



DO OR DIE
By S. L. Viehl

Introduction

If years were wars, I think I would have earned a couple of purple hearts for 2002. The last twelve months brought a succession of publisher snafus which had major, negative impact on me and my career. As usual, there wasn't much I could do about it. By the end of the summer, I was ready to toss in the author towel and go get a regular day job. I even went and got one for a couple of weeks, when things turned really bleak.

And things got very bleak indeed. At one point I had to gamble every last cent I possessed in order to stay home and write. While I was writing, there was always this little voice in the back of my head telling me that if I failed, I'd have to go and get two jobs to keep me and the kids afloat.

The stories published on my web site over the past year often reflected the turbulent times with which I was coping. The May/June story, "Skin Deep" had to be split as I was dealing with an editor quitting, and "A Personal Injustice" came right after I nearly quit writing myself. They're all here, along with one that never made it to the web site, "La Matanza."

Writing these stories for the web site helped to remind me that I'm not just in this for the money. I'm in this for you - my family, friends, and readers. What you wrote to me helped me through that bad stretch of 2002. Your e-mails and letters encouraged me, made me to laugh, and kept me writing no matter what.

I don't gamble, so maybe it was beginner's luck that has since landed me two new contracts, moved me into a whole new genre and promise enough income to keep me home and writing full time for the next five or six years.

Or not. Personally, I blame you guys. Thanks.

Sheila
November 2002

Night Trauma

If working the graveyard shift wasn't bad enough, now I was stuck working New Year's Eve with a rookie. While bartenders and waitresses drank leftover champagne and crowed over their tips, I'd be pumping stomachs and pulling bodies out of MVAs. I didn't mind that as much as the presence of a new partner. New guys were always a pain.

As I turned off the interstate, I glanced sideways at the silent hulk riding shotgun. "Where you from, Malone?" His first name was Rory, but I'd learned to stick to surnames on the job.

He stopped looking out the windshield for a minute to meet my gaze. "Why?"

So I can avoid going there. "No reason, just making conversation." The radio buzzed, and I reached over to answer it. "Dispatch, this is Charlie Fourteen, go ahead."

"Fourteen, we've got multiple GSW at seven-oh-one Taylor. Eight-three and seventy-six en route. What's your ETA, over?"

I checked the nearest street sign. "Three minutes, dispatch. Blues on scene?"

"They called it in, Fourteen."

"Copy. On the way." I hung up the mike before I switched on the lights and hit the accelerator. "You're not fresh out of school, are you?"

"I got my certification last month."

Half the crew had called in sick so they could party -- they'd probably put him on shift out of desperation. "Look, they called for three units so this isn't going to be pretty. If you need to vomit, walk away. Last thing I want is to clean that out of an open chest wound."

"I won't puke."

Famous last words. *Every* rookie I rode with threw up on the messy calls.

Seven-oh-one Taylor was located in Crackhead Heaven, a section of abandoned warehouses occupied by the homeless addicts. I didn't bother to look at the building numbers but followed the flashes of blue cop lights. Two rescue units and three black and whites were parked around a huddled group. In the center I spotted four bodies still on the ground, one clutching a sawed-off, another with a .45.

"Welcome to the Ok Corral," I muttered as I parked, grabbed my bag and jerked open my door. "Get the stretcher, Malone."

I recognized two of the cops who were working CPR on one of the victims. The other three bodies had no faces. Blood and brains were splattered everywhere. *Hell hath no fury like a night in Crackhead Heaven.* I still checked for pulses before kneeling down beside the cop to take over on the fourth, a scrawny white male who hadn't bathed or changed his ragged clothes since the new millennium. Blood streamed from a gruesome right lateral chest wound, and I felt a couple of snapped ribs beneath it.

"How's your patient, Teddy?" I opened my bag.

"Still got a pulse," Ted Jones, the cop on the other side of the body, said. "But he ain't breathing, Erin."

Both the cops backed off. I used my laryngoscope to check the throat, then tubed and bagged him to force air into his lungs. I felt under the right shoulder for the

exit wound, which was bigger than my hand. Malone appeared with the stretcher as I checked the chest for positive airway sounds. "I'm in. Let's load him."

That was when my patient decided to sit up, grab me by the throat, and shove a bloodstained knife in my face. I clamped my hands on his arm, trying to force the blade away. His face contorted as he began to choke on the tube, but whatever he'd smoked or snorted had lent him the strength of ten men. His grip tightened, then I began to choke.

"Rory . . ." I wheezed, wrestling for control of the knife.

There was a blur, then someone yanked me back and dropped down on my patient. Malone. As I landed on my backside, he swiftly straddled the patient, pinned the hand holding the knife, and nodded to Teddy, who disarmed the man.

I rubbed my throat. "Watch the chest," I said, my voice harsh and cracking. My partner gave me a wild sideways look. "His ribs are broken."

The cops helped Malone transfer the victim onto the stretcher and strap him down, and then the scrawny man went limp. I starting bagging again with one hand and popped the IV pack with the other. I trotted alongside the stretcher, prepping his neck as the men carried him to the unit.

"Call ahead to Holy Cross," I said to Malone as I wiped blood from my hand on my jacket. "GSW right lateral chest, in and out, traumatic arrest." I hesitated, then patted his arm. "Rory, thanks for the save back there."

He nodded. "No problem."

Malone drove fast and smooth as I worked on the victim in the back. My throat-grabbing knife wielder had a prominent external jugular, which made it easy to stick him, but every time I stopped CPR, he stopped breathing. After watching the agonal rhythm on the heart monitor, I popped him with epinephrine and atropine and kept two bags running wide open.

"You okay?" I heard my partner call through the partition.

"I'm fine. He's gonna arrest, any minute," I said as I packed a temporary dressing on both sides of the chest wound. "Report our stats to dispatch and drive faster."

A full team was waiting as Malone and I unloaded the patient, and one of the nurses took over bagging for me as they rushed him in.

"Found him over on Taylor," I told the attending doc before stopping outside the treatment room. "Better keep him strapped down, he nailed me pretty good."

"Catch you on the neck there?" The physician took a moment to check my throat. "Skin's not broken. Gargle with a little warm salt water when you get a chance, you'll be okay."

Okay would take more than a little gargling. "Will do, doc."

In they went, leaving me and Malone out in the hallway. It was always a wrench to stop and let the pros take over, and I was jittery with nerves. If the crackhead had broken the skin . . . "C'mon, Malone, I'll call us in and you can buy me a cup of coffee."

* * *

"How long have you been an EMT?" Malone asked me as I pushed his quarters into the vending machine.

"Seven years. You want cream or sugar?"

"No, thanks." He took the styrofoam cup I handed him and followed me to the tiny table by the window. "You must like it."

If he only knew. "It's a job." Holy Cross had a nice view of the beach from this side, and I liked watching the waves roll in -- reminded me a little of home. As I pulled off my jacket, I noticed the dark red lines under my fingernails and made a mental note to scrub before we went back on duty. "What made you decide to save the world?"

"It's a job."

The deadpan humor startled me -- maybe there was some hope for Malone yet. The harsh white hospital lights tended to be unkind to anyone exposed to them, but he wasn't a bad-looking guy. A little on the big side for my taste, but solid-big, not scary-big. Unlike the other guys I worked with, he kept his light brown hair cut short and his broad face clean shaven. He wasn't handsome or ordinary, but somewhere in the middle. The wariness in his narrow dark eyes made me wonder what he'd seen before tonight.

Right now he was looking at my neck. "You should knock off early."

"You heard the doc." I produced a raspy chuckle. "Besides, the boss doesn't let us off unless we cough up blood or sever an artery."

I knew what else he saw when he looked at me. A too-tall, too-skinny, too-pale woman with big ears. My orangey hair was particular great camouflage, rendering me invisible to most men. Except I had the feeling Malone wasn't most men.

I checked my watch. "Two hours to midnight. Got any New Year's resolutions?"

"I don't drink, and I already quit smoking."

"Me either." I'd never liked the odor of alcohol or tobacco, but thankfully I'd never been required to do more than smell it second-hand. "I'm think I'm going to do a bit of travelling this summer. Maybe move out of the area permanently."

His brows lifted. "Why?"

"I get restless." My handheld buzzed and I down the rest of my coffee before I switched on the radio. "Charlie Fourteen, over."

"Hey, Erin." Dispatch sounded a little drunk now. "Sorry to pull your break, but we've got a 911 call on a single MVA out on twenty-seven, two miles east of Uncle Joe's. Everyone else's tied up."

"Copy, on our way." I tossed my cup and shrugged back into my jacket. "Let's go save some more of the world, Malone."

* * *

Twenty-seven was a long, lonely stretch of highway that ran through cattle ranch and orange grove territory farm, and so far had remained unincorporated by the surrounding three countries. State troopers rarely even bothered to respond to calls out here, which like tonight were usually strange, unexplained single MVAs. Since I wasn't spooked by the isolation, I'd told dispatch to assign me whenever calls came in from the area while I was on shift.

"Get the flashlights from the utility box under your seat," I told Malone. "There's no power poles out here, and we'll probably have to wade into a ditch to pull them out."

I sped past Uncle Joe's, a truck stop we used as a landmark, and put my brights on to illuminate the blackness ahead. The dashboard lights began to flicker and dim, and I covered my reaction by hitting the top of the dash with my fist.

"Don't you die on me now, you old bag," I told the steering wheel.

My partner shifted beside me. "You usually have problems with the unit's electrical?"

"Now and then. The company keeps them until they're ready to fall apart." I checked the sky, but it was clear. Which did no reassure me. "This one's pretty new, though. I'll have to write it up after our shift." I picked up twin sets of skid

marks on the asphalt and slowed down. "Look out your side, Malone, this might be it."

I felt him tense. "Hundred yards ahead, between those pines."

The vague outline of a wreck appeared on the edge of my headlights, and I pulled alongside it and parked. No smoke or fire, and the utter stillness made me scan the tree line on both sides.

Malone leaned over. "What's wrong?"

"I hate dead on scene calls, they make me feel so useless." And from the angle of one of the pines, whoever drove the car into them was probably pancaked. "Remember what I said about vomiting."

I took a flashlight from Malone, and we approached the wreck. It was a bad one, engine rammed back into the interior, fenders crumpled like used Kleenex. The smell of gasoline was strong, and I moved my light around to look for puddles. There was a huge one under the rear tires.

"Ruptured tank, not good." Any spark could ignite the fuel, so we had to work fast. "Get the passenger side, but don't move anything metal."

The driver's window had been reduced to a few fragments clinging to the door frame, so I was able to lean in. The car was an old model, no air bag. The carburetor and A/C compressor sat in the driver's lap, just beneath the steering column impaling his chest. An expression of mild surprise still etched his untouched face. I laid two fingers against his throat out of habit. Rigor mortis had already begun to set in.

"Erin, over here."

I backed out of the window and circled around the car. Malone was kneeling on the ground beside the mangled body of a woman. Blood and something white soaked her clothes. And the white stuff glowed.

I crouched and reached to touch the body, but Malone snatched my hand away. "What?"

"Don't touch her." He stood up and looked around. "Stay with them."

"Where are you going?" I asked, but he was already gone.

Hopefully he'd gone into the scrub to empty his stomach. I walked back to the unit to call in. Only the radio didn't work, and the headlights started fading. I pulled out my hand held and switched it on.

Only it was dead, too.

Have to get him out of here. "Malone?" I walked down toward the smashed vehicle. "Malone, get up here."

"I'm okay." He sounded too far away. "Stay there."

He's found something. I grabbed the bag and hiked into the scrub, wading through the kudzu and sawgrass, swinging my flashlight from right to left. "We've got problems, the battery--" then I saw his silhouette standing over something glowing in a clear patch of ground.

It looked like a child, covered with more of the glowy white stuff, until I got beside it and dropped to my knees.

Malone crouched down on the other side of the body. "It's not human."

"No shit." I snapped on some gloves and reached for its neck. "It's got a pulse." It also had an inhuman face with three eyes, four nostrils and a hinged jaw mouth, and did not resemble anyone I'd ever seen before. Under my forearm, its narrow chest moved. *How do I call this one?* "Um, it's breathing."

"Go back to the unit, Erin."

I watched him pull a gun out of his jacket and put a protective arm across the body. "You're not killing it. No way, Rory."

"It's a dangerous being."

"It's an unconscious, wounded life form. You're the dangerous one." I tugged open the top of the odd-looking flightsuit it wore and exposed a set of slits that gaped and contracted. *An aquatic.* Beneath the gills, a shallow wound in the upper abdomen was leaking more glowy whiteness. From the pattern of the surrounding contusions it looked like it had gotten hit with something heavy -- maybe it had bounced off the car. "We've got to control the bleeding."

Malone knelt beside me. "It's not blood, it's stasis fluid."

Which changed everything I'd assumed about my new partner. I took a deep breath and opened a sterile bandage pack. "Explain to me how you know that."

"We think they use it to survive FTL travel." He scanned the area. "They always travel in threes."

I slapped the dressing on and applied direct pressure. "I take it you're not just a big X-Files fan."

"I work for the government."

The gruffness, the moves, the haircut -- it should have tipped me off. "Undercover secret agent man?"

"Something like that." He watched me listen to the alien's chest. "You don't seem too shocked by this."

"I once had to pull the undigested parts of a three month old baby out of a dead gator's gullet. I'm basically shock-proof." I would have done vitals on the alien, but I couldn't use human standards. Maybe I could find out more about what he knew. "Can you give me any hard info on this thing?"

"We don't know much about them. All the others died upon recovery." He pulled out a hand held -- different from mine -- and spoke quietly into it. Someone else said a few words in response, too low for me to hear. Then Malone put it away and whirled around. "The other two are mobile, heading our way. We've got to move it."

"The unit's out of commission; we're not going anywhere." I tried to inject some conviction and reassurance in my tone as I added, "If there are others, we should leave it here for them to take care of. They'll know what to do."

He shook his head. "I've got orders."

I was going to have to do this the hard way. I removed a palm-sized object from my jacket and stood up. "You want to carry it out?"

"It's two miles back to Uncle Joe's," he said. "We'll take it there and wait for my people."

His people. I put the object back in my pocket. "All right. Just one thing." That got his full attention. "If you call me Scully, I am out of here."

The body didn't weigh much -- maybe forty pounds -- so it was no chore to load it on the gurney and push it down the road toward the truck stop. I covered it with a thermal blanket and tucked the unit bag beside its two legs. It didn't wear shoes and had weird, clubbed feet. Malone walked beside me, gun back in his hand.

"I'm not letting you shoot anyone," I mentioned as I avoided a pothole. "ET or otherwise."

"I may not have a choice."

"There's always a choice. You didn't shoot the crackhead who pulled the knife on me." I tapped the red cross certification badge on his jacket sleeve. "In case you forgot, this means we do no harm."

He slowly holstered the gun and took control of the gurney. "The crack head wasn't capable of faster than light speed interstellar travel."

I snorted. "You've obviously never smoked crack."

