenn's end of the table. He moved with a frightening sense of purpose that had everyone in the room silently watching him. He looked around the table and when his gaze fell on Darin he rounded the table to stand next to him. "I will have your seat," he said in a no nonsense tone.

Darin looked at Glenn, who shook his head almost imperceptively. It must have been some kind of silent wish to keep the peace because Darin stood and squared off with the other man. "You may have my seat, tonight," the werewolf said in a low, rumbling voice, "but remember that you do not rule me."

The other man's face turned red with fury, but Darin ignored him and moved to sit on the other side of Marty.

"Are we all here?" Sebastian asked, getting everyone's attention and I breathed a sigh of relief that he spoke before the two men came to blows.

"No, there was--" Nemet began, as a large Hispanic man walked in and everyone in the room turned to look at him.

The air changed in some imperceptible way. A few sitting at the table actually shivered slightly, but their spines went rigid when they realized how the other had reacted. Only an old native man appeared to not be affected by the newcomer's entrance.

--Oscar," Nemet practically whispered.

"Am I late?" Oscar asked with a pleasant smile that really didn't match the energy he brought to the room.

Sebastian glanced at Nemet, who only gave the slightest of shrugs in return. "Please, have a seat," Sebastian told the newcomer.

Oscar walked around the table, smiling at everyone as he passed them, and sat down in one of the few empty seats, between the native man and a woman with a dark pixie haircut.

Sebastian stood up and introduced himself, stating that he would act as the moderator for the council. "I'm aware that some of us already know each other, but I think its best if we introduce ourselves and identify our species so that we're clear as to everyone's role here. I'll begin by introducing Lachlan Nash to my left," he said, gesturing toward his friend. "He and I will represent the vampire population of the city on this council. Also with us is Ariel Espenosa," he continued, gesturing toward me. "She will be acting as our consultant this evening."

Sebastian turned his gaze to Nemet and the other man got to his feet as well. "I am Nemet Ghazni," he said in his deep voice. "I represent the Resurrected in our city."

I saw the brunette woman who sat on Nemet's other side eye him with interest as the man next to her leaned forward to look at Nemet. "Zombie?" he guessed.

"Mummy," an African American woman further down the table corrected, sounding contemptuous.

"You are alone?" Oscar asked, looking around the table when it became clear that Nemet wouldn't be introducing anyone else.

"My kind are few," Nemet replied with a small bow. "And fewer still who are willing to work with others."

Nemet sat and the woman next to him rose. She looked to be in her mid-twenties and I noticed that she appeared to be pretty confident, despite the fact that she avoided looking directly at the native man across the table from her. "I am Kim Rapier," she announced, then gestured to the man next to her. "Michael Keogh and I will represent the Ratkin on this council." She started to sit back down, but stopped herself and quickly added, "Donny is here to observe."

Donny was sitting next to Michael and looked around the table restlessly; nodding slightly as the pretty African American woman next to him eyed him closely. Kim did take her seat then and the woman next to Donny got to her feet. "I am Theresa Ford," she said, looking around the table. "I am a child of Seline and I speak--"

The old native man across from her cut her off. "You speak for yourself," he said briskly, leaning forward slightly, his palms on the table as if he were getting ready to launch himself to his feet.

Theresa eyed the man angrily, but did not meet his eyes. "I speak for myself," she agreed, her tone irritated, "but you speak for our people no more than I."

"No one person could ever speak for the entirety of our people," he retorted as he leaned back, suddenly at complete ease and sounding almost amused.

"If neither of you speak for your people, why are you even here?" a woman near Siofra asked.

"Someone must bring news back to the rest of--," Theresa started.

"Yes, and that won't be you," the native man said. "Sit down, kitten, and let the introductions continue."

Theresa's expression looked like a cat with her fur on end, but she did as she was instructed and sat down.

"Fascinating," Oscar said under his breath. I was thinking the same, but I kept silent.

The man who'd demanded Darin's seat started to get to his feet, but Glenn put a hand on his arm to stop him. He growled at Glenn, but Glenn just looked at him calmly and didn't move. "Take your hand from me," the older man commanded.

"Don't get your back up, Teddy," Glenn drawled with a hint of a smile. "I think it's best if someone else introduces your people, save the bloodstains on the carpet."

"Your brother-in-law's status does not give you leave--"

"No," Glenn said sharply, as all trace of amusement left his features, "my will gives me leave. If you can't play well with others, you're no good to this council. Let me make the introductions or send in John. I know he's waiting downstairs."

Slowly, reluctantly, the other man backed down, but the look in his eyes spoke volumes as to how angry he was as Glenn stood. "To my left is Ted Allen, leader of the Radnor Lake Pack of werewolves," he explained. "He has won the right to speak for most of his people in Nashville."

"All of my people," Ted protested.

"Most," Darin growled. "We have yet to determine who would win between the two of us."

Ted's eyes narrowed as he looked at the other werewolf. "We can determine that now, pup."

Glenn spoke quickly before Darin could react, his voice overly friendly. "And this is why I am making the introductions, Teddy. Beside him is Marty Aldrich, who some of you have met, and beside him is Darin Brocks, who is here to consult."

Glenn continued, "I am Glenn Johnson and the young lady next to Lachlan is Deandre Bevans." The woman with the pixie cut nodded. "We will represent those who can use magic in the city." He reached over to put his hand on Siofra's shoulder and added, "This is my wife, Siofra."

Glenn sat then and the man next to Siofra looked around the table before he stood. "I'm Harold," he said, sounding uncomfortable. "I speak for the... the werespiders."

Ted gave the man a harsh look, but said nothing as Harold sat back down.

The woman next to Harold took her turn. "I am Aster," she said in a breathy voice. "I speak for the Seelie Court."

She said nothing else and as she sat a small bald man across the table from her stood. "I am Gaylord," he announced in a clipped voice, never looking in Aster's direction. "I sit this council on behalf of the Unseelie court." He sat back down and the old native man stood, charisma seeming to roll off him in waves.

"I am Frank Roberts," he told the group with a great deal of authority in his voice. "I am Red Sun Rising. I am the eldest of the cat shifters in Nashville. I do not speak for them, but I will share information with and from them to the council."

Theresa gave him a dark look, but said nothing as he took his seat again.

Finally Oscar got to his feet. "I am Oscar," he said pleasantly and again I felt something... wrong about him. "I am not a shapeshifter, nor a magic user, nor fae. I speak for my people."

"What are your people?" Sebastian asked.

Oscar eyed him. "I speak for my people. That is all you need know."

"Now see here," Ted growled. "Everyone here has revealed themselves. You can't just sit there and--"

Lachlan leaned forward. "While I'm sure we would all like to hear more about Oscar and his people," he said reasonably, "we have more important ground to cover. There is a new threat in the city, one that has, if I am not mistaken, killed at least one of every race represented here."

Heads nodded around the table and Lachlan continued, "If you are so disposed, Mr. Allen, you may speak with Oscar after the meeting to determine what his people are. For now, let us focus on the problem."

I had to admit that I wanted to know what Oscar was as well. The tension in the room was palpable and I started to hum a soothing song, ready to use my ability if I needed.

Thankfully Ted reluctantly backed down and Sebastian began the meeting by talking about the hunters we had been able to identify so far as Raleigh again ran a multi-media presentation on the screen. Sebastian then moved on to known attacks against supernaturals and asked if anyone knew of any others. Responses were reluctant at first, but eventually other attacks were revealed and Raleigh was busily feeding all the new information to Fly. I maintained a steady humming of soothing melodies in the hopes of keeping everyone calm.

As the discussion continued, Fly cross referenced the hunters against the creatures killed, which brought up an interesting theory. Some of the hunter groups that had not known each other were involved in an attack against supernaturals, and thereafter the hunters worked together. There had been no history of violence against any supernatural prior to the initial one they were involved in.

About an hour into the meeting, I noticed that some of the participants seemed to be either seeing or sensing something that I didn't. Red Sun Rising noticed whatever it was first, then Oscar, then a few minutes later Siofra and almost immediately afterward Glenn was looking around the room warily.

Whatever it was seemed to move toward the end of the table where Glenn was sitting. As it got closer to him, one by one the rest of the shifters on that side of the table became aware of it.

"What is it?" Lachlan asked.

"Spirits," Deandre told him. "A man and two women."

I looked to where everyone who could see the spirits were turning their attention and saw that there seemed to be something moving in the area. I couldn't make anything out for certain. I looked at Sebastian to determine if he could see anything and found that he was looking in that direction as well and frowning as if he couldn't believe what he was seeing.

The spirits moved around the table and one of them sat in the empty chair between Gaylord and Red Sun Rising. I saw the chair move back then the cushion sank in the center as if someone sat down in it. No one reacted with any amount of surprise.

Red Sun Rising looked toward the chair and after a moment he said, "Mark Jones is here to speak for his people. He has listened to our meeting and has several attacks to add to our tally." Red Sun Rising spent the next several minutes relaying the information from the ghosts, which Raleigh forwarded to Fly.

After the spirits were finished the discussion turned to how the hunters obtained their incredible abilities. The general consensus believed that the hunters started off as normal humans who observed a supernatural event that somehow gave them either some sort of magick or a measure of True Faith. I'd heard of True Faith before. Some members of the Inquisition, usually priests or nuns, were said to have some kind of *super* faith that let them use their belief in God as a weapon. They could push our kind away from them with nothing but a look. Every city usually had some kind of Inquisition group and every new vampire was told stay away from members of clergy just to be on the safe side.

The council finished the meeting by voting on how often to meet. Weekly, for now, with an eye to spreading out the meetings in the future after the hunters were dealt with. It was decided that Sebastian and Glenn would act as intermediaries between meetings for those who needed assistance. Raleigh gathered the pertinent contact information from everyone before the meeting came to a close.

## Chapter 31 - Patching up

"I found a man I can trust and boy, I believe in us  
I am terrified to love for the first time"  
Christina Aguilera  
"Bound To You"

I asked Sebastian to drop me off at The Masquerade after the meeting was over. I knew Vanessa would be interested in hearing what happened at the meeting and I'd missed spending time with her in the last week. He agreed and once we were in the car I commented that the meeting seemed to have gone all right.

"No one killed each other," Sebastian said with a wry smile. "I think for now they'll work together."

"I was surprised to when the wraiths arrived," I added.

"You weren't the only one," Raleigh put in. "Very creepy."

"I'm just glad we had someone who could communicate for hem," Sebastian added.

"Do you think they might be able to be more civil to each other once this hunter situation is resolved?" I asked Sebastian.

"Maybe. Or maybe they'll have enough information about each other to try and take out their natural enemies."

"That would be sad," I said. "Some of them are nice."

"And some of them are very dangerous," Sebastian said. "I can't imagine Ted Allen working with any of us once this is over. And something about Oscar really rubs me the wrong way."

"Yes. I got the same impressions." I also wondered why Lachlan was so quick to put off the groups desire to know what Oscar was, but I didn't voice anything.

"We just need to be careful to watch what information we share," he told us. "And watch them, all of them."

"I'm sure they will be doing the same thing," I pointed out.

Sebastian smiled over at me. "We'll get through this. We took out a lot of these hunters, and we may be able to hunt down the few that are left. Maybe that will take care of the problem."

I nodded in agreement. "It will be nice to not have to worry about them anymore."

"Yes, it will. I just hope more don't crop up to take their place."

I hoped the same thing.

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Vanessa happened to be checking in at the front desk when I walked in and she greeted me with a wide smile. There was a trace of what looked like concern in her dark eyes and I wondered if she was worried because I'd come in alone. I assured her that everything was fine, that Sebastian needed to go see Tristan and they would come pick me up when they were done.

"I wanted to spend some time with you," I told her, linking my arm through hers as we entered the bar proper.

"Well, I'm glad you did," she said, patting my arm with her free hand. "Let me fill you in on what you've missed the past few nights."

She told me all the new gossip, including the usual rumors about who was now sleeping with the Brujah at Alexander's. Vanessa also informed me that it seemed that there were a few new Nosferatu moving into town. Others said that the new vampires were in fact Toreador, but no one had any other specifics. I listened to her with interest, taking note of specific items that I thought might be useful to Sebastian and Raleigh.

I asked Vanessa how nervous the Kindred of the city were about this hunter situation and she told me that as far as she knew a lot of them were either staying close to home, or



only going out in groups of twos or threes. Like any group, some were more paranoid about it than others while other were ignoring the danger completely.

Vanessa was quick to assure me that she was among those who were being careful. She told me that she'd barely left the building since the whole mess started. I was relieved to hear it. Vanessa was my closest friend, not just my sire. If anything happened to her I would be devastated.

"What about Nathan?" I asked her. I hadn't seen my friend since the meeting at Burn and I hadn't had much of a chance to talk to him then.

"I haven't talked to him," she told me with a kind smile. "Why don't you call him and see if he wants to come here."

I agreed and in a matter of a few minutes I had him on the phone and vowing to meet us as soon as he finished up a couple things that needed his attention. While we waited for him to arrive I asked Vanessa if she would listen to the song I'd been working on and she enthusiastically said yes. She was usually one of the first people who heard my music and I knew I could count on her to give me an honest opinion.

We went down to one of the warm up rooms in the basement where Vanessa kept a baby grand piano. I'd written many songs in this room and knew its acoustics as well as I'd know the ones in my old apartment. Vanessa's eyes were glowing with praise when I finished. "That's beautiful, sweetie," she said, her hand over her heart. "When did you write it?"

"Just recently," I answered, trying to keep my answers vague, but the light in her eyes told me she knew whom the song was about. I asked her if she had any suggestions to make it better and she voiced a couple.

"But this song is from your heart," she cautioned. "I don't want to color it with my own perceptions. Its fine the way it is." Her approval had always meant the world to me and I thanked her for listening. We returned to the main floor of the club just as Nathan was coming in.

Before I knew it, a couple of hours later had passed. Nathan was in the middle of a story about this group he was thinking about signing when his normally open face closed down a bit and his body tensed when he noticed something over my shoulder. I turned to see what had affected him so and found Sebastian and Raleigh just coming in. I quickly went to greet them.

"Did you call and I didn't hear my phone?" I asked when I reached them, a ridiculously large smile on my face.

Sebastian leaned down to kiss my cheek. "We thought we'd surprise you."

"It's a perfect surprise," I beamed at him. "Can you stay a while?" I asked as I leaned over to kiss Raleigh's cheek.

"For a little while," Sebastian said. "Are you having a good time?"

I nodded. "Yes. I've been catching up with Vanessa and Nathan. Come join us." I saw that some of the regular Kindred patrons had noticed how Sebastian and Raleigh had greeted me, some not in a positive way. I was sure that Tabitha, one of the Nosferatu Harpies, was going to have a field day with her new tidbit of gossip.

I led the two men back to the table where Vanessa and Nathan were waiting. Raleigh grabbed an extra chair on the way over and we spent the next hour or so talking. Nathan was more subdued after the arrival of the other two men and I remembered how he'd been weird about me staying with Sebastian at first. I figured that he was probably just worried about me and needed to see that Sebastian and Raleigh were great men.

Vanessa was the opposite. She asked Sebastian about the hunter situation and if her reaction to his answers was anything to go by, she was even more okay with me helping them.

It was nearly three when we left and as I hugged my friend and sire, telling them we needed to do this again soon.

"You only have to call," Nathan replied with a smile, but something clouded his eyes as he pulled away from the hug and shook hands with Raleigh then Sebastian.

## Chapter 32 – On My Own

"No one ever wants or bothers to explain"  
Christina Aguilera  
"The Voice Within"

The next night Raleigh announced that he needed to go into The Iron for a while. Sebastian added that he needed to start checking on the more reclusive Kindred in town that no one had seen in a while. Both of them said that I was welcome to accompany either of them, or I could do my own thing. Sebastian said he understood that I would need time on my own, and he didn't want to infringe on that.

I was grateful that they both wanted to spend time with me, but I knew there were things around the house I needed to work on. Raleigh and I hadn't finished getting all of my stuff situated in the closet and laundry was piling up. I told them that as long as neither of them needed me, I'd rather stay here. I knew I would feel more like this was where I lived if I had my own things around me.

I spent the next few hours working on my tasks. When my last load of laundry was in the dryer and everything was arranged just right in the closet when I remembered how Nathan had acted the night before. Now was the perfect time to call him to see if I could figure out what was on his mind.

"Cruz," he said in his clipped, business tone when he answered.

"You busy?" I asked tentatively.

"Ariel, hey, hold on a minute." His voice muffled so I figured he covered the mouthpiece to talk to someone, then he came back. "What's up? Don't tell me you have a little freedom two nights in a row."

"Hey," I greeted him, noting his freedom comment, but choosing not to say anything about it yet. "You got a minute?"

"You can have two, sweetie, but only because it's you."

I laughed. "You're very special to me, you know that right? You're one of the very few I consider a friend."

"Well, that's very nice of you, dear, but I'm sure that's not why you called."

"But it is, in a way," I sighed. "I called because I couldn't help but notice that... well, that you're less than enthusiastic about Sebastian."

"Of course you called to talk to me about another man," he said, making it sound very dramatic.

"Nathan... come on," I pleaded with a laugh. "Please talk to me."

He hesitated, then asked, "What do you want me to say?"

"The truth," I told him honestly, speaking quietly. "Do you have a problem that I'm with him?"

The line was silent a long moment before he answered. "As long as you're happy, it's not really my business is it?"

"I am happy," I said. "Really happy. But I'm not stupid enough to not realize how new this is. To know how different Sebastian is from me, even though we have more in common than I ever thought we would." I sighed again. "Nathan, as my friend I'm asking you to be honest here and help me see the big picture."

He didn't answer and I heard the background noise around him change as if he was moving into another room.

"Ariel, you're a big girl, and I know you're looking for my help here, but I'm not sure I can give it. You're in a new relationship and everything is shiny and new, despite what you're asking from me, people in new relationships really don't want to know anything... negative about the people their with, trust me."

"But you have reservations. That much is apparent after last night."

"I have reservations," he agreed. "I'm hoping I'm wrong."

"Is it something I should know about?"

"Ariel..." he said with a sigh, sounding as if he really didn't want to say anything at all. Finally he said, "All right, look. I heard there was a girl, in Flint, someone he was close to. It ended badly, for her."

I thought about what Nathan said. I'd never heard anything about Sebastian being involved with a girl, but then again why would I? I knew that he had been in Flint before coming to Nashville, he'd told me that much, but my insecurities got the better of me.

"Wh-what happened?" I forced myself to ask.

"I don't know the full details," he told me. "I just know that they were hot and heavy and then suddenly she was yesterday's news."

I wanted to think that Duncan was the cause for Sebastian dismissing someone like that, but I knew that in the back of my mind I was waiting for the same thing to happen to me. When it happened I knew that I was going to be devastated, but that didn't mean I could walk away before.

"I see," I said carefully. "Thank you for telling me."

"I really haven't told you anything," he pointed out. "Just, if anything happens, Ariel, you know I'm here for you, right?"

"Thank you, Nathan." It meant so much to have someone besides Vanessa that I could go to. "That means so much."

"Any time you need me, Ariel. Just be careful."

"I will. Listen, I gotta go. We'll talk soon, okay?"

"Sure, babe. Just give me a call."

"Bye." I hung up and sat for a long moment, thinking about what Nathan had told me. *Really, it's not that big a deal*, I told myself. If Sebastian had, in fact, been involved with some girl in Flint it had nothing to do with me.

I needed a distraction before fretting about it drove me to start making assumptions. I went to the studio and worked on my music.

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I was surprised that I heard Sebastian and Raleigh enter the house around midnight, probably because it hadn't even been an hour since I'd talked to Nathan. I closed my notebook and turned to face them when they came in.

"Don't stop on our account," Sebastian said, a small smile on his lips.

Raleigh came over and sat next to me on the piano stool. "Whatcha workin' on?" he asked eagerly.

"Nothing to share just yet," I told him with a smile as I leaned in to kiss him. "Did you both get all your work done?" I asked Sebastian.

Sebastian nodded and moved further in the room so he was standing next to Raleigh and I. "I still have a few people to check up on tomorrow, but I found most of them, yes."

I looked back to Raleigh with a wide smile. "And you?"

"For tonight, yes," he replied with a smile. "What about you?"

"I got everything put away in the closet and bathroom. Laundry caught up. Talked to Nathan. And did a little work in here."

"Sounds like you were busy," Raleigh commented.

I shrugged and looked up to Sebastian. "It needed to be done."

He gave me a half smile of approval as he watched me. "Good to see you settling in."

"So what do you have for the rest of the night?" I asked, looking between the two men.

"I thought we might spar some more," Sebastian suggested.

I nodded. "Good idea. Give me ten to change?" I grabbed my songbook and stood.

"Sure."

## Chapter 33 – Damsel

“So you hang with the boys, makes you feel secure”  
Christina Aguilera  
“Bobblehead”

The next night Sebastian still needed to locate three of our kind. They hadn't been seen in a while so Sebastian wanted to check on them and to make sure they knew about the new hunter threat. Two were from Clan Toreador and the third was from Clan Nosferatu.

Sebastian asked if I wanted to join in the search. Since I'd gotten so much accomplished the previous night and I really wanted to spend more time with him I said yes. Raleigh was going, too.

Before the search started, however, we made a stop at a car dealership because Sebastian was over having a rental car. An hour later we rolled off the lot in a brand new Black Impala SS. The car was luxurious and sporty at the same time with light grey leather interior and from the sounds of it, an incredibly powerful engine that Sebastian was quick to put through its paces.

The first person Sebastian wanted to locate was Damsel, the unaccounted for Nosferatu. I knew who she was, but I'd never seen her. She'd lived in Nashville a long time, but like so many others had left when harsher princes than Tristan had ruled the city. In fact she had only just returned a time after Duncan's death.

Regina had told Sebastian that Damsel might be living at Fort Negley, an old Civil War Military Post not far from downtown. It was a state park now, but the actual fort itself was in ruins.

When we got there we found that there was minimal lighting on the grounds, and the fort itself was nearly surrounded by trees and brush. The ruins lay on several tiers of land and everything was in various stages of atrophy. There was an arch near the entrance that was really the only sound standing structure left. Sebastian led the way while Raleigh hung back with me, keeping an eye out for trouble from the rear as we entered.

“I'm not sure where the entrance to her haven might be, if she has one,” Sebastian told us. “We may have to spread out to see what we can find.”

“I'll take this side,” I said, moving off to his right. Raleigh circled to the left and we spent the next ten minutes looking but came up completely empty handed. I even swept my area twice to be sure.

“I didn't find anything,” I told the men when we regrouped.

“Maybe if we switched areas,” Sebastian suggested. “Raleigh, you take the center, Ariel, the left, and I'll go over here.”

I nodded and went where Sebastian directed. I approached an area where there was a tangle of vegetation that was deep in shadow and realized that someone - or *something* - was watching me. “Hello?” I called out tentatively. “My name is Ariel. We're looking for Damsel? Sebastian want's to make sure she's okay.”

I got no response at first. Raleigh heard me speak and immediately started heading my way. A very faint, rough voice said, “Pretty, pretty.”

“Are you Damsel?” I asked quietly.

“Pretty lady. Can you sing?” the croaking voice asked.

“I can,” I told her with a small smile, trying not to show how creeped out I was. “Won't you come out and talk to us?”

I saw movement in the shadows. “Pretty lady, sing for me.”

I started to hum nervously as I squinted, hoping to make out more of the person behind the voice. “Come out, come out,” I sing-songed. “I'd like to meet you.”

Raleigh came to a stop beside me and the creature moved a little more. “Sing a song,” it croaked.

I started to sing a soothing song, wanting to keep the situation as calm as possible. The shadow moved closer, until she was about five feet away from us and I reached for Raleigh as I continued to sing. I felt his warm fingers envelope mine as I noticed Sebastian heading our way. The shadow moved as if Damsel were dancing and I continued singing until Sebastian reached us, then the shadow stopped dancing and stood upright.

"Ritter," she said, somehow making it sound like a hiss and I stopped singing.

"Damsel," he replied politely. "Regina said we might find you here."

"You brought me a pretty," she croaked.

"I brought you a warning," he said, his voice a low growl. "There is a new breed of hunter on the streets."

"Hunter, hunter, burning bright," she chanted, lowering her voice to a growl that almost matches his. "Drawing symbols in the night."

"You know of them then?" I asked.

"I see things, pretty," she almost purred. "I hear things too. Pretty singing."

"You must be careful of these hunters," I warned her. "Our abilities don't always work on them."

She hissed, dropping to crouch a bit. "Eyes that see, hand that burns, don't pay attention to little ones who watch them." She looked down and I could now see rats gathering at her feet. I glanced at Sebastian, uncertain what she was talking about.

"You set the rats to watching them?" he asked.

"Little ones move silently in the night," she told him. "Golden hunters pay them no mind."

"Golden?" he pressed, looking for more of an explanation.

"Pretty, shiny," she growled. "Stalking their prey in the night."

"What have the rats told you?" I asked her.