Something fast and dark shot past the front of the gurney, which Malone jerked to a stop. "Shit." He shoved me behind him, pulled out the weapon, and did a three-sixty, then froze. "Run, Erin. Run!"

I would have grabbed his gun, but one of ET's pals appeared in front of me, and I heard a squeaky sound. Malone fired his gun, then cool white light filled up the world.

* * *

"Malone?"

I'd woken up in a small, dark, cold place. I couldn't see anything, but I could smell my partner's aftershave and heard him breathing. A bit of groping around helped me find him, huddled on the metal floor. I ran my hands over him, feeling for injuries. He had a bump on his forehead, but no blood leaking out of his ears, and his pulse and respiration were normal.

I shook him. "Malone. Come on, up and at 'em." He groaned and stirred. Then he seized me by the arms and dragged me down by his side. "It's Erin, it's okay."

"Where are we?"

"I have no clue, and you're hurting my arms." I released a breath as his grip eased. "Thanks. What happened?"

He didn't answer for a minute. Then he said, "They shot us. We're on their ship."

I tried to stand, but bumped my head on the low metal ceiling. "Okay. Tell me you know how to get *off* their ship."

He did the same thing, and swore. "No one's ever been on board one."

"What about all those alien abductees?" I crouched over and felt along the nearest wall. "Every month there's a new story about them in the National Investigator."

"That's fiction, Erin." Malone bent over and muttered under his breath. "I found a door seam, but I need something to pry it open. Got anything?"

I searched my jacket and jeans pockets. "They cleaned me out."

Light poured into the cramped metal chamber as the door silently slid open, and my partner lunged through it. I followed.

A milder version of the cool white light hit us just outside, making it impossible for me or Malone to move. Didn't matter -- I was too busy gaping at everything. From the looks of the lights and panels and little robotic thingies swooping around us, we were definitely on ET's ship.

Two of the aliens stood a few feet away. Like our patient, they wore odd-looking flightsuits. Unlike it, they held weapons and looked pretty upset. One leaned toward the other and made some squeaky sounds.

Finally I relaxed. "It's okay, Rory. They're friendly."

Malone wrenched his face toward mine. "You don't know that."

"Trust me." I looked at our captors, and said, "We meant no harm. We're engaged here as medical rescue personnel." So I was lying. If I told them what Malone really was, they'd never let us go.

Both of them squeaked, then the elder turned off the containment field holding me. "You speak standard galactic."

I nodded. "Is your crewmember well?"

"No, and we must return him to our flagship." The alien cocked its head. "You are quite convincing. Especially the male."

"Thank you." To Malone, I said, "They're going to release you. Bow your head twice, don't say another word, and follow me out of here."

"I can't --"

Damn, stubborn human males. "Do it, Malone, or you'll end up filled with stasis fluid and going on a very long trip."

* * *

The visitors didn't return Malone's weapon, but he was on me as soon as we walked clear of the ship. As in shoved me against the nearest tree and peered into my eyes. "Tell me how you just did that."

"I'm really good at picking up languages."

"Bullshit."

This was going to get me at least five reprimand notations on my sojourn record. "Okay, I'll show you. Just let go of me, okay?" He let go, and I lifted my hands to remove one of my gloveskins. "Don't freak out on me now."

I peeled back the synthetic human skin, exposing four of my elongated digits, shimmering derma, and triangular shape of my true palm.

Malone stared, cleared his throat, then looked into my artificial corneal coverings. "You're not human."

"No, I'm not." I replaced the gloveskin. At least he hadn't fainted.

"What are you? Why are you here?"

I rubbed the back of my neck. I needed to sedate him, but I didn't want to drag him all the way back to the road. "Is that a professional or personal question?"

His dark eyes were wide but steady. "You just saved my life. It's personal."

As we walked up to the highway, I told Malone the basic facts -- that I was a Chiyaran medical resident, doing field work on his planet in pursuit of my final medtech degree in primitive xenobiology. I also explained that as Terra had yet to join the Allied League of Worlds, we were not allowed to reveal ourselves as alien life forms. "A few of us come here every couple of decades to study your species. We also try to help out while we're here, which is why I pose as an EMT."

"You didn't recognize those aliens at first. How come?"

I chuckled. "I hate to tell you this, Rory, but there are more than a million intelligent life forms in your galaxy, and about a third of them are capable of FTL travel. You try memorizing all those faces."

"Can I see yours?"

I didn't know how I compared to human standards of beauty -- I still had a lot to learn about that portion of their culture -- but it wouldn't hurt to give him a

glimpse. "Brace yourself." I disconnected the skull clamps hidden under my wig, and pulled off my faceskin.

Along with a narrower, Chiyaran cranial case, I had distinctly non-human recessed eyes and flat nostrils instead of a nose. I popped out one of my mouth plates to display my natural, pointed teeth. It was nice to feel the air on my scales for a few seconds before I went to replace the faceskin.

"Don't." With a strange expression, Malone reached out and touched my cheek. "It's soft."

"Of course. My people are more amphibious, but we're also warm-blooded, like you." I put my fake teeth and face back on and secured the clamps. "I'm not going to hurt anyone here. We only want to learn from you. Terra will be invited to the League soon; we need more complete knowledge of your species."

"Same here." He shook his head. "Only I don't know how to tell Washington about this -- or you."

Standard procedure demanded I do a complete mind-wipe on him, but I had an idea. "Let's go get a cup of coffee." I smiled. "I'll buy this time."

* * *

After a couple of hours of talking, Malone agreed to my idea, and we made plans. My new partner quietly resigned from his government job -- citing stress burn-out -- and we got our boss to put us on as permanent partners. It took some getting used to on both sides -- I'd never dared have a close human friend before, and his first view of my full natural physical form actually did make Malone sit down really fast -- but in time he got used to it.

More than anything, we talked. Constantly. About life on his world, and mine. How life would change for all Terrans once they joined the League. The myriad forms of life beyond his solar system, and how we stayed connected and at peace.

Then I completed my study, and told Malone it was time for me to head back to homeworld. "I won't mind wipe you, and I won't make you go with me. Just -- don't go telling the whole story to the National Investigator, okay?"

"What do you mean, I'm not going with you? You got your chance to study humans," Rory pointed out as I was removing the last traces of my occupancy from the dwelling I'd rented. For the last couple of months, he'd shared it with me. "Now it's time to return the favor."

"Until I explain all this to the medtech board, you'll have to wear a Chiyaran skin suit," I warned him. "They're tight, itchy, and you can't scratch yourself in public."

"If you can deal with it, so can I."

He was such a *male*. "Our physicians will want to examine you and ask a few million questions."

"No anal probes, and I get to ask all my questions, but otherwise, no problem." Rory gave me one of his rare, lop-sided grins. "You're more nervous than I am."

I closed my travel case. "I've told you this before, but remember, it's a very different world from Terra. My people mature in water before they live on land. We have communal dwellings. I have fifty-seven brothers and sisters -- "

He laughed. "Erin, it was originally your idea to take me with you."

"I know, I just want you to be sure." I sighed. "This is going to get me fifty reprimands on my sojourn record. At least."

He bent over and kissed the end of my fake nose. "It'll be worth it."

* * *

Rory Malone made an excellent Terran ambassador, and adjusted to life on my homeworld like a Chiyaran in water. He was so enthusiastic and presentable that the board only levied ten reprimands at me, which were immediately suspended. He didn't even mind living with all four hundred twenty-nine members of my family.

"I've almost got the scale patterns memorized," he told me at our meal interval one evening. Patterns were how we identified each other, instead of the names Terrans used. "But you've never told me what yours means."

"Joyful-giver-of-ease." I tilted my head so he could see the pattern better. "Helps to be born knowing what you'll be when you grow up."

A short time later, I graduated from medtech, discarded my student tunics and put on the white and blue for the first time.

"So you're a full-fledged doctor now?" Malone paced around me, studying my healer's rig.

"Yep." I adjusted the line of my new tunic. "Xenotrauma was my last degree requirement. How does it look?"

"Fine." He didn't sound happy. "I guess from now on you'll be too busy to hang out with a lowly XT ambassador."

"Ambassadors can't do much in trauma. A xenoparamedic, on the other hand, could be a big help with all the visiting offworld humanoids." I rolled one of my eyes in the Chiyaran version of a grin. "What do you think, Malone? Want to be partners again?"

"Oh, yeah." He picked me up and whirled me around for a minute, then set me back down on my flukes. "Let's go save some more of the world."

Infusion

A carpenter who falls and impales himself on a two-by-four isn't *supposed* to burst into flame, but there he was: *construction worker kabob*.

"Maybe he spilled some solvent on his clothes," my partner Harry said as we contemplated the still-smoldering body. "Bumped into an acetylene torch, whoosh, he panics, then jumps off the seventh floor."

"That would work, except the welder went home for the night, and the security guard said the fire started *after* he landed." I checked the perimeter to assure the uniforms were cordoning off the area. The smell would probably keep people back as much as the crime scene tape; the air reeked of Eau de Extra Crispy Dead Guy. The coroner's white van pulled up to the curb, and I rubbed the sting of smoke from my eyes. "Tenderson's about to make his entrance."

Harry winced. "I'll go repeat with the guard."

I watched as Frank Tenderson jumped out of the van and stomped over, a scowl puckering his pudgy face. "Evening, doc."

"It's three a.m.," he said, lips peeling back from teeth his parents should have gotten fixed long ago. "Where's the body?" I pointed up at the scaffold platform where the carpenter had landed, three stories above us. "Shit. How the hell am I supposed to get up there?"

I'd have suggested inserting a pogo stick up his ass, but then I'd be tempted to help him with the installation. "Elevator's over here."

We took the open lift to the third floor, and walked across the newly-laid flooring to the scaffold. The stench made my stomach roll, but I'd smelled worse. You didn't work Fort Lauderdale homicide for eight years without smelling a *lot* worse.

"Christ." Tension set down his bag, held on to a support beam and leaned out over the body. "He's not burned, he's charcoal." He looked down.. "No accelerant, no heat source." He lifted his head. "Anything upstairs?"

I stood beside him and breathed through my mouth. "Nothing but wood, tools, and hardware. He was putting in wall studs."

The coroner reached out toward the body, then shrieked and pulled back his hand. At the same time, the victim's body disintegrated.

Tension and I stood there for a moment, staring at the small heap of ash. "You ever see anything like that before?" he asked me, eyes wide.

I'd seen three-week floaters, chainsaw dismemberments, and what happened when you pissed off Colombian drug dealers. But this was a first. "No." The wind picked up, and starting taking the ash with it. "Better get out your dustpan before he blows away."

* * *

"Sam, Harry." Captain Grant nodded toward his office.

We left our desks and followed him in. Harry, who was two weeks from retirement, got the only chair. I took my usual spot against the right wall, next to the rows of framed citations John Grant had earned over the years. He was a good cop; there were a lot of them.

The Captain had run Homicide for three of the seven years I'd worked there, but he remained something of a mystery man. He ran a tight, efficient squad, had zero tolerance for time wasting or bullshit, and didn't encourage anyone to get friendly. He kept his big frame in shape by lifting free weights and running five miles every morning before work - I knew that because I used the same gym three days a week myself. The guys thought he shaved his head to play up his resemblance to the actor, Vin Diesel, but I suspected he didn't want to waste time in the a.m. fooling with his hair.

"Prelim on Tyson, Albert, your barbecued carpenter." He tossed a file on his desk. "The ME's tagging it unknown cause."

"They took the guy out in an ashtray, Cap," Harry said. "Had to be some kind of fire, do that to a body. Blow torch, maybe?"

"Gasoline," was my suggestion. "Doused him, made him drink."

"No residue - and Amoco cocktail parties don't cremate the bones. Not in open air, anyway." Grant pushed the file toward Harry. "Pull his photo off DOT, check out the next of kin, see who'd be pissed enough to grill him. That's all."

"Can I have a minute, Cap?" I asked. At his nod, my partner slipped out and shut the door. "When Harry's out of here, I'd like to fly solo."

A flicker of surprise crossed the captain's face before it went back to impassive. "You know policy, Sam."

I also knew who'd be taking Harry's place. "It'll just be for a couple weeks, 'til Singer screws himself with IA."

"*Singer* got a transfer." It wasn't a question. I nodded, and he grabbed his phone. "How come you've got better spies than I do?"

I shrugged. "A lieu over in Admin owed me."

"This is Grant," he said into the receiver. "Who shoveled Richard Singer my way?" He listened for a minute. "Put me down for a nine a.m. with him tomorrow. I don't fucking care, just do it." He slammed down the phone.

I closed my eyes. The last time I'd worked with Singer, I'd ended up in the hospital for six weeks - two in intensive care. "I've got vacation time coming."

"Sit down, Sam."

I sat. Grant got up and shut the blinds before coming back around to lean against the edge of the desk. Although he didn't look sympathetic, his deep voice softened a couple of degrees. "How bad has he got it in for you?"

"Bad." I forced myself to recite what constituted the worst moments of my life. "I got him washed back at the Academy for sexual harassment in '93. Two formal reprimands for unprofessional conduct while we were in uniform. About a dozen unofficials after that, until the Hernandez case."

Wood creaked under his hands. "You had to kill Hernandez after he shot you."

"Which is why I couldn't prove Singer had ratted me out to him." I toed the carpet with my shoe. "Since they booted him down to Vice, I've heard he's kept his nose clean, did the mandatory psych, earned a few citations."

"You think he's been waiting for another chance?"

"Oh, yeah." I met Grant's gaze steadily. "You partner us, I'll be dead in a week."

"I'll see what I can do. In the meantime, keep it under wraps."

I'd been harassed, stalked and shot down in the street because of one unbalanced cop with a grudge, but I couldn't tell anyone. "Right." I got to my feet.

"Sam." Grant held up a hand. "I'm on your side. But you're the only woman I've got, and you've made rank faster than any guy here. He's always claimed you had the hots for him."

And the squad would believe Singer over me. That was the way it was. "Singer made me want to puke, from day one. And I earned my rank with my brain, not my ass." "I know. Which is why you're going to keep your head down until I can boot this nutcase off the force." He produced an ugly smile. "You're not the only one owed favors." "Hope they're large ones, Cap." I walked out of the office.

* * *

"I still can't believe it. Deputy Dickless, working my desk," Harry said as we pulled up to Tyson's home. "Screw Grant; take the vacation time."

"I'm tired of running away." I saw him massage his chest. "Take your pills, partner. Your wife will kill me if you fuck up your trip to Acapulco."

"Don't know why I got to take Gloria to *Mexico*, for Christ's sake. Got all the goddamn beach in the world right here." Harry shook out a couple of the nitro tablets no one but me, his wife and his doctor knew he took and popped them in his mouth. "She's planning another frigging surprise party, too, isn't she?"

"Next Friday, right after our shift. She said you'd better look surprised, too, or else." I called in our twenty to dispatch. "Who's the next of kin?"

Harry checked his notepad. "Victim's mother, Rebecca Tyson. Called in the MPR last night." He sighed. "I hate it when it's the mothers."

So did I. "Let's get it over with."

The elderly woman who answered the door looked terrible - withered face, straggly white hair, ashy skin. She looked at Harry, then me. "Yes? Is this about my Albert?"

"Yes, ma'am." We'd have to be really careful telling her; she looked like one good shock would finish her off. "I'm Detective Farrell, Mrs. Tyson, and this is my partner, Detective Halloway. May we come in?"

Her gnarled hand crept to her throat. "Of course, please, come in."

Momma Tyson had a nice, if rather sparsely furnished home - from what I could see of it. It was so dark inside I nearly tripped over a footstool on the way into the living room.

The old lady gestured to a sofa, then carefully lowered herself into an overstuffed armchair. "He's dead, isn't he?"

Harry and I exchanged a glance. "Yes, ma'am," I said. "He was killed last night at the construction site. We're very sorry for your loss."

She pulled a lacy handkerchief from her sleeve and pressed a corner to each eye. Her hand shook badly. "How did he die?"

"He fell, ma'am, and his body was burned."

Her cloudy eyes widened. "Burned?"

"We're still trying to determine the circumstances involved, Mrs. Tyson." I took out my notepad. "Do you know if anyone might want to hurt your son? Someone at work, maybe?"

"No, everyone liked Albert. He was a hard worker. And a good man." She

turned to Harry. "Albert was a very good man. He loved me." "I'm sure he did, Mrs. Tyson." My partner kept his tone gentle and sympathetic. "Did Albert go out a lot? Was he having any problems with friends?"

Something changed in the old lady's face, and she sat up a little straighter. "He didn't have time for friends. He never wanted to go out anywhere. We were happy together."

Like most bereaved parents, she'd already made Albert a complete angel. Which was understandable, but not helping. "Thank you, ma'am." I pocketed my notebook. "May we take a look in Albert's room?"

A knotty hand waved toward the back of the house. "It's at the end of the hall. But - my sweet Albert -" She finally crumpled and began to cry.

Harry rose and gave me a nod before going to the old lady's side to offer what comforting words he could. I went to check out the room.

Albert Tyson had a big bed, a dresser, a small bookcase sparsely stacked with a few copies of Popular Mechanics. Inside his closet I found two pairs of dress shoes and a couple dozen jeans and t-shirts. That was all.

Harry poked his head in. "She's gone to lay down. Anything?"

"Not much." I checked each drawer, under the mattress and in the shoes, then gazed around. "No photos, no personal effects. Not even a dust mote." I glanced at the king-sized bed. "He liked room when he slept, though."

Harry ducked into the adjoining bathroom, then emerged. "A toilet, a sink, and a roll of Charmin. You could eat off the seat in there."

"Try to restrain yourself." I went over to the bookcase, and pulled a book of matches Albert had used as a bookmark from one of the magazines. "Infusion," I read off the cover. The back side listed an address on A1A. "Sounds like a nightclub."

Harry rubbed his jaw. "Maybe Albert wasn't such a good boy."

"Could be." I pocketed the matches. "Let's take a ride."

* * *

One phone call confirmed that Infusion didn't open until after dark, so Harry and I went back to the construction site to interview the work crew.. Spending six hours in a cramped trailer listening to what a great guy Albert was bad enough, but one of the last guys decided to get cute with me.

"Yeah, he was okay." Hector Ladega slouched in his chair, which did nothing for his paunchy form. "You know what burned him up like that?"

"No. Do you?"

"Maybe it was the hole in the ozone." Four gold front teeth flashed. "You know, you too good lookin' for a cop, chica."

Harry had stepped out for a smoke, or I'd have turned Ladega over to him right then. "Did he have trouble with any of the crew? Ever hear him arguing with anyone?"

"Nah. Al never talk much to anybody." He used one dirty hand to casually adjust his crotch. "You single? You like to dance?"

What was it about me that drew assholes like a magnet? I put down my notepad. "Know a club on the beach called Infusion?"

"That goth shit?" He shook his head. "I hang at the salsa clubs down on Calle Ocho. You should go with me tonight, chica." His hand patted his thigh. "We have a real good time."

Singer had said that to me once. Someday, Samantha, I'm going to show you how to have a real good time. "Was Albert into that goth shit?"

"If his new mamacita found out, she woulda whupped his ass." Hector laughed. "He said she like him to stay home with her."

"Who was his new mamacita?"

"Some chica he met, few weeks ago." Hector shrugged. "Mabel. No, Rebel."

I questioned him about the girl, but he didn't know anything more about her than the name. When I told him he could go, he leaned across the desk instead. Close enough for me to smell the garlic and onions on his breath.

"What you think, chica?" He fingered a piece of my hair that had come loose from my ponytail and tried to stare down the front of my blouse. "Wanna come dance with me? We can go to my place, do the nasty tango - "

I curled my fingers around his wrist, then slammed his hand down on the desk and held it there. With my other hand, I twisted his collar until I cut off his air. "I can dance on your face, then book you for assault. Want me to do that?" He choked and shook his head, and I let go. "Pity. Get out of here."

Hector shot out of the trailer like a bullet, nearly knocking over Harry on his way in.

"What's his deal?" my partner asked.

"He needs to get laid." I clamped down on my temper. The prospect of Singer on the squad had me too riled. "That's your third cigarette today, Har. Make it the last, or I call your wife."

"You would, you bitch," he said without heat. "We hitting this club later?"

I glanced at the driver's license photo we'd pulled off the computer; Albert Tyson had been an average looking, clean-cut type of guy. Religious, too, judging by the big gold crucifix he'd worn around his neck. Then I took out the book of matches. A good Catholic boy, into goth. "Yeah. I'll pick you up at nine-thirty. Wear your spiked collar."

* * *

A long line of patrons were waiting outside Infusion when we pulled up to the curb that night. I flipped down the visor to display our unit ID card before heading toward the main entrance with Harry.

"What is this, like that Rocky Horror movie?" my partner asked as he scanned the waiting crowd.

"That was thirty years ago, pal." I checked out a woman dressed like Elvira on acid, wearing a Rolex, and arguing with her boyfriend about where they'd parked the Lexus. "This is yuppie goth." And not the kind of place I'd have expected a blue collar carpenter to have the cash to frequent. According to the sign by the door, the cover alone was twenty bucks.

Maybe Albert had himself a secret life going. Or a second income.

The bouncer, who resembled a tank in a surprisingly nice tux, stepped in front of the door as we approached. The one inch of skin that passed as his brow lowered over mean eyes. "You two gotta wait in line like everybody else."

"But we have special invitations from the city." I flashed my shield. He made a rude sound, but moved sideways. "Thanks."

It took a moment for my eyes to adjust to the near total darkness inside, then I took in the layout: plenty of tiny tables and stools crowded around a huge dance floor,. Bars that stretched the length of the walls. Everything was hung with tiny red Christmas lights. The bartenders wore tuxes, and had their hair slicked down. The waitresses sported abbreviated french maid outfits. The basic décor was red and black. Lots of black.

And the noise - Harry was almost reeling from the heavy metal music pouring out of the oversized speakers above our heads. "See the office?"

I spotted a plain door off to one side. "Over there," I yelled back.

We found the door locked, and a shouted inquiry at one of the bartenders revealed that the owner had not yet arrived. Harry jerked his head toward the entrance. "I'll go canvas the line."

I nodded and caught the arm of a passing waitress, then showed her the photo. "Recognize this guy?"

She glanced, then shook her head. "Sorry." She hurried off.

That was the same answer I got from everyone, and after an hour of coming up empty, I was ready to leave. The pounding music and clouds of cigarette smoke had given me a headache, and if Albert Tyson had ever come to Infusion, he'd apparently done it invisibly.

"Sam." Harry appeared and watched the gyrating bodies on the dance floor for a moment. "No luck outside. You?"

I shook my head. "Manager still hasn't shown up. I think we'd better -" A huddle in one corner caught my eye. "We got a deal going down over there."

Harry squinted. "Yeah. Take two o'clock, I'll come up from nine."

The five men and women stood shoulder-to-shoulder, half-hidden between a square column and the wall. I strolled up, looked over one shoulder and saw a woman in the center. Ten hands were groping her, big time.

I prodded a back. "Hey. Time for a cigarette."

"I don't smoke." The man glanced over his shoulder and bared some fake plastic fangs. "Would you care to join us?"

"Sorry, she's my date tonight," Harry said, coming up from the other side. He peered at the guy's mouth. "You need an orthodontist, friend."

I didn't see any sign of drugs, or drug use, which puzzled me. "Let me talk to the lady." I pushed two shoulders apart and stepped into the huddle. "You all right, hon?" The young girl's dress was open to the waist, but nothing was hanging out. Her eyes focused on me after a couple of seconds. "Oh, I'm fine." She smiled and leaned back against one of the men, who cupped her breasts. "So . . . fine."

Everyone smiled. Everyone had fangs.

"Right." Swingers playing oversexed vampires. It took all kinds. "Look, why don't you folks get a room?"

"Is there a problem here, officer?"

I swiveled and nearly slammed into a broad chest. Then I looked up, and blinked. "And you are . . . ?"

Tall, dark and handsome nodded, and somehow got my hand in his. Cool, strong fingers squeezed mine. "G. Gordon Norby, the owner."

"Detective Farrell, Fort Lauderdale homicide. My partner, Detective Halloway." I extracted my hand. "We need to ask you a couple of questions, Mr. Norby."

"Shall we go to my office?" Pale eyes briefly flashed up at the speakers. "That way, you'll be able to actually hear my answers."

My partner was rubbing his chest again, so I sent him outside, then followed Norby to his office. The interior matched the club in style, décor, and darkness.

He turned on a small desk lamp before offering me a drink and a seat on a sinfully comfortable-looking black leather sofa.

I refused both, and checked him out while he poured some wine. The full-sleeved, white shirt and plain black trousers were retro 19th century, but it was a goth club; he fit right in. The thick, curly black hair could have been Cuban, but his voice sounded British. He was really tall, too -- I was six foot one in my socks, but he had at least seven inches on me. "How did you know we were cops?"

"You're not wearing black lipstick." He sat on the sofa and sipped his wine before inspecting me with his spooky, colorless eyes. "And judging by your suits, you were either bill collectors or police officers. What can I do for you, detective?"

"I'm looking for someone." I showed him the photo. "Recognize him?"

Norby studied the image. "Yes. I hired him to do some work before I opened the club. His name is Albert Tyson."

So Albert had worked here, which explained why none of the customers had seen him. But the bartenders and waitresses should have. "When did Albert work for you, what did he do, and how long was the job?"

"I opened the club six weeks ago, so, he would have been here for the two week period before that. He installed the bar counters and the stage lighting. He came every night after he finished at his day job, I believe." He handed me the photo. "Is he in some sort of trouble?"

"Not anymore."

The door burst open behind me, and I turned to see a gorgeous redhead in a skimpy black dress. "Norby, I must speak to -" she stopped and looked at me, stunned.

"Rebel." Norby put his glass aside. "Meet Detective Farrell."

Bloodshot green eyes narrowed. "You're here about Albert."

"Yes." I wondered how much crack she'd smoked - her voice was a raspy, cracked ruin, and she was weaving on her feet - then nodded. "He was a friend of yours, wasn't he? When was the last time you saw him?"

"Three days ago, when he walked out. He was an idiot." The woman shook back her heavy mane and planted her long-nailed hands on her hips. "Tell her to leave, Norby. We have to settle this."

"You want to come downtown and tell me about you and Albert there?" I asked, and zeroed in on the fear in her eyes. "Or maybe you want to do it now?"

Without another word, Rebel pivoted and ran out the door. I followed, but as soon as I got outside the office, I lost sight of her in the crowd.

After combing the entire club twice for the redhead with no luck, I went back to talk to Norby, but found his door locked again. The nearest bartender said he'd left for the evening.

"Great." Feeling like a rookie, I stomped outside and saw Harry snoring in the unit, chin against his chest. My watch read two a.m., and my partner wasn't getting any younger, so I decided to call it a night.

I still slammed the door as I climbed in. "You see a redhead fly out of there?" Harry didn't answer, so I shook his shoulder to wake him up. "Come on, old man, wake -" I pulled back my wet, red hand, then pushed my partner's head up.

The blood had come from his slashed throat.

* * *

Four days later, I helped carry my partner's casket to his grave. Hundreds of officers from Dade, Broward and Palm Beach counties attended, as I did, in full dress uniform. I listened to the eulogies, placed my rookie shield on the huge bouquet of white lilies Harry would have loathed, and suffered the stares and whispers.

I endured them because in spite of ninety-six hours on the clock, I still

had no idea who had killed my partner - or why. "Sam." As the funeral directory flipped the switch that lowered Harry into his grave, Grant tugged me off to the side. "I'm taking you home."

I looked over his shoulder at the white-faced, middle-aged woman accepting a folded flag from the Commissioner of Police. "Gloria -"

"-will be with her kids. You haven't slept since it happened." He ignored a short man in a dark suit who had approached us and gave me a little shake. "It wasn't your fault."

Oh yes, it was. "I know." In spite of my heavy uniform, I couldn't feel anything but cold. "I'm going back to Infusion tonight. I'll find witnesses."

"Perhaps Detective Farrell will allow me to give her a lift?" the dark suit said, drawing my attention. He sounded a little Latino, but not quite. Something else. "I am going that way."

If he was another obnoxious reporter, I was going to punch him out. "Who are you?"

The captain's hand tightened, then dropped away. "Samantha Farrell, Matteo Dante. He's working with the local INS on Norby."

I frowned as he shook my hand. "What, his green card expire?"

"Something like that." Dante gestured toward a black late model caddy parked at the fringe of the cemetery. "Are you ready to go?"

Grant started to say something, hesitated, then nodded. "I'll see you back at the station."

Dante didn't get in behind the driver's wheel, and I glanced at the discreetly uniformed driver as we climbed in the back. "The INS must pay pretty good these days."

"Your Immigration service does not employ me," he said as the driver pulled away from the curb. "I work in Rome. I just flew in last night."

I couldn't seem to concentrate, but then, I'd just watched them put my partner in the ground. "Norby's Italian?"

"British, before his citizenship was revoked." Dante removed a small tape unit from his pocket and set it to record. "Do you mind?"

Some cops used them instead of notepads, but not with other cops. Maybe it was an Italian thing. "Why not?"

"The authorities in Rome are interested in locating Mr. Norby and questioning him regarding his activities." Dante sounded more like a politician than a cop. "Can you describe his present appearance to me?"

I gave him a short description of the nightclub owner, then clued in on the word present. "Does he change how he looks to avoid arrest?"

"Occasionally he appears, ah, older. Sometimes he limps." Dante leaned forward and said something in rapid Italian to the driver. "The redheaded woman you reported meeting in his office, her name was Rebel?"

"That's what he called her." He knew an awful lot for a guy who just flew in from Rome. "Who did you say you work for, Mr. Dante? The Italian cops? Interpol?"