"Glowing hands, burning trails, many deaths," she croaked, crouching to pet the rats. They started to climb all over her and Damsel didn't seem to notice. I turned toward Raleigh to hide my disgust, moving closer to him in the process and he put his arm around me.

"It's important that you pass along any information you find about these hunters," Sebastian was telling her. "You can contact me directly, or talk to Regina."

"Pretty, pretty," she croaked. "Pretty sings for me. Ritter," she made the word sound like a curse, "does not."

Something told me that what she meant was she would talk to me and not Sebastian. "Is... is there something you want to tell us about them?" I asked her hesitantly.

"Hunters hear voices like heroes have horses," she croaked. "Golden voices crawling around their heads like fleas." She picked up one of the rats and stroked it around the head as if to emphasize her words.

I glanced from Sebastian to Damsel. "The rats told you all this?"

She shrugged. "Hunters talk. Rats listen."

"Do the rats know where these hunters are?" I asked her. "Could they take us to them? Make sure we've stopped all of them?"

She tilted her head at me. "Rats can't follow."

I looked to Sebastian, not sure what else to ask her. I wondered if the rats were her ghouls, but I was a little too creeped out to ask.

"If we brought you pictures, could you recognize the hunters?" Sebastian asked. "Maybe tell us if we've found all of them?"

Damsel turned her eyes toward him. "The rats would know."

"I can bring them here, this same time tomorrow night," he suggested. "Would that be all right?"

"Bring the pretty, pretty," she said, putting the rat she was holding down. "My rats will be waiting." The shadows just sort of swirled up around her, and she was gone.

I tried really hard not to show how creeped out I was and pressed closer to Raleigh, wrapping my arms around his waist and relieved when he held me tight. I think he may have been a little creeped out as well.

After a minute of no further movement in the shadows Sebastian gestured back toward the car and the three of us headed in that direction. Once we were inside it I commented, "That was weird."

"Damsel is... unique," Sebastian agreed.

"Bat shit crazy," Raleigh added under his breath.

I agreed with Raleigh. "And of course I'm the one she wants to talk to!"

"Well, you are pretty," Sebastian teased.

I hit his arm playfully. "Not funny."

"Sure it is," he grinned, starting the car. "But really, if she can help us, we really need to follow up on this."

I shuddered. "I know. As long as you're both there and all I have to do is talk or sing it's fine."

"You'll be fine," he assured me. "Hopefully the next visit won't be anything like this one."

Somehow I doubted that, but I didn't voice my thoughts. "I hope that she can get us something useful," I commented.

"Or her rats," Raleigh agreed.

I looked back at him with a smile. "You can talk to them if you want. Ugh!" I stuck my tongue out.

"Better not do that when the rats are around," Sebastian teased.

I rolled my eyes and shook my head at him, then I leaned across the console, winking back at Raleigh as I brought my mouth to Sebastian's ear. "I have plenty of other things to do with my tongue," I assured him, using my tongue to bring his earlobe into my mouth to nip at it.

Sebastian moaned softly and reached over to put his hand on my knee. "Is that a proposition?" he asked in the low, sexy voice I loved so much.

I laughed a little. "Whenever you want." I kissed his neck then pulled back.

He gave me a sideways look. "Don't tempt me."

I didn't say anything, just lifted an eyebrow at him and smiled mischievously.

## Chapter 34 - Jonas Davis

"The pieces gone, left the puzzle undone  
That's the way it is"

Christina Aguilera  
"Beautiful"

Jonas Davis, a member of Clan Toreador, was next on Sebastian's list. He hadn't been seen at his usual handouts, Crash and Squirts, for several nights, but Sebastian wanted to check them anyway.

"Nathan's usually at Crash," I told the men. "Should I call and check with him?"

"Sure," Sebastian said after a careful clearing of his throat.

There was a reticence to his tone that caused me to pause as I started to pull my phone out. "What is it?" I asked him.

Sebastian glanced at me quickly, but his eyes returned to the road before I could read anything in the blue depths. "What?"

"You seemed hesitant. Did you not want me to call?"

"No, it's fine," he assured me.

I didn't understand why Sebastian wouldn't want me to contact Nathan so I went ahead and placed the call. Nathan answered on the second ring and I could barely hear him over all the background noise. "Hello?" he called out.

"Hey it's Ariel," I said, raising my voice so he could hear me. "Are you at Crash?"

I could hear his smile in his reply. "Yeah, how'd you guess?"

"I was hoping you would be there. Look, have you seen Jonas Davis?"

"Jonas?" he repeated. Nathan didn't answer right away and I figured that was because he was checking the crowd of faces for the man in question. After a moment, he said, "I haven't seen him in a couple of nights I guess. Maybe a week."

It was a long shoot, but one we needed to double check. "Okay thanks. Can you let me know if he comes in?"

"Yeah, sure. I'll keep an eye out for him for you."

"Thanks. Talk to you soon." We quickly exchanged good-byes and hung up.

"Not there?" Sebastian asked.

I shook my head. "He hasn't seen him in about a week."

He nodded. "We'll try Squirts then."

As Sebastian drove across town we speculated about where Jonas might be if he wasn't at one of his usual hideouts. Apparently Keri Bowers, the Toreador Primogen, had been less than willing to share his haven's location. Since I didn't know Jonas, I didn't have much to add to the conversation, but Raleigh and Sebastian came up with a couple more places to try if he wasn't at the bar.

Squirts wasn't exactly the kind of place I liked to hang out at. I'd been there once or twice when I'd first come to Nashville, but there'd been something about it that I hadn't connected with. "It's been a long time since I've been to Squirts," I told the two men.

"What's it like?"

Sebastian smiled at me. "It's kind of a dive. Lot's of poor college kids hang out there, reading bad poetry and drinking too much caffeine."

"They serve more coffee than beer?" I asked, my nose wrinkling a little. That was hard to believe.

"I think they sell their share of beer too," he corrected. "Or at least the popular fruity drinks."



"Poetry? They have readings?" I could see why a Toreador would like to hang out there. Toreador were known for their artistry, even singers, which was why my clan tended to not get along with them.

"Couple of nights a week, from what I understand," Sebastian informed me. "One of Mateo's ghouls goes there sometimes."

"I'm intrigued by the place myself," I admitted. Poetry was so close to music after all.

"Let's see if you still feel that way after you've been there," Raleigh piped in from the back seat.

I laughed slightly and looked back at him. "It might be inspiring."

Raleigh laughed. "Let's see if you still feel that way after you've been there," he repeated and I had to reach back to squeeze his knee as I returned his smile.

We arrived at Squirts a few minutes later and as Sebastian parked the car I took a look around the neighborhood. The outside of the place didn't look like much and once we were inside I was nearly overwhelmed by the smell of coffee and cigarettes. The bar was about half full, and there was a young man on the little stage and it looked like he hadn't showered in at last week. He was holding a microphone and reading some really bad poetry from a battered notebook.

I watched him long enough to determine that he was bad, then I started to search the sea of faces for Jonas. I didn't see him anywhere, but I did recognize Spike, one of the Clan Brujah members, across the bar. I pointed him out to Sebastian. "Maybe he's seen Jonas?"

"Well, we'll find out." Sebastian headed off through the crowd toward the vampire and I waited for Raleigh to follow him before tagging after.

Spike was sitting on a couch at the far end of the room. Sebastian made his way over and sat on the arm of the couch. As Raleigh and I caught up, I heard Sebastian say, "- seen him in a week or so."

"I hate to break it to you lad, but no one has," Spike informed him.

I stopped next to Raleigh and listened.

"He goes off on these little tangents sometimes where he sits in his apartment writing songs," Spike added. "We may not see him for a couple of weeks yet."

"Do you know if he heard about these new hunters before he disappeared?" Raleigh asked.

"No idea, mate. Only heard of them last night, myself. Got your hands full, don't ya?" Spike replied.

"Full enough," Sebastian agreed. "Any time you wanna lend a hand, you know how to reach me."

Spike shrugged. "Might do that, mate, I get bored enough."

"In the mean time, can you tell me where Jonas' haven is?" Sebastian asked.

Spike thought a minute. "Off Riverside Drive, I think, over by Shelby Bottoms."

"Can you narrow that down a bit? It's a big area."

"One of those girls names streets," Spike added. "Brittany maybe. Or Beth. House backs up to the Bottoms."

I wasn't familiar with the area. All I knew was that it was a newer subdivision in the city. I didn't know Spike either. We didn't exactly move in the same circles, but I knew that he spent at least some of his time with a group that fondly called themselves the Scooby Gang. They were a group of mortal young people that had been friends with Joan when she was still alive, still the Slayer. She hadn't been in contact with any of them since she'd been turned and they had no idea she was still... well, alive, sort of. Spike wasn't even aware of who Joan really was. I guessed that it made for a murky situation.

We headed for the car and once we were on our way, Raleigh lean forward between the seats. "I'm surprised he didn't ask about Joan," he said to Sebastian.

Sebastian glanced at him in the rear view. "I don't think he'll ask me about her again."

I looked between the two men and waited to see what else was said.

"Took him long enough to get the hint," Raleigh said.

"Took most of my patience," Sebastian added in a hard voice.

"He knew her... before right?" I asked.

"Yeah," Sebastian said with a sigh. "They worked together from time to time, when it suited Spike to play the good guy."

"Do you think he suspects her real identity?"

"Spike's not the type to keep that to himself. If he knew who she was, we would know it."

"I wonder if there's some kind of unconscious pull to her," I mused out loud. "Maybe he just feels who she is and is drawn to her. That happens right?"

"Yeah, I suppose," Sebastian agreed. "I've heard stories about something like that happening, if there's a strong enough connection between two people."

I nodded. "I think its possible."

"She should talk to him," Raleigh said.

"She doesn't want to," Sebastian pointed out, his voice taking on the edge it usually did when talking about his child.

But Raleigh wasn't letting the subject go this time. "She might feel better if she did."

"Cutting herself off from her old friends has to be hard." I added. "What about her sister? I get who she was, but ignoring the situation doesn't make it go away."

"She feels a clean break would be best," Sebastian insisted. "If her old friends and family knew what had happened to her, they might think they had to do something about it."

"Making the choice for someone isn't fair to them," I pointed out, trying to put myself in their shoes. "She might be surprised by their reaction. Either way she'd know and could move on instead of remaining the limbo she's living in."

"I-I don't want to push her on this," Sebastian said slowly.

"You shouldn't," I told him. "But maybe if you asked her about it she would come to a decision on her own"

He hesitated, then nodded slowly. "Maybe."

I reached out to touch his knee comfortingly. I knew this was a hard subject for him to talk about, but in my heart I knew it would be good for Joan. Silence hung in the air for a few blocks as Sebastian continued to drive toward our destination. Finally, I asked what the plan was.

"We'll cruise the back of the neighborhood and see what we find," Sebastian said, glancing over at me and giving me a small smile that I returned.

We'd made a full circle of the neighborhood and were coming through a second time when I spotted the vehicle we were looking for parked in the drive of a house. I didn't see any lights on as I pointed it out to Sebastian and he turned the car around to go back to it.

Sebastian pulled into the drive behind the car and shut the Impala off. Silence hung in the vehicle as we all studied the house without getting out.

"Seems weird for his car to be here and the lights are off," Raleigh commented.

Silently, I was dreading what we might find inside. I looked around the house for any sign of symbols as the three of us exited the car. My stomach dropped when I found a chalk drawing half under Sebastian's car on the driveway.

I pointed it out and Sebastian swore something in German and pulled his gun. Raleigh pulled his gun as well and that was enough for me to slip mine from my holster, too, as we approached the front of the house carefully.

Sebastian tried the door and found it unlocked. There was a nasty smell coming from inside.

"Do you smell that?" I asked, covering my nose and mouth even though I didn't need to breathe. I really didn't want to go in there. Really.

"Yeah," Sebastian replied, his features set to deal with whatever it was we found. "Smells like it's been there a couple of days, whatever it is. Wait here."

I was torn between guilt and relief at his words as Sebastian slipped inside. Raleigh stood by my side, his eyes constantly sweeping around us. I kept my eyes moving as well, looking in the directions where Raleigh wasn't so that we were always covered. "Maybe you should go in with him," I said very quietly.

"Whatever's in there's been dead for days," he assured me.

I moved closer to him. "What if they laid a trap? Should I go?"

Raleigh looked around the structure again, then back to me. "Stay here," he instructed, then moved toward the house.

"I'm going with you!" I whispered insistently and followed him.

The smell was worse once we were inside. Sebastian hadn't turned any lights on, so we had to use the LED lights of electronics equipment to move around. Raleigh moved toward the back of the house and I followed. When he came to a stop in the doorway to the kitchen I looked around him and saw Sebastian crouched down next to a body on the floor. From the smell of things, it had been there a while.

"Hit the lights," Sebastian said.

Raleigh did and after my eyes adjusted to the harsh light I looked at the body there.

"It's not Jonas," I said.

"Human, I think," Sebastian replied. "Female. Looks like he bit her."

"Maybe she was a hunter," I suggested. "Maybe he left town."

"Without his car?" Raleigh asked and I shrugged.

"Maybe he went on foot?"

Raleigh shook his head. "A Toreador? Where would he go?"

I looked to Sebastian and asked, "Who is his sire?"

It was his turn to shake his head. "I don't know. He's not from Nashville."

"Maybe you should call Keri and let her know what we've found here. Maybe she'd be more forthcoming with information."

"Yeah," Sebastian said, looking up at Raleigh. "Check the rest of the house."

Raleigh nodded and I went with him to help. The smell had permeated through the entire place, but I really wanted to be away from the body. Raleigh and I split up, Raleigh heading toward the front of the house while I went to the bedroom. It looked as if someone had packed a bag quickly.

There was a landline phone on the bedside table. On a whim I picked it up and hit redial. After three rings a man answered. "Hello?"

"Hello, my name is Ariel," I said, using my most trustworthy tone. "I'm looking for Jonas."

The other end of the line was silent a moment. "How did you get this number?"

"I'm at his apartment and hit redial on his phone," I explained as I made my way back to the kitchen where Sebastian was on his cell phone. "We're worried about him. Who is this?"

"You will forgive me if I don't give my name to a stranger, Ariel," the man said.

"I can understand that," I sympathized. "I hope that you understand as well that I'm only concerned for Jonas. Do you know where he is?"

"I suppose that would depend on why you're looking for him."

I waved my free hand to get Sebastian's attention, then pointed to the phone in my hand. "Some things have happened in Nashville that have his friends concerned and he hasn't been seen in about a week," I explained. "How well do you know Jonas?"

"He is like a brother to me," was the answer.

"So you know if he's safe? When did you talk to him last?" I glanced at Sebastian and said, "The... well, the Sheriff here is concerned and I'm helping him."

From the look on his face, Sebastian realized I was talking to someone who knew Jonas and quickly finished his call.

"Then you know what he left," the man on the phone said.

"We do, yes," I replied. "Do you know the Sheriff here?"

"Not as such, no."

"Would you feel more comfortable talking to him?" I asked, eager to give the responsibility to Sebastian.

"Do you hold a position of office in Nashville?"

I shook my head, even though the man wouldn't see me doing so. "No. I'm just helping him."

"Then I will continue to speak with you. If no one in authority has an official word of where Jonas is, they cannot move against him. I want to make it clear that he was attacked in his home."

"That's what we feared," I confessed. "Can you tell me what happened?" Using my second voice I told Sebastian, "He was attacked."

Sebastian nodded that he could hear the other side of the conversation as the man on the phone spoke again. "A girl he'd met a few weeks ago followed him home and attacked him. He defended himself."

"Did he say if she said anything?" I asked.

"He was pretty upset, but I think she called him an abomination. He was hurt pretty badly, too."

"How is he now?"

"He's fine."

"Could you pass a message to him?" To Sebastian I said, "I'll have him call you."

Sebastian nodded in agreement as the man said, "I will give him a message."

"Please ask him to call Sebastian. Do you have a pen to take the number?"

"Sebastian is the Sheriff?"

"He's who Jonas needs to talk to. Can I give him your name?"

The man hesitated. "What assurance do I have that... Sebastian won't use my name to call a blood hunt?"

"There's no need to worry about a blood hunt," I assured him quickly, looking to Sebastian for approval and he nodded in return. "Not if what you've said is true. We just want to make sure he's okay, truly."

"Jonas is safe, and well, and if we get a guarantee he will not face a blood hunt for killing the human, he will return."

"I'm with Sebastian now and he agrees with what I'm telling you."

The man on the other end was silent for a moment, then said, "Jonas will call your Sheriff in two night's time. If the assurance is the same, we will come."

"Two nights," I repeated, watching Sebastian for his reaction. "We will take care of the clean up here and await his call." Sebastian gave me a curt nod, telling me that he was fine with what I'd told the man, who then asked for the number. I gave it to him.

"Thank you, Ariel," the man finally said. "Perhaps we will meet soon."

I smiled, glad to be helpful. "I look forward to it."

"Me, too."

We said our good-byes and I hung up the phone, then met Sebastian's gaze. "Is there a way that Fly can get that phone number? The gentlemen wouldn't give me his name, but he said Jonas was like a brother to him."

"Yeah, write it down, we'll call it into him when we leave here."

I located a piece of paper and wrote the number from caller ID down just as the clean up crew arrived. Raleigh gave them a few instructions and in a few moments they were underway. I returned the phone to its cradle and told Sebastian that Jonas had packed a bag.

"At least we know he went willingly," he said with a sigh. "Maybe he took this girl's car."

"You'll be able to find out for sure in a couple of days," I assured him. "The man on the phone was very worried about a blood hunt."

Sebastian glanced around the apartment as the clean up crew worked. "I can't say I'm happy with him taking off," Sebastian said, "but I can't blame him for protecting himself."

"I don't know him well. It might be the kind of person he is."

Sebastian thought about it a moment, then added, "I'm just curious about his friend. Still can't find out who Jonas' sire is"

I recalled my conversation and commented, "I think the man on the phone was his sire or brother."

"I think you're right," Sebastian agreed with a slight nod of his head. "Obviously it's someone Jonas feels he can trust."

"I feel bad there's no one here he seems to trust."

"I'm afraid that many Kindred in town feel that way. The previous prince worked more to divide the city than to bring it together."

"But it's been, what, three years since Tristan came here," I pointed out. "They should feel confident in him by now."

"Most of them do. People like Jonas, with few connections in the city, they're more wary." Sebastian frowned. "Though you would think he would have gone to Nez or Tor Kelson."

I knew Nez. He was Nathan's sire. What I didn't know was why Jonas would have gone to him. "Is he close to them?" I asked.

"Not close enough to call if there's trouble, apparently," Sebastian commented. "You know they were all in a band together, in the 60s."

I had heard that. The Jester's had reached some notoriety during that time. Of course, not the way that The Beatles had, but they'd done their fair share of record sales. "That's right," I said. "I'd forgotten about that."

"I doubt he had. I wonder why he didn't call one of them."

I shrugged. "It's hard to say what goes through a persons head when something traumatic happens."

"I suppose. Still, I don't see them hanging around much."

"He must be lonely."

"Maybe."

## Chapter 35 - Rina Montalvo

"Desnudate (Get naked)

Desnudate (For me)"

Christina Aguilera

"Desnudate"

Rina Montalvo was the final person we needed to locate. She'd moved to the city last summer, but she was rather reclusive and I'd never met her. I had seen some of the multimedia art that she'd created, though, and it was breathtaking. Rina's work normally consisted of a computer-driven laser show, using multi-colored beams to highlight almost unlife-like images, which were all hand-painted by the woman herself. She scanned the paintings into her computer and programmed all of the music that accompanied the art, which was written, performed, mixed, and mastered by Rina as well.

Her apartment complex was near the Belle Meade Country Club on the outskirts of the city and on the way there I asked Sebastian if there was anything I should know about her.

"She's a little scattered," he told me. "Even for a Toreador."

"Great," I replied slowly. "Does she at least live in a house?" I was remembering our earlier encounter with Damsel.

Sebastian chuckled a little. "An apartment. She's kind of a technoweenie, she appreciates technology."

"Hmm. That's kinda nice then. No more searching ruins?" I asked him teasingly.

"No, thankfully," he replied and I got the impression that all this was quite tedious for him. "Civilization. As long as we find her, that is."

"So is she like Jonas... no one seen her in a week?"

"Since Friday, actually. Again, Keri's not being real helpful."

"Maybe Keri should be looking for her own people then," I commented, knowing that Henrietta, my own clan's Primogen would never be that way with any of the Daughters. Keri was the default Primogen after their previous one Jesus disappeared, but that didn't mean she shouldn't be aware of what was happening with her people.

Sebastian thought so, too, since his huffed, "If she would, we wouldn't be doing her job."

"Maybe they need a different Primogen," I suggested. "One that cares."

Sebastian glanced over at me thoughtfully. "Who would you recommend?"

I didn't have to think to answer. "I'm not sure there's anyone here who would be better."

"We have to deal with what we have and work around her," he replied with a sigh.

"Believe me, Tristan doesn't like it any more than I do."

I nodded in understanding. "It's too bad Jesus was a sick jerk. He was least cared about his clanmembers."

"His positives really didn't make up for the negatives."

"No, they really didn't."

Rina's apartment building was an older one, and her apartment was supposed to be one of the basement units. We didn't see any symbols as we approached, but there was an excessive amount of flickering light that peeped out from around heavy curtains at the windows. It looked like there were four or five different televisions on in there. I pointed the lights out to the guys and Sebastian nodded.

"She's probably working," he commented.

"If she is, she won't welcome our interruption," Raleigh added.

Sebastian sighed. "But we still have to know."

There was a sliding glass door at the ground level, but Sebastian decided to go inside to knock at the door in the hall instead. There was no answer.

"Should we try the slider?" I asked.

"I doubt it would be any different," Sebastian commented, raising his hand again to pound on the door louder.

On a whim I reached out and tried the knob. To my surprise it was unlocked and the door swept open, allowing a low thrum of music to vibrate out of the apartment. I glanced up at Sebastian with a smile. "Shall we go in?"

"Let me go first," he scowled, his voice low and dangerous as he pulled his gun.

I stepped back enough for Sebastian to go through the door as I pulled my weapon from the holster and followed, Raleigh behind me. The place was a mess. Paint splatters, unfinished canvases and computer equipment lay everywhere. Sebastian entered carefully, looking around and listening before he went too far. The music made it hard to hear if anyone was moving around.

The further we moved into the room, the messier it got. The garbage in the kitchen was overflowing with empty paint tubes, broken paint brushes, and empty blood bags. In the living room there was a bank of monitors against one wall with a large chair in front of a computer station. The image on the monitors looked as if someone was doing some sort of programming, design, video work, or a combination of all three at once. The chair moved slightly as if someone shifted in it and I glanced at Sebastian to make sure he saw it.

"Rina?" Sebastian called out.

A female voice began cursing some pretty awful things in Spanish. The coding on screen continued for a few moments, then the chair spun around quickly, revealing a beautiful black woman in paint splattered clothes that looked like they'd been worn a few days.

"What do you want?" she demanded.

I figured that she must be the person we were looking for when Sebastian lowered his weapon, so I did as well. "We are checking on the welfare of all Kindred in the area," he told her. "You haven't been seen in nearly a week and haven't answered your phone."

"I've been busy," she said, gesturing toward the computer monitors.

"There are new hunters in the city," I added. "They are very dangerous."

"I know," she replied flippantly, waving her hand like the news didn't matter to her. "They got Carlos two weeks ago."

"They killed your ghoul and you didn't notify anyone?" Sebastian asked, clearly irritated.

"I told Keri, as I was supposed to," Rina replied, looking him over from head to toe. "Have you ever thought of sitting for a portrait?"

"You told Keri," he repeated, trying to get her to focus.

"I did. You would make a wonderful subject," she told him. "I would even paint you nude, and I don't do many nude paintings."

My brows lifted in surprise. She wanted to paint Sebastian? Nude? There was no way in hell he was posing nude for this woman. No way.

"She never reported your ghoul's death," I informed the woman to keep from forbidding Sebastian there and then from sitting for her. "What happened to him?"

"Hunter," she said distractedly, turning her eyes to Raleigh. "Caught him at a restaurant, just before sundown. I felt him die, but couldn't help him. Why wouldn't she tell you?"

"I don't know, but we will find out," Sebastian promised her.

"Our abilities don't work on them like normal humans," I explained to Rina. "You must be cautious. If you see any strange symbols, they are using them to mark places. We didn't see any outside your building so they may not know where you live."

She finally turned her eyes to look at me. "I don't go out much," she said, looking me over, "and Carlos didn't live here. They'd have no way to tie him back to me."

"It might be a good idea that you check in with someone at least once a week to be sure you're okay. Someone besides Keri," I suggested, not feeling very impressed with the woman right now.

"I'll have one of Mateo's people check on you," Sebastian promised. "Alicia, or Hugo."

"Mateo won't sit for me either," Rina pouted. "I don't suppose you'll agree?"

Sebastian shook his head. "I'm afraid not. I have too many responsibilities to take care of, I don't have the time."

"Shame," she said softly.

"Please answer your phone, Rina," he added.