"That doesn't matter -"

"I'm giving you confidential information from a police investigation, I think it does." I noticed the driver had taken a subtle turn and was now headed toward the beach. "Where are we going?"

Dante clicked off the recorder. "You said you wished to return to Infusion, no?"

"Yeah, but it doesn't open until ten tonight. So why are we going there?"

"I don't suppose you are a Catholic, Detective Farrell." When I shook my head, he smiled a little. "Do you know anything about Greek legends?"

I knew the guy was starting to piss me off. "No, and you didn't answer my question."

He considered that for a moment before he said, "We cannot wait for it to open."

"You've got a warrant?" When he shook his head, I leaned over and said to the driver, "Stop the car." He kept driving, and I turned to Dante.. "Doesn't he speak English? Tell him to stop the car."

"Calm down, detective."

Now I was tired. And angry. Why had Grant stuck me with this Euro-jerk? "Look, according to our laws, you can't go busting into someone's home or club without probable cause or a warrant. You'll blow the case."

"I answer to a higher authority. We have been trying to locate Mr. Norby for some time. When Albert Tyson reported his presence here in Florida -"

"Tyson called Italy?"

"His report was forwarded to us. It took several days, but I came as soon as the message arrived." That was when Dante did something very bizarre. He took a chain of beads out of his pocket, kissed it, then hung it around his neck.

Not a chain of beads - a rosary.

"Okay." I leaned over the seat again. "You. Piasano. Stop the damn car right now." Instead of stopping, the driver pulled into an alley, and parked beside a service entrance discreetly marked Infusion. "You can't go in there, Dante. You don't have jurisdiction. It's breaking and entering."

Dante bent over to grab a small black gym bag from under the seat. "It is my duty, Detective Farrell. You may wait in the car with my driver, if you wish."

"What's in the bag?" I asked, but he was already climbing out. "God damn it, wait!" Dante had the service door open by the time I caught up. "What do I have to do? Put cuffs on you?"

"Wait in the car," was all he said before he moved inside and the door swung shut.

Swearing again, I pulled the door open and went after him.

* * *

The interior of the club was pitch black, but Dante turned on a flashlight and handed it to me before retrieving another from his gym bag. "Be quiet," he murmured as he entered what looked like a storage room.

"Why? There's no one here." A familiar odor hit my nose, and I swung the light around. "That smells like . . . oh, *shit*."

The body of a woman lay propped against a wall. As I knelt down, I saw no visible wounds, but from the odor, she'd been dead for days. I checked her face, and sighed. She'd been the girl in the center of the grope-fest.

I automatically reached to close her eyes, but Dante yanked my hand away. "Don't touch her," he said.

"She's dead." I got to my feet. "I have to call this in."

"Later. Come with me now." He held on to my wrist and led me out of the storage room. "Don't touch any of them," he said as we entered the main room of the nightclub.

"Any of who?"

He moved his flashlight around the room. Two bartenders lay sleeping on top of the bar, while one waitress sat snoozing with her head down at a nearby table.

"Is everybody who works here fucking homeless?" I turned to see Dante take a large coil of dark colored wire out of the gym bag. "What is that?"

"The only thing that binds them." He started toward for Norby's office.

"I've got handcuffs," I told him as he efficiently picked the lock on the office door. "Look, let me call in this dead girl and get a forensic unit out here."

"She's not dead." He went inside, and put the bag on Norby's desk. "I don't have a great deal of time to explain this to you."

Now he was in a hurry. "Try."

"Norby and his *vrykolakes* are powerful, dangerous killers - ancient, extremely strong, and aided by unnatural forces." He kissed his rosary and unzipped the bag. "Your weapon will not work on them."

Ancient killers. Unnatural forces. And what was that first thing - *fries and colas*? I took out my cuffs. "Dante, I respect religion and all, but you can't do this ritual thing on private property. Plus we've got a body out there, and it's really dead."

"Not exactly." He took another coil of the dark wire from the bag, then a pair of leather gloves, and a small spray bottle of water. "Wrap the wire around their bodies, then spray them with this." He tugged on his own pair of thick gloves. "Do not touch them with your skin. I will pierce their hearts with these." He took out a handful of thin, sharp wooden stakes.

"Let me guess." The guy was full scale loony tunes. "You've a big fan of Buffy, right?"

"No, but I am," a deep voice said. "Matteo. What a pleasure to see you again."

I pulled out my gun, but Dante moved in front of me as Norby came in and leaned back against the door, blocking our only exit. "*Alastore*."

Norby smiled, showing a pair of plastic fangs. "Not according to the gospel of *Relation de l'Isle de Sant-erini*, my friend. Father Francois called me the devil himself, did he not?"

Dante began to chant out loud in what sounded like Latin.

"I need to talk to you, Norby." I tried to get around the Italian, but he pushed me back. "Enough with praying, okay?"

The big man's pale gaze settled on me. "My friend here believes I am a minion of the devil, my dear."

"You are not my friend, Norby. And I will send you back to hell where you belong."

I looked from Norby to Dante. Nope. They weren't kidding. I stepped back and lifted my weapon. "Both of you, up against the wall. Right now."

"It is true, detective. Satan keeps certain bodies incorrupt and animates them after they die. He sends the demons to wander the earth - to feed on humanity." The Italian lifted a spray bottle like it was a .357 magnum. "Norby and his kind are *vrykolakes*, blood drinkers - the incarnate of evil."

Obviously, I was going to need some backup with straight jackets, so I kept my eyes on the crazy men and groped for the phone.

"Tell her the rest, Matteo. When such a *vrykolakas* is identified, the Vatican sends the good Father or one of his brothers to destroy it." Norby smiled wider, and the plastic fangs looked a little larger. "Are you still restricted to killing only six days each week? Or has His Holiness finally allowed you to violate the Sabbath?"

"You're both going to take a little trip to the Thorazine dispensary," I said as I found and picked up the phone.

That was the exact moment the lights dimmed, and Dante shouted something in Italian at me. Norby was suddenly right there, grabbing me, yanking the phone from my hand. I got one shot off before he knocked it away and yanked me back against him. A couple of bartenders ran in and tackled Dante. To add the final bizarre twist, the bartenders were wearing welding masks and raincoats.

Be still, Samantha. The voice in my head was Norby's, and it made me turn to stone.

"Don't kill the priest," I heard him say, and then a big hand covered my face and the world turned silent and black.

* * *

When I opened my eyes, I discovered I was still in Norby's office. Someone had taken off my dress jacket, my tie, and unbuttoned the collar of my starched shirt. The nightclub owner was sitting behind his desk, writing something in a ledger. His sleeves were rolled up and he was wearing reading glasses.

"What the fuck?" I sat up and grabbed my head. Pain hammered into it from both sides in a category five migraine. "Where's Dante? What did you do to me?"

"Father Matteo is quite safe, if a little out of sorts. My men escorted him off the premises." Norby closed the ledger. "His beliefs are quite sacred to him, you know. He doesn't like being proved wrong."

I pushed myself off the sofa and looked around for something I could use to knock him out. "Where's your girlfriend, the redhead?"

"I haven't the faintest idea. Rebel comes and goes as she pleases." He rose and swept out his arms. "Feel free to search the club, of course."

I felt like searching his mouth with my fist. "Did you kill my partner?"

"No." He stepped around the desk and came toward me. "How is your head?"

"Sore. Was she upset with Albert Tyson? Did they have a fight?" I backed up a step before I realized what I was doing. He wasn't listening to me. He was touching my hair, which someone had taken down - probably him. Then he smiled, and that close, I could see the fangs looked pretty real. "Are you incorruptible, Samantha?"

"Back off." Amazing what they could do with caps these days. "Right now."

Norby looked down, and his hair brushed my face. "I think you are." His mouth came up, hovered just an inch above mine. "Do you really think I'm the devil? Father Matteo does. He thinks if I touch you, I'll corrupt you with my evil."

"Dante needs help. So do you." I smelled wine, and something else on his cool breath. And the pain in my head intensified, to the point of where I could barely speak. "Every cop in Fort Lauderdale will be here within an hour, pal. I think you'd better give yourself up."

"You're an interesting puzzle, Detective Farrell. Beautiful woman, ugly job. But perhaps you think too much." He touched my face with his fingers, then frowned. "Who is Richard Singer?"

Before I could ask how he knew about Singer, the world went away again.

* * *

Sometime during that long stretch of darkness, I dreamed -- strange dreams. I saw beautiful women in long gowns. Men in suits with lace around their throats. I heard low, cultured voices speaking with British accents, like Norby's. An ocean voyage in an incredibly nasty-looking wooden ship. Islands. Black sands. Dark men in ragged clothes fighting in hills, hiding behind scraggly-looking trees.

Norby was there, too, but only his voice, at first. *You've never been made to leave your homeland, Samantha. You are fortunate in that.*

I turned around, trying to see him. *As soon as I wake up, you're going to jail. Wouldn't you rather stay with me?*

I felt hands touching my face, a mouth pressed against my throat. *This how you get your jollies? Can't you do it when the woman's conscious?*

Laughter vibrated against my neck. *You simply won't give in. Such an astonishing will.*

Get off me!

The laughter died away. *I could make you mine with a single thought.* For some reason, that made me think of Singer, and how I felt every time he'd put his slimy hands on me. *Try it, and see what happens.*

No, Samantha. I am not like him. But I will give you a taste of what you can have.

Another explosion of images filled my head, this time of me and Norby. I wore the long gown this time, and he held me in his arms and waltzed me around a room. That blurred into something darker, a bedroom filled with huge, ornate furniture, and I fell back against an enormous bed. Norby was on top of me, kissing me, pulling down the bodice of my gown -

He lifted his head, and smiled down at me, white fangs gleaming. *Now you give me a taste.*

* * *

"Then he bit me on the neck, and that's all I remember. I woke up in my apartment, in my own bed, and it was Tuesday morning." I rubbed the side of my throat, where it should have hurt - but there were no bite wounds. "I figure he drugged me with a hallucinogenic."

Grant had listened to my ridiculous story in complete silence. "I checked out Matteo Dante. He is a priest, and he works for the Vatican. He's some kind of investigator, and the INS story checks out. However, he hasn't been seen since he left the funeral with you. I sent a unit down to search the nightclub, but it was empty. As was your apartment."

I didn't want to ask, but I had to know. "Do you believe me?"

He nodded. "A lot of these goth types get into the vampire fantasy. He definitely drugged you."

"There's no way to know." I'd gone to the ER before checking in, but the exam and blood tests came out clean. Norby had used something untraceable. "I'm sorry, captain. I should have slapped the cuffs on Dante in the alley." I saw a shadow hovering outside Grant's door. "What about Singer?"

"I put him on desk duty, but he filed a grievance with the union." The captain pulled out a file. "All he has to do is twitch the wrong way with you, and I can nail him. But he has to twitch first, Sam. Until he does - "

"I know." I got up and made a point to check my weapon in front of the window where one blind strip was bent. "If he moves on me, I'll defend myself."

He nodded. "Get witnesses."

It wasn't hard to walk out and face Singer - physically. I went on automatic, the same way I had during my partner's funeral. Though I hated the tall, skinny, rat-faced son of a bitch almost as much as whoever had killed poor Harry.

"Detective Farrell." Singer's voice dripped saccharine. "So nice you could make it into work today."

"Detective Singer." Conscious of the many eyes watching us around the squad room, I walked over to my desk and sat down. The file on Albert and Harry were there, but someone had gone through them. Probably the dickhead, who now hovered behind me. "Excuse me, I have to type up some reports."

"I already did them for you." He dropped a small stack of completed forms in front of me. "Tyson's mother called while you were in bitching, I mean, talking, to the captain. She says she knows who killed Albert."

Which meant getting into a car with Singer and driving out there. He has to twitch first, Sam. I grabbed my keys and my jacket. "Let's go."

I'd set up a voice-activated recorder in the unmarked unit I usually drove, but Singer must have anticipated that, because he didn't threaten me at all on the drive to Tyson's house.

Instead, he chatted. Like we were old pals.

"Vice has twice the caseload, but they don't have half the floor space Homicide gets," Singer said as he watched me drive. "While I was down there, I had to share a desk and file cabinets with Burglary and Traffic. And my last partner was a slob, always spilling whatever he was drinking on the reports. I must have retyped a thousand of them." He chuckled a little. "I was really glad to get the transfer."

He'd been just as chatty back at the Academy, right up until he broke into my dorm room one night. After I'd kicked his ass, he'd claimed I'd come on to him. Luckily, my roommate had backed me up.

"I'm also glad I have a chance to work with you again," he added. "We should let bygones be bygones."

The same thing he'd said, just before sending Hernandez after me. *I'm not falling for your shit this time.* I parked in front of Rebecca Tyson's home. "We're here."

On the walk up to the door, Singer stepped in front of me, forcing me to stop. "I'm dying to know, are you wearing a wire, Detective Farrell?"

I opened my jacket so he could see my weapon. "Put your hands on me, Dickhead, and I'll blow your balls off."

"Oh, really?" Singer grinned. "What if I'm wearing a wire, Detective Farrell?"

I pushed him aside and went to the door. After ringing the bell and knocking for a few minutes, I heard a shuffling sound on the other side.

"Lazy broad takes her time, doesn't she?" Singer commented.

"Shut up, she's old." I stepped back as the door opened and Albert's mother peered out. She looked ten times worse than the last time I'd seen her. "Hello, Mrs. Tyson. Detective Farrell, remember me?"

"You came to tell me about Albert," she said, then looked at Singer. "I don't know you."

"Detective Farrell got her partner - I mean, Detective Farrell's partner was murdered," Singer said.

I controlled a wave of rage. Barely. "You wanted to talk to us, ma'am?"

"Come inside."

The house was just as stark and dark as before, but I noticed a distinct, unpleasant odor - like someone had thrown up. Then the old lady passed in front of me, and I saw some vomit stains on the front of her house dress. "Are you feeling okay, Mrs. Tyson?"

"No," she said bluntly. "I know who killed Albert. It was that man he worked for at the nightclub. Norby."

So she was ready to admit Albert wasn't such an angel, after all. "The last time I spoke to you, Mrs. Tyson, you said Albert didn't have time to go out - that he never went out anywhere."

"I forgot." She pushed back a handful of her ratty hair. "Albert did work for Norby. I know he killed my son."

"You don't have any evidence, lady," Singer said.

"Go and search his office." Her withered face turned an alarming shade of purple, and she dug her twisted fingers into the chair arms. "You'll find all the evidence you need."

I heard upholstery rip. "How would you know that, Mrs. Tyson?"

"One of the girls who works for him called me." She let go of the chair and folded her arms tightly over her shrunken abdomen. "She said she saw things. Things in Norby's desk."

Singer got to his feet. "Right. Thanks for the tip."

I wasn't ready to go just yet. "What motive would Norby have to kill Albert? Was there a problem with the work he did for him?" "He wanted Albert all for himself, the disgusting man." The old lady's voice dropped to a whisper. "He was jealous of me."

Singer sputtered out a laugh. "Of you?"

Mrs. Tyson's head snapped up. "Yes! Albert loved me! Only me!"

I felt sorry for her, but I got to my feet. "Okay, ma'am. We'll check it out."

"He'll be at that club of his tonight." Mrs. Tyson's eyes gleamed. "The girl told me. After sunset." As we left, she called out, "You can only catch him after sunset."

I wondered if Tyson's mother thought Norby was a vampire, too.

* * *

Singer behaved himself for the rest of our shift, but informed me he was going with me to Infusion.

"Department policy," he said when I told him I could handle taking in Norby with the help of a couple of uniforms. "You don't want me to file another grievance, do you, Detective Farrell?" As we were in the squad room, he said it loud enough for everyone to hear. "You can pick me up at my place, after dark."

Like I'd ever go within ten miles of his place. "I'll meet you here."

I went home, and paced around my apartment for a couple of hours. My neck still hurt where there should have been a bite. The dream images kept bugging me. Singer was a bomb, waiting to go off in my face. Dante was still missing and probably dead. And I still didn't know who killed Albert Tyson, or Harry, or the girl we found in the storage room.

You think too much, Norby's voice whispered in my head.

RatFace was waiting by my unit when I came back to headquarters that night. I glanced at his change of clothes and slicked-back hair - I was still wearing the same, wilted suit -- but didn't comment. Which irked him. "Don't you like my new Armani? I got it cheap from the last DEA auction."

Only a guy like Singer would buy clothes that once belonged to a pusher. "It's not Armani," I said, mouth-breathing to avoid the smell of his musk cologne. "It's a knock-off."

"How do you know?" His beady gaze crawled over me. "Does Grant wear the real thing?"

Responding to that was useless - he was already working himself up to be jealous of any man I spoke to. Just like every time before. I made a mental note to warn the captain, then drove down Broward Boulevard toward the beach. Singer chatted again, but this time about his conquests.

"That's what's good about working Vice - it's wall to wall women." He alternated between staring at my face and staring at my crotch. "Hookers, crack heads, runaways - and you wouldn't believe how friendly some of them can get. Oh, but I forgot - you don't like sex."

He'd probably raped a few suspects before bringing them in for booking, the sick bastard.

"You're not listening to me." He sounded vaguely upset. "You're ignoring me. You can't ignore me like this."

"Watch me." I stopped at a red light, then felt Singer's hand snake over my thigh. "Get your fucking hand off my leg."

"Not yet." He kept it there, and edged a little closer. "Did I mention that I ripped out the recorder?" He pressed something harder into my side. "I've waited too long for this, Samantha. Don't," he tagged on when I reached for my weapon. He jerked it out of my grip. "I can shoot you in the side and dump you in an alley, too."

"You need help, Singer." I looked up at the light, which had turned green. "Why do this to yourself again?"

"I haven't done anything yet. Just you wait." His gun dug into my ribs as he reached down and pulled my backup piece from my ankle holster. "Drive to the nightclub."

I drove. I was betting Singer couldn't keep his weapon on me once I was out of the car, and he didn't know about the blade I had strapped to the small of my back. "You'll either die or fry for this, Singer. Don't do it."

"Norby will take the heat. I promise, I'll be one of your pall bearers, Samantha. Like you were for poor old Harry." He kissed my cheek and stroked my thigh. "You shouldn't have turned me down at the academy. You shouldn't have tried to ruin my career."

I stopped the car in front of Infusion and tried to get out, but Singer curled his free arm around my shoulders. "You coe out this way, with me." He moved the gun hand to open the door, and I tried to drive an elbow into his throat. An instant later, the gun was under my chin. "Bitch. Move your ass."

He got me out of the car and into a one-armed hold, then marched me up to the door. "I'll shoot the bouncer between the eyes if you say a word," he whispered into my hair. "One word."

The bouncer didn't even try to stop us, he just opened the door. Inside, the heavy metal music had been replaced by Mozart, and there were candles burning everywhere. No bartenders or waitresses, only a man gagged and tied to a chair in the center of the dance floor.

Dante.

As Singer took this in, the door swung shut behind us and the bouncer locked it from the outside.

"Detective Farrell." Norby stepped out from behind one of the bars, carrying a glass of wine. "How nice to see you again. You remember Father Matteo. And who is this charming gentleman?"

"Norby, get out of here!" I yelled.

"Oh, no." Singer calmly shot the nightclub owner in the chest. "I need his body."

Norby staggered back for a moment, then straightened and placed the wine glass on a nearby table. "That wasn't very polite."

I'd seen the bullet hit. He'd taken a direct shot to the heart - was he wearing a vest? Had to be -

Singer shot him again, over and over until he emptied his clip. All Norby did was jerk a little as each bullet hit him. In the chest, in the groin, and twice in the head. He didn't bleed. He didn't fall down. He didn't die. He just waited until Singer's gun clicked on an empty chamber, and then he smiled.

Those long, sharp fangs weren't plastic or caps. They were for real. *He* was for real.

"Finished?" Norby asked. He wasn't even winded.

With a bellow of outrage, Singer knocked me to the floor and ran toward Norby. I scrambled up in time to see the nightclub owner catch him and lift him off the floor by the front of his cheap suit.

"This is Richard Singer, is it not?" orby asked me. Singer just sort of hung there, his face comical with surprise. "The one who has been trying to kill you?"

"He's a very sick man." I moved in, ready to kill myself. "Put him down, I'll deal with him."

"You've tried before, Samantha." Norby transferred his gaze to Singer. "He murdered your partner, you know. Tell her."

"I . . . killed . . . Halloway." The words exploded from Singer's white lips. "Old fuck . . . kept me . . . from Samantha. Tired . . . of waiting."

Matteo made a harsh sound from behind his gag.

A strange humming sound filled my ears. "How did you know that?"

"I'm a bit of a psychic, actually." Norby lowered Singer to the ground, then cradled his face between his palms. "Enjoy hell, Richard. Try not to take it over." With one brutal jerk, he snapped Singer's head around, and broke his neck, then let the body fall to the floor. "Come here, Samantha."

I went over to Dante instead, stripped off his gag and tugged at knot binding his wrists. There was blood on his mouth, and he was pale. "Are you all right?"

He swallowed, then pushed what looked like a little bottle of breath spray in my hand. "Holy . . . water . . ." then he sagged forward, unconscious.

Someone seized me from behind, and I felt sharp nails dig into my neck. "I told you to search his office!" a raspy voice shouted in my ear. "You stupid cow, you've ruined everything!"

I turned my head, grimacing as the nails dug deeper, and saw Rebel's furious face. "What?"

"We age," Norby said. "In the daylight, when we're denied blood."

"As you denied me. Making me drink the blood of animals for weeks, making me sick." Rebel dragged me back against her, and edged away from the dance floor and Norby. She was so strong I couldn't move an inch. "You want her, don't you, Gordon? Just like Albert. You couldn't leave my Albert alone."

"I never touched the boy." For the first time, Norby sounded angry. "He was yours, Rebecca. You knew how devoted he was to the church, and you still changed him against his will. Your lies drove him to suicide."

Rebecca?

The dead girl from the storage room appeared beside Rebel, adding one more bizarre note to the entire scene. "Let go of her!"

The redhead reached out and clawed the girl across the face, then dragged me away, heading for the entrance. No one tried to follow us.

"He wants you, but he can't have you." She let go of my throat, whirled me around and stuck her face in mine. The wrinkled face was smoothing out; the white hair was turning red. "You want to love me, don't you?" she asked in her old lady's rasp. "You want to live forever with me?"

I pulled my blade and pressed it against her belly. "No."

She giggled as she wrapped her hand around mine, and forced me to stab her. "That won't kill me." A gun fired from somewhere, and she jerked. "Or that."

"This might." I sprayed her in the face with Dante's holy water.

I thought it might blind her, but I was wrong. Holy water worked like acid, from the way she clawed at her cheeks and screamed and fell to the floor. "Jesus." I dropped the sprayer, whipped off my jacket and tried to wipe her face, but her flesh was smoking and . . . melting.

"You can't save her." Cool fingers enclosed mine. "Come, Samantha."

* * *

I ended up in Norby's office, calmly sitting on his leather sofa while he poured me a glass of wine. I didn't want to be there, but I was in shock. Or something. I wasn't too sure what kind of control Norby had over me at that point.

"I owe you an apology." Norby handed me a glass. "I punished Rebel for forcing Albert to undergo the blood exchange, when I should have simply destroyed her."

I drank half the glass in one swallow. "So it's true, what the priest said. You're vampires. You, Rebel, the bartenders. That dead girl."

"Vrykolakes. There are some functional differences, but yes, that's the general idea." He straightened his sleeves. "It was the two-by-four that killed Albert, not the fall. Wood through the heart causes our bodies to spontaneously combust. As does holy water."

I drank the rest of the wine. "Albert Tyson wasn't a vampire, though, until he met up with your friend Rebel. She made him into one, he couldn't stand it, and killed himself. And Singer killed Harry."

"I believe so." He sat on the edge of the desk.

"What about the Vatican cop?"

"Alas, Father Matteo chose to return and attack me a second time. However, he hasn't been harmed. In fact, I'm sending him back to Rome with a message for the Pope." He studied me for a moment. "Now I must decide what to do with you."

"Nothing. You're not going to do a fucking thing," John Grant said as he stepped out of the shadows, gun drawn. "Get up, Sam."

I didn't look away from Norby's pale eyes. "Rebel for Singer - that makes us even. I don't know what the rest of your deal is, but I don't want any part of it."

His mouth hitched. "Not even the promise of immortality?"

I thought of the dreams, then Rebel's face, melting. "Goth isn't my thing. Neither is blood or serving the devil. I'm a cop."

Norby laughed. "That you are." He inclined his head toward the captain. "I yield her to your prior claim, sir." He looked at my neck. "For now."

Grant covered me as we backed out of the room. I looked around to see the bodies, along with the priest, were gone. The captain didn't let go of me until we

were outside the club, surrounded by uniforms and lights from a dozen patrol cars. The swat team moved in, but emerged a short time later.

They'd found no one inside - the club was completely deserted.

"You had someone tailing us," I said as Grant guided me toward his car. "The whole time?"

"And a backup recorder. I was with you every step of the way, Sam." He opened the door for me, then had a word with the officer in charge before getting in. He didn't turn on the engine, though. He sat for a full minute, staring at the steering wheel. "I though I'd seen everything, before tonight."

"Me too." I fell silent for a while as he drove back to the station. Vampires committing suicide, priest cops, and my own captain tailing me. As he parked, I decided I had to know. "What did he mean, your prior claim?"

"Nosy bastard," the captain said in disgust, then pulled me across the seat until our nose bumped. "I was going to transfer you out to Missing Persons before I did anything." Then he kissed me, quick and hard. "Tell me you don't want any part of this, and we'll forget about it."

It was the final shock of the evening, but a good one. "I stay in Homicide."

He drew back a little. "Yeah. Okay."

"If it works out" --I smiled and patted his cheek before I kissed him back-- "you'd better make Commissioner."

* * *

It worked out.

To protect both our futures, John and I had to write some very creative, edited reports about what had happened to us. As a result, Richard Singer, Rebecca Tyson, and the girl from the storage room were reported as missing persons. To date, their bodies have never been recovered.

Infusion never reopened, and was sold by an anonymous property management company a few months later. Well-paid attorneys handled everything.

Norby kept his promise, and sent Father Matteo back to Rome. I knew that because the priest called me from the Vatican to see if I had any further leads on the nightclub owner's whereabouts. He didn't say what Norby's message had been, but I remembered the blood on the priest's mouth, and wondered if it had been his - or Norby's.

A few months after the final showdown at Infusion, Singer's sister called IA. Apparently she had moved into her brother's house and found a disturbing room wallpapered with photos of me, along with evidence that proved every allegation I'd made against him. There was a bit of a media flare, and a couple of true crime authors contacted me, wanting to write my story. I politely declined.

John and I kept our relationship quiet for a year, while we were figuring out what we wanted. Then he made Chief of Police, and I resigned from the force to start my own security firm. We got married six months later.

We spent our honeymoon at a bed and breakfast in the Key West, mostly in bed. I didn't have trouble sleeping, although my new husband did one night, after a beautiful arrangement of white roses were delivered. No card came with the flowers, but the hotel manager confirmed that they were definitely sent for us.

When John finally fell asleep, I got up, and went to sit out on the balcony. He'd insisted on putting the flowers out there, then I remembered him tossing something in the trash. I studied the roses, then went in and picked up the little trash can by the bed. In the bottom was the card, crumpled up. I understood everything when I read the two words someone had written on it.

For now.

Roomies

"You don't really want this place," Betty-Ann the property agent told me. "Let me show you that pretty little townhouse I was telling you about, over on Royal Palm."

"That's okay." I looked around the estate cottage one more time. Two rooms, five windows, completely furnished, no neighbors. Writer heaven. "This is perfect."

"You don't understand." Her thready soprano dropped to a less annoying octave. "The last tenant who lived here died suddenly. He was sitting right there on that couch reading, then he just keeled over. Poof. He was gone."

"Better than dying slowly." I reached in my purse and pulled out my checkbook. "First, last, and security, right?"

She shook her head, and her sprayed, tinted hair bounced like a loose helmet. "I shouldn't say this, my new boss will kill me if he found out." Her eyes moved right, then left. "Mr. Noble, the tenant before, well, some people say he was murdered."

I glanced around the floor, but no sign of bloodstains or brains. Not even so much as a hint of a chalk outline. "How did he die?"

"They just found him on the floor, dead." She sounded like he'd done it on purpose, to ruin the lease value. "No apparent cause, it said in the papers."

I wanted to write my check and start carrying in boxes. "Maybe it was old age."

"That's just it, he was only forty." B-A gave me a troubled look. "And he was a detective. A real one."

The facts and the name suddenly clicked. "Devin Noble?" When she nodded, I grinned. Life generally stinks, but sometimes, it tosses up a little well-deserved revenge. "Now I *have* to have it. How much?"

She told me, then added, "You still want to move in? Knowing he died here and all?"

"Devin Noble was presumptuous egotistic bastard who had about as much charm as a diseased hyena. I'll bet some client swindled did the world a favor and smothered him in his sleep." I started filling in the check.

"Oh, my goodness." Betty-Ann managed to look both horrified and impressed. "You knew him?"

"No." I ripped off the check and handed it to her.

"Then how" she made a helpless gesture.

"He sent me some fan mail." In which he'd told me, repeatedly, that I knew nothing about real detective work and should stop writing mysteries - not that I was going to tell B-A that. I smiled. "I kept every letter he wrote." *And had used each one to line the cat's litter box.*

"Well." Betty-Ann folded the check in half and tucked it in the date book she carried. "I hope you'll be happy here."

In the place where my severest critic had met an untimely death? "I'm crazy about it already."

* * *

Faust shot out of his carrier the minute I opened the little mesh door, took one look around, and hissed.

"What's the matter, baby?" I asked as I put the empty carrier in the closet. "Can you still smell the big fat jerk who used to live here?"