"Perhaps," she replied with a shrug, "if I hear it." But she had already turned back to the monitors and wasn't really listening.

I shook my head, unable to understand how she could be so uncaring about her own safety. Her ghoul. Sebastian gestured for us to leave and I moved toward the door. He made sure the door was locked, then we were on our way out of the building again. I could feel his irritation and I held my tongue, simmering at the idea of her asking to paint him naked.

When we were in the car Sebastian pulled out his phone and made a call.





## *Chapter 36 - Four Prince Bids You Come*

"I've got trouble, trouble, trouble  
Always knocking at my door"  
Christina Aguilera  
"I Got Trouble"

"Sire, we have a problem with the Toreador," Sebastian said into the phone. "... No they are both fine, though Davis fled the city after killing a hunter who attacked him." He paused, listening to Tristan, then continued, "A better question is 'why didn't the Primogen report the death of a ghoul by one of the hunters?' Rina claims she reported it. We'll have to keep an eye on her, I think her ghoul took care of her, for the most part."

Raleigh and I maintained our silence as Sebastian spoke to is Tristan.

"I will call her and bid her come," he said. "All right. ... Thirty minutes. ... See you then." He hung up.

"So we're heading to the Prince's?" I asked.

"Yeah," he said, punching keys to make another call. The next words he spoke were ones no Kindred ever really wanted to here. They meant that trouble was afoot and there was only one way to respond. "Keri Bowers, your Prince bids you come," he said after a moment. "The Prince's home."

"What did she say?" I asked after he hung up.

"The only answer to that question is 'I come to my prince's call'," he told me and I could hear the anger in his voice as he started the car and put it in gear. "She will be there or we will hunt for blood before dawn."

I reached over to touch his leg. "She's coming Sebastian," I said quietly. "Stay calm so we make it there in one piece."

"I would almost prefer that she didn't come," he said grimly as he backed out of the space he's parked in and put the car in drive.

"There may be a good reason," I said, not really sure myself. "She deserves the chance to explain."

Sebastian glanced over at me. "Do you really think there is a good reason for her to neglect her people this way?" he asked in a low voice.

I shook my head. "No, I don't. That doesn't mean she might not have one."

"We'll see how long she remains Primogen," he countered, still irritated. "Jonas Davis would have done a better job."

I squeezed his leg a bit. "Let's see what happens," I soothed.

Sebastian reached down to take my hand gently in his, rubbing his thumb over the back of my hand. "We'll see."

He seemed to calm a little, which was all I wanted for the time being. Not that he was being reckless. Sebastian always had impressive control of himself, but it was better to be safe, then sorry.

\* ~ \* ~ \*

Tristan, Mateo, Lachlan and Mateo's ghoul, Alicia Ruiz, were waiting in the Prince's study when we arrived. Tristan was sitting at his ornately carved desk with his brother standing to his right. Lachlan stood near the fireplace and when Sebastian moved to stand in front of the desk Lachlan motioned for me to sit in a chair close to him as Raleigh positioned himself next to Alicia near the door.

Sebastian quickly outlined the scene at Jonas' house and when he reached the point when I spoke to the man on the phone he turned to look at me. Taking his silent cue, I stood and told Tristan and the others about my conversation, sticking to just the facts for now. When I finished I took my seat again and Sebastian continued on to explain what happened at Rina's apartment. Half way through his explanation, the doorbell rang. I assumed that was probably Keri.

It was more than obvious that Tristan and Mateo were not happy with the situation, less so now that they'd heard all the details. Lachlan simply watched quietly, but I had a very hard time reading anything from him.

When Sebastian was finished he stepped back to stand next to me and put his hand on the back of my chair.

Tristan sat back, thinking, then gestured toward the door to the foyer. Mateo walked over and opened the double doors, looking out into the foyer where I caught a glimpse of Keri pacing. Another one of Tristan's ghouls stood at the ready just outside the door.

"Your Prince bids you come," Mateo said in a stern voice.

Keri turned toward him. "I come at my Prince's call," she said, lowering her head slightly.

Mateo stepped back and she walked into the room, hesitating a moment when she saw who was waiting inside. She moved to stand in front of the desk and made something between a bow and a curtsy. "I hear your call and obey," she said gravely to Tristan.

He let her stand there, bent over, for a long moment, before he said, "Rise." Silence hung in the room a long moment as he studied the newcomer. "Tell me of your clan, Miss Bowers," Tristan said in a voice that was somehow soft, yet commanding.

She straightened and looked at him. "My Prince?"

"It seems that you have misplaced one of your members?" he prompted.

I saw the effort Keri made not to look at Sebastian. "Jonas Davis has not been seen in over a week, my Prince," she admitted reluctantly. "He does this from time to time."

"He has left the city," Tristan replied. "He was attacked by one of these new breed of hunters."

I could only see Keri's back and part of the side of her face, but I could still tell she was surprised. "But, why didn't he call me?" she asked.

"I wonder that myself," the Prince replies coolly. "That he fled rather than call his Primogen says much about your clan in the city."

Keri stifled a restless movement in her arms, but said nothing.

"What else do you have to report? Tristan asked.

She hesitated, then added slowly, "Carlos Rivera was killed two weeks ago."

"So I understand," he agreed. "Under what circumstances?"

"I-I'm not sure," she replied.

"Do you not think you should find out?" he asked evenly. "Or at the very least, report his loss to my Seneschal?"

Keri glanced at Mateo, who didn't look one bit happy about the situation. "I-I did not think of it, my Prince," she replied hesitantly. "Was I supposed to?"

Tristan looked at her for another long moment. "I understand that you did not take your seat willingly, Miss Bowers, but you have held the seat for two years. In that time, one would think you would learn what a Primogen's duties are."

She looked between Mateo and Tristan. "Jesus left suddenly, my Prince. There was no one else to ask."

"There are seven other Primogen in this city," Tristan pointed out. "I would think one or two of them would have been willing to aid you in learning your duties. If nothing else, you should have come to me, or to Mateo to learn your duties."

It didn't sound like Keri was intentionally shirking on her responsibilities to me and I hoped that Tristan wouldn't be too harsh on her. I understood that as the Prince he had to make sure that the city ran smoothly, but I knew that Toreador tended to get lost in what they did. Look at Rina?

"Yes, my Prince," Keri said softly. "I will do better, my Prince."

"You will," Tristan agreed in that way he had of being gentle, but authoritative at the same time.

"I will visit your home tomorrow evening," Mateo told his clanmate. "We will discuss this matter further."

"Yes, sir," Keri nodded quickly. "Thank you, sir."

"You may go," Tristan dismissed her and with another half bow, half curtsy, she hurried out.

Well, that could have gone much worse. I breathed a sigh of relief, then resumed the nervous humming I had been unaware I was even doing. The room was quiet for several minutes, save my humming, then, Tristan said, "Alicia, what time is it in London?"

She looked at a clock on the wall. "Nearly six AM, sir," she replied.

Tristan moved his gaze to his brother, who nodded and exited the room. Sebastian seemed to relax a little as Mateo left, but I didn't understand why.

"Alicia," the Prince continued, "you will take a... care package to Senorita Montalvo and take care of whatever she needs for the next few weeks."

"Yes, sir," she replied, bowing a bit before following her master from the room.

After another moment, Tristan turned his eye to me. "Tell me more of this man you spoke with. What was your impression of him?"

I was surprised by the Prince's request and glanced at Sebastian quickly before adjusting in my seat a little. "Well, he seemed genuinely concerned about Jonas," I said. "He was especially concerned that if he divulged his identity that it would aide in a blood hunt being called against Jonas. He mentioned that he was like a brother to him so that leads me to wonder if they either share the same sire or if he is in fact Jonas' sire."

Tristan thought for a long minute, then nodded as if he were putting something together. He turned his attention to Sebastian. "Make sure you let... this man know that Jonas will face no repercussions upon his return to my city. He is welcome to accompany Jonas to ensure his safety, if he so desires."

"As you wish, my Prince," Sebastian replied with a brief nod of his head.

"Now, if you will excuse me," Tristan said, getting to his feet, and I stood, too. "I must speak with Serena. She won't be happy with me, but it cannot be helped." Without another word he left the room.

Sebastian sighed, then said, "I suppose we should go as well. I'm sure there will be much to do tomorrow." He held his hand out to me and I took it.

"What's happening?" I asked, moving closer to him. I looked to Raleigh, wanting him near as well, and the other man smiled as Sebastian led me toward his ghoulish and the door. I hadn't understood all that had just happened and I had a strange, disturbing feeling in the pit of my stomach.

"Mateo's going to have a visitor," Sebastian said vaguely.

Raleigh must have understood what that meant because he gave an exaggerated moan. I couldn't tell if he was more pleased than bothered.

I looked up at Sebastian. "Who? What does a visitor have to do with Keri?"

Raleigh reached the outside door first and opened it for us.

"Mateo's childe, Darcy," Sebastian explained. "They've been talking about having her in for a visit."

"What does that have to do with Keri not being a good Primogen?" I asked, making sure to keep my voice down so no one can hear what I was saying. Last thing I needed was for someone to think I was bad mouthing her.

"Darcy has been serving as the clan whip for the Toreador Primogen of London for some time," he explained. "She'll be able to lend a hand here."

"Oh, that makes sense," I said. There wasn't another strong enough Toreador in the city to take over as Primogen so Tristan was looking outside the city.

"Keri will have a chance to prove herself," Sebastian added, opening the car door for me when we reached the car.

"Are you okay with that?" I asked, moving to get into the car, but stopping to look at him over the window.

He looked at me seriously. "Her actions could have gotten Jonas and Rina killed. She was sloppy and careless, but it's not my call whether she has the chance to screw up again."

I reached up and touch his face. "You care so much," I said softly. "I wish they all had your heart."

Sebastian smiled. "I'm just doing my job, *prinzessin*."

I pulled him down for a brief kiss and said, "My heart." I then looked at Raleigh and moved the few steps that separated us to kiss him, too. "And my soul."

I looked back at Sebastian. "Home? Or is there something else we need to do?"

"Home," he agreed, sounding tired.

I smiled at him slightly. "Want me to drive?"

He shook his head. "No, I got it."



## *Chapter 37 - Spending Time with Raleigh*

"You got me, I got you  
Together we always pull through"  
Christina Aguilera  
"Oh Mother"

Raleigh was sleeping peacefully beside me when I woke the following night, which was a welcome surprise since he normally slept on Sebastian's other side. I curled up next to him, careful not to wake him as I laid my head on his chest. He stirred a little, then shifted enough to wrap his arms around me and settled back into a deep sleep.

I dozed like that for a few minutes until I felt Sebastian begin to stir behind me. I was aware of his arms stretching out as if he were looking for something, then his hands found my back and I couldn't stop the smile that formed on my lips as he pulled me close to his body. Raleigh snuffled a little, but didn't wake as I was pulled out of his arms.

"Morning," Sebastian mumbled into my hair as his palms flattened on my belly.

"Morning," I replied, looking over my shoulder at him. He claimed my lips in a possessive kiss that had us in a passionate embrace before I fully registered what was happening. One thing quickly led to another and before I knew it Sebastian was having his wicked way with me.

I felt like I could never get enough of this man. Of him or Raleigh. I was on fire whenever either of them came in touching distance and my reason ran out the room. I was still trying to catch my breath after this latest encounter when I glanced across the mattress and found Raleigh still sleeping.

"He must be very tired," I commented to Sebastian. It wasn't likely that Raleigh to be such a light sleeper especially when we hadn't been exactly quiet and now I was a little worried.

Sebastian turned his head to look at Raleigh, too, then he reached over to put a hand on his ghoul's chest. Raleigh still didn't stir, which made me frown with concern. Sebastian eased off me so that he could edge closer to his ghoul. "I wonder if something happened today he was called in on," he mused.

I propped myself up on one elbow so I could get a better look at the other man as well. He didn't look hurt in any way, but that didn't mean that something hadn't happened. "Should we try to wake him to find out?" I asked in a low voice. "What if he was hurt?"

Sebastian moved even closer to Raleigh and called his name softly, lifting one hand to smooth a lock of Raleigh's hair off his cheek. Slowly Raleigh opened his eyes and when he saw Sebastian, he smiled sleepily.

"You okay?" Sebastian asked, his voice laced with the same concern that I was feeling.

"Busy day," the other man said, groaning as he stretched and yawned. "Serena is a demon."

His comment made me frown and I reached out to touch his shoulder. "What happened?"

"She called about ten," he groaned. "Wanted me to help her."

"With what?" Sebastian asked.

"A house, a car, furniture, linens, china," he grunted, covering his eyes. "She's a demon."

I moved my gaze to Sebastian in confusion. "The woman from London?"

Sebastian sighed slowly then nodded. "Does she expect her to stay?" he asked Raleigh.

"No idea," the blonde replied. "All I know is that everything has to be fucking perfect."

"How much sleep have you had?" I asked him. "When was the last time you ate?"

"About four hours before she woke me up," he said, glancing toward the bedside clock. "Then about forty minutes since I got home." His gaze fell on me and he frowned. "I think we had lunch, but it's all a blur."

I smoothed back his hair. "Maybe you should try to go back to sleep. I can make you something to eat when you get up."

Raleigh rubbed his cheek against my hand and let his eyes slowly close. "'Kay."

I started to hum softly to help him fall asleep as Sebastian watched the other man quickly relax back into slumber. When he was out I turned my gaze to Sebastian, "What do you have to do tonight?"

Sebastian smiled down at me. "Apparently, I need to find out what's going on with Darcy."

I reached out to touch his face. "I think I should stay here and take care of Raleigh, but I don't like the idea of you on your own."

Sebastian nodded his head in agreement. "I'll swing by and pick up Joan."

I leaned in toward him and kissed him lightly on the mouth. "Is there something I should look into doing here in preparation? Will you have to entertain Darcy?"

Sebastian's expression turned wry. "Darcy will... Require attention, but not here. I'm not staffed for the kind of service she requires."

"Is there anything I should know about her?"

He started to say something, then glanced at Raleigh. "We should probably leave Sleeping Beauty to his rest," he suggested softly.

I nodded as I started to lift the sheet away from my body so I could get out of bed. "You can tell me in the shower."

\* ~ \* ~ \*

Once there was hot water pouring down over us, Sebastian explained how Darcy was a bit of a handful, but a good person who only wanted what was best - for the city, her sire, people she considered family. She never hesitated to do whatever it took to succeed when she put her mind to something.

From the sounds of it Darcy was even worse than Serena when it came to being protective of those she loved. I remembered what Sebastian and Raleigh had said about Serena not approving of me and knew that Darcy would be an even tougher nut to crack in terms of acceptance. I found myself asking how much I would need to interact with her.

"As much or as little as you want," Sebastian assured me. "I am sure that I will have to spend some time with her, as we are part of the bigger 'family' so to speak, and you are welcome to join me, sweetheart, or not as you prefer." He leaned in to kiss my forehead and added, "You'll do fine. She's not any more proper than Serena, and you handle her just fine."

Oh God, that was the wrong thing for him to say. All it did was feed every single one of my fears. What if Darcy didn't like me? Sebastian claimed he would have left Nashville if Serena hadn't, but would he do the same for Darcy? I didn't want him to know how nervous I really was so I just nodded, not convinced that I could handle another interrogation like the one I'd gotten from Serena. Out loud I tried to put on a good face. "Okay. That will be fine then. Is Serena putting together any kind of welcome party for her?"

"Well, that's one thing I need to find out. When she's coming in, where she's staying, if there's to be a party, all of that."

"Okay. I'm going to check in with Vanessa while you're gone then, while Raleigh is sleeping."

"All right. Take care of him, will you? Sometimes he works too hard."

"I will," I told Sebastian with a smile as I reached up to move a wet lock of hair off his forehead. "And you both work too hard."

"I had hours off last night," he smiled back. "Besides, if I don't do my job, who will?"

"I know. I'm trying to help as much as I can, but it does fall on you." I wrapped my arms around his neck. "If there's something else I can do, I will."

He pulled me close to him by wrapping his arms around my waist. "You do more for me than you realize, *prinzessin*."

I watched his features for a long moment, praying that he believed that. "I hope so. You've given me so much, Sebastian. You and Raleigh."

He kissed me, soft and light at first, but it quickly turned to hungry and hot. Sebastian's hands slid from my waist to my hips to bring our bodies closer even as he moved us toward the wall so that I was sandwiched between it and him.

I was pressing soft kisses along his jaw when I heard Sebastian's phone start to ring. He'd brought it into the bathroom so that it wouldn't disturb Raleigh if it rang and had left it on the counter. We both went still and when it rang a second time he moaned forlornly.

"Rain check?" he asked.

I nodded mutely and he dropped one more kiss on my lips before pulling away and exiting the shower. I quickly finished and followed him out.

I dried off quickly, then wrapped a towel around me as I listened to Sebastian's end of the conversation. I figured that it had to be either Lachlan or Mateo and by the sound of it Sebastian was being called in to do something for Tristan.

I tried not to feel disappointed, but it was hard. Still, I told myself that this was going to happen from time to time and the quicker I got used to it the better off I'd be. The better off our relationship would be, too.

When Sebastian was finished he hung up the phone and dropped it back down on the counter. "I have to go. I'm sorry," he said, reaching out to brush my hair over my right shoulder. His voice was full of regret and hearing it made me feel better.

"It's fine," I assured him as I gave him a small smile and handed him another towel for his dripping hair. "Do you want me to grab some clothes for you while you finish up in here?"

Sebastian smiled in return, looking relieved that I was being so understanding and even that helped me to take the situation a little less personal. "Yeah, if you don't mind," he replied as he started to towel dry his hair.

"Anything special you want," I asked, pausing at the door and keeping my voice down so as not to wake Raleigh.

He shrugged and paused to look out from underneath the towel. "Business casual. Its gonna be one of those nights."

I nodded. "Be right back." I headed for Sebastian's closet to find something suitable for him to wear. On the way through the bedroom I paused to check on Raleigh and found that he was still sleeping peacefully. Poor baby.

It was the first time that I was in Sebastian's closet on my own and for a second I felt like I was in Sebastian's inner sanctum. I fingered the sleeves of some of the dress

shirts that hung in a crisp, white line and I felt a little thrill run through me as I wondered what I might find in here. Maybe I'd get to know the man a little better.

I couldn't help myself. I took one of the white linen button down dress shirts off the hanger and slipped my arms through the sleeves. They were really long, as I knew they would be, and I had to turn up the cuffs a few times before my hands weren't swallowed by the white fabric. I pulled the towel off my body and used it to bundle up my hair on top of my head then I buttoned the shirt enough to keep it closed in front and I continued to explore.

For a Ventrue, Sebastian wasn't into designer clothing much. Don't get me wrong, he did have some great looking Prada suits that looked like they were tailored to fit him perfectly, but mostly the shelves and hangers were filled with the same comfortable clothing that I'd always seen him wearing. Clothes that he could effectively do his job in. As I looked around the closet I found many pairs of the same kind of well-made jeans that I normally saw him in as well as drawers of old, soft concert t-shirts and silk boxers.

He must have a liking for bracelets because there was a large assortment of them on the top of a built in dresser. Leather. Silver. Even some beaded ones in every color of the rainbow. They were all chunky and manly. I'd seen Sebastian wear bracelets in the time that I'd known him, Raleigh too, but I never realized he had so many. I'd been toying with the idea of getting him and Raleigh some kind of jewelry as a gift. A bracelet might be a good idea.

Sebastian also had many pairs of boots, from well-worn cowboy boots that had seen better days to brand new black Prada dress boots. I loved the look of these last ones and picked them up, knowing that I had to see him wearing them. I picked out a pair of black dress pants, a blue dress shirt, and a plain, black suit coat to go with the boots. I put the suit coat on the back of a chair so it wouldn't get linty, then I grabbed a t-shirt and a pair of boxers and took everything else back into the bathroom.

"This okay?" I asked, holding them up for Sebastian's examination.

He glanced at them with approval. "That's great, thanks," he told me as he took the clothes and paused to give me an appreciative look. He liked that I'd put on his shirt.

"Anything else I can do?" I asked, giving him a secretive smile.

He leaned in to give me a quick kiss. "Not really. Just keep an eye on Raleigh, okay?" I smiled brightly. "Sure."

I left him to get ready and moved upstairs to check the kitchen for something to make Raleigh to eat. I found a recipe and ingredients for a chicken and broccoli casserole on the refrigerator that was easy enough to put together with my limited cooking skills. It would keep in the oven okay enough that Raleigh could sleep for a few more hours without anything being ruined.

A few minutes after I put the dish in the oven Sebastian entered the kitchen, looking good enough to eat in the suit jacket and pants. I hadn't seen him dressed like this too often and I really liked it.

He took one look in my direction and immediately came over to take me into his arms. "You make it hard to leave, Ariel," he said, his voice full of promise as his hands cupped my bottom under the tails of his shirt.

I smiled at him innocently and rested my palms on his shoulders. "Isn't that what I'm supposed to do?" I asked innocently, standing on tiptoe to kiss him briefly.

"Yes, but I can't stay tonight," he said, almost sounding like he was pouting, which caused my smile to widen.

"I'll be right here when you get back," I promised him, playing with his collar as if it needed straightening. "And Raleigh will, too."

"I'll hold you to that," he said, bending for one more kiss. "I'll see you later."

After he left I went back downstairs to get ready. I dried and styled my hair. Put on makeup. What I didn't do was get dressed. I really loved the feel of Sebastian's shirt over my skin. It was like being wrapped up in him so I left it on.



I checked on Raleigh and found he was still sleeping so I took the time to do some things around the house. I started a load of laundry. Picked up the kitchen. I even did a little dusting. Then I called Vanessa to check in. She wanted to make sure that I was okay and I assured her that I was fine.

"I'm learning to fight. Sebastian and Raleigh are teaching me. I'm not great, but I'm not bad either."

"Good," she replied, sounding like she meant it. "You're by yourself too much. Those boys are good for you."

"I like to think so," I told her sincerely. I wasn't sure how many more questions I was willing to answer about what was going on between the three of us so I quickly asked her if things were okay at the club and if she was being careful.

Vanessa assured me that she had been staying at the club and that she hadn't gone out alone since this whole mess started. Nothing had happened at the club and there were no symbols to report either in the neighborhood or on the building itself.

That was a relief to me to know that she was safe and taking precautions. I didn't know what I would do if something happened to her. I made her promise to call me at the first sign of trouble and she agreed, and me to do the same.

"I will."

\* ~ \* ~ \*

Raleigh came stumbling upstairs a little after ten. I was in the studio, putting lyrics to music for the song that I'd been working on when I noticed him leaning on the doorframe, wearing only a pair of jeans. His hair still damp from a shower.

I wasn't sure how long he'd been there, but it had to have been only a few minutes. He smiled when I noticed him. "Sounds good," he commented as he pushed himself away from the wall.

"You're sneaky," I scolded him as I closed my book. "You know this is supposed to be a surprise."

"Not my fault," he said with a small smile as he crossed the room to stand next to me. "I did call your name when I came in." He leaned down to give me a kiss and I pulled him down to sit next to me.

I checked him over to see that he looked fairly well rested, a great deal better than he'd looked earlier. "There's something in the oven for you," I told him, brushing his hair back from his face. "Did you sleep enough?"

"I'm fine," he assured me. "Hungry, though. What's in the oven?"

I stood. "Hopefully something edible. It's been a while since I've had to cook."

He laughed softly as he got to his feet as well. "I'm sure it'll be fine."

We moved into the kitchen and I dished him up a plate of the casserole. "Do you mind if I have something with you?" I asked.

"Go ahead," he said then started to eat.

I poured myself a glass of blood from the pitcher in the refrigerator then took a seat with him at the table. "Well? How is it?"

"It's good," he told me between bites. "I hope you have more hiding when I finish his off."

I smiled at him. "There's plenty left. I put it back in the oven to stay warm."

"Good. Where's Sebastian?"

"He got a call and had to go. I'm assuming it was Tristan. Are you going to need to join him?"

He shrugged. "I'll have to call and find out. What time did he leave?" I told him that it had only been a couple of hours since Sebastian had left and he looked at the clock on the stove before adding, "I'll call when I'm done," he said. "Serena's probably had her nap and has him jumping through hoops."

"I can help, too," I offered, still a little leery of Serena. "If my help is needed."

"We'll find out when I call Sebastian," he replied with one of his bright smiles. "Did he go out alone?"

"He said that he would pick up Joan," I reported. "I haven't heard from him."

"Good. You said there was more in the oven?"

I nodded and he got up to refill his plate. "Help yourself. Did you want me to call Sebastian while you're eating?"

"If you want," he said, dishing himself a second helping. "I'll need to talk to him when you're done, though."

"I'll wait until you're almost done then," I agreed, enjoying being able to spend time with just him. This was a first for us and when he returned to the table I watched him eat and we talked.

I asked what kinds of foods he liked in case I got the chance to cook for him again and he confessed that he enjoyed cooking. That led to a lively discussion about what he normally made and what foods I remembered my mom making. It was really nice to be able to spend time with just him, getting to know him away from Sebastian.