My cat gave me a disgusted look and stalked off to patrol the premises.

It had taken me a couple of hours to transfer everything from my truck to the cottage, but I was almost done. My computer was set up, my suitcase was stowed, and the books I couldn't live without were stacked neatly on the shelf above Devin Noble's desk.

My desk, I thought as I ran my fingers over the glossy mahogany surface. He'd rented the cottage, too; there was no reason to assume all this stuff had been his.

A cool breeze rushed in through the window I'd opened, and I shivered. It was March in South Florida, but a cold front had moved in and the temperature was supposed to drop to an icy forty degrees by night. As cold as New York when I'd left it.

I decided to make some tea to warm myself up, then get right to work.

As I prepared the kettle, I thought about the rather weird series of events that had brought me to this cottage. After the horrors of 9/11, I didn't feel safe in New York anymore, and I was tired of the cold weather. Florida had always been one of my favorite vacation spots, but I couldn't afford to make the move.

Then my last novel, a funny little cozy featuring a grocery cashier sleuth, had unexpectedly popped out of the midlist and started climbing the bookseller charts. Within a month, I'd hit the New York Times best seller list. Even better, I'd stayed there for seven months.

Everything changed. Editors who couldn't be bothered to read my submissions or return my e-mails were suddenly calling me "Ms. Anderson" over the phone and asking me out to lunch. My agent sent me a dozen roses with my last royalty check, which had increased by four pretty hefty digits. Reviewers called me "the overnight sensation" or "the hidden wonder" of the mystery genre.

You're nothing but a hack.

The voice sounded so real I actually turned around. "What? Who's there?"

No answer.

"I've got to stop rehearsing dialogue in my head," I muttered.

Someone knocked on the front door. "Ms. Anderson? You still up?"

Maybe he'd called out before and that was what I'd heard. I went and found a short, stocky bald man in a beautiful suit hovering on my new front step. He was carrying a small bunch of daisies and looked totally miserable.

"Yes?" I looked from the daisies to him. "Can I help you?"

"I'm Marc Waynewright." He nodded toward the big mansion on the other side of the property.

"My new landlord." I smiled and held the door open. "Come on in."

He shook his head and thrust the daisies in my hand. "Haven't been able to come in here since my wife left me. She used to live here, too."

I didn't know what he was talking about, but I gave him a sympathetic smile anyway. "Sorry."

He glanced at the living room floor. "Did you, uh, know about Dev?"

"Betty-Ann told me." And I was still gloating over it.

"Maybe you should reconsider, you know." He peered furtively over my shoulder. "The last couple who rented it left the day after they moved in. They said this place is haunted."

Only by the smell of testosterone. "I'll be fine. Thanks for the flowers."

"If you need anything." He made a vague gesture toward the house again, then trudged off.

I put the daisies in a vase I found under the sink, made my tea and carried it out to the computer, which I'd left switched on. Marc Waynewright seemed terrible upset about . . . his wife? I vaguely remembered some article about her in the paper. She'd run off, maybe. Shame, he seemed like a nice, if rather easily spooked, guy.

I went to start writing, only to find the screen was dark. I frowned as I knelt next to the tower and checked the various connections. They were all tight, so I got up and tried rebooting it. My word processing screen instantly came up, and there were words typed on the blank page.

I said, you're nothing but a hack.

I chuckled. "Cute. Someone trying to make me believe there's a ghost in here or something?" I did a one-eighty. "Come on out."

The property agent didn't come out. Marc Waynewright didn't come out. No one came out.

A tapping sound made me turn and look at my keyboard. The keys were moving up and down. *By themselves.*

I stared at them until they stopped moving. Then I looked up at the screen. There were more words typed on the page.

You're a hack, your cat is ugly and you've got too much stuff, but I like the dress.

A wisp of breeze tugged at the hem of my skirt, and an invisible, icy finger brushed across my lower lip. The keys began moving again.

Still want to be roomies with me?

* * *

I'd never had a paranormal experience before, so I did what any sensible woman would do - I screamed, and ran out of the cottage - or tried to. The front door wouldn't open. I jerked and pulled and twisted the knob, but it wouldn't budge.

"Leaving so soon?"

I went still and my throat dried up. I knew how many ways you could kill someone using ordinary household objects. I'd researched it for my last novel. "I have a gun. Get out of my house."

"No you don't, and it was mine first."

Slowly I turned around. I don't know why - that was usually the point in all the slasher movies I'd seen when the victim got a hatchet in the face. Then I saw him standing by my computer.

He was short and blond and not particularly handsome. He wore a turtleneck sweater, pegged jeans and work boots, all in various shades of faded black. There was a chunky old watch on his left wrist. His almost-white hair was pulled back from a widow's peak into a longish ponytail. He stood with his thumbs hooked in his belt loops, like a hood.

He was also semi-transparent and floating six inches off the floor.

For some reason, that didn't bother me as much as the smirk on his face. "Who are you supposed to be? Jacob Marley Meets the Beach Boys?" I demanded.

He folded his arms. "Guess again."

"All right." I scanned the room, looking for the projector beam. "Fun's over. Turn off the light show and come out here, before I call the police."

"It's no light show, Andy." He walked - well, floated - toward me. "I'm Devin Noble."

I snorted and circled around him, looking for whatever was creating this not very impressive illusion. "And I'm the Easter Bunny." I poked behind the entertainment center. "Come on, Betty-Ann, I'm not giving up my security deposit that easily." *And how did she know my nickname was Andy?*

"You don't believe it's me?"

"No, Casper, I don't." I jerked open the closet door, but Faust's carrier was the only thing inside. "Harassing a tenant isn't too wise. There are laws against this kind of thing."

"Okay, you asked for it." That chilly breeze touched the back of my neck like a lover's caress. "In my first letter, I told you that your characters were made of cardboard and your plotting was romance writer stupid. In my second, I suggested you try talking to a real cop instead of turning them all into pansies in your stories. In my third, I told you I was going to write a book just to show you how it was done. Then my first book hit the bestseller list, and I sent you a signed copy. That enough, or you want more?"

I slowly swiveled around. The man was right in my face, only an inch away. He wasn't hovering now, and he looked pretty solid. "You *are* Devin Noble."

"I was." He sighed. "Look, we've got work to do."

"Do we?" I slammed my fist into his belly, and watched him double over as I rubbed my knuckles. "You know, you feel pretty corporeal for a ghost."

He sank to his knees, still clutching his abdomen, and groaned. "I knew you'd be a total bitch in person."

"I'm calling the police now." I went over and picked up the phone. "Faking your own death is a hell of a publicity stunt, Dev, but I'm pretty sure it's illegal." He didn't make a sound, so I glanced back. "Oh, come on. I didn't hit you that hard, you wimp-"

But the not very convincing ghost of Devin Noble was gone.

* * *

The cop who'd taken my statement was sympathetic, but not very optimistic. "Sounds like a bit of a practical joke to me, ma'am. I'd get your landlord to change the locks and put in a security system."

I was calling Marc Waynewright first thing in the morning. "Thanks."

After he left, I searched the entire cottage for whatever Noble had used to create the illusion of the ghost. And found nothing. By the time I was finished, it was almost midnight, and I was hungry, dusty, and cranky. I fed Faust, who was in an equally foul mood, then grabbed a sandwich for myself.

I ate at my computer, as usual, reading the last chapter I'd worked on before my move. The new novel was coming along nicely, and I expected to finish it by the end of the month. My editor was certainly frothing at the mouth, anxious to read it.

"I don't know why. A four year old could figure out the puzzle."

I grabbed the baseball bat I'd taken from my truck and jumped into a batter's stance. "Where are you? Come on, Noble, you rat. Show yourself."

Some pretty lights twinkled in the middle of the room. Just like the sparkly trail the cartoon fairy left when she flew around the Disney castle.

I got the distinct feeling I was in for paranormal experience #2.

"Put that down, you're just going to hurt yourself," he said, his voice coming from the center of the lights.

"Come out!" So he could throw his voice. I could knock a baseball out of the park. "I mean it, you louse!"

"Okay, keep your panties on." The lights intensified, stretched, and formed into a body. Slowly they faded until Devin Noble appeared.

"Wow, special effects." I strode over and took a swing at him. And watched my bat pass through his body. I turned around in a circle. "Get your ass out of my house, Tinkerbell."

"It's real. I'm real." He caught the bat when I swung at him again, and tossed it across the room. Then he walked into me. And through me. My body temperature dropped twenty degrees as the freezing patch of air went through me and back again. He appeared in front of me once more. "Is that enough proof?"

"No." I shook my head, trying to keep my teeth from chattering. "The villains on Scooby-Doo are more convincing." I picked up a chair.

"Put that down and stop trying to bludgeon me." He took the chair out of my hands and jerked it away. Then he started fading again. "I need your help."

"You do." I lifted a hand and tried to touch him. And felt my fingers chill to the bone as they slid through his arm. "With what?"

He reached up and tapped the end of my nose with an icy finger. "Nailing the guy who killed me."

* * *

A half hour later I sat in my kitchen drinking tea while Devin Noble's ghost sat and finished telling me about his murder.

"I figure it's someone involved in the last case I worked on." He watched me sip. "Marcus Waynewright, the guy who owns this place, hired me to track down his ex-wife, Linda. She used to live in this cottage, but she's been missing since Christmas. Linda's mother, Isabel, is convinced Marcus killed Linda and disposed of her body. Marcus thinks Isabel is hiding her daughter somewhere, trying to get him thrown in jail. I was getting close to solving the case toward the end."

"Hmmm." I smelled jasmine, and looked out the kitchen window. I'd seen a huge bush of the night-blooming variety outside when I'd moved in. The beautiful scent only added to my bizarre situation. "Kind of a short list of suspects. Didn't you see who killed you?"

"No. I don't even know how they did it. One minute I'm relaxing with a book on the couch, then next, I'm like this." He gestured toward his now transparent body.

"How come you don't stay solid?"

He grimaced. "It's too hard. I can only do it for fifteen, twenty minutes at the most. Tires me out so much I fade away for a couple of hours." Then he leered a little. "But that's enough time for some things, if you don't mind getting a nice, hard, cold -"

"In your dreams." I finished my tea. "And where do you go when you fade?"

"A place that sucks. Nowhere. I just hang in between this world and the next." He eyed my mug. "You want more?"

"No, I think I've had plenty." I went to the sink and rinsed out the cup. "Devin, what do you want me to do? Go question these people? Tell them you're haunting the cottage? You're really pissed off? What?"

"I was writing a book based on the Waynewright case. Just before I was murdered, I'd gotten some threatening letters-

I huffed out a "Ha."

"-so I hid everything under the floorboards in the closet." He glared at me. "Take it out and read it tonight. Then we'll talk."

"Tomorrow. I need to get some sleep." I didn't want to read Devin's book. I didn't want to talk to his ghost anymore. The letters sounded promising, though. "Tell me something. Did you have anything to do with me coming here?"

"No. It's the way this stuff works out. Karma," he added when I gave him a blank look. "I did something for you in life, now you get to do something to avenge my death." He yawned. "I'd better go."

"Wait a minute." My eyes narrowed. "What, exactly, did you ever do for me? Other than bore me to tears with your whiny little letters?"

"They weren't whiny. I mentioned your last novel to one of my reviewers." He sounded disgusted. "She's a big mahaff over at the New York Times."

"You hated my books."

He met my gaze straight on. "Yeah, I did."

"You told her it sucked, didn't you?"

"Words to that effect." He shrugged. "It doesn't matter now."

"You sent it to her and told her it sucked so she could rip it apart in a review." I wanted to kill him all over again, until it dawned on me. "And it backfired on you. She loved it."

"Yeah, she did." He gave me a testy look as he started to fade away. "You goddamn women always stick together."

"I like karma already," I said, and laughed until he was gone.

* * *

When I woke up the next morning, it seemed like I'd just had a really spectacular bad dream. I don't think it really hit me that I'd spent half the night talking to the ghost of a man I detested until I found Devin's manuscript hidden in the closet, exactly where he'd said it would be.

"Jesus." I sat on the floor and looked at it for a few minutes. "It wasn't indigestion or a nightmare."

The file folder was heavy, and nearly spilled all over the place when I picked it up. There was a manuscript inside, bound with a wide rubber band. The first page read "'Til Death Do Us Part" and "A Novel by Devin Noble."

"Cheesy title." I set the manuscript aside.

There was a notebook, filled with Noble's atrocious handwriting, a couple of photographs of a beautiful blonde in a microscopic bikini, a dark brunette in sunglasses and an ugly dark suit, and three folded pieces of paper with bits of newsprint pasted on them.

Aha. I took out the three letters. *The good stuff.*

As threatening letters went, they were short and pretty juvenile. The first read, *Stop investigating Linda Waynewright or you'll be sorry.* The second read, *Drop the case now before you get hurt.*

It was the third that made me take in a quick breath. *Leave town tonight or I'm going to kill you.*

I spent the rest of the day going through Dev's notes, reading the police reports, studying the letters and finally, reading the manuscript.

As soon as I finished the last page, a familiar voice asked, "Great story, huh?"

Lights coalesced in front of me. I stood up, yawned, and stretched, then carried the manuscript and folder with me into the kitchen to fix myself something edible.

"Well?" he demanded as he materialized next to me.

I nearly dropped my mug. "Well, what?"

"Pretty fantastic, isn't it?" He smirked.

It had been great; I couldn't put it down the whole time I'd read it. "Marginally."

He didn't seem to hear me. "When this is done, you've got to finish it and send it to my editor. It's guaranteed to blow Grisham off the charts."

"So now you need me to solve your murder and finished your book." I turned on the gas stove and smiled as I picked up the title page. "How's the byline going to read? A novel by Devin Noble's ghost and the romance writer stupid girl?"

He glanced at the title page I was holding over the flaming burner, then solidified and grabbed my wrist. "You wouldn't."

I flashed him some enamel. "No, but you would *not* believe how much I am tempted." I waited a few more seconds, then set the title back on top of the manuscript. "Lucky for you, I'm not a malicious vindictive envious jackass megalomaniac intent on destroying someone else's career."

Dev released a long breath. "Okay, I deserved most of that. Not the envious part, of course. But it doesn't matter. I'm dead, and you're alive." He leaned into me. "In the end, you came out on top, babe."

"Don't call me babe." I gave him a good shove and went to the fridge. "So where do we go from here? And if you say the bedroom, I'll going to call an exorcist."

"Keep your chastity belt on, Anderson. You need to go up to the big house and talk to Waynewright. I'm not going anywhere." At my look, he spread his hands. "I've tried, but I can't. I'm stuck here in the cottage for the duration."

"Lucky me."

"How do you think I feel about it?"

"Like I care. And Waynewright really didn't have a motive to kill Linda." I retrieved some cold rotisserie chicken I'd picked up at the market and brought it to the table. "They had a pretty amicable divorce, remained friends, and even lived on the same property. In your notes, you said Marcus often came to the cottage to have lunch or dinner with her." I frowned. "Kind of a weird divorce, if you ask me."