## Chapter 38 - Preparing for Visitors

"Are you ready, ready, ready to go-g-g-go?"  
Christina Aguilera  
"Bionic"

When Raleigh was close to being finished I retrieved my phone from downstairs and returned to the kitchen to call Sebastian. The phone rang a long time before he answered it. "Hey, Ariel," he said softly, just the sound of his voice making me grin like an idiot.

"Hey, do you have a minute?"

"Sure. What's up?"

"Raleigh's awake and just finishing up dinner. Did you need us?"

"Well, I don't, but Serena's been insisting I get Raleigh down here for almost an hour. Maybe the two of you could help her? She has a lot to do before tomorrow night."

"Is that when Darcy is set to arrive?"

"Yeah, close to midnight," he told me. "Serena wants everything to be perfect."

"I would love to be of whatever assistance I can," I said. "Raleigh wanted to talk to you so I'll hand him over and go get dressed."

"All right. See you soon, *prinzessin*."

"Bye." I handed Raleigh the phone and told him to come find me in my closet when he was finished. I was almost ready when he came down to change.

"Hope you're up for a night of accessorizing," he said with a grin.

I turned to face him. "I have no idea what to expect," I confessed as I finished putting my earrings in. "Do I look alright?" I'd figured an evening of preparing for a foreign visitor meant something fashionable, yet comfortable, was in order, so I'd chosen a knee length navy dress and moderate heels that wouldn't have my feet hurting by the end of the night.

Raleigh came in and took me into his arms for a kiss. "You look beautiful."

I was again reminded of how little time the two of us had spent together and how much I'd enjoyed his company this evening. I kissed him back and in no time both of us here panting, pulling a needy moan from the back of my throat.

"When did you tell Sebastian we'd be there?" I gasped, kissing my way to his ear.

Raleigh was breathing hard, obviously just as turned on as I was. "We have a little time," he breathed.

I started to kiss my way down his chest. "Good."

He put his hands in my hair and watched as I moved down his body. He'd come upstairs wearing only jeans and as I popped open the fly I found that he had nothing on underneath. Very easy access. I looked up at him through my lashes and slowly licked my lips in approval. He swallowed hard in anticipation.

I pushed the denim down his long legs and after he'd stepped out of them I used my hands and mouth to show Raleigh just how much I approved of his previous lack of attire. His breathing quickened more and he moaned out when I took as much of him in my mouth as I could.

After a few minutes Raleigh called out my name, his voice thin and desperate. He pulled me up to my feet and held me against his chest as he kissed me, reaching under my dress to strip off my panties.

I wrapped an arm around his neck for balance as the small piece of silk and lace hit the floor, then I nuzzled his neck, grazing me teeth a little over his skin. "So warm."

He lifted me with hands at my waist and set me on the edge of the dresser, pushing my skirt up before moving close to thrust into me.

I wrapped my legs around his waist and tilted my hips for a better angle. "Love this," I panted into the skin of his neck.

Raleigh started to move inside me and he tipped his head away from me, baring his neck as if he wanted me to bite him. I hesitated, unsure of what to do. I mean, we were lovers, yes, but he was Sebastian's ghoul. I'd never had one of my own and I didn't know how these kinds of things worked. I wasn't going to be presumptuous without an invitation.

I kissed his neck instead, finding the spot that he liked so much and sucked until he took my head in his hands and kissed me.

It wasn't that I didn't *want* to bite him, because I did. I really did! I knew how sensual feeding could be for the one being drank from and I desperately wanted to know what Raleigh tasted like. I also wanted to have him feed from me, but again, Sebastian was the Domitor, not me. It would be wrong for me to make those kinds of decisions for him.

When we were both spent I was boneless and clinging to Raleigh. "That was amazing," I barely manage to tell him with a giddy smile.

He took my face in his hands and kissed me again. "Absolutely."

I used my fingers to comb his hair back from his face. "I'm so happy to be here. Thank you."

He smiled at me. "Any time, ma'am."

I ran my finger along his bottom lip. "I like your accent. I've never developed one."

"Sweetheart, you sound like pure New York to me."

I laughed a little. "Yeah. You can take the girl out of the city." I curled a lock of his hair around my finger as I watched his pupils return to normal. "We should get going before they send someone to look for us."

"Yeah." He kissed me again and moved back. "We should clean up."

I dropped my legs from around him and grasped his arms to get down. "I'm gonna get in the shower for a rinse off."

Raleigh grinned. "I'd offer to help, but that wouldn't get us out of here any faster."

I pulled him down for one more kiss. "Later. I doubt I could keep it quick either."

We separated to get ready and I went as quickly as I dared, making sure my hair and makeup was perfect. I didn't want Serena to find one flaw in me or my appearance. Raleigh was done before I was and he looked gorgeous in dress pants and a nice button up shirt. He asked what car I wanted to take.

"Doesn't matter," I replied. "Do I look okay? I don't want to give Serena anything to find wrong."

"You look beautiful," he insisted, giving me another kiss.

I hoped he was right. I asked him to watch me put the holster on and I was relieved when I finally managed to do it all on my own with no help. Raleigh only grinned with approval then suggested we should take my car and that I should drive.

"Whoa," I said with a wide smile. "I like how you think. Let's go."

\* ~ \* ~ \*

When we arrived at the Prince's house we found out that Sebastian was busy with Tristan and Mateo, but Serena commandeered both of us immediately. "I am so glad you came, Ariel," she said, taking my hand and pulling me into the dining room where the table was set with five different styles of china. "I can't make up my mind," she confessed in something of an excited rush. "The blue/gray pattern, or the green/brown seem best, but I just can't be sure."

I was more than little surprised and I needed to take a moment to I put my purse down then went to stand next to her. "Well, let's see." I considered each pattern carefully, and then I gave her my honest opinion, along with an explanation of why I liked it better than the others.

Serena listened to what I had to say and to my complete surprise she agreed with it. "Raleigh, call Thomas at that store we were at this morning," she ordered. "Tell him we need sixteen place settings. Ariel, come with me, we must finalize the linens."

I glanced in Raleigh's direction and gave him a nervous smile, then I followed Serena out of the room. The next two hours passed in much the same manner. I was very careful to give her my honest opinion on everything from table linens to silver patterns. Sometimes the other woman liked my choices, some times she didn't. She had excellent taste, however, and seemed to appreciate my sense of style. She never made me feel bad, though, when she didn't agree with me and I was grateful for that.

It was exhausting work. Luckily Raleigh stuck with us through most of it. He was constantly on the move between fetching, carrying, calling, and getting on the internet.

I had no idea how much time had lapsed but at some point I looked up and found Mateo standing in the doorway, watching for a couple of minutes without comment. When I noticed him I stopped to say hello. I looked behind him to see if Sebastian was with him.

He wasn't.

Serena noticed her brother after my greeting and turned to add her own.

"Are you torturing our guest, Serena?" Mateo asked her with a smile.

Serena looked around at the mess of the room. "I just want things to be perfect for Darcy," she explained.

"Darcy doesn't need perfect, my dear sister. She only needs comfortable."

I smiled at Mateo. "I look forward to meeting your childe," I told him. "I thought about picking up a gift for her. Could you recommend something?"

"I'm sure that won't be necessary, my dear," he assured me as he came further into the room. "Serena has arranged enough gifts for all of us."

"She must be comfortable here," Serena protested.

"Darcy would be comfortable in a mobile home," he retorted with a teasing grin.

When Serena spoke again I could hear a tinge of frustration in her voice and she used an old form of Spanish that was a bit hard for me to understand. She said something about wanting to show Darcy how nice Nashville was, to make sure of... something.

"Are you hoping that she will choose to remain here?" I asked Mateo.

He smiled, fondness for his childe and his sister very apparent. "Perhaps." He went to Serena and took her hand. "Let my childe see the city," he said in modern Spanish. "Let her meet the people and walk he streets. If she wants to stay, you can line her nest."

I glanced at Raleigh and waited for Serena's reaction. They went back and forth a few times, she protesting, he insisting. Finally she agreed and apologized to me and Raleigh.

"Its fine," I assured her, glancing at the clock and seeing that the hours were slipping by quickly. "Shall we continue?"

The other woman looked at Mateo, who smiled, then kissed her on the cheek and left the room. With a sigh, Serena nodded and we continued our task, though thankfully not with the manic fervor she'd pushed us at before.

"Tell me more about Darcy," I suggested.

"Darcy is... *magnifico*. She is *hermoso* and *educado y sabio*..." She went on for a while in a mixture of English and Spanish, describing a dark haired beauty that was smart and powerful and had no equal. She even used some archaic terms that I had to guess the meaning of sometimes.

"I'm very excited to meet her," I told Serena. "I'd like to know any member of Sebastian's family better."

"You will like her, I think," she said. "She is very talented."

"Does she sing?"

"No, no," she shook her head with a smile. "She is a wonderful actress. And she writes beautiful poetry."

"Does she do stage work in London?"

"From time to time, when it does not risk the Masquerade," she told me. "I once saw her play *Rosalind in As You Like It* at the Shaftsbury Theatre. She was magnificent."

"How wonderful. When was the last time you saw her?"

"Oh, it has been perhaps five years since we last went to London," she reported with a fond smile of remembrance. "She was acting in a little theatre in the West End."

"I've never been to London," I said. "What's it like?"

We continued to talk about other things as we worked and I began to feel better about my standing with the other woman. It was obvious that she was the glue that held together this little family. They'd spent many years together and it was Serena who did the most to care for them. I found myself respecting her a great deal and I think that maybe she even began to like me a little that night.

\* ~ \* ~ \*

It was around four o'clock in the morning when Sebastian entered the room. After he kissed both Serena and me on the cheek he handed Raleigh an envelope.

"Go home and get some sleep," Sebastian told him. "You're flying to Flint at noon."

Raleigh took the envelope and looked at Sebastian questioningly.

"Reggie and Barbara are coming in," Sebastian explained with what seemed like a pleased smile. "You'll fly back with them tomorrow night."

Raleigh grinned. "Yeah?"

"Yeah," Sebastian replied, then he looked at me. "Did you want to take him home, or should I send Joan with him?"

I turned to Serena. "Can you spare me?"

The other woman smiled fondly at me. "You have been very helpful and very patient, my dear. Of course you may go."

"I'm glad I could help," I told her honestly, feeling much better about our relationship. "Let me know if you need anything else." I turned to Sebastian. "I just need to get my purse, would you walk us out?"

"Of course." He waited for me to gather my purse and say goodnight to everyone, then he offered me his arm to walk outside. "I'm sorry I haven't been able to spend much time with the two of you tonight," he said as we walked outside.

"It's okay. You have things to do. This is going to happen from time to time." I looked up at him and asked. "How much longer will you be?"

"Another hour maybe. I'll be home before sunrise."

I nodded. "I'll help Raleigh pack. See you when you get home." I leaned in to give him a quick kiss and he pulled me close for a nice, long one.

"I'll be home as soon as I can," he promised.

"Be careful."

"I will." Sebastian kissed me one more time then opened the car door so I could get in. As Raleigh pulled the car out of the drive I offered to pack for him if he wanted.

"You can help if you want. I won't need much. "

I nodded. "Then you sleep. "

He pulled me in for a kiss. "You're gonna spoil me."  
I smiled. "Isn't that my job?"  
"Maybe you could make me tired enough to sleep," he suggested with a smile.  
I reached over to caress his thigh. "I can do that."

\* ~ \* ~ \*

It was dangerously close to dawn when I heard Sebastian enter the house. Raleigh had been asleep for about an hour and I'd managed to pack a bag for him without disturbing his sleep.

I was waiting for Sebastian in the music room with my guitar. As the time passed I got more and more nervous about the hour and was anxiously plucking at the strings when he came in, tossing his jacket on a chair before crossing over to sit near me. "Raleigh set to go?" he asked as he settled in his seat.

"Yes," I reported with a grin. "I made sure he fell asleep."

Sebastian smiled and took my hand gently in his. "Good. He'll have a long day tomorrow."

"When is the return flight?"

"It leaves Flint at nine. They should be here by midnight, which will give us time to get Darcy settled into her house before we pick them up."

"You have pick up duty?"

Sebastian sighed. "Yeah. I'm riding with Mateo to the airport to pick up Darcy just after sundown. Her plane gets in around four so she may be ready by the time we get there."

I moved closer to him and laid my head on his shoulder. "Is there anything you want me to do tomorrow night?"

I could feel his fingers as they worked their way into my hair. "You could help Serena with any last minute details," he said softly. "She's driving herself crazy."

I smiled and snuggled closer to him and covered his other hand with mine. "Of course. Did you want to drop me off?"

He hugged me to him and said, "I can do that."

"Good. Should we head to bed then?"

He sighed again. "Yeah. I'm sorry I'm so late getting home. I really wanted to be back earlier."

"It's fine." I leaned up to kiss his cheek. "Are you excited to see Darcy? Serena is."

"There's no way I can match her excitement," he told me wryly, "but yes, it will be good to see her again."

"Serena used an old Spanish word I didn't know." I repeated the word she used. "Do you know it?"

Sebastian chuckled. "Serena uses a lot of old Spanish words," he told me. "Tristan or Mateo are the only ones I know old enough to remember some of the words she uses." He gave me a quick kiss. "We need to go to bed or we'll still be here come sunrise, and that would be bad."

I slowly got to my feet and pulled him with me. Sebastian wrapped his arms around me and pressed his body against mine. "I really wish I'd been able to come home sooner."

I smiled and put my arms around his neck. "So we'll make up for it later," I said, rising up to kiss him. Then with my best over-dramatic tone I added, "For now, carry me to bed as if we had all night."

"As you wish, *prinzessin*," he said, sweeping me into his arms and heading for the bedroom. Once there he sat me on my feet and kissed me deeply, making me the one wishing we had more time. After a moment he pulled away. "Dawn is coming. We need to get in bed."

I reached behind me to unzip my dress and let it fall to the floor. I then slowly removed my undergarments, watching him the entire time. Sebastian undressed completely

as well, never taking his eyes off me. When we were both naked, he swept me into his arms and laid me on the bed, lying down next to me.

Careful not to wake Raleigh, I snuggled next to Sebastian and prepared for sleep. We only had time for one more lingering kiss...

And the sun came up... and we slept...





## Chapter 39 – Darcy

“Mirror mirror on the wall  
Who’s the flyest bitch of them all?”  
Christina Aguilera  
“Vanity”

I really wanted to kiss Sebastian awake, but I knew that he had to get over to Tristan’s early to collect Mateo so we didn’t have a lot of time. Besides, I really wanted to make sure that I looked my best to meet Darcy so I slipped out of bed and headed for the shower while Sebastian still slumbered.

I was only under the warm spray for a few minutes when Sebastian joined me. I turned to him and smiled. “Hey, sleepy head,” I said, moving over to him for a kiss. “I was thinking that a dress is a must for tonight, right?”

“A dress is good,” he confirmed. He mentioned one he really liked, a tight red one that I’d worn to a theme party at The Masquerade last year that was in no way appropriate to the situation.

I lifted a brow, surprised he’d remembered it, and slipped my arms around his neck. “Nice choice, but not for meeting Darcy, I don’t think. I can wear it later, though, if you want.”

“Ooh, promises, promises,” he growled, pulling me close, then turning serious. “I don’t like waking up alone.”

I worked my fingers into his hair. “Sorry. I figured you needed to hurry to get over to Tristan’s so I was trying to get ready.”

“We’ve got a little time,” he said, bending to kiss my neck and I tilted my head to give him better access.

“Are you sure?” I asked, tightening my hold on his hair slightly and pressing close to him.

“A little time,” he repeated, moving forward until my back was against the shower wall. I curled one leg up and around his and removed one hand from his hair to trail it down his chest slowly.

“Better make it count,” I told him, my voice low.

\* ~ \* ~ \* ~

“This is a lovely home,” I told Serena about an hour later as she showed me around the house she’d procured for Mateo’s child.

“I really hope Darcy will like it,” the other woman told me. “We need a strong woman like her in the city.”

I couldn't help but think that my sire was strong, along with other members of my clan, but I didn't voice my opinion. "I'm sure she would be a welcome addition anywhere," I assured Serena.

There were many last minute tasks that *needed* to be done according to Serena and we only had about an hour to accomplish them. I did everything the other woman asked me to without question, even though I was sure that most of them were details so small that Darcy wouldn't have noticed either way. About ten minutes before Sebastian and the others were expected to arrive; Serena hurried me into a bathroom so we both could freshen up.

By the time the limo pulled up in front of the house I just wanted the evening over. I was usually a pretty even keeled person, but I was so sick of hearing about Darcy... how perfect she was... how she was always dressed impeccably. I was sure she was going to take one look at me and immediately dismiss my existence. I just wanted to go home.

Serena and I were waiting on the porch as one of Mateo's ghouls got out of the front passenger seat and opened the back door. Sebastian got out first, then Tristan, Mateo, then Mateo leaned back in to help a tall brunette woman out.

She wore a stunning burgundy dress that hugged her curves in all the right places. Her matching hat had a black netting that swept down to cover her delicate features with just the right amount of mystery. Her eyes were dark and her skin was olive colored, reminding me of some desert beauty right out of the pages of an Arabian Knights story. In fact, I found myself humming a very Middle Eastern inspired tune I hoped I could later translate onto paper.

After Darcy, Tristan and Mateo moved a little away from the car, Sebastian reached back in and helped a slight blonde woman from the vehicle. Serena hadn't mentioned anyone traveling with Darcy and I wondered who the newcomer was. She smiled widely up at Sebastian as she took his hand and he returned the smile.

Sebastian tucked her hand into the crook of his arm, mimicking Mateo with Darcy as the group headed toward the house. Mateo and the dark haired beauty were talking with Tristan as they approached the house. The blonde was laughing at something Sebastian said.

When Darcy reached the bottom of the stairs, she looked up and saw Serena for the first time and her face lit up. "Darling," she said as she started up the stairs. "It has been too long."

"Darcy," Serena beamed, her voice warm and welcoming. "It is so good to see you again."

"I understand all this was your idea," Darcy said as they reached the porch. "It looks impressive."

"I hope you think so once you've seen inside," Serena told the other woman, blushing as Darcy leaned in to kiss her on the cheek.

I remained quiet and watchful, a smile pasted on my lips as the two women talked. I glanced over toward Sebastian and found his gaze on me, a warm smile on his lips that made my own smile feel more genuine.

When Darcy moved back from Serena, Mateo held a hand out toward me. "Darcy, this is one of Nashville's Daughters, Ariel Espenosa. Ariel, this is Darcy Quillan, my child."

Darcy looked me over slowly and smiled, holding her hand out toward me. "A pleasure, I'm sure."

I took her hand and let my smile go wider. "It's so nice to finally meet you, Ms Quillan. Everyone has been anticipating your arrival. Welcome to Nashville."

Her eyes ran down my body again, then she turned to where Sebastian and the blonde were just coming onto the porch. "Ariel, this is my assistant, Klara Weber."

Ah, a ghoul then.

Klara gave me a polite smile and a brief wave that seemed less than sincere. She seemed like someone who did not like another beautiful woman on principle. Like she didn't care for competition for all the attention she probably got.

"Ms Weber," I said, returning her smile. "A pleasure. Welcome to Nashville."

Klara didn't say anything in return, just smiled at me. I took a step back to let Serena lead the way into the house. Tristan and Mateo followed Serena and Darcy inside and Sebastian gestured for Klara to follow them. He then came over to me and kissed my cheek.

"You look beautiful," he said as if he hadn't seen me just an hour ago.

I slipped my arm around his waist and pressed close to him. "Thank you. You're not so bad yourself." I reached up and smoothed the collar of his jacket. "Any problems?"

He smiled down at me. "We'll see if there are any problems tomorrow night," he said. "Toreador Clan meeting."

"Will you have to be there?"

He shook his head. "No, thankfully. I'm sure Mateo can handle it if any problems come up." He put his arm around me and led me into the house where the others were checking over the house.

"So what will do we do tomorrow? More patrolling?" I teased, knowing how boring it was.

"Oh, I'm sure something will come up," he grinned.

Klara smiled when she saw Sebastian enter the room and he returned her greeting. I think I was the only how who saw that smile falter a bit when she saw his arm around me. Was she in love with him, too? It wasn't a hard thing to do and as long as she didn't do anything to cause problems between he and I there would be no issues.

Sebastian and I joined in the conversation about the house and the city. I suggested that Darcy and Klara visit The Masquerade during their stay, telling them that my sire would love to have them. The invitation led to some questions about the club and of the Daughters who lived in the city.

After a few minutes Tristan said, "I think it's time for us to leave you to settle in. I'm sure you and Mateo have a lot to discuss."

"Of course, my Prince," Darcy replied with a smile.

Klara looked disappointed, at what I wasn't sure.

Sebastian and Tristan stood and Sebastian held his hand out to me. I took it and got to my feet as well, then said goodnight to the women. "If there's anything I can do to make your stay enjoyable please let me know," I told Darcy.

"Thank you, *Señorita* Espenosa," she replied happily. "I will be sure to let you know if you can help."

I gave her one last smile then collected my things from the table in the front hall. Serena joined me, thanking me for all my assistance, then Sebastian, Tristan and I headed out to the limo. I slipped in first and made room for the men. Sebastian was next and he slid over to sit next to me, putting his arm around me. I rested my hand on his thigh and leaned into him. When the car pulled away from the curb I commented, "Darcy is very beautiful."

Sebastian looked down at me and smiled. "Yes, she is."

"Mateo chose well," Tristan said.

"Do you think she will choose to stay, my Prince?"

"She may," Tristan mused, looking out the window. "We certainly could use her leadership for the Toreador."

"I'm sure she'd be a valuable asset."

He made a noise of agreement, but seemed distracted.

I looked down at where my hand was resting on Sebastian's leg and didn't say anything more. I didn't want to bother the Prince if he was contemplating something.

"Raleigh's flight is due in at midnight," Sebastian told me after a minute. "I want to check in with Johnson tonight before we head for the airport. Are you up for coming along?"

I nodded. "Of course. Have you heard from Raleigh tonight?"

"Earlier," he replied. "He's expecting the flight to leave on time."

"Good," I said. It was like something was missing without the other man with us. "So we pick up your car and go from there?"

"Yeah, but we'll need to hook back up with the limo later to pick up Raleigh and the others."

I nodded. "Did you just want to keep using the limo? Is that possible?"

"I doubt Johnson would be impressed if we pulled up in a limo," he teased with a smile.

I grinned back at him, thinking that taking the limo left us to have some time for other things, I didn't mention that out loud. "Whatever you want," I told him, squeezing his leg a little.

\* ~ \* ~ \*

We met Glenn at a blue-collar bar I'd never heard of. Sebastian and I stuck out in our less than casual clothes, but Sebastian still looked dangerous as his gaze scanned the crowd.

Glenn saw us when we came in. He leaned over to say something to the man he was with before he stood and headed toward us. "I was just getting ready to call you," Glenn commented as came to a stop in front of us.

"Why?" Sebastian asked, his brow furrowing.

"Got a lead on a possible hunter attack, later tonight," Glenn replied.

"Do you know where?" Sebastian pressed, clearly on edge by the idea of another threat.

"Airport," Glenn told him. "Some time close to midnight."

Fear gripped my entire being and I grabbed for Sebastian. "Raleigh," I breathed.

It was now Glenn's turn to frown as Sebastian put an arm around me. "Do you know a target?" he asked the other man.

"Plane coming in," he replied slowly. "Not sure what's on board."

"Do you have any idea how many hunters are involved?" I asked. I wanted to pull out my phone right then and call Raleigh, tell him to come later. The only thing that stopped me was that it was probably too late to stop the plane.

"We've taken out most of the ones in the city, but rumor has it that two of them called in three more to come down from Cincinnati," Glenn told us.

"We can take out five," Sebastian said. "Especially if we can count on your help."

Glenn looked at him for a moment, then nodded. "I'll be there."

We still had some time to get to the airport and ready ourselves for the attack. I knew that I wasn't wearing the right clothes for a fight and I hoped that Sebastian would be okay to go by the house so I could change quickly.

"You know why they're targeting the airport, don't you?" Glenn said.

Sebastian nodded. "Raleigh's coming in with some... friends from out of town," Sebastian explained.

"How many friends?" Glenn asked in a low voice.

"Just a couple," Sebastian replied, sounding irritated. "They won't be staying. You have any IDs on these hunters?"

"Just the two natives," Glenn told him. "Should be easy enough to spot the others."

Sebastian glanced at me, then back to Glenn. "I'm gonna make some calls, get some more firepower. You meet us at the Observation Park at 11:30. Bring as many as you can trust to help us."

Glenn nodded and Sebastian took my hand to lead me out without another word.

We had about an hour before we needed to be at the park. Once we were outside I said, "I'd like to go home and change if we have time. I'll make sure to pack a bag to leave in the car for next time."

"If you can do it fast, fine," he replied, pulling out his phone. "Call Joan, have her bring the Brujah people to Observation Park in forty-five minutes." He put his phone to his ear and opened the car door for me to get in.

Once I was in the car I had my phone out to do as Sebastian asked. As we made our way back to the house each of us made various calls to ready anyone Sebastian could think of. He pulled into his house in record time and as soon as I got inside I stopped just long enough to slip off my shoes, then I ran downstairs to change. I grabbed the first pair of jeans, shirt and sturdy flat shoes I could locate.

When I came back upstairs, Sebastian was coming out of the music room and I didn't need to see the extra lumps under his jacket to know he'd been in the gun safe. "Ready?" he asked in a low voice.

"Yes," I answered, making myself stay calm and mentally preparing for what was to come. "Do you have a plan?" I asked as we headed outside.

"Tristan is getting a message to Raleigh. He's already in the air so I can't reach him. They'll be ready on the plane, we'll be ready on the ground."

"What if there's more than what Glenn thinks there will be?" I asked quietly, hoping and praying there wouldn't be, but we had to be real. All the previous fights we'd had with the hunters had just kind of happened. This was different. They were making a planned strike and I was nervous.

"He thinks there will be five," Sebastian said. "There are five of us before we start counting the Brujah, Ventrue, Nemet, Rita, or anyone Glenn brings. We will outnumber them at least two to one, probably more."

I looked over at Sebastian, hoping he was right. "I don't want you to worry about me," I told him. "If I'm a liability I will stay in the car, but you have to keep yourself safe."

Sebastian gave me a small smile as he reached out to take my hand. "Just stay with me, or Joan. You'll be fine." He held it just a little too tightly and I knew he was worried about Raleigh, too.

Everything had to turn out okay. It just had to.



## *Chapter 40 - Trouble at the Airport*

"You think you're something special don't you"  
Christina Aguilera  
"Shut Up"

We got to the Observation Park around eleven-fifteen. I recognized one of the Brujah cars already there, along with Max Brehmer's sedan. There were other cars parked near them, but I didn't know if they belonged to anyone Sebastian had called.

Sebastian parked near the Brujah vehicle and Joan got out of it, followed by Ray Kennedy. They came over to receive instructions from Sebastian along with Nez Smith and my friend Nathan. Sebastian quickly detailed a plan then sent most of them out to the private tarmac where the plane was due to land with orders to stay out of sight. He kept Joan, Nathan and Max with us.

More cars continued to come in over the next ten minutes and Sebastian gave each group an assigned area to wait. I stayed close to him, my eyes constantly sweeping the area in case of any surprise attacks, while Sebastian talked to each newcomer.

Then suddenly, Glenn Johnson was there with a sizable group, including his wife, Siofra and his werewolf friend, Darin. He had managed to get a hold of pictures of the two hunters from the city, which was helpful, but he didn't have any further information on the other three he'd heard were coming.

At quarter to midnight, Sebastian led a group comprised of myself, Nemet, Glenn, Darin and Joan toward the private tarmac. I stayed close to Sebastian's side, my eyes scanning the night and as we settled in to watch a limousine pulled up as if nothing was awry.

I could see movement in the darkness, but it was mostly our own people and that was very little. Then I noticed something completely out of place. A young woman with black pants and a camouflage shirt, holding a shot gun, was standing near a truck parked not too far from where the plane would come in. I silently touched Sebastian's arm and pointed in the direction of the woman.

He nodded and made some hand motions to someone off to our left. I heard only the slightest sound as someone began to move toward the woman.

The low roar of a jet engine sounded and I realized that the plane had landed and was now taxiing toward the area of the tarmac where the limousine waited. I heard a faint sound behind us that shouldn't have been there. Everyone that Sebastian had contacted was already here; there was no one else that would be arriving late. And the sounds were definitely someone moving cautiously. They were maybe ten feet behind us.

I turned around quietly and studied the darkness. Almost immediately my eyes found a rather large, older man as he carefully made his way toward the plane, holding a

crow bar in one hand and a stake in the other. Thankfully he hadn't seen us yet and I reached out to touch Sebastian's arm again.

I raised my gun as Sebastian turned. He must have seen the man right away because he gestured to those around us as I pulled the trigger. Several other gunshots rang through the night as well and the man dropped, his head having been completely blown off.

There were other cries in the darkness as more gunfire exploded and my eyes darted around, looking for other possible targets. It didn't take long to determine that there were more hunters than we'd originally been aware of. It was at least double that, given the amount of fighting going on around us and I was glad that Sebastian had spared nothing in terms of who he had called on.

I saw that Aster, one of the fae from the Inter-Racial council, appeared to have been knocked down by a hunter, who was about to shoot the fae in the face. Running on pure instinct I swung my gun toward the hunter, took aim and fired. I hit him in the shoulder and his shot went hard, missing the fae completely. The hunter looked up at me and I could see the hatred in his eyes as Aster rolled away from him.

I squeezed the trigger again, but not before the hunter was able to get a shot off at me as well. Fire bloomed in my left thigh where the bullet impacted, but I'd managed to hit the man in the chest with my second shot and he fell back, dying.

I'd never been shot before. Luckily I'd felt the bullet pass through my leg and I knew that I could use my blood to heal the wound. Thankfully it hadn't been a phosphorus round and after a moment of concentration I was fine.

A glance around me found that there was still some continued fighting around the plane, but it was sporadic. I looked for Sebastian and saw that he was moving toward where a group of several hunters were fighting a man and a woman. I quickly followed him and saw that the woman is Glenn's wife and the man was one of their friends.

I was able to get a clear shot at one of the hunters and managed to clip him, but the wound didn't stop his attack. I fired at him again as he hit Siofra with a piece of wood that sent her to the ground. Sebastian fired as well and both hunters went down in a heap.

The fight was pretty much over then. Once Sebastian felt that everything was under control he looked toward the plane and made a gesture with his hand. The plane door opened and Raleigh peeped out, taking in the area. I could see the gun in his hand as he took in the scene. Once his gaze had made a full sweep of the area, he turned to look back into the plane and offered a hand to someone inside as Sebastian headed toward it.

I followed Sebastian, looking him over from behind for injuries and found none. Then I scanned our surroundings and saw that several of our people had sustained injury, but they were all easily healed. At least no one had died.

A beautiful black woman came down the steps. She saw Sebastian and smiled at him warmly. "'Bastian, it's so good to see you again," she said in greeting when she reached him, and he bent so she could kiss him on the cheek.

They appeared to be good friends and I couldn't help but recall the story Nathan had told me. Was this the woman he'd told me about?

Sebastian was in the middle of introducing me to Reggie Dawson when a brunette woman came out of the plane. She spotted Sebastian and ran down the steps to fall into his arms.

"Sebastian," she sobbed. "I was so afraid!"

I wondered who this second woman was and what each of them meant to Sebastian as I looked up to where Raleigh was exiting the plane, his hands full with luggage. He was rolling his eyes at the hysterical woman Sebastian was trying to calm down.

"You're fine, Barb," Sebastian was telling her as he smoothed her hair down. "None of them even came near the plane."

"But they could have," she said, sounding on the verge of hysterics. "And you could have been hurt!"

"He's fine," Reggie said, clearly annoyed with her traveling companion. "Stop crying all over his nice suit."

The way Barb was pawing all over Sebastian wasn't sitting well with me, but I wasn't going to say anything as I hummed a calm tune and held my gun tightly.

Barb pulled back just a little and dabbed at the wet spots on Sebastian's jacket. "I'm sorry, Sebastian, but I was so worried for you." She looked up at him with tear bright eyes, but I could read her like a book. She knew him very well. Intimately. I could tell by the way they both held their bodies.

I felt a wave of relief when he smiled at her and put his hands on her shoulders, backing up a step to put distance between them. "As you can see I'm fine, Barb," he told her, then let her go as he looked over toward Raleigh, who had now reached the bottom of the stairs. "Any problems?" he asked the other man.

Raleigh glanced pointedly at Barb, who was looking at Sebastian as if he was the prince of something. "Not any unexpected problems," he replied dryly.

I saw Reggie making no attempt to hide the wide smile on her lips and knew there was a story here for sure. I pasted a smile on my face for now and pretended there wasn't a huge sense of dread forming in my stomach.

Sebastian looked a bit uncomfortable as he turned toward me. "Reggie, this is Ariel Espenosa. She's been... helping us out since this mess started. Ariel, this is Reggie Dawson, and Barbara Mason."

Reggie looked me over, taking in the bloodstain on my pant leg and the gun in my hand, then she held out her hand. "It's good to meet you, *Senorita*," she said with a smile. "Raleigh's had nothing but good things to say about you."

I held my gun down to my side and moved to shake Reggie's hand. "Nice to meet you. Sorry your arrival was less than smooth."

"It's not like we saw any trouble," she replied, still smiling. "You all took care of that before the door ever opened."

"Call it southern hospitality," I said with a smile. "It wouldn't look good for us if visitors were hurt before getting to their destinations. "

Reggie laughed a little as Barb pulled out a handkerchief and tried to wipe at the tearstains on Sebastian's jacket, apologizing and offering to pay for cleaning. I felt my jaw clench every time she brushed against him. What would happen if I shot her?

Reggie must have noticed my reaction because she took my arm and led me toward the limo. "You have to forgive Barbara," she said in a low voice. "She doesn't have the first brain in her head."

I looked back over my shoulder at the pair as Sebastian grabbed the other woman's wrist. "I-I'm not sure what you mean?" I told Reggie as Sebastian said something to Barb that I didn't hear. He didn't look happy.

"I don't know why the hell her sire chose her," Reggie continued as we walked toward the car. "Or why Stuart had me babysit her on this trip, for that matter," she added with a smile. "Still, someone has to keep an eye on her."

"Why?" I asked. "What's wrong with her?" Sebastian's grandsire sent her with Barb?

"She has no sense of propriety, or tact," she murmured, her eyes catching sight of Nemet, who was walking toward the limo. "Hello, who do we have here?"

I introduced Reggie to Nemet, who bent to kiss her hand gallantly. Reggie smiled, appreciating the attention a great deal as Sebastian joined us, Barb trailing after him and looking disgruntled. Reggie introduced Nemet to Barbara Mason and I forced myself to not reach for Sebastian as the other woman tried to wind her arms around one of his. I was relieved when he moved closer to me instead and put an arm around my shoulders.

"Sweetheart, would you mind riding to Tristan's with Raleigh and these ladies?" Sebastian asked, looking down at me. "There are a few things I need to finish up here."



He'd never called me sweetheart before so that threw me a little. "Are you sure?" I asked slowly, concerned for his safety if he left him here. I pulled him aside a little to add, "You shouldn't be alone. We don't know how many of them are left."

"Lachlan is here, and plenty of Brujah," he pointed out. "I won't be alone."

"You won't go anywhere without backup?" I insisted.

Sebastian put his hands on my shoulders and met my gaze and I reached out to lay my hand on his chest. "I won't, I promise," he told me.

"Okay. I'll see you at the Prince's," I told him and he bent down to give me a soft kiss that I returned eagerly, bringing my hand up to his face to caress it briefly. "Be careful," I told him softly, grazing my lips over his one more time before turning to rejoin the others.

Barb was already in the back of the limo and Reggie was still talking with Nemet.

Raleigh came up to me and looked down at my leg. "Are you okay?"

I nodded. "Yes, I've healed it already," I told him with a smile. "Good to have you back."

He smiled down at me and put a hand on my arm. "Good to be back. I missed you."

I put my hand over his. "I missed you, too. It's funny how much a person's life can change in a week."

"It is," he agreed, then nodded toward the limo where Reggie was looking our way.

"Looks like Reggie's ready to go."

"Who is Barbara?" I asked him quietly, unable to hold the question back anymore.

"She's a bit... handsy."

His face went neutral. "She's like that. We'll talk later."

I glanced up at him and nodded before heading back toward the limo. "Ready?" I asked Reggie with a cautious smile.

"Yes," she replied with a smile of her own. She slipped into the limo, leaving room for me at the door. Once I was settled in I laid my gun in my lap and looked out the window as I saw Raleigh getting into the front.

"Bastian should have come with us," Barb pouted. "Anything could happen between here and Tristan's." She was sounding less flighty than before and I couldn't help wondering if it had been an act.

"He has a job to do," Reggie reminded her.

"It's a short drive to the Prince's," I assured them. "We'll make sure you arrive safe."

Barb looked at me for the first time, assessing me from the looks of it. She eyed the gun on my lap and the blood on my leg. "I heard Bastian is using Brujah for his enforcers."

I forced a smile at her, feeling a little proud that she thought that was my clan. "I'm not Brujah, miss," I told her.

She looked me over again and I could tell she didn't think much of me. "You're not Rita," she said after a moment.

"No, miss. My name is Ariel."

"Ariel Espenosa," Reggie said. "Had you been paying less attention to crying into Ritter's shoulder, you'd know that."

Barb smiled coldly. "Priorities," she drawled and I wanted to punch her.

I didn't even try to hide my scowl. Who did this bitch think she was? I turned my attention to Reggie and said, "I'm sure the Prince is looking forward to your visit. Are you part of his bloodline as well?"

"Stewart is also my sire," Reggie told me, sounding a great deal more pleasant than she had when she spoke to Barb. "May I ask your clan?"

"I am a Daughter of Cacophony, ma'am," I told her with a smile. "I've been in the city for a long time. Since before the Prince and Sebastian came."

"Were you here when Wyatt was in control?" she asked.

"Yes, ma'am. Those were dark days. We were very happy when the Prince came to the city."

"Daughter of Cacophony," Barb repeated slowly, her gaze calculating as she looked me over again. "Interesting."

"I'm sure things are much better now, with Tristan in charge," Reggie commented, ignoring the other woman. "He is a very strong man, I'm sure he rules the city well."

"He does, ma'am," I assured her. "He and his people have done right by the city."

"Of course they have," Barb said sharply. "Wasn't the last Prince a Daughter?"

It seemed like she was implying that any other clan would make a better choice. I really wanted to claw her eyes out and I was surprised by that. I'd never felt that way before.

"I understand Jax Alexander has returned to the city," Reggie said, distracting me.

"Brujah," Barb mumbled under her breath, rather dismissively.

I ignored her. "She has returned, ma'am. Her people have been very helpful with these new hunters."

"We've had a few of them in Flint as well," Reggie told me. "It's one of the reasons I came down, to see how you're handling them."

"The best thing that's worked so far is to not rely on your abilities, because they aren't very reliable," I informed her. "I'm sure Sebastian probably has a formal report somewhere that he can share if you ask, but the use of firearms is the most effective. We've also been working in teams so that one of you can try something like Presence or my singing ability to distract them enough to take them out. That was something that Raleigh thought of."

"It seems like I saw a werewolf at the airport," Reggie commented. "And I don't think Nemet was Kindred."

I nodded. "Yes. Sebastian has been successful in creating an Inter-Racial Counsel to deal with the hunters. Nemet is actually Reborn, definitely not Kindred. We're also working with other werecreatures besides the wolves as well as Mages and even some ghosts. It is my hope that the counsel will continue after we've dealt with the hunters."

"That's ridiculous," Barb scoffed. "Werewolves and Mages hunt vampires, everyone knows that. And whoever heard of a Reborn?"

"We have," I informed her, trying to keep my voice civil. She was really pushing my last short fuse with her comments. "Werecreatures and Mages may inherently hunt our kind, but Sebastian works hard to keep the peace here and we all benefit from it."

"Well, I suppose if anyone could do it, 'Bastian could," she scoffed, sounding a bit put out.

"I think that's the first time I've agreed with you this month," Reggie said with exaggerated surprise.

"Don't be a bitch, Reg," Barb replied, her eyes narrowed on the other woman.

"You're not that good at it."

"Yes, normally I leave that to you, Barbara dear," Reggie drawled.

"How long will you ladies be staying in Nashville?" I asked, pasting a smile on my face.

"Through the weekend," Reggie told me, but the look in Barb's eyes said that she was determined to stay longer. That wasn't something I wanted to hear.



## *Chapter 41 - Too Much Thinking*

"When my world is going crazy,  
You can turn it all around."  
Christina Aguilera  
"I Turn to You"

Reggie filled the rest of drive asking questions about the city while Barbara continued to regard me as if I was nothing more than a servant. I did my best to answer Reggie's questions and tried to ignore the other woman. When we arrived at Tristan's house Raleigh opened the back door and I smiled at him when he offered me his hand.

Once out of the vehicle I finally holstered my gun, keeping Raleigh's hand briefly as we moved a few steps from the vehicle. When the Reggie and Barbara exited the car I motioned for them to go ahead into the house and found Max Brehmer waiting to greet us. He welcomed the two women and told them he would see to their luggage and they moved to enter the house.

One of Tristan's ghouls was there as well to help Raleigh with the bags and Max fell into step with me as we followed Raleigh and the ghoul inside.

Max smiled at me. "Hello, Ariel. Everything went well at the airport, I take it?"

I nodded. "It was contained with minimal injuries. I believe there was another hunter captured. Perhaps we can get some effective information out of him. Sebastian is dealing with the clean up and will be here after."

"Good." He gestured toward the back of the house. "Tristan and the others are waiting for us in the great room."

I looked down at myself, knowing that my pants were a bloody mess. "I'm sorry about my appearance. Perhaps I should wait somewhere else for Sebastian to return," I suggested. I didn't want the Prince to see me like this and frankly there was something about Barbara that made me want to keep my distance.

Max looked me over. "If you'd like to clean up a little first, I can show you to the powder room."

I smiled at him, thankful for the suggestion, but I knew a little clean up wouldn't do any good. "Unfortunately, I really don't think a visit to the powder room is going to magically clean or fix my clothes." I shrugged. "I don't want to mess up anything. I can wait. Unless you think the Prince wants me to report on what happened."

Max just smiled as he led me to one of the chairs in the foyer. "All right. Have a seat here, I'll let the Prince know you're waiting for Sebastian."

"Thank you," I said. I moved to stand in front of the seat and watched as Max headed toward the back of the house, but I didn't sit. I didn't want to run the risk of getting blood on the chair's upholstery so I tried to appreciate the artwork in the foyer instead.

Unfortunately my mind circled back to Barbara. I thought about what Nathan had told me the night before, about the woman that Sebastian had supposedly been involved with in Flint. Given her greeting, I was pretty sure that Barbara had to be her.

One thought led to another and I began to wonder why Barbara was here. Did she want to rekindle her relationship with Sebastian? That seemed kind of obvious considering how she'd been with him. But what did that mean for me? My time with Sebastian and Raleigh had been so short compared to how long they'd known Barbara. I had no idea what to think about the situation. And Sebastian wasn't the sharing type so that didn't help.

I started to wonder if I had misread the signs from Sebastian at the airport. The kiss. His arm around me. It was like he was trying to show Barbara something. Then again was he? I started to question everything that had happened in the last few days. Barbara was a beautiful woman. Maybe Sebastian would want to be with her instead of me.

About twenty minutes later, Sebastian and Lachlan came in the front door. I turned to face them and saw surprise in Sebastian's eyes at finding me there.

"Hey, everything go okay?" I asked, stepping toward them and trying to act like nothing was wrong.

"Yeah, everything's fine." Sebastian came over and kissed my cheek as Lachlan continued on into the house. "Your ride was okay?" he asked, looking me up and down as if he expected to find something wrong with me.

I had to pretend that I wasn't about to come apart. I quirked an eyebrow at him and tried to sound lighthearted. "Reggie is lovely to talk to," I told him honestly, not wanting to comment on the other woman who'd been with us. Sebastian was a friend of Barbara's after all. Maybe more than friends.

He smiled. "I'm sorry you had to go with them by yourself. I hoped Reggie would keep Barb under control."

"She's just a little... opinionated," I said, trying to keep things easy. "And handsy." He frowned and looked me over again. "Handsy?"

I shook my head, realizing that I was being anxious and didn't want to argue with Sebastian about his friend. "Nothing. You need to go talk to the Prince. Go ahead and I'll wait for you here."

"Are you sure?" he asked softly, frowning in what looked like confusion.

"Yeah," I assured him, nodding my head with a little too much enthusiasm. "I'm... well, I'm a mess," I added nervously as I indicated my ruined clothing. When I spoke again I could hear the tremor in my voice and that made me talk even faster to get it all out. "I was afraid of getting blood on Tristan's furniture, which it's dried now and kind of a mute point, but I'm still a mess. Maybe you want to spend some time with your friends? I can go back to the house or something."

Sebastian's frown deepened. "I don't want you going back to the house alone. I have to report in, but if you really want to go back, I'll get Raleigh to take you."

"It doesn't matter," I told him, trying desperately to get my wits back under control. Then I remembered something. "Actually, I think I would have to go back with one of you anyhow because I don't have a key. Just go ahead and I'll wait." I gave him a shaky smile. Oh God, he was going to think I was a complete basket case. Maybe I was.

"Are you okay?" he asked, concern clearly written in his blue gaze.

I nodded quickly, maybe too quickly because I was sure that okay was the last thing I was at the moment. "I'm fine," I said, wanting to push him so he would leave me alone. I had to get a hold of myself before I totally freaked out. "Just... I don't know. I'm fine. Go talk to Tristan."

"All right," Sebastian said slowly. "Do you want me to find Raleigh to take you home?"

I shook my head, silently begging him to just go already. "No. Then you would have to travel on your own." I took a deep breath, certain tears of frustration were about ten

seconds away. "Damn. I'm sorry. I don't know what... I'm fine. Really." I wasn't and I couldn't do this in front of him.

Sebastian watched me for a long moment, then he took my arm and lead me to one of the chairs. "Sit down," he said firmly, pointing at the chair. I did so silently and he added, "Wait here. I'll be back as soon as I can."

As soon as he turned to walk away I dropped my head in my hands, positive I'd completely messed everything up somehow. I was an idiot. I'd let my insecurities get the better of me. There was no way Sebastian would want me now.

Five minutes later Raleigh was by my side, looking me over like he had at the airport, as if he expected me to have injuries. "Are you all right?" he asked gently.

I looked up at him. "I'm fine," I assured him, my voice still a little jerky as I reached out for his hand.

He took it as he crouched beside me. "Are you sure? You did get hurt."

"No, I'm fine, really," I said, looking down at the carpeted floor. "I'm just an idiot," I added under my breath.

Raleigh ducked his head to look in my eyes, but I didn't look at him. "Why are you an idiot?" he asked, his tone quiet and soothing.

I took another deep breath. "I may have... I don't know."

He hooked a finger under my chin to lift my face. "May have what?"

"Messed it all up with my own freak out?" I say in a small voice. I could hear the mockery in my tone. I was such an idiot.

"What did you freak out over?" he asked gently.

I looked around to make sure that we were still alone before I asked, "Who is Barbara to Sebastian?"

"This is about Barbara?" he asked, surprised.

I looked down again, feeling ashamed by my reaction.

"Ariel, Barbara--" Before he could finish the doorbell sounded.

I pulled back from him, looking at the door as one of Tristan's ghouls entered the foyer to answer it. I was horrified to see Darcy and Klara enter and I did my best to smooth my features and hide my state of clothing and mindset. I was a mess and the last thing I wanted was for Darcy to see me like this.

Raleigh stood and let go of my hand. He seemed pleased to see the two women, and they were pleased to see him as well.

"Morgan!" Klara cried, obviously thrilled to see whoever Morgan was. She came up to Raleigh and gave him an enthusiastic hug.

He hugged her back, shaking his head. "You know no one calls me that," he told her, his tone more friendly than reproofing.

"Why not?" she asked, pulling back with her hands still on his shoulders. "It is your name." I could hear the slight German accent in her voice and I wondered how long the two had known each other.

*Wait... Raleigh wasn't his name? What?*

He was shaking his head again, but was still smiling. "It's good to see you again, Klara."

She hugged him again. "I couldn't stay away when I heard you'd be here."

I tried to remain small in the chair where I was sitting. Maybe the two women wouldn't notice me and would continue into the house. Yeah, that wasn't meant to be though.

"*Senorita* Espenosa," Darcy said, turning her attention toward me, "you've been injured, are you okay?"

I forced a smile on my face and slowly got to my feet. "I'm fine, thank you," I told her. "There was a bit of a confrontation earlier, but I've healed." I tried to cover the blood on my clothing, but I knew there was no way to hide it all. "I need to change."

Darcy looked down at my leg, but I didn't see any disgust in her features. "A badge of honor, that is," she said with a smile. "Shame that your clothes were ruined, however. Are there any good clothing stores in Nashville?"

I nodded slowly. That wasn't the reaction I'd expected. "There are. I've been meaning to do some shopping because my wardrobe has taken quite a hit in my time with Raleigh and Sebastian. Perhaps you would allow me to show you and Klara sometime?"

"Certainly," Darcy agreed. "Perhaps once this mess with the hunters settles down."

I nodded. "It would be my pleasure."

Klara was still talking with Raleigh. They appeared to be good friends but I was trying to keep any further conclusions from forming in my mind. I was already facing some serious explaining to Sebastian and didn't want to add to it.

Sebastian returned to the foyer and smiled when he saw the two women. "Darcy, I'm surprised to see you so soon. Was there something wrong with the house?" he asked teasingly.

"No, of course not," she assured him. "I heard there was trouble and I wanted to find out more about it."