"Linda found out Marcus was having an affair with the exotic dancer, and decided to call it quits. She may have looked like a bimbo, but she was a pretty old-fashioned girl." He rolled his eyes, like that was a bad thing. "Marc talked her into taking the cottage as part of the divorce settlement. Maybe after it was over, Linda found herself a new boyfriend, and ex-hubby walked in on them."

"You think he was jealous?" I cut off a leg and peeled off the skin. "When he was screwing around her?"

"Any man can play dog in the manger, Andy."

"I'll take your word for it." I gave him a brilliant smile before nodding at the file. "About the photos -- the blonde is Linda, right? So who's the brunette?"

"His mistress, Elisa. She danced at a club down on the beach. He paid her to leave town after Linda left him, hoping it would save the marriage." He openly checked out my legs. "You would have made one a hell of a stripper."

"Gee, Mr. Noble, did every woman you hit on really fall for that lame line?"

His blond brows lowered. "Babe, if I was hitting on you, you wouldn't have a prayer."

"I'd become a lesbian first." I batted my eyelashes at him before I took a bite of my chicken and chewed. "Okay, so I go up and interview Marcus. What about the mother?"

"Isabel couldn't have killed Linda; she was in Nassau on vacation at the time." He rubbed his chin. "You really aren't attracted to me?"

"No, I'm not. Live with it. And, by the way, you can buy yourself a Cuban hit man for twenty bucks and a carton of cigarettes in Little Havana." I shook the chicken leg at him. "And you don't know Linda's even dead. Isabel could have taken her off to the islands, according to Marcus's theory, and is keeping her there to put the squeeze on him."

"The police have kept the case open, but they're not pursuing Marcus - or anyone, at this point." He stared at my plate. "Damn, I miss eating, even if I don't get hungry anymore." His gaze shifted up. "Among other things."

"Maybe she had you murdered out of pity for the rest of my gender."

"Or to jump start the case." He sighed. "I just don't know."

I wiped my hands and mouth on a napkin, then put the chicken away. I felt frustrated - what did he expect me to do? "I've got to go make the rounds and talk to these people."

"Tomorrow?" he asked in a hopeful tone.

"I'm not a lady of leisure, Dev." I planted my hands on my hips. "I have a deadline to meet on my latest book."

"I'll help you write it. Would only take me a few-" He saw my expression. "Okay, bad idea."

"Yeah. Here." I picked up the manuscript, and held it out. "Go put this back in closet and get out of here, I want to take a shower." I paused. "And no popping into my bathroom when I'm naked."

"You should have mentioned last night."

He disappeared before I could punch him again.

* * *

I spent all of the next day interviewing the two main suspects -- Marcus Waynewright and Nancy Hillerman. Both were completely convincing, sincere, and hated each other guts to the point of where I was surprised they hadn't tried to kill each other.

"That controlling witch would love nothing more than to see me go to the electric chair," Marcus assured me when I went up to the main house to speak with him. "She filled my wife's head with all that nonsense about the divorce, then got pissed off when Linda settled for the prenup amount we agreed on. She won't be happy until she ruins my life."

"Marcus Waynewright is a lying, murdering adulterer who deserves to be filleted with a rusty fish knife," Linda's mother told me an hour later, when I stopped by her house on the beach. "He murdered my poor baby because she wouldn't demean herself by tolerating his sordid affair with that disgusting snake dancer. I won't rest until he's brought to justice and given the death penalty."

I stopped for lunch, then went back to the cottage and started making phone calls. I spoke to a dozen of Linda's friends, the modeling agency she worked for, and slowly put together the events that led up to the time of her disappearance. As the sun set, I was about to give up, when a FAX copy of the police report on Devin's death came it. After I finished reading it, I was more confused than ever.

"The house was locked, the police had to break down the door." I got up and walked to a stretch of floor in front of the coffee table. "Dev's body was right here." I looked at the scanned photo from the crime scene. No signs of violence, not a thing out of place.

What had he said? *One minute I'm relaxing with a book on the couch, the next . . .*

I peered at the scan again. There was no sign of a book anywhere in the picture. Slowly I got down on my hands and knees, and felt under the sofa. And came up with a rather dusty copy of my last novel. "I'll be damned. He told me he put this in his wood chipper."

That was the moment when everything came together. I went to my computer and started typing furiously.

* * *

"You're not working on that book of yours, are you?" Devin asked from behind me.

"No. Shut up." I finished the page and scrolled up, then read through everything. Then I queued it up to print and turned around. Dev was ghost-pacing - hovering back and forth across the floor. "Stop that, it's annoying."

"So is looking at your back. Your front is a lot more interesting." He gestured toward the printer. "What have you got?"

"A new suspect." I removed the pages from the printer, stacked them neatly, then held them out. "You read, I'm going to take a shower. Then I'm going to see the police."

He waggled his brows at me. "Need me to help scrub anything?"

"Yeah. Your mind. Use a big bar of soap."

I spent ten minutes soaking under a hot spray, wondering if my suspicions were right. If they were, I'd have to vacate the premises immediately.

The shower curtain jerked to one side, and I screamed.

"Get out." Betty-Ann was holding a very large gun, pointed at my chest, and a towel. "Here." She thrust the towel at me.

"Did my security check bounce?" I asked.

"Get dressed." She gestured toward my clothes with the gun.

I dressed, then marched out into the front room. Devin was nowhere in sight. Neither were my notes. "I know about you and Marcus, Betty-Ann." I paused. "Or should I call you Elisa?"

"You don't know anything about me," she said, and shoved me down on the sofa. "Marcus and I are getting married."

I glanced at my computer. The monitor was smashed, and the tower was overturned and in three pieces. So much for my records. "Marcus had an affair with you that cost him his marriage. He paid you off as soon as Linda left him, and told you to leave town." I slid forward, perching on the edge of the cushions.

"But you didn't, did you? You couldn't accept that it was over, that he was trying to get Linda back."

"No, he wasn't. She was distracting him, that's all."

"You changed your name, dyed your hair, and got a job working for his property management company, and used it to keep an eye on things. You saw Marcus coming to the cottage practically every day." I gave her a measuring look. "It must have driven you crazy, watching him drool all over her, trying to convince her to come back."

"It was a game - she was punishing him for loving me."

"So you killed her, and you got rid of the body."

She finally smiled. "Those gators in the Everglades? Will eat anything dead."

"And then Devin Noble moved in, and started investigating the case. You were afraid he'd find out you were Marcus's old girlfriend, and make the connections."

"He thought he was so smart. Well, I fixed his wagon." She eyed me. "How did you figure out it was me, anyway?"

"You told me Devin was reading on the couch. When they found him, he was on the floor, and the book he was reading was under the sofa. The only way you could have known what he was doing was only if you'd been the last person to see him alive."

"Huh." Not impressed by my sleuthing, she gestured toward the door with the gun. "Outside."

I shook my head. "I'm not going anywhere with you. If you're going to kill me, you'll have to do it right here. Just like you murdered Dev."

"Fine." She took something out of her pocket with her free hand - a syringe. "This is faster anyway."

Whatever was in it was clear. "Some untraceable substance, I suppose?"

"Venom. I handle snakes in my act." She glared. "But you found that out when you called my club to check on me."

As she came at me, I pretended to cringe. "Why didn't the ME find the needle mark on Dev, or traces of the venom in his bloodstream?"

"They didn't bother to look at his scalp, and after three days the venom is untraceable," she told me, eyeing my short cap of red hair. "There's a spot at the base of your skull where the needle slips right in."

"And how did you know that?" I saw Tinkerbell lights forming in the air behind Betty-Ann.

"She got it from my first book," Devin said in a low, nasty voice. "I gave the bitch an autographed copy when I moved in."

Betty-Ann swung around, and shrieked. While I lunged for the gun, Dev knocked the syringe to the floor, where it shattered. I ended up wrestling with her, trying to get the gun away. She was a lot stronger than she looked, but I was turbo-charged with adrenaline. For a few seconds, it looked like I would win.

Then the gun went off, and I fell to my knees. The front of my blouse slowly turned red as I stared down at myself. "Uh. . . oh"

Devin shouted something and ran at Betty-Ann, his arms outstretched. She shot at him until the gun was empty, then screamed as he took her down. I was on my side by then, having a hard time breathing. I thought I saw more Tinkerbell lights, then a beautiful blond woman catch Dev's arm as he went to punch Betty-Ann.

"Go take care of your lady, Dev." Linda Waynewright stared down at Betty-Ann's bulging eyes. "This one is mine."

I was pretty far gone by the time he got to me. He cradled my head on his lap, and stroked my cheek with his cold hand. "Oh, shit, Andy, I'm sorry. I never meant for it to end this way."

"So . . . rewrite."

"When I saw her come in, I put all your notes in the file in the closet." He looked over at Linda, who was lowering Betty-Ann's lifeless body to the floor. "I'll make sure the cops find it."

"Want . . . my . . . own . . . byline."

"You'll get it. Something else I should tell you - I was just jealous of you, you know. I loved your books. Every single one of them."

"Liar." I wheezed in a breath. "See . . . you . . . soon."

* * *

"You don't really want this one," the new property agent told the middle-aged woman standing on my doorstep. "There's this fabulous two bedroom bungalow over on Sample; it would be perfect for you."

Dev looked up from the book he was reading. "Listen to her, honey. She *knows* what she's talking about."

"Stop being obnoxious." I glanced over at him from the window. Being dead would have been no picnic, especially the long interval I'd spent in the place between worlds. But Dev had stayed with me the entire time, and when we came back or were sent back (I still wasn't clear on how that worked) we were together. Since then, he'd become my companion, my lover, and my best friend. "We're friendly ghosts, remember?"

"I prefer this one," the prospective tenant said.

He snorted. "You're so friendly you scared off everyone for the past six months."

"Oh, yeah?" I came over and poked him in the back. "Who wasn't able to pull the case file out of the closet when the cops got here?"

"Fighting Betty-Ann took a lot out of me." He slammed his book shut. "And the cops didn't come back, and you've terrified every wuss who's walked in here."

"I have not. This is your chance to redeem yourself, pal." I walked over to the new tenant and studied her from all sides. "She seems nice enough."

"She's short."

I sniffed. "So are you."

"You never complain about anything when we're horizontal." He gave me a familiar look. "Want to go get possessed again?"

"Twice a day is enough for me." That was the other good thing about being dead -- sex in the afterlife. It was, um, pretty interesting stuff.

"This seems ideal," the woman said to the agent as she came in and walked around, smiling at everything. "I love it already."

"I could get fired for telling you this, but" - the agent grimaced- "a bunch of people were murdered in this house."

"I know." The middle-aged woman didn't seem shocked at all. "I'm planning to write a novel based on the Anderson-Noble case. I thought it would help if I lived here, get a feel for the atmosphere."

Dev and I looked at each other, then at the closet, where the case file and manuscript still lay undiscovered.

The middle-aged lady took out her checkbook. "First, last, and security, right?" she asked the agent.

I let out a breath I'd been holding. "I get equal credit."

He glowered at me. "It was my case first."

"You promised me before I died." I made an airy gesture. "And I solved the case."

He considered that. "Okay, you get credit, but I write the final chapter."

"We write it together - with her." I held up a hand before he could reply. "This is non-negotiable, lover boy. You still owe me some payback karma."

"Yeah, yeah." He scowled until I kissed him. "Just don't turn me into a pansy, okay?"

I sat on his lap and hugged him. "I'll try to restrain myself, roomie."

Warrior Bond

"I'm told the Jorenians are a handsome species," Htok said as he examined the riddled surface of Ghamayt's moon on his ship's viewer. "All exotic blue skin and ghostly eyes. They should bring a good price at our next auction."

"They also hunt down and gut anyone who harms their kind," his procurement officer Verlu pointed out. "Very slowly."

"According to our scans, there were only two left." The Garnotan captain shifted in the grav harness that kept his massive upper bulk from crushing his stunted legs. The fact that he had killed off most of the stock he had intended to acquire was simply a tactical mistake. One that would be corrected by performing an additional raid before returning to Garnot. "Now find them."

"Captain." The slave handler Paraf scuttled up to the command platform. "What Verlu says is true. No Garnotan slaver has ever dared captured a Jorenian vessel."

Htok allowed a small burst of flatulence to escape his body, then sighed with pleasure. He hoped the blues were male and female, he would then oversee

their breeding and perhaps create an entire stable of Jorenian flesh for the block. "I have corrected that oversight, have I not?"

Agitation made the handler's wiry limbs twitch. "What I mean is, we must not let either survivor escape us, or their people will pursue us to the end of the galaxy, to take their revenge."

"You worry needlessly, handler." The Captain extended a bloated tendril, and whacked Paraf on the skull. "We crippled the Jorenian ship before it landed. My lovely blues will not leave this moon unless they are wearing my control collars."

* * *

"Torin." Someone was shaking him. "Wake up."

He had drunk too much t'berrka wine after the last Bond ceremony, Salo thought as he opened his eyes. But then it was not every day his ClanBrother Konal took a bondmate. Beautiful white eyes stared down at him. *Laili*? No, it was the quiet little archivist from Administration - the one who had barely spoken to him since he joined the crew.

"What are you - " he winced and touched a painful spot on his head as he realized he was on the deck, not his sleeping platform. "What are you doing here?"

"Saving your hide, Torin." She tugged at his arm. "Get up."

Now the smell of burnt alloy and stale air hit his nose, and the stickiness of blood spread over his fingers. Five years of training had him on his feet a moment later, and he examined the archivist's smoke-streaked face. "What happened to you? Are you injured?"

"No, you are the one with the wound. Come, we must evacuate the ship immediately." She hesitated for a moment. "Your head wound, does it require attention? I have basic healer training."

"It is nothing." As far as he knew, the Skytalon was still on routine patrol. "Why must we leave the ship, ClanDaughter Varena? Who hit me?"

"You must have fallen during your sleep, when I landed the ship. We must go now, before the slavers board us." She made an impatient gesture toward the door panel. "I will relate everything on the way to the shuttle. Please, hurry."

It will do you well to serve a cycle on an Uyo ship, ClanCousin, Xonea had said after they'd sobered up, and Salo had discovered he'd been volunteered to train

on board Laili's family research vessel. *You spend far too much time studying those endless code encryptions. Besides, you might find your Choice.*

I am not Choosing anyone, Xonea. Salo had been adamant. Choice was for older people, and he had yet to finish his studies.

Xonea had jerked a thumb toward Konal and Laili's bonding chamber. *You never know, ClanCousin.*

Serving with the Uyo had been an uncomplicated business. They had been performing sweeps of the outlying Varallan trade routes for mercenaries and Hsktskt, but Salo hadn't expected to gain any combat experience. No one dared attack Jorenian ships. Yet as he followed the archivist into the corridor, he saw the evidence of what must have been a savage strike - split panel seams, tangles of circuitry hanging from the upper deck, and bodies everywhere.

He stopped to check the first, then another. Why was she acting so indifferent to the dead? He caught up with her and jerked her around. "How many have embraced the stars?" he demanded.