"I just gave my report to Tristan," he told her. "Lachlan is going over the details about it now."

I hadn't expected him to appear again so soon and I watched him carefully, trying to gauge his mood. He was surprised to see Darcy and Klara and given the way his eyes pinched a little when he saw how close Klara was still standing to Raleigh, he didn't like her proximity.

"You're not staying?" Klara asked, looking very disappointed as she looked from Raleigh to Sebastian and back to Sebastian again.

"No, I have some other things to take care of tonight," he answered before turning his attention to me briefly.

Klara looked at me too, but her expression plainly said that she didn't think I was the reason Sebastian was leaving.

"Perhaps later this week you can come with *Senorita* Espenosa and me when we go shopping," Klara suggested Sebastian with a teasing smile, surprising me. I hadn't thought she'd heard my offer when I'd made it to Darcy.

Sebastian looked surprised, but pleased. "Thank you for the invitation, but I think I'll leave you ladies to it." He came to my side and put a hand on my lower back. "Are you ready to go?" he asked me.

I nodded up at him then looked between the two women. "It was nice to see you again," I told them.

"I'm sure we'll talk later this week, *Senorita* Espenosa," Darcy told me with a small smile.

I nodded and we said our goodbyes, then Sebastian led me outside, his hand still on my lower back and Raleigh closely following behind. Sebastian's car was parked to one side of the driveway and once I was seated I kept my eyes downcast, terrified that Sebastian was going to tell me to get out of his life at any moment.

No one said anything until Sebastian had pulled out onto the road. "Are you all right?" he asked me again, barely looking sideways in my direction where I sat in the passenger's seat.

"I'm fine," I told him. "I'm sorry you felt you had to leave so soon. I would have... waited."

"It's fine," he assured me. "Lachlan saw everything I did at the airport."

I turned my head to look out the window, not sure what else to say. Sebastian didn't say anything either, but confusion was practically rolling off him in waves. I was confused, too. I felt that Barbara meant something to him, but I didn't know what or how he felt about her now. I wanted to ask him, but I was terrified to know the answer.

The car was silent the rest of the journey to Sebastian's and once the car came to a stop I collected my purse from the floor of the vehicle and went into the house. "I'm going to get cleaned up," I told the men as I immediately turned toward the stairs.

It wasn't until I got to the bedroom that I realized Sebastian had followed me down. By the expression in his eyes he was worried.

"Let me take a look at your leg," he said as he removed his jacket and threw it on a chair.

I dropped my purse on a bedside table and removed my jacket. "Its fine," I told him quietly, sounding slightly tired. "I healed it."

Sebastian was taking off his holster and the look he gave me brooked no argument. "Let me see it," he said again.

I sighed slightly, but nodded and moved to face him as I reached for the button and zipper of my jeans. I undid both, then waited as he finished removing his holster and laid it on the dresser. He then crossed to me and kneeled at my feet as I pushed the denim down over my thighs and turned so he could see the leg.

He put his hands on my thigh, examining the area where I'd been shot thoroughly before looking up at me. "Were you hurt anywhere else?"

I shook my head. His hands were so strong and sure when he touched me. I had to bite my bottom lip to keep from saying something stupid. "No. See, I'm fine."

*God, here's where he tells me he doesn't want me anymore.* I started to nervously hum a song of longing.

He started to help me take off my pants and I moved to help him, his hands gentle and sure. Once the pants were off, he stood and took me into his arms. "Are you sure you're all right?" he asked, his lips in my hair.

I looked straight ahead at his chest and nodded. I felt like an emotional wreck inside and I just wanted him to hold me, not reject me. I knew I was weak for thinking that way, but I didn't care. I pressed in closer to him and buried my face in his neck as I slipped my arms around him to hold on tightly. Sebastian cradled me against his chest and rocked back a forth a little as he smoothed my hair down my back.

All too soon he pulled back a little to look down at me. "Let me help you get this off," he told me as he began to take off my holster.

I did as he bid mutely, thinking that what I needed to do was prove to him that I could be good enough for him.

When my holster was off, Sebastian set it on the dresser next to his. "Come on," he said, taking my hand to lead me into the bathroom. "Let's get you cleaned up."

I felt a bit like a child that had to be told every move to make, but it was nice to have his attention after seeing Barbara fawn all over him. Once we entered in the bathroom I started removing my clothes as Sebastian turned on the water in the stall. Then he came back to my side and helped me undress. When I stood naked before him, he asked haltingly, "Do-do you, do you want me to, come in with you?"

I nodded, not sure what my voice would sound like if I spoke. "If you want to," I replied hesitantly.

Sebastian studied my face for a moment, then turned away and started taking off his clothes. I stepped into the shower and backed under the spray, watching him undress. He couldn't reject me. I needed him. Raleigh, too. What would I do without them?

He stripped quickly, dropping his clothes on the floor. It was obvious that something was upsetting him and that he was trying to hide it. When he joined me under the warm spray he eased me under the water to wet my hair, then I turned so he could lather my hair with his shampoo that I loved the smell of.

"I... I'm sorry I got... freaked out," I said, crossing my arms over my chest defensively.

"It's understandable," he said quietly, his voice barely audible over the water as his fingers massaged my scalp. "A lot has happened in the last few days."

Once again I recognized my own weakness because I just wanted to let him think that the last few days were what was wrong with me rather than telling him the truth. I turned to face him, needing to look in his eyes. "I... You would tell me if you weren't happy... with us, right?"

He frowned as his hands came to rest on my shoulders. "Ariel, of course I'm happy. I've wanted to be with you for... so long."

He wasn't lying, not that I could tell anyhow, but I couldn't help but notice that he'd been careful not to say that he would voice any unhappiness either.

"I... I don't know how to do this sometimes," I said, getting a little emotional.

He smoothed the soap and hair back from my face with both hands. "Me neither," he admitted softly. "I know I come on a bit strong sometimes."

"And it's only been a week, I get that." I reached up to touch his face. "I have to remind myself that the man I've wanted for three years is a fantasy and that the real one is so much better, but more complicated. I'm not good at relationships. I've never been in a real one. I just get these feelings and I'm not sure how rational they are sometimes."

"I'm not good at... talking about things," he confessed. "I'm just... so much better at doing. I'm sorry."

"I'm not great at talking either," I told him. "I've never had to. Anything I have to say comes out in my music." I looked down at his chest, then continued. "I guess all these visitors have made me realize that there's so much more about you and Raleigh that I don't know yet and it... well, it makes me unsteady." I lifted my gaze to meet his again. "I want to know you. I want to know Raleigh. And I want you both to know me."

Sebastian whispered my name and bent to kiss me softly, as if he expected me to pull away. I met his mouth eagerly and kissed him hungrily, needing to feel that he still wanted me.

My response was like flicking a switch for him. Sebastian quickly maneuvered me backward until my back was firmly pressed against the shower wall, his lips hard as he thoroughly claimed mine. His hands were desperate as he kept me close to him, the long length of him already hard and pulsing against my hip.

Wordlessly he lifted my legs until they were wrapped around his hips, then he was pushing inside me. I gasped out in surprise at his suddenness, but not because I wanted him to stop. I liked this forceful Sebastian. It was like he was trying to brand me with his body and I responded in kind, using hands and teeth and hoping that I marked him in some way that would show he was mine. I was thrilled that he did the same, concentrating on an especially sensitive part of my neck that had me crying out in pleasure as my orgasm hit.

The encounter was swift and hot. I felt a bit bruised and sore afterward, but it was a good soreness. Sebastian carefully finished washing my hair, then we washed each other. I still felt a little clingy, but he didn't comment, just continued to drop light kisses on my face and shoulders.

When we were both clean, he turned off the water and reached for clean towels. Together we dried each other off and I dropped kisses on his skin as I did so. "Do you have to go back to Tristan's?" I asked, praying he said no. The last thing I wanted was to go back to the Prince's to watch Barbara paw all over him again.

"I should," he told me. "I told him I wanted to make sure you got home all right."

"Okay," I said with a nod, wrapping a towel around myself. I gave him a tentative smile and started to hum a song about courage as I moved to comb my hair.

He gave me a quick kiss then left the bathroom in search of clothes. I knew that it was too much to hope that he might stay or that he might ask me to go back with him. God, I didn't even know what I wanted him to do. He still wanted me so that was huge and I prayed that this yo-yo effect I'd kept myself on stopped.

I combed my hair, then set about straightening it to give my hands something to do. Sebastian came back in a few minutes later wearing a pair of dress pants and a button up



shirt to brush his hair and put it back in a ponytail. "I'm going to leave Raleigh here with you," he said.

"You shouldn't be traveling by yourself," I said. "I'm fine here on my own."

"I'm going straight to Tristan's, I'll be fine, and I don't want to leave you alone," he replied firmly.

"I will be far safer here alone than you will be on the road," I pointed out.

"I'll be fine," he said again. "I'll call when I get there so you can make sure I'm safe."

He leaned in for another kiss and I had to acquiesce, not willing to start an argument and secretly happy to not be alone. I wanted to ask him how long he would be but I feared that I would sound too clingy and I wasn't going there. "Please give the Prince my regards then."

His blue gaze met mine for a long moment before he said, "I will. Just... take it easy the rest of the night. Work on your music or something."

I gave him another nod. "Okay. You have fun, too. I'm gonna get dressed."

"I'll be home as soon as I can," he said, then turned to go.

I watched him go, wishing that I had a better grasp of this relationship thing and how to deal with everything. I dressed and went up to the main floor, looking for Raleigh.



## Chapter 42 – Jack and Dark

"I thought I knew who you were  
I see now you were a lesson to learn"  
Christina Aguilera  
"F.U.S.S. (Interlude)"

I found Raleigh was sitting in the darkened living room with a bottle of Jack Daniels and a glass of ice. I'd never known Raleigh to drink, so the fact that he was doing so now put me on edge. Especially since I had no way of knowing how long he'd been drinking.

"Hey," I said from the doorway. "What are you doing?"

Raleigh looked up at me, then lifted his glass. "Just havin' a drink."

"Do you want to be alone?" I asked, already knowing that I wasn't about to let him be alone. Not like this.

He gave a rough laugh that held no amount of amusement. "No."

I came into the room slowly. "I've heard that drinking alone is never a good thing."

"Yeah, I heard that, too," he said gruffly as he lifted the glass to his lips for a drink.

I came up to stand in front of him, then reached out to take the glass from his hand to take a sniff of the bourbon. It was awful and I made no attempt to hide my disgust. "So why are you doing it?"

He shrugged, watching me. "Seems like when I really need a drink, I'm always alone."

Instead of giving him back the glass, I put it on a nearby table and sat in his lap. "One wig out a night only, please," I said, leaning in to kiss him and trying to ignore the liquor taste on his lips. "It seems that I'm crazy enough for the both of us."

His arms came around me and I settled against him. "I'm not wiggin' out," he drawled. "I'm havin' a drink. And you're not crazy."

"Oh, I think you're probably wrong." I laid my head on his shoulder. "A drink in a dark room. Not the signs of a non-stress moment. What's wrong? I don't think I've seen you drink."

"Oh, I've had my share of drinkin'," he said and I could tell from his tone that he was at least smiling. "And I never said I wasn't stressed, just that I wasn't wiggin' out."

I traced an absent pattern on his chest with my finger as I wondered what I could do to get him out of this mood. "Tell me more about yourself," I said, deciding that if I kept him talking he couldn't drink. Something told me that was the key.

Raleigh shrugged. "Not much to know, really."

"What was your childhood like?"

"I don't know, the usual, I guess. We lived on the poor end of town 'til I joined the Air Force and could send money home to my mom."

"Was it just you and your mom?"

"No, I've got a younger sister," he sighed and I could hear the fondness he had for her in his voice. "She's married, lives in Charleston with her husband and son."

"Do you talk to her still?" I thought of my brother and how strained our relationship had been. I'd always wanted to be closer to him, but it was too late for that now.

Raleigh was shaking his head. "Nah. I'm about thirty-five years older than I look. Little hard to explain. She thinks I was in a car accident back in '88."

I lifted my head to look at him. "I'm sorry." My gaze dropped to his chest. "I guess that's the risk we run in this life. It's almost better to just be an orphan before."

"I don't think so. I had some good years with my family, and I can still check up on them from time to time. Got new family now, anyway." He looked past me to where his glass was sitting on the table where I left it.

I let my fingers trail up onto the skin of his neck absently in hopes of distracting him from the whiskey again. "I'm very grateful for Vanessa's gift," I said. "My mom was all I had for a long time and then she was gone."

Raleigh's features softened a little before his eyes met mine. "I'm sorry. My mom passed about ten years ago. I-I couldn't be there."

"I'm sorry." I fingered back one of his blonde curls.

"No, it's fine. It was a long time ago."

I nodded. "So, Air Force? How long were you in?"

"Eight years. I'd have been in longer if Sebastian hadn't looked me back up."

"How did you two meet?" I asked.

"In Berlin. We were both stationed there in the 60's."

"Sebastian was in the German Army?"

Raleigh nodded. "Yeah. We met in a bar near the wall. Kinda... just fell in together."

I smiled. "What does that mean?"

"I don't know." He shrugged, looking down. "We... hit it off, I guess. Instant friends." My smile got even bigger. "Yeah?"

"Yeah. We ran the length of Berlin for a couple of years, until I got transferred to Spain."

"And he was still mortal then right?"

"Yeah. He met Tristan in Berlin shortly after he got out of the army."

"And you said he looked you up again?"

He nodded. "After his embrace. Offered to ghoule me." He looked at his glass again and this time he leaned me to one side so that he could grab it.

"When did your... relationship start?" I asked carefully.

He took a long drink from the glass. "We, ah, messed around a bit, when we were in Berlin. 60's, you know. Free love. Everyone was experimentin'."

I watched him talk about Sebastian and I had to ask, "It was just experimenting, was it?"

Raleigh gave me a crooked smile. "It's what men do, darlin', in the armed forces. Especially in the 60's." He drained the rest of his glass.

"And the 70's? 80's?" I asked, reaching out to take the glass from him. I was surprised when he let me pull it from his loose grip.

Raleigh cleared his throat uncomfortably. "Yeah, some time in the 70's, Duncan showed up." He shifted me then from his lap to the cushion next to him and adjusted himself so he was sitting on the edge of the couch. He took the glass from me and poured himself more of the amber liquid.

"That didn't change anything though, did it?" I asked.

He took a long drink then his head dropped to look down at the floor. "Masters changed a lot of things, sweetheart, it just didn't seem like he did at first."

He was in love with Sebastian and wouldn't admit it. Maybe to himself, but not out loud. Not to me. He'd grown up in a time where a man loving another man held a stigma

that was now keeping him from admitting it freely now. And now that I thought about it, he probably felt that every time he got really close to Sebastian someone stepped in and he got pushed aside. First with Duncan. And now with me.

I reached out and put my hand over his that was holding the glass. "I don't want to take him from you Raleigh. You have to believe that. I want you both."

Raleigh looked over at me for a moment, then looked back down into his glass. "It's a nice thought, isn't it? The three of us together."

"I would like it to be more than just a thought," I told him, my voice quiet but heartfelt. "I know that... I know that I'm stepping into your relationship with Sebastian and I don't want to change that."

Damn. Now that the words were out of my mouth I realized that maybe I already was changing their relationship. I thought about the time I'd had alone with Sebastian, like just a little while ago, and realized that wasn't fair to Raleigh. Yes, we'd all agreed that spending time separate with one of the others was fine. But Sebastian and I had been alone many times. I'd only been with Raleigh once and I didn't think that the two men had been alone at all since the three of us got together. We were shutting Raleigh out. How could I have let this happen?

Raleigh was shaking his head then he drained his glass before setting it on the table. "Ariel, you're not... stepping into anything." He put his hand on the side of my face so I had to look at him. "I'm glad you're here, though. I... as much as I hate to say it, I'm glad this hunter issue came up. If it hadn't, I would never have been able to do this." He kissed me.

I kissed him back and Raleigh put an arm around me to pull me closer. His lips burned a trail of kisses across my jaw, but when he reached my neck he pulled back a little and ran his thumb over the spot where Sebastian had left a love bite.

Guiltily I covered his hand with mine and looked into his eyes, gauging his reaction. His blue eyes were sad, lonely, jealous, but I wasn't sure if he was jealous that Sebastian had put a mark on me, or that Sebastian hadn't put a mark on him.

"Please tell me what you're thinking," I pleaded, holding onto him tightly. "We can't... this isn't going to work if one of us doesn't start talking." I realized that I should probably be the one to start it, but I was so scared of being hurt. Raleigh probably felt the same way.

I figured I was right when he closed his eyes. "I can't--I... I don't want to lose you, Ariel," he said in a tightly controlled voice. "But you know that I-I don't have any control here."

"Of course you do," I insisted. "We all do. That's the only way this can work. I know that I've got my own insecurities and I'm trying to get a hold of them, but you can't think that way."

Raleigh shook his head. "I have to think that way. Sebastian, he's... I can't go against him, you know that. I-" He stopped for a moment, screwing his eyes closed again, then without opening them he added, "I love him, but he's the one in control."

I gently took his face in my hands and kissed his closed eyes. "I understand, but I've seen the way he looks at you," I soothed him. "He's admitted he's not good at talking. Looks like all three of us have to change that about ourselves."

Raleigh looked at me. "I don't want to see you get hurt."

I gave him a sad smile. "I hope that I don't get hurt, but that's a chance I'm taking." I kissed him and leaned my forehead against his. "I don't want you hurt anymore. I'm realizing that I've allowed for some hurt by spending time with Sebastian without you. I want you to know that I want you both. Equally." I pulled back so that I could see his reaction to my next words. "Not you as Sebastian's ghoul, but you as a man."

He looked into my eyes while I spoke, as if he were trying to judge the honesty of my words. Then he whispered my name and pulled me close for another deep kiss that reminded me of the way that Sebastian had just made love with me, though with Sebastian

it had felt more about leaving a mark and staking a claim and with Raleigh it was more about showing me how much he cared.

I knew that I had been truthful in what I'd just told him. I returned his kiss, hoping to show him how much I'd come to care about him. One thing led to another and soon we were both naked and baring our feelings with more than just our lips.

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"I let myself get freaked out earlier," I confessed a little while later, when we were both sprawled out on the couch.

He nodded. "Over Barbara," he confirmed softly.

"Yeah," I replied, looking at his chest. "I let her get in my head." I shifted my gaze to look up at him. "There's something there, isn't there? Or there was."

He looked like he really didn't want to talk about it, but was going to if only to explain. "Yeah. They were pretty hot and heavy for a while."

I reached out to touch Raleigh's face. "If you don't want to talk about it we don't have to, but she's going to be here a few days and I'd like to know what to expect besides her being all over him."

"I-I'm not sure. They broke up a year or so before we came here."

She had to be the one that Nathan told me about. I thought about the possessive way Sebastian had made love to me in the shower and I wondered if that was his way of saying he wanted me and not Barbara, but the fact that he was with her and not here left me worried. I glanced at Raleigh and saw the same doubt in his eyes.

"You're worried about her, too, aren't you?" I asked.

He hesitated. "I'm not sure."

I sighed. "What do we do then?"

"Well, I was trying the drinking," he replied dryly.

I gave him a look that told him that wasn't helpful. "That's not going to do any good," I scolded slightly, then I leaned in to brush my lips over his with a sigh. "And hiding here isn't going to do any good either. God, I'm such an idiot."

"No, you're not," he told me. "Barbara just... gets to you, I know."

"We're going to have to not let her get to us," I said, wondering if that were possible.

Raleigh sighed heavily. "Yeah, I know."

"And stake our own claim."

He scoffed. "I'm not sure Barbara would notice."

"I wasn't talking about her."

He didn't answer me, just played with a lock of my hair, thinking.

"What are you thinking?" I asked quietly.

"That... drinking might be easier to accomplish."

I kissed him again, hoping that we could be encouraging for each other. "Maybe, but it's lonely at the end of the night." I tipped his head so that he had to look at me. "I want this. Us. Do you?"

"Yes, of course I do," he said firmly. "I-I want Sebastian too. I want the three of us to be together."

"Then we have to fight for it."

Raleigh studied me for a long moment, considering. Like he knew that a fight was eminent, he just didn't wasn't convinced it would do any good. "Yeah."

I knew that it had to. I also knew that he really needed some time alone with Sebastian. I could feel the disconnect now between them and part of me knew that my being here was part of the problem. Raleigh had spent so many years being cast aside when Duncan had held Sebastian in blood bond. They'd only just gotten each other back a few months ago and then I came along. That left me feeling guilty, but I also knew that we all wanted this. As long as I knew that Sebastian wanted me I could fight for us and encourage Raleigh to do the same.

We lay on the couch for a long time, talking softly about nothing in particular. Then I remembered something that I'd overheard that had troubled me. "Klara... she called... your name isn't Raleigh?"

Raleigh had been softly brushing a finger across the skin of my cheek and he stopped to look at me. "I'm from Raleigh, South Carolina," he said with a smile. "Picked it up as a nickname in the service. No one's called me Morgan in years, except Sebastian when he's pissed of."

"I see. It was a bit of a shock to hear her call you that."

"Klara likes to push buttons too," he said in a warning voice. "But just so you know, it's Morgan Daniels on my driver's license."

"She doesn't like me," I said with a shrug. "I don't know why."

"You're beautiful," he told me simply. "Too much competition for her."

His words made me frown. "What? That's ridiculous. I'm not beautiful."

"Yeah, baby, you are," he said with a smile.

I caressed his face and brush his lips with mine. "You're beautiful."

He started to deepen the kiss, but his stomach started making some pretty disgruntled sounds that caused me to giggle. "Drinking on an empty stomach even?" I asked in exasperation, pulling back. "Bad boy. We better take care of that."

"We had other issues to deal with," he retorted with a grin. "Much more satisfying than food."

That earned him one more kiss before I gently pushed Raleigh off me and stood. I handed him his pants and began to dress myself. To my secret delight, he only donned his jeans, then helped me find my clothes before heading to the kitchen to scrounge up some food.

I followed him, thinking that I'd grab something myself. We talked while he threw together a simple salad. He asked about my childhood in New York and how I got into music. I gladly told him stories about my mom and what it was like growing up in New York.

"When do you think he's going to get back?" I asked after a while.

Raleigh looked at the clock and shrugged casually. "Should be soon."

I nodded slowly. "How much is he going to need to be around Barb while she's here?"

Another shrugged. "Depends on what she's doing here."

"I thought she was here to visit Darcy."

He looked at me. "What gave you that idea?"

"No reason. They just came at the same time. Is there another reason?"

"Mateo called Darcy in. Reggie came down to talk to Tristan about business. I'm not sure why Barb came with her."

"Oh," I said slowly, hoping my tone was conversational. "How long are they staying?"

He shrugged. "Through the weekend, I guess."

"Reggie said something about hunters in Flint. That might be the business."

"Yeah, just not sure why Barbara came along."

I gave him a knowing look. "I'm sure I know why she came. And it wasn't to learn about new hunters."

"Yeah, I'm sure you're right," he answered with a sigh. "Problem is, Sebastian doesn't see her for what she is. He thinks she's just this helpless little... thing."

"But we know she isn't."

Raleigh nodded. "We know. Doesn't mean he'll listen if we try to tell him differently."

"He probably won't," I agreed. "No offense, but you guys just don't get women and how underhanded they can be sometimes. I don't even get it half the time. Seems like wasted energy to me."

"Me too," he agreed.

"It's getting late," I commented, glancing at the clock for find that it was quarter to five already. Part of me wanted to call Sebastian and ask when he was getting home, but I didn't want to come off clingy.

"It is," he agreed, looking toward the clock as well. "I'm gonna call him, make sure everything's okay."

I nodded. "Good idea."

Raleigh went to find his phone to make the call and by the time he returned to the kitchen he was already talking with Sebastian. I heard him mention that it was getting late and from Raleigh's end of the conversation I figured that Sebastian was planning on leaving Tristan's directly. Raleigh told him to be careful, then hung up, looking troubled.

"Everything alright?" I asked.

"Yeah," he said, sitting down to finally eat. "He's just cutting it close, is all."

"Maybe... well, maybe he got caught up in talking about hunters with Reggie," I offered.

"Yeah," he replied slowly, picking up his fork. "Maybe."

"He wouldn't do anything with Barb with us waiting here for him, Raleigh. I have to believe that." I heard the tremble in my voice regardless of the fact that I wanted to believe Sebastian wouldn't betray us.

"Yeah, you're right," he said, bit more firmly this time. "There's a lot going on, with Tristan and Darcy and Reggie, too. We're stupid to worry about it."

"But he's coming home?" I asked, needing to hear that he was.

"He said he was."

"So, do you have anything you need to get up for during the day?" I asked, trying to change the conversation to something else.

"I should check in at The Iron. Need to get some laundry done, too."

"I've been trying to keep up on that. Why don't I go grab a load and get it started?"

"Yeah, if you want," he said. "But I can get it when I'm done here."

I went over and kissed his cheek. "It's fine. I don't mind. Do you have a hamper somewhere?"

I distracted myself with domestic chores and Raleigh joined me once he was done eating. I tried to not look at the clock, but I couldn't help but be aware that dawn was fast approaching and Sebastian wasn't back yet. About twenty minutes before six Raleigh's phone rang.

"It's 'Bastian," he said after glancing at the display. He answered and as the quick conversation played out I eagerly watch him. He was trying to hide his emotions, but I could tell that he was angry and hurt while talking to Sebastian. Raleigh didn't say much, but I quickly got the gist that Sebastian wasn't coming home. When he hung up, Raleigh said in a carefully controlled voice, "He says he got delayed. He's staying the day at Tristan's."

I looked at him in disbelief, knowing that hurt was probably showing in my eyes. "What did he say?" I asked in a rough, low tone. "That's it? He got delayed?"

Hurt blazed in Raleigh's features, too. "Yeah. He sounded mad about it, but it's too late for him to get back here before the sun comes up."

I wasn't sure what to say so I just went over to him and put my arms around his waist, my face against his chest. "There must be a good reason," I said, more for my own benefit than his.

Raleigh wrapped his arms around me and rested his head against my hair. "Yeah, there must be."

I held onto him for a bit, enjoying being so close to him. I pulled back to look up at him. "I need to get downstairs," I said. It was the last thing I wanted to do.

"Yeah," he said, smoothing my hair. "I could use some sleep myself."

We headed downstairs to the bedroom and both of us climbed into bed, Sebastian's absence very apparent.

I cuddled into Raleigh. "I don't want to sleep," I whispered to him in the dark. "Shh," he said softly. "I'll be here when you wake up." I kissed his chest and closed my eyes.





## Chapter 43 – Shopping

"The only approval that I need is mine"  
Christina Aguilera  
"Empty Words"

Raleigh was warm next to me as I woke, my fingers loosely held in his. I turned my head toward him as my eyes slowly opened and the first thing I saw was the heat in his gaze. "Good morning," he purred.

I smiled at him and moved closer for his kiss. "Good morning."

"Feeling okay?"

I remembered my heartache from the night before. Of Sebastian not coming home and I nodded. "Yeah. You?"

"Yeah."

"Did you go to The Iron today?" I asked, reaching up to touch his face. "Everything alright?"

Raleigh smiled and pulled me close to him. "Yeah, spent a couple of hours there. Finished laundry, too."

"Thanks," I said, moving my face into his neck to smell him. "Anything interesting happen?"

He hesitated for a moment, then said, "Klara stopped by earlier. She wants to go shopping with you tonight."

I stiffened in his arms. "Damn. I had to offer, didn't I?"

The last thing I wanted was to go shopping. I had this need to see Sebastian that I could barely contain and I was thankful that Raleigh had kept his promise to be here when I woke. I knew how important it was that I at least got along with Klara and Darcy, so there was no way I could get out of the outing. It should be interesting though.

"Did she mention Darcy as well?" I asked.

"Yeah. Darcy wants to check out the shopping opportunities. I hate to say it, but I think you should go. I know the Prince would really like Darcy to stay."

"And in order to make the stores we're going to have to go soon," I said, starting to sit up. I had a few contacts at the nicer stores that I could call to keep them open later if we needed, but we still had a few hours yet.

Raleigh sat up, too. "I can go with you, keep an eye on things."

I smiled at him. "Probably a good idea, but... what if Sebastian needs you?"

He shrugged. "He'd want to make Darcy happy."

"Okay, I'll go grab a shower and then we can make arrangements. Would you do me a favor and see if you can call some of the best stores to see if they will stay open later? Tell them we have a VIP who is coming into town late and doesn't like crowds?"

He smiled. "Yeah, absolutely."

He named off three of the better stores in town and I nodded. "Perfect," I said, getting out of the bed and heading for the bathroom. "Thank you. I have no idea what to wear."

I took a lightning fast shower, then got my hair and makeup done. Next I looked at clothing options. I wanted something that was feminine, but serviceable in case we ran into trouble. Raleigh came in the closet while I was contemplating and gave a couple of suggestions that were pretty good. I thanked him with a kiss. "You're the best."

"Klara wants us to pick them up at seven," he told me.

"Any word from Sebastian?" I asked quietly, practically dreading the answer.

"Yeah." I could tell he didn't want to talk to me about it, but he said, "He and Reggie are gonna go talk to Nemet. He said to have fun shopping."

The news didn't sit well and I made no attempt to hide it. Sebastian had stayed the day in the same house as Barbara and now he was taking Reggie to see Nemet. Raleigh didn't like it either, but what could either of us do? He hadn't mentioned Barbara, but I was sure that she'd plaster herself to Sebastian's side as soon as she could.

"We should go," I said quietly.

We took Raleigh's car since it was bigger than mine. Luckily the two women were ready to go when we got to Darcy's and the brunette greeted me, not quite warmly, but polite enough. "It's good to see you again, Ariel," she said when she opened the door.

"How are you settling in?" I asked, looking past her and seeing Klara entering the foyer, slipping a jacket onto her slim shoulders.

"The house is wonderful. Serena has excellent taste." Darcy gave me a thoughtful look. "And apparently, so do you. I want to thank you for the help you gave her, putting things together so quickly."

"It was mostly Serena," I said. "I was glad to help. Shall we go? Raleigh has made arrangements for some of the nicer stores to stay open later for us."

"How wonderful," Darcy replied with a smile. "It's good to know who has contacts in the city."

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The women seemed to be enjoying themselves at our first stop. I'd been meaning to do some clothes shopping myself, both to replace the things that had been destroyed while fighting the hunters and to acquire suitable workout clothes. Darcy expressed an interest as to why I needed workout clothing.

"Sebastian and Raleigh are teaching me to fight," I told her. "I don't have much suitable for sparring in."

Darcy eyed me consideringly. "How intriguing," she said slowly. "You don't have much experience in that, then?"

"I can do alright in a gunfight, but I'd never had to worry about hand to hand." I shrugged slightly. "They say I'm doing okay, but it's only been a week."

"Well, it's good that you recognize a shortcoming and are taking steps to correct it," Darcy observed.

I nodded, not sure how sincere she was. "I'm just glad that they have the patience to deal with a newbie."

Darcy asked what I did for fun and I told her that I wrote music. "I'm very excited to have music in common with Sebastian and Raleigh. Have you heard them sing?"

"I have," she said with a smile. "They played for the Prince of London once. He enjoyed it very much."

"I love listening to them." My eyes swept the store for Raleigh and I saw him not far away, looking at pants with Klara.

"And you write music," Darcy mused. "Of course you sing."

I nodded. "But I spend most of my time writing. Serena mentioned you were an actress? I would very much like to see you perform sometime."

Darcy's lips curved slightly. "I'm not sure what opportunities there are for actresses in Nashville. Do you have any recommendations?"

"Well, it's certainly not New York," I confessed honestly, "but there are a few opportunities. And if nothing suits you, you can always start your own group. I bet there are many of our kind who would invest."

"That is an intriguing idea," she said thoughtfully. "What do you think of this one?" she asked, holding up two hangers.

I studied the slate blue and gray skirt and matching jacket that had been paired with a light gray blouse. It was pretty and feminine, but dull. I suggested it would be better with a brighter colored blouse and waited to see if she agreed.

Darcy thought a moment, then she nodded in approval and I got the feeling I'd just passed some kind of test. I quickly changed the subject, asking her about London since I'd never been there. She regaled me with some stories and asked me more about Nashville as we moved on to another store.

I was hoping to find some jeans there that I could wear while out patrolling. I also wanted a sturdy pair of leather boots. Raleigh stayed with me as we looked for what I wanted and at some point I realized that we were holding hands. Of course, about the time I noticed, so did Klara and I watched as she not so discreetly brought it to Darcy's attention.

Not long after that, Darcy asked how long I'd known Sebastian.

"Since he came to Nashville. Before Tristan arrived," I replied, mindful that I had to be careful of my choice of words in the store. "I worked with Sebastian and a group of our kind to... prepare for Tristan's coming."

"Oh," she said, as if my response answered a question she hadn't asked. "Then you knew Duncan."

My gaze hardened, wondering how well Darcy had known the man. "I did. Its unfortunate he proved to be less than trustworthy. I wasn't sad to see him go."

"I think most people would agree with you," she replied with a smile, "however, there are some who would miss him."

"I'm sure there might be, but the matter was dealt with properly. I'm certain that no one would find fault with my actions, nor anyone else's who were involved."

Darcy fingered the collar of a shirt for a moment before she spoke. "Duncan spent quite a bit of time with Barbara and Sebastian in Flint, from what I understand."

"Oh?" I said, trying to keep my tone even as I picked up a vest to examine it's stitching. "I'm afraid I don't know Barbara or anyone else from Flint. Sebastian speaks highly of Stuart, so I hope to meet him one day, however."

"Stuart is delightful," Darcy agreed. "There was some speculation that the three of them were involved. Duncan, Sebastian and Barbara."

I deliberately lowered my head so that my hair hid the hurt I was sure shown in my eyes. "I wouldn't know about that," I replied quietly, after a moment as I put the vest back on the rack. "I think there are some pretty dresses over there that might look fantastic on Klara."

To my relief Darcy followed the topic change, but I saw Raleigh's expression and knew that he'd heard what the other woman had said, even if they couldn't tell. There was something in his blue depths that spoke of sadness and bad memories. I think I understood how he felt all too well.

Thankfully Klara liked some of my suggestions, even though she clearly didn't want to. She actually bought one of them. Duncan wasn't mentioned again, but Darcy did ask how well I knew Sebastian's child.

"I like Joan very much," I told her with a guarded smile. "We've been spending more time together lately, dealing with the hunter situation. She's a special girl."

Klara looked up from a rack of sweaters. "I understand she fights very well."

I smiled at the other woman warmly. "Yes, she really does."

"And the two of you get on well?" Darcy asked.

"So far," I said. "Joan has been very helpful."

I knew that I was supposed to be 'selling' Nashville to Darcy so I was glad when she showed an interest in visiting both The Masquerade and Alexander's. I just hoped that she didn't want to go to either tonight. As we talked I noticed that Klara had moved in closer to Raleigh and was openly flirting with him.

Thankfully he wasn't flirting back.

I kept an eye on them as I blindly looked through a rack of skirts. As long as Klara kept things to merely flirting I wouldn't do anything. Raleigh was a big boy and he could handle her advances. It wasn't until she pushed a little too far and he looked uncomfortable that I decided to intervene.

I grabbed a few more hangers to add to what was already in my hands to try on. "Raleigh?" I called out. "Could you come help me with these?"

He excused himself from Klara and came over, a grateful look in his eyes. "Of course."

I handed him the hangers. "Thank you," I told him in a low voice and reached up to touch his cheek.

Raleigh smiled down at me. "Any time."

I turned to smile at Darcy, resting my hand on Raleigh's upper arm. "I think I'm going to go try a few of these on. Are you ready as well?"

"In a moment," she said with a tight smile.

I gestured for Raleigh to go ahead toward the dressing rooms and followed behind him. Again I found myself wishing we were anywhere but here right now. I was preoccupied with Sebastian and I was finding it more and more difficult keeping up appearances.

Raleigh put the clothes I'd selected into one of the changing rooms then stepped back so I could enter. Not caring if Darcy saw us or not, I stepped into the little room and pulled him in with me, then closed the door behind us.

Raleigh laughed softly and kissed me. "Thanks for the rescue."

"Anytime," I replied, returning his kiss. "Although I'm not sure Darcy approves."

He shrugged. "She's not my Domitor."

I reached up to brush his hair back from his face. "Unfortunately neither am I. If I were..." My eyes dropped to his neck and I remembered how much I wanted to feed from him the night before.

I felt him pull back just a little, almost imperceptibly, but it still hurt. "Let's get these tried on, okay?" he says, reaching for the first dress.

"Wait," I said, putting a hand on his arm to stop him. "I've... never had a ghou." I made sure he was looking at me. "What if... what if I wanted to... you know... would Sebastian have to okay it?"

"I-I'm not sure. If..." he hesitated, then shook his head regretfully. "You should probably ask Sebastian."

I knew that before all this doubt started to take root in both of us he would have said that I didn't need to ask. I nodded in understanding, reaching to touch his face again. "Okay. I want to know... very much..."

Raleigh pulled me against him. "Me too."

I kissed him briefly. There was no use lingering on things we couldn't do anything about now. "Which one should I try first then?" I asked, trying to smile, but my lips quavered.

He picked a hanger blindly and I put the dress on. We came out of the dressing room so I could check out the fit and found Darcy and Klara nearby, talking softly. They turned to look at me and Darcy smiled politely, saying that she thought the dress was pretty.

I thanked her as I watched her gaze move from me to Raleigh, who was standing in the doorway of the dressing room. She seemed confused by my treatment of Raleigh. Not disapproving, but it was clear that she didn't understand my interest in him.

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We ended up visiting two more stores after that. I kept Raleigh close by and we were both relieved that Klara was keeping her distance from him.

Darcy continued to ask about the city, she even asked about my clan and the other Daughters who lived here. The trunk of Raleigh's car quickly filled with all the purchases we made and I was happy to finally have some proper things to wear out with Sebastian and Raleigh when they patrolled.

I noticed that Raleigh dealt with payment at each store, which basically meant that Sebastian bought everything for me. I wasn't sure how I felt about that right now and decided to not say anything.

Around one Darcy requested to be taken back to Tristan's. She wanted to talk to Mateo.

"Of course. We'd be happy to drop you there. Would you like us to drop off your purchases at your house?" I asked, trying to keep my relief that the outing was almost over.

"Yes, let's do that first," she suggested.

"Of course," I told her, forcing a smile on my face.

Raleigh and Klara took all their packages inside while Darcy and I waited in the car. It didn't take the two ghouls long, but Raleigh looked irritated when he came out. He didn't voice anything, but drove silently toward Tristan's. I was certain something had happened with Klara and I knew I would have to ask him about it later.

Sebastian's car wasn't in the drive when we arrived at Tristan's so I decided I wouldn't be going in with the other woman. "It was fun shopping," I told Darcy at the bottom of the stairs leading to the front door. "I hope you weren't too disappointed in what we have to offer."

"Nashville has... promise," she said with a smile. "You've made a good companion this evening, Ariel. Thank you."

"I'm happy to. I hope that you do look into a theater here because I would like to see you perform." I cleared my throat and added. "Tristan would like you to stay here, I think, and I believe you would be an asset."

Darcy's eyes were thoughtful as she regarded me a moment. "Well, I will certainly think on it." We exchanged goodbyes, then she and Klara went inside.



## Chapter 44 – Betrayal

"I am done, smoking gun  
We've lost it all, the love is gone  
She has won, now it's no fun  
We've lost it all, the love is gone"  
Christina Aguilera  
"You Lost Me"

I slipped into the front seat with Raleigh. "Any word from Sebastian?" I asked. He shook his head. "No. I thought he'd be here, actually."

I looked out at Tristan's house, wondering where Sebastian was. "Should we call?" I asked, not looking at Raleigh, scared of the emotions I might find there.

"Yeah," he voice was scratchy as he pulled out his phone and I reached over to put my hand on his.

"Do you want me to call?"

He thought about it. "No, I should."

I nodded and removed my hand. He dialed the phone.

"Hey... Yeah, we just dropped her off.... Pretty good, I think... yeah, for the most part... Oh?" he asked, surprised. "With--... Yeah, all right.... Half hour.... okay." Raleigh hung up the phone and looked down at it. "He wants us to meet him at Alexander's."

"Who is he with?" I asked.

"Reggie," he said, "and Barbara."

I really didn't want to see Barbara. Really.

"Did he say what they were doing there?"

Alexander's was known by our kind for it's backroom, and what happened back there. I'd been in the room only twice, when I met Raleigh for the first time and the other night when Joan and I used it to call Sebastian. Neither times had anything to do with sex but I couldn't get the picture of the huge bed that stood in the middle of the room out of my head.

"Nemet's there, too," Raleigh added. "He didn't say what they were doing."

"I don't know what to say to him," I confessed to Raleigh, still hurt that he hadn't come home the night before. "I mean, he... I don't know that anything happened but... I'd like to think we're building something exclusive here. I've been cheated on before and I can't... I won't go through that again."

"We don't know that anything like that happened, Ariel," Raleigh said. "We need to talk to him."

I looked over at Raleigh, silently praying nothing happened, as I reached for his hand. "We should go." I had a really bad feeling about this.

He took my hand and kissed it, then he started the car and headed for Alexander's.

\* ~ \* ~ \*

My eyes found Reggie and Nemet sitting near the back of the club, talking intently. I didn't see anyone else I knew in the packed crowd.

"I don't see him," I said to Raleigh. "Do you?"

"No," he answered, his eyes scanning the crowd as well. "We should go ask Reggie."

I nodded and led the way toward their table. They didn't notice Raleigh and I right away and I had to clear my throat to get their attention.

"Oh, Ariel," Reggie said, surprised as she looked up and noticed us. "Raleigh."

I gave her a small smile in return. "Hello Reggie. Nemet."

Reggie looked around. "Sebastian was just here."

"He went into the back," Nemet added, pointing to the only door in the place I didn't want him to. The backroom door.

My gaze went to Raleigh questioningly and I saw that his features were hard. "Wait here," he said in a low voice, then moved toward the door.

There was no way I wasn't going with him. I followed Raleigh, his back rigid as he moved through the crowd. When he reached the door he opened it and stood in the doorway. I moved to peer around his shoulder and my stomach dropped when I saw the amount of naked flesh in the room. Time seemed to stop and everything started to move in slow motion.

I reached out to grab a hold of Raleigh's coat tightly. I looked for Sebastian, dread filling my entire being. I was only vaguely aware when Raleigh turned and grabbed me, pushing me out of the room. When he did so, I finally caught sight of Sebastian, his hands on the upper arms of a woman who was kissing him passionately. Somehow I knew it was Barbara and she was naked, save for a scrap of lace and silk panties.

Hurt and shock stabbed through me as I choked out a sob and started to double over in pain, stopped only by Raleigh's hold on my body. Then all I wanted to do was to rip the bitch to shreds.

Raleigh continued to support me as he began to lead me across the floor. "Just hold on till we get out of here, all right?" he said into my ear and I could hear the hurt in his voice, too.

I didn't know how I did it, but I held the tears at bay until we were outside, then everything was a blur. I was only aware of the sobs that escaped the back of my throat. "H-how... h-how could he..."

\* ~ \* ~ \*

*How could I have been so stupid?*

I was numb. My mind was in a complete fog, but one thing was clear. There was no way I could stay at Sebastian's anymore. I would go back long enough to get some clothes then I'd have to find someplace to stay until I could figure out what my next move would be.

I glanced to Raleigh and I saw that I wasn't the only one hurting. Raleigh was very upset as well, his face tight as he supported me on our way to the car. Like me, he'd invested a lot of his feelings in this relationship and now we were both on the losing end.

The worst of it was that I knew I couldn't have Raleigh, not without Sebastian. It was obvious that Sebastian didn't want me anymore, not if he was getting back with Barbara.

I turned to Raleigh, aware that I had blood tears running down my face. "I'm so sorry," I said, burying my face into his chest and holding him close.

I felt his arms enfold me as he buried his face in my hair. "Me, too," he whispered.

I let him hold me for a little while in the parking lot, but then I needed to do something before I went back inside to deal with Barbara. I was falling apart. "I-I can't stay there anymore," I choked out, still hiccuping. "I've been here before and I-I can't do this again. I-"

Raleigh smoothed the hair back from my face and nodded. It hurt me even more to see the sadness in his blue eyes and know that I was adding to it. Thankfully understanding was there as well. "Come on, I'll take you back to the house so you can get a few things."

I nodded mutely and got into the car. I looked in the glove box for anything that I could clean my face with and found napkins and a package of baby wipes. I did what I could on the way back to Sebastian's house, my mind racing as I wondered who I could turn to. I didn't want to go to Vanessa or any of my clan sisters. I knew I would look like a fool in their eyes for moving so quickly with a man I barely knew.

Maybe Nathan...

"I'm really sorry," I heard Raleigh say, his voice low and rough. "I'd hoped we could..."

I looked over to him and reached for his hand. "I'm sorry. I probably sound like a complete coward, but I just... I can't do this again." I looked down, my heart heavy in my chest. "I wish... I wish that I could have you come with me."

His other hand tightened on the wheel. "Me too."

"I... I don't want to lose you," I whispered, tears clouding my vision.

"You haven't lost me, Ariel," he insisted softly.

I sniffled and nodded silently. In my heart I knew that if Sebastian forbade him from seeing me he'd have to. There was nothing that either of us could do to stop that. My senses were dead right now. I couldn't formulate anything past finding somewhere to go. I couldn't see Sebastian. Not until I had my head on straight again.

\* ~ \* ~ \*

Back at Sebastian's I grabbed the first decent sized suitcase I came across and blindly started throwing clothes into it. I tried not to think about doing the same thing about a week ago, when this all started. Raleigh's phone rang and he looked at the display briefly, then silenced it without answering.

Sebastian. I was sure that's who'd called.

"I will gather the rest for you later," he told me as my phone started to ring and we both froze.

I fished the device from my pocket and looked, but I didn't really need to. Sebastian's name flashed almost insistently. I looked at Raleigh gravely, then silenced the call. "He's going to worry," I said numbly, mad at myself that I still cared.

"Then he worries." Raleigh shrugged. "I'll deal with it later."

I watched him silently for a long moment, pain once again filling me and making me numb. How did I get here? I put the phone back in my pocket and fought to not pull it out again when it chirped to alert me to a new voice mail message.

Raleigh helped me gather pretty much the same things I'd first brought to Sebastian's, including my laptop and guitar. We got it all out to my car then stood facing each other next to my driver side door.

"I... I can't. I don't want to leave you," I told him brokenly, tears forming again.

He pulled me into his arms. "I'm going too," he told me and I could hear tears in his voice. "I still have my apartment."

I put my arms around him. "Okay," I said, looking up at him. "I can't go to Vanessa's. Not now. I can't talk about this. I'm going to call Nathan. He said when all this started with the hunters that I could stay with him. Then I can get my bearings."

Raleigh's eyes were filled with the same sadness that was threatening to pull me under. "Just be careful, okay?" he pleaded. "Don't go anywhere alone until we get this situation under control." His phone started to ring again and he ignored it as I shook my head.

"I won't. You neither. I will figure out what my next move is and then I'll get the rest of my stuff." I reached up to touch his lips. "I... I'll call you."



"All right. Call Nathan, and I'll follow you to his place to make sure you get there all right."

I nodded. "And then you're going right to your place, right?" I asked, pulling out my phone and dialing Nathan's number.

"Yes."

Nathan answered on the third ring.

"Nathan? It's Ariel. Are you busy?" I asked, closing my eyes and hoping I made it through the conversation without having a complete breakdown.

"Not really," he replied slowly. "What's up?"

I took a deep breath. "I... I wanted to know if your invitation was still open to stay with you."

"O-of course it is," he stammered. "Has something happened? Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," I answered him quietly. "Are you home? Can I come now?" I knew I was going to have to explain everything to him. I just hoped he wouldn't make me do it on the phone.

"Yes, absolutely. Do you need me to come get you?"

"No. I'm on my way. See you soon."

He hesitated, then said, "I'll be waiting."

I put my phone away and look up to find Raleigh watching me closely. "He said to come over," I told him. "You don't have to follow me if you don't want."

"I'll see you safely there," he said firmly.

I nodded, looking up at him. I wanted so badly to kiss him, but I wasn't sure if I should. Raleigh saved me from making a decision by pulling me to him and kissing me softly before he turned and headed for his car.

Mechanically I moved to get into mine as well and started toward Nathan's house. I tried to be strong. I really did, but I couldn't help myself. I wasn't even a full block away before I had the phone to my ear to listen to Sebastian's message.

"Ariel, it's Sebastian," I heard him say, worriedly. "I've been trying to get a hold of Raleigh. I thought..." Then I heard another voice. "Come back inside, 'Bastian." Barbara. She kept talking, but Sebastian talked over her. "Call me." Then he hung up.

The sound of the other woman's voice stabbed through my heart. Somehow I kept the car on the road as I hung up without deleting the message. I don't know how I did it, but I made it to Nathan's. He was waiting for me on his front porch and he started down the steps as I brought my car to a stop.

Raleigh stopped at the end of the drive long enough to make sure I was safe, then he waved and pulled away. I waved back and watched him drive away before I moved to the trunk to retrieve my bag and laptop case.

Nathan met me and took my bag. "What happened?"

I shook my head mutely, tears already coming again. "I can't, Nathan. Please, I can't talk right now."

He put his arm around me and led me to the front door. "Come on, let's get you inside."

I let him lead me, my head filled with questions like what was I supposed to do now? Where should I go? My chest ached with loss and I wanted to hurt something until it felt as awful as I did.

Nathan ushered me into the living room where he sat me down on the couch. He dropped down beside me and held my hand. "What can I do for you, Ariel?"

I blinked myself back to the moment and looked over at him. "I... I just need a place to stay," I told him weakly. "Until I can figure out my next move." I looked down, wondering how on earth I was supposed to stay in Nashville and run the risk of running into Sebastian every night.

"You're welcome to stay here for as long as you need to," he assured me.

"Thank you," I whispered, the numbness getting worse. "I... I just want to lay down for a while."

Nathan stood and pulled me up with him. "All right. I've got a room ready for you."

He took me into a spare room and made sure I was settled on the bed, he even switched on the bedside light for me. "Call me if you need anything," he said, then he left the room.

I pulled out my phone and called Raleigh. It rang a few times before he answered. "Ariel, everything okay?" he asked in a low, rough voice.

"Yeah," I replied, my voice full of emotion. "I had to know you made it to your apartment alright."

"I'm fine," he said, sounding anything but fine. "Got some TV dinners in the fridge and plenty of clothes. I'm just worried about you."

"It's like I can't take it all in," I confessed. "It's like I'm seventeen all over again and walking in to find Jack with my best friend." I couldn't hold back the sob that escaped. "I can't do this, Raleigh. I don't know how to do this."

"Shhh, honey, don't cry." His voice was thick, like my crying was making him want to cry, too.

"I'm sorry. I know this hurts you, too. I'm a coward to run, but I can't face him. Not now. Not like this."

"You shouldn't have to. I'll talk to him. You know, maybe... maybe we're just blowing things out of proportion." He sounded like he was trying to convince himself of the fact. I couldn't see things the same way.

"I don't know," I answered, sounding tired. "Raleigh, that didn't look like we're blowing anything out of proportion. She was practically naked!"

"Yeah," he said, his voice full of pain and regret. "She was."

"Did you listen to his messages?" I asked, hating myself for wanting to know what he said.

"No," he replied in a low voice. "Can't--" he broke off, then said quickly. "I gotta go. I'll call you later."

"What is it?" I asked, scared. What if hunter had followed him? He was alone.

"Sebastian," he said in that low rough voice. "I gotta go."

He hung up without saying anything more and my stomach dropped. A huge part of me still wanted Sebastian. Wanted what the three of us had been starting to build together. I held the phone tight to my chest and curled up in a ball on the bed.



## Chapter 45 – Emptiness

"I've been standing where you left me  
Praying that you'd come and get me"  
Christina Aguilera  
"Army of Me"

Nathan checked on me a couple of times, asking if I needed anything and offering to call Vanessa if I wanted him to.

"No, thank you, Nathan," I said from where I still lay on the bed. My chest ached so bad it hurt to move. "I'm okay. I will call Vanessa later."

He didn't press me and I didn't call her. I lay on the bed, unmoving, images of Sebastian and Barbara kissing played over and over again in my head. Sometimes Sebastian morphed into Jack, then back to Sebastian and all the feelings of hurt and emptiness I'd felt all those years ago came rushing back, only ten times harder. I'd taken a chance again on love and now I was paying the price of betrayal all over again.

Finally I felt the sun edging ever closer to the horizon and I fell asleep... alone for the first time in a week. How is it that the thought was so foreign to me all of a sudden? I wanted Sebastian's arms around me and I wanted to snuggle into Raleigh's warm body as I drifted off to sleep.

Nathan checked on me again as soon as he woke the next evening. Concern was plain on his face when he stepped into the room and I knew I looked a mess. My face was probably streaked red from dried blood tears and while I tried to push my hands through my hair I found it tangled and matted. Hell, I was still wearing the same clothes I'd shown up in. I couldn't make myself care.

I again reassured my friend that I was okay and that I planned to talk to Vanessa as soon as possible. I asked if he minded if I asked her to come over here and he quickly agreed. I also needed to call Raleigh, but I didn't tell Nathan that.

I nearly lost it all over again when Nathan pressed a key to the house in the palm of my hand, in case I wanted to go somewhere and he wasn't there when I got back. I had supposedly been living with Sebastian at his house and he had never even mentioned giving me a key.

Somehow I kept myself together and Nathan finally left the room. I immediately picked up my phone and called Raleigh, but all I got was his voice mail. "Hi, I-it's me," I said hesitantly. "Just wanted to make sure you're all right. Call me what you can. Bye."

Next I called Vanessa

"Ariel," Vanessa said when she answered the phone. "Are you feeling a bit better this evening?"

"W-what are you talking about?" I asked, surprised. How much did she know?

"I spoke with Nathan last night," she explained. "He's very worried about you, my dear."

"I'm fine," I told her, sounding like a broken record after saying it so many times. "I hate to bother you, but I really need to talk to you. Can you come to Nathan's?"

"Of course I can. When do you want me to come?"

"I only need a half an hour to clean up. Is that too soon?"

"No, dear, that's fine. I will see you then."

I took my phone to the bathroom while I took a quick shower, but Raleigh didn't call back. I had no intentions of going anywhere so I threw on the first pair of jeans and shirt that looked like it went together, not bothering with my hair or makeup. When all that was done and Raleigh still hadn't called I tried his number again.

It rang for a long time and just when I thought he wasn't going to answer, he did, speaking in a really low voice. "I really can't talk right now."

"Oh, okay," I said, trying not to feel further rejected. "Sorry to bother you."

"No, no, it's not-- Ariel, I want to talk to you," he said, still keeping his voice low. "Sebastian is here."

A lump formed in my throat. There were so many questions I wanted to ask him but remembering that reinforced the fact that we couldn't talk. "Okay, sure," I told him quickly, praying I didn't sound like a complete idiot. "Just call when you can. I just wanted to make sure you're alright," I said in a rush. "Bye." I hung up, praying that me calling didn't get him into trouble with Sebastian.

I started to think what it would be like if I ever saw Sebastian again. It had to happen, I wasn't going to dilute myself into thinking it wouldn't. I just knew that there was no way I could see him right now, if ever. The only way I wouldn't have to see him was if I weren't here.

An idea started to take root in my head. I could leave Nashville. I didn't want to, of course, but it seemed like the easiest solution. Sebastian had a job here, there was no way he would leave the city. Tristan needed him. But I could go. Maybe I needed to go. That was the only way I wouldn't go crazy, worrying when I'd run into him or Raleigh again. It would be too much.

And what if Barbara remained here? There was no way that I could take seeing them together. I was dying inside just thinking about it.

But I couldn't just move to another city. I had to get permission even to visit somewhere else, much less move. Maybe I could ask Vanessa to talk to Tristan for me. I couldn't go to him myself. What would I say? *'You're childe cheated on me and now I can't live here anymore.'* No, the embarrassment would be too much.

Then there was Raleigh. It would be too hard to be in the same city as him and not be able to talk to him. Not be able to touch him...

A knock on the bedroom door brought me out of my thoughts.

I answered the door and was surprised to find my sire waiting. She took one look at me and shook her head. "Oh, honey, what happened?"

I felt my face as it crumbled and I stepped close to her, grateful when her arms went around me. "I'm such a fool," I cried into her neck.

She held me for a long moment, then led me over to the bed. "Tell me what happened, childe."

"A-a woman... from Flint came to town a couple of nights ago. H-he was involved with her when he was there." The tears came again and I made no attempt to stop them. "T-then he didn't come home. Stayed at Tristan's," I sobbed. "Maybe with her, I don't know."

I wiped at my face. "Then... last night Raleigh and I went to Alexander's to meet him. T-there's a backroom and we... he was kissing her... and she was practically naked. Oh, Vanessa." I buried my face in my hands.

"Oh, honey," she soothed, pulling me back into her arms. "I'm so sorry. I'd hoped that the two of you... three of you, would be able to make a go of it. You've been so lonely."

"I was trying, but I can't live through that again. It almost killed me before." I pulled back. "I need you to do something for me."

"Whatever you need, honey," she assured me, patting my hand.

"I need you to talk to the Prince," I told her. "I can't stay here. I could run into him anywhere. He's the Sheriff. I need to leave Nashville."

Vanessa's brow furrowed with concern. "Oh, honey, don't you think that's a bit... sudden? Give yourself a bit of time, you never know, things could work out."

I shook my head. I knew that she wouldn't approve of my request, but I knew that I would not be able to survive seeing Sebastian with that woman. I would do something that would call for my death. "Why would he want me when she's here?" I choked out. I stood and started pacing. "It's killing me to think about him. I can't stay here. Please Vanessa."

"Oh, Ariel," she said sadly. "If you truly want me to talk to Tristan, I will, but I ask you to wait a few days. You might feel differently with a bit of distance from the situation."

"I don't want to leave you," I told her. "I'll do whatever you think is best, but I... I can't see him." More tears coursed down my cheeks.

"All right," she soothed, her tone low and caring. "If you still want me to talk to him I will, on Monday night, okay? That will give you a few days to calm down."

I nodded. "Thank you. I'm sorry to do this to you. I don't want to bring you trouble."

"It's my job to take care of you, remember?" she retorted with a wide smile. "This is no trouble."

"Do you need to get back to the club?" I asked, wiping at my face.

"Not right away."

Vanessa ended up staying for about an hour or so. Like any supportive mother would, she held my hand as I stared at nothing. I wasn't the mood to talk, but it was a comfort just to have her there. When she left she reminded me to not go anywhere alone and to call if I needed her.

She also asked if I wanted to stay with her until I decided what I wanted to do, but I told her no. Not that I thought it would happen, but if Sebastian did come looking for me, Vanessa's would be the first place he would go.

After she left Nathan poked his head in to see if I needed anything. It was just after nine and when I asked why he wasn't at work he said he would call in if I needed him to stay home.

"I don't want you to neglect your responsibilities for me, Nathan," I told him, grateful that he cared enough to stay if I wanted. "Do what you need to. I'm just going to stay here."

Nathan left a little while later and I took my guitar to the bed, hoping that music would distract me. It didn't and I spent the next few hours plucking the strings mindlessly until my cell phone rang.

A glance at the display told me it was Raleigh.

"Hello," I said tentatively once the phone was at my ear.

"Hey," he said softly, though I could still hear some tension in his voice. "Sorry about earlier. I really couldn't talk."

"No, I get it," I assured him as I moved to sit in the bed again, pulling the covers over my lap. "Are... are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine," he told me a bit hesitantly. "How are you doing?"

I couldn't sugarcoat this, not with him. "I feel like there's this weight on my chest," I confessed. "It's a good thing I don't have to breathe."

He made a sound that might have been a laugh in happier times. "I know. I feel the same way."

I took a steadying breath and asked, "Have you talked to him?"

"Yeah." I didn't know how one word could hold so much regret, but it did.

I swallowed, knowing I shouldn't ask him, shouldn't put him in the middle. "What... what happened?"

Raleigh hesitated. "He's... a bit pissed off right now."

"He's mad?" I asked, a little outraged. "What does he have to be mad about?"

He hesitated again. "I-I can't say."

Those three words took all the fight out of me. "He... he's forbidden you to talk to me about it," I said sadly. That was it. I'd lost them both.

"Got it in one," he replied in a low, rough voice. "I'm sorry, Ariel. I wish I could tell you."

I swallowed back another sob. "It's okay," I whispered, trying to hold the tears back. The last thing I wanted was to get him in trouble so I didn't push. "I... I shouldn't keep you, but you should know that I've talked to Vanessa about..." I took a deep breath. "I've asked her to go to the Prince about finding another place for me to go."

"Why would you need the Prince to help you find another place to stay?" he asked, confused. "I'm sure there are plenty of places in town that you could rent, or buy."

"I... I can't stay in Nashville, Raleigh," I choked out, sorrow filling my voice. "I... I can't see you or Sebastian and know that I can't be with you. I-I can barely think about it without... Don't you see? If I see him and her... I don't know what I'd do."

"But--but you know she's going back to Flint tomorrow night! Ariel, you can't just leave!" he begged, very upset.

"Do you know that for certain?" I asked, another sob threatening to escape. "She won. She got him. I can't watch that happen. I want you both too much."

"She-- It's-- You--" each word cut off as if something was physically stopping him from speaking. Raleigh swore violently. "She is leaving tomorrow night," he said in a tightly controlled voice. "You don't have to go anywhere."

"I'm going to get you in trouble," I said sadly. "I should go."

"Ariel, please," he practically begged again. "Don't leave Nashville."

I couldn't promise him that. It was probably best for all of us. "I have to go," I told him. "I-I'm sorry."

"Ariel," he said softly. "I really don't want you to go."

"I-I don't either, Raleigh. But... I can't see you and not... have you hold me. I can't see Sebas... I have to go," I cleared my throat, trying to sound resolute. "I won't ever forget you. Goodbye."

Before he could say anything else I hung up.



## Chapter 46 - We Need to Talk

"I leave the past behind and say goodbye to the scared child inside  
I sing for freedom and for love"  
Christina Aguilera  
"Lotus Intro"

When I woke the next night I found myself reaching for someone that wasn't there. I realized what I was doing and held back a sob, missing Sebastian and Raleigh so much it nearly hurt to move. I dragged myself from the bed and into the shower before Nathan decided to check in on me again. I'd already proven how weak I could be in front of him and I really needed to start pulling myself together.

My new resolve didn't last long. When I walked out of the bathroom my eyes fell on my cell phone and I had to pick it up. I tried really hard to keep from hoping that there was a message from Raleigh and my spirits plummeted when there wasn't one. Vanessa had called, however, to check up on me she said in her message. I decided to call her back before she showed up at the door, which is exactly what she asked if I wanted her to do.

"I'm not great company right now, Vanessa. I don't want to bring you down," I told her, my eyes falling on my guitar. "I think I'm going to try writing tonight."

"Good, that'll be therapeutic for you," Vanessa urged.

I sighed heavily, not convinced my sire was right, but willing to try anything that might fill the hole in my chest where Sebastian and Raleigh had so easily taken up residence. "I hope so. I'll check in with you later." I wanted to ask her if she'd talked to Tristan about me leaving the city, but I promised her that I would give things a couple of days so I held back.

As if she were reading my thoughts she asked, "Have you thought any more about staying in Nashville?"

"That's all I've been thinking about, Vanessa," I told her, feeling that empty ache in my chest forming again. "He's... he's forbidden Raleigh from talking to me about it. I've lost them both."

"Have you tried talking to Sebastian?" she asked.

"I can't," I whispered. "He... he doesn't want me."

"I have a hard time believing that, my dear. You are much more beautiful than that Barbara person, both inside, and out."

"I want to be more than just pretty," I insisted. Sebastian had told me that I was beautiful many times, but beauty wasn't everything. I needed to be more to him than someone to hang on his arm. "Besides, that wasn't enough because I couldn't keep him."

"I still think it's a good idea to talk to him," my sire pressed. "Then you can at least take out your anger at him."

I shook my head, the thought was unbearable to me. "No. I would only end up making a fool of myself."

"If you're sure." It was obvious that she didn't agree, but she was respecting my decision.

What I couldn't confess to her was how much I really wanted to talk to Sebastian. I was sure that if I did I would do something ridiculous like beg him to take me back. "I'm sure."

"It is your choice, of course."

"Thank you for your support."

"Any time you need me, Ariel, you know I'm here for you."

I smiled at how supportive she'd always been for me. "I know. You've always been exactly what I needed."

We said our good-byes and as I hung up I thought about what Vanessa had said. Her suggestion that I talk to Sebastian made me miss him and Raleigh even more, but I had to stay strong and not call him. I'd only make a bigger fool of myself and it wouldn't help, not when he'd so obviously chosen Barbara over me.

There was a slight knock at the door, then Nathan was popping his head in to check on me. I greeted him with a small smile and assured him yet again that I was fine. I knew that I looked like crap, because of the minimal effort I'd put into my hair and makeup so it was a good thing he and I were friends.

"Do you want me to stay home with you tonight?" he asked, as he looked me over.

"No," I insisted, gathering my guitar and songbook before facing him. "I'm okay on my own. I think I'm going to try to write some tonight. Get some normalcy back."

Nathan watched me a long moment. "All right." I could tell he was still very concerned about me. "Call me if you need anything?"

"I will. Thank you." I followed him out of the bedroom, intending to get my head out of things with my music and I prayed that it actually worked.

Nathan made sure that I was settled then left to head to the bar. I opened my book to the last thing I'd worked on. Sebastian and Raleigh's song. It was almost done, I only had to work on the arrangement for the last minute or so and then I'd be finished.

Had it only been a little over a week since they'd become such an integral part of my life?

I'd only been playing with cords for a few minutes when I heard a car in the drive. I wondered what Nathan had forgotten, but I didn't get up, figuring he would be inside before I could get to the door. Then I realized that it wasn't Nathan's car I'd heard. I didn't know how I knew, I just did. I wondered if it was Vanessa so I laid my guitar on the couch where I'd been working and moved to a window that faced the drive to see who it was. My stomach dropped when I saw Sebastian's black Impala.

I jerked back from the window, not sure what to do, as Sebastian exited the driver's side of the vehicle and started around it toward the house. He was alone and part of me wanted to run to him, while the other wanted to run and hide. I felt a bit panicked and that feeling only grew when I realized how unhappy he looked.

I didn't know what to do. Should I answer the door? No. I'd spent the last couple of nights trying to keep myself from running back to Sebastian and there was no way I was going to let myself crumble so quickly. Besides Nathan would have locked the door and I was perfectly safe, right?

I moved slowly toward the front door, unable to make up my mind as to what I should be doing. By the time I was halfway to there, I heard a key in the lock and froze.

*How had he gotten a key?*

Then the door was open and I was back pedaling, fear of the unknown gripping me like a vise as Sebastian entered the foyer. His eyes swept the room and fastened on me.

"We need to talk," he said firmly.

"H-how did you get a key?" I asked weakly.



Sebastian's expression hardened as he closed the door behind him. "I talked to Nathan."

"What do you mean 'talked'?" I asked, crossing my arms over my chest. If he hurt Nathan...

Sebastian stopped in the middle of the foyer and tucked the key into the pocket of his jeans. "Talked. You know, where both people say words, and communicate? That thing we haven't been doing?" The dangerous look on his face had me backing away from him again. "At least, that's what Raleigh tells me, at any rate."

"What do you want me to say?" I asked, wanting so much to touch him, but I couldn't let myself get too close so I continued to back away into the living room.

"I want you to say whatever you want to say to me," he said firmly, his intense gaze never leaving me. "And I will listen, and then I will talk and you will listen."

"I don't have anything to say," I said, looking down so he couldn't read my expression. "Well, except maybe congratulations."

"Congratulations?" Sebastian asked in surprised. "For what?"

"On your reconciliation with Barbara," I told him with a touch of venom, feeling the need to strike first. "I'm sure she's very happy."

"I doubt it, since she's on a plane to Flint," he replied in a dangerously low voice I'd never heard before. "On the other hand, she still has her head, so I suppose she should be happy."

My gaze moved up to meet his again. "W-why is she going back to Flint?"

"She lives there," he deadpanned as if that should be obvious.

"But..."

"And if she'd have stayed in Nashville much longer she would not have kept her head," he added, sounding angry.

My stomach turned. "But she... you..."

He took a step closer to me. "She what?"

"She was practically naked. You were kissing her," I said, my voice thick with emotion.

"She was practically naked," he agreed. "And she kissed me." His gaze held mine and as much as I hated to admit it to myself, somehow I knew that he was telling the truth. "And if you hadn't run like a scared rabbit, you'd have seen me push her away."

*Oh God. What had I done?*

"I-I... I thought you... didn't want me anymore," I choked out, sounding near to tears as I realized how much of a fool I'd been. Sebastian would never want me back after this.

"I can't imagine how you could think that, Ariel," Sebastian said soothingly as he came closer. "On the other hand, Raleigh was pretty fucking clear about the matter."

"I couldn't talk to you," I insisted, shaking my head. "Not about that. I... I can't..."

Sebastian moved closer. He was almost within arms reach now. "We have to talk, Ariel."

I blinked, realizing how close he was and I backed away to put more distance between us again. "But you don't like to talk," I said weakly.

"No, I really, really don't. I'm more... hands on," he said, taking the last few steps that separated us and putting his hands on my shoulders. "But I don't want to lose you."

Sebastian's touch was everything I'd wanted, but I knew that I couldn't just fall back into him so quickly so I maintained at least a little space between us. "Y-you don't?"

"I don't." He took a slow breath. "I was involved with Barbara, but that was a long time ago, and it wasn't serious, not for me. I would never have left you for her." He hesitated, then added, "I would never have left you and Raleigh for her."

"But... you didn't come home," I pointed out, desperately holding onto what I'd thought had been his worst transgression. "I thought you wanted her. You didn't say anything about her. How was I supposed to know?"

"I didn't say anything about her because she isn't important." He took another breath, but I didn't know if it was to calm down or gather his thoughts. "I didn't come home because Tristan kept me until I barely had time to make it back, and then... Barbara waylaid me on my way to the car. By the time I got away from her, I didn't have time to drive home."

It was obvious that he was still angry with Barbara's tactics. Sebastian dropped his hands and I could see the hurt in his clear blue eyes. "You were supposed to trust me," he said, showing vulnerability for the first time. "You and Raleigh were supposed to trust me."

I covered my mouth with my hand, realizing how badly I'd judged him. I'd been so busy waiting for the other boot to drop and for him to be done with me that I hadn't left any room for another outcome.

"I'm sorry," I whispered, reaching out for him, but stopping myself because I didn't know if he wanted me to touch him. "I was so wrong."

"I went into the back room of Alexander's to tell Barb I was leaving and she jumped me," he explained. "I didn't even know you guys had been there until after you left. Reggie told me you'd walked out, upset."

"I saw you and it was like... like before," I said, feelings of betrayal from all those years ago once again flooding my senses even though they had nothing to do with Sebastian. "I panicked. I couldn't deal. I had to get away."

Sebastian frowned. "Like-- Ariel, I've never done anything to hurt you."

I shook my head. "No, you haven't." But I'd been waiting for him to. How could I explain to him how young and naive I'd once been?

He nodded as if he understood what I was thinking, then said, "Maybe Raleigh's right. Maybe I have hurt you."

I didn't know how to answer that and silence hung in the air between us. "Where's Raleigh?" I asked after a moment.

"He's waiting for us at home."

I looked at Sebastian questioningly. "Us?"

"Us," he repeated. "He... he wouldn't come with me, he said you and I had to talk before the three of us were together again."

"Did you and he talk then?"

He smiled weakly. "It was mostly yelling, really, but we worked things out." He sobered again and asked, "Can we work things out, Ariel?"

I took a hesitant step toward him. "I... I would like to," I told him hopefully.

He looked down at me seriously. "Raleigh said I don't talk enough, that he jumps to conclusions because I don't... tell him how I... feel."

I was surprised by Raleigh's boldness, yet happy he'd been honest with Sebastian as well. "That's what... he said?"

"Yeah, that's what he said."

I recognized that I'd jumped to conclusions as well, but Sebastian continued before I could say anything more. "He also said that if I... talked about how I feel, he wouldn't have to try and... interpret what I say and do."

"I think that maybe... I agree with him," I said slowly. "I want to understand you Sebastian, but there's so much that I don't know. I need you to help me. Raleigh and I both need that. I will give you whatever you want, all you have to do is ask for it."

He nodded. "That's what Raleigh said. Well, he used different words, and mostly yelled it, but it meant the same thing."

I moved even closer to him. "I promise not to run again. I realize now that was wrong."

Sebastian drew in a breath and put his hands back on my shoulders. "I need you, Ariel. I need you, and I need Raleigh, and I would never do anything to lose either of you."

I heaved a sigh of relief. "I don't want to lose you either. I... I was prepared to leave the city because I couldn't stand the thought of being here without you."

"I know, Raleigh told me, among other people," the last part of his statement was said mostly under his breath, then he was moving his palms up and down my upper arms. "You can't leave, Ariel," he nearly pleaded.

I frowned, wondering who else he had talked to. "I don't want to. Not really." I reached out to touch his chest. "If I don't have you then I would have. D-do I... have you?"

"You do." He slowly pulled me close as if he was afraid I'd pull away and I laid both hands on his chest.

I could feel the relief as it filled me up, washing away the despair and loneliness of the past few nights. "And you have me," I told him.

Sebastian pulled me close and pressed his lips to my hair as his arms came around me. "Ariel, I-I love you."

His words freed my heart and I wanted to sing with happiness. "I think I've been in love with you for years," I told him, my face pressed into his shoulder, then I pulled back enough to look up at him. "Ever since you came here I've wanted you. The last week has shown me how complex a man you really are and I want to spend the rest of eternity getting to know that man."

"The rest of eternity sounds pretty good," he said with a smile. "You, me and Raleigh."

"Yes," I said with a smile, feeling good for the first time in days as I pressed closer to him. "You, me and Raleigh."

He cupped the side of my face. "Will you come home with me?" he asked, his voice a low rumble. "Live with us? Raleigh said I should have asked, before, not just assumed you would."

I bit my bottom lip to keep from crying out in relief. Sebastian still wanted me. My head was nodding before I could speak. "Yes. Oh, yes. I want that more than anything, Sebastian. I really do." I reached up to pull him down for a kiss, knowing that now everything was going to be okay. So long as I had these two amazing men next to me, everything was better than okay.