"All but you and I."

His claws emerged. "We are not leaving."

"You wish to be chained and sold? Then luck to you, Torin." She pulled free, turned and stalked off.

He caught up with her again just outside the small launch bay. "They are my kin through bond. Honor demands we seek ClanKill."

"They are dead and we are alive." She glared at him. "You think you can kill an entire ship full of slavers? How many paths have you diverted?"

"None," he was forced to admit. "But I do not fear my duty to kin."

Her claw tips emerged, then retracted. "If you wish to attempt ClanKill now, do so, with my blessing. I am going back to Joren to inform the Uyo, and get more warriors."

"You are right, of course." Salo swallowed his rage. "I will go with you."

"Mother be praised." She gestured toward the surface rover. "Do you wish to pilot, or shall I?"

* * *

"I have a direct relay, ClanCousin, audio-only," Kna Torin said, startling Xonea as she transferred the signal from her com array to central command. "Junior Archivist Varena, emergency assistance requested."

"An Varena archivist?" Puzzled, Xonea tapped his console. "This is Xonea Torin, commanding the Lightfall. Identify your vessel."

"A moment, please." Sounds of multiple, close-range blasts boomed in the background. "Commander Torin, this is archivist Varena from the Skytalon. How close are you to Ghamayt?"

The very ship they were searching for - but what was a Varena doing in command?

"Seven hundred thousand kim," Xonea said as he checked their coordinates. "Varena, who is firing on you? Is my kin with you? Where are the Uyo helm officers?"

"A slaver attacked us, forced us to land on Ghamayt's moon. The Torin and I alone survived." More blasts went off. "We have abandoned the ship and are seeking shelter. Your assistance would be most welcome, commander."

"You have it." Xonea took over the pilot's board, changed their heading and initiated the stardrive. "Tell me more about the attack, lady."

"I saw the Garnotan ship through the viewport before it began firing on us. Freighter class, but heavily armored." Her voice grew tight. "They destroyed our command level on their second pass, our weapons and propulsion on the third. The archive section is heavily buffered, as are the crew quarters, which is why your kin and I were the only survivors. I transferred the last of the controls to make the landing."

That meant the ship was scuttled. "Have they located you?"

"Not yet. The Garnotan is firing random patterns at the surface, trying to draw us out. Apparently our rover has not registered on their sweep yet." She gave him the coordinates. "Torin, be cautious - these slavers travel in pairs."

"Confirmed, two Garnotan transports, one in orbit above Ghamayt's moon," his security officer said.

More blasts echoed over the channel, but not as loud. Xonea pulled up the surface map of the moon on his console and studied it. "We will draw off the guard ship, then come back for you."

A different voice came over the secured channel. "You had better, ClanCousin, or our Houses will have much cause to celebrate."

Before Xonea could respond, Salo terminated the relay.

* * *

Darea gripped the sides of her seat as the Torin male took another wild turn. "Why say you that to him?"

"That we would seek eternity? It is the way of the warrior-trained." He gave her a slow, measuring look, and paled. "Mother of All Houses, I did not realize . . . you are only a child."

"I have seventeen seasons, and spent three of them in the Varena quads." She let her voice chill. "I carry no combat scars, Torin, but I assure you, I can kill."

He thought of the indirect insult he had made before by questioning her decision to leave, and winced. "Your pardon, lady, I meant no disrespect. It is simply that these slavers, they will - " a pulse blast caused a basalt cliff behind them to crumble, and debris showered over the rover. He muttered an obscenity under his breath, then added, "It matters not. I will not let them take a young one."

She snorted. "I am no more a child than you."

"I have nineteen seasons." His dark brows drew together. "And five years in the quads."

"Two seasons seniority does not entitle you to act my ClanFather, Torin." Darea peered through the forward view panel. "There, to the right - is that the science station?"

He initiated a scan, and studied the results. "Yes. The atmosphere appears to be intact." He frowned as he drove around the structure to the equipment storage sheds. "Interior temperature regulation has been disabled."

"It was abandoned," she pointed out. "They had no reason to leave the biocontrols set for occupation."

"Perhaps." He terminated the scan and drove into one of the open sheds. "No matter the reason; we must wear envirosuits until my kin arrive."

They pulled on the suits in silence, then by unspoken agreement retrieved everything of value they could carry from the rover and filled four carryalls. Darea would have led the way into the facility, but the Torin caught her arm and pointed at the entrance panel with the double-bladed dagger in his other hand.

"We do not know what lies within," he said, and pushed a pulse weapon into her glove. "Remain alert and beside me."

She wanted to scream at him to stop ordering her around, yet she knew he was right. The slaver ship was moving off in the wrong direction, and she knew for a fact that the Torin would not arrive for at least a day. "We appear to be alone here," she said, as politely as she could manage. "What troubles you?"

"That we may not remain alone."

Gloom filled the interior of the science station, which was a series of laboratories interconnected by short, empty corridors. Sparkling ice crystals covered every surface, but there were no signs of neglect in the first lab they entered. Equipment and experimental samples were strewn across the work tables, as if whoever had left had meant to return.

"We will need to secure an area and remain there until the Lightfall retrieves us," he said.

She knew that, but only nodded. "What species operated this station?" Darea leaned over to examine a still-blinking display. "I do not recognize this language."

"It is Kcepsa." He brushed away some ice from a data pad, and switched it on. "According to these reports, they were taking deep core ore samples, looking for large mineral deposits." He skimmed through the excavation logs. "There is no reason listed as to why they left."

"It seems foolish to abandon so much tech." Darea looked around for the envirocontrols, and found a sealed panel. "Torin, come and see this. Someone fused a plate of alloy over the controls."

"Salo," he said as he joined her at the terminal.

Darea glanced at him. "What say you?"

"That is my name - Salo." His stern mouth curled slightly. "I would be honored to know yours, lady."

"I am Darea." She reached into one of the carryalls, and pulled out a small tool kit. "How did you come to be on the Skytalon?"

One of his dark brows arched. "You never thought to ask me before this."

Ah, so he was annoyed that she had ignored him. Darea had heard the Torins were sometimes prickly about such matters. "I was never marooned on a lifeless

planet with you before this." It was better than telling him she had felt too homesick to mingle with the Skytalon's crew.

"My ClanCousin felt I needed a change from my duties." He took a sturdy pryrod and drove the sharp tip into the seam of the fused panel. "And you?"

"I was training with the ship's archivist." She thought of home, and something twisted in her chest.

"Is this your first time away from your kin?"

She made an ambivalent gesture. "My ClanMother was born Uyo; it was to please her."

He stopped prying up the panel and stared at her. "The Uyo are ClanKin to you."

"Yes." She flexed her hands, which were cramped from holding in her claws. Her mother's Uyo blood gave her every right to enter into a state of vengeance that would not end until she gutted the last of the slavers. Yet she had never killed, and she feared she would fail in her duty. "I know I cannot prevail alone, so I will wait until we are among our kind before I declare ClanKill."

He didn't say anything for a moment. Then he put down the tool and offered his gloved hand. "I, too, share ties with the Uyo. Laili, my ClanBrother's bondmate, was born to them. This Torin will stand with you, ClanDaughter Varena. For our Uyo kin."

It was not a promise given lightly, and despite her fear, it made her feel better to know that when the time came, he would help her. She carefully curled her fingers around his. "For our kin, ClanSon Torin."

He held her glove in his for a moment, then turned back and ripped off the panel. "Let us make the air warm enough to breathe."

* * *

Verlu located the derelict vessel an instant before Htok's sister ship signaled a warning. "I have the Jorenian ship on display, Captain. It lies within a small cavern two kim northeast of our present position. Wait." He listened to the secured channel and frowned. "Captain Mlij reports a second Jorenian vessel approaching orbit."

"Have Mlij draw them off. Tell him not to kill too many and I will split the profits with him." Htok extended an eye stalk to gaze at Verlu's panel. "No life signs."

"No, sir."

The bulging eye at the end of the stalk narrowed. "What are those tracks in the surface dust, leading from the cavern?"

"They could be from a surface vehicle. This moon is within Kcepsa territory." Verlu held his breath as a foul odor enveloped him.

"Kcepsa aren't even good Hsktskt fodder," Htok said, and spat a gob of yellow phlegm at the back of Verlu's head. "They puke continuously until they regurgitate their stomachs and choke to death on them. They will bring me nothing on the block."

Paraf made a tentative gesture with one of his spindly limbs. "There are no indications of any current Kcepsa occupation, sir. The surface marks could have been made by an escape vehicle."

Verlu shuddered as he felt the mucous sliding down into the collar of his uniform. "Your orders, Captain?" he managed to say without inhaling.

"Assemble your men, handler." Htok settled back in his harness. "Verlu, follow the tracks. I have the feeling they will lead us directly to my lovely blues."

* * *

By the time the temperature rose enough for them to remove their helmets, the two Jorenians had taken over the largest laboratory and arranged it for comfort and personal defense. As Darea monitored the exterior perimeter, Salo decided to take a look at what the Kcepsa had been mining before leaving Ghamayt's moon with such haste.

"You should eat something," she said, and handed him a nutrition pack from the carryall.

He lifted his hand and took it without looking away from the scope. "Incredible. The specimen labels indicate these ore samples were extracted more than fifty kilometers beneath the surface, and yet they are unlike anything I have ever seen."

"I knew you would be a scholar." She moved away from the scope and paced restlessly behind him. "That is why you know everything."

He heard an echo of resentment in her words. "I do not know everything, but yes, I am pursuing my education."

"I envy you your determination. It always seems an eternity when I am obliged to apply myself to my studies." She opened a nutrition bar and bit into it. "My ClanFather says I am too impatient."

He sensed her agitation had more to do with their situation than her sire's opinion. "You like being out of doors, do you not?"

She stopped chewing. "How did you know that?"

"You are quick, and strong, and our sun has touched your hair often." He nodded toward the faint streaks of lighter black in the dark braids she had coiled at the back of her head. "I would imagine you a fine runner, or gardener."

"I keep a large garden." She smiled. "And I do like to swim."

"You should visit Marine Province. Our coast line is quite beautiful." Struck by an unexpected longing to see her long, strong body cutting through purple waters, he turned back to the scope. "Unfortunately my studies have not prepared me to become a geologist. I do not recognize this substance. It is some kind of red mineral, but it has a spiral form, and appears to be multiplying at a rapid rate, almost like bacteria-

"Salo."

"Wait." Something cracked, and he lifted his eyes from the scope, astonished. "What is this?" He took the slide out from under the magnifier and held it up to the light. "It has grown beyond the slide cover-

A single pulse blast knocked the slide from his fingers, and he jerked around to see Darea pointing her weapon at him.

"Get away from the scope, now." She leveled the weapon at the work table, and fired again, destroying the equipment.

"What are you doing?" he demanded, shielding his face with his arm.

"Look at the other samples." She nodded at the table beneath the air vents as she backed toward the door. "Move quickly, back toward me."

Salo turned to see the open core samples he had set out on sprouting gigantic versions of the spiral mineral. Crimson coils had punched through the alloy table surface and now appeared to be absorbing huge chunks of it. He glanced at the shattered slide that Darea had shot from his fingers, and saw a similar growth digesting the glass.

"What is it?" he breathed.

"I know not, but it looks hungry." She reached behind her and hit the door panel controls. "Come, Salo, we must seal this room."

He grabbed one of the carryalls, but the rapidly-blooming spirals had already covered the second. Then a coil popped down from the ceiling, and sprang at his face. It seized the dagger he slashed at it, wrenched it from his hand, and began absorbing it.

"Salo!" Darea grabbed the back of his suit and dragged him out into the corridor, then slammed her fist into the door controls. The panel closed, then began undulating and bulging. "Mother protect us."

He thought of the sealed envirocontrol panel. "No, only cold will protect us."

They hurried down toward the first lab they had entered, and Salo was relieved to see no sign of the ravenous mineral. "You must put on your helmet," he said as he went to shut down the heat.

"No, leave it off, lovely girl," a new voice drawled as the exterior air lock panel opened, and a gigantic being squeezed inside. "I would rather admire your pretty blue face."

* * *

"Level three reports hull damage in the starboard panels, buffer holding," Kna reported to Xonea. "We should leave the area now."

She was correct, of course. The slaver proved to be heavily armed, and their hull as resilient as any Jorenian's. The other problem was the Ruling Council's moratorium on violence - Xonea could not attack another ship, he could only defend his own against their attack.

Someday I will change that, he thought as he considered his options. *We cannot continue to run from every battle like frightened young ones.*

"Xonea, another pass may prove fatal to our crew," Kna was saying. "We have enough time to transition, if we do it now."

Or could they?

"An excellent suggestion," he told her as he made some swift calculations. "Ralko, I will take over your station. Supervise emergency repairs on three." His pilot relinquished his terminal and went for the gyrlift. Xonea recalibrated the controls as the Garnotan slaver powered up its weapons for another strike pass. "Kna, give the transition alert for two minutes."

The entire command crew went still for a moment, and Kna's eyes widened. "What say you, ClanCousin? In two minutes they will be upon us."

"I know." He flashed her a quick grin. "It will be well, Kna."

"So I will entreat the Mother." She cleared her throat, then opened up a channel to every level of the ship. "Caution. Emergency transition commencing in two minutes. Two minutes until emergency transition."

Xonea waited until the Garnotan ship came within ten kim before giving the order to his Head Engineer. "Transition, now."

Reality whirled into a dizzy blur as the Lightfall moved from one dimension to another. Dimly Xonea heard one of his helm officers mutter a prayer, and added his own silent appeal to the Mother.

This will work, it must work.

No Jorenian ship had ever transitioned in such close proximity to another vessel, and for good reason. The Lightfall's interdimensional jump created a temporary energy backwash, which swept over the slaver ship in slow, heavy ripples. Before they vanished, Xonea saw multiple, silent explosions fill his screens.

* * *

It took three slavers to hold Darea, and four to pin Salo down. The obese being in charge ordered them collared, then they were released.

"I am Captain Htok, your new owner. I would not do that, my darling blue boy," he added as Salo jerked a blade from his belt and slashed at the nearest Garnotan. One fat tendril caressed an odd device, and Salo shouted and dropped the dagger as he clutched at his neck. "The collar's output is calibrated to stimulate certain spinal nerves. I'm told the agony is unlike any pain in the universe."

"Stop it!" Darea ran to Salo and tried to pry the collar from his neck. "You will kill him!"

"Ah, no. You are far too valuable to waste. He will suffer terribly, though." Htok lumbered over to her, and lowered his snout into her coil of braids. "You smell simply divine, my dear. Is that a natural body odor, or some type of fragrance you apply to yourselves?"

"Turn off the collar," she said through clenched teeth, now supporting a writhing Salo in her arms.

Htok's mouth stretched. "Say please, master."

"Please. Master." She shrieked both words.

"Very good." The slaver touched the device again, and Salo sagged against her, shaking, his face covered with sweat. "I know we will all get along perfectly now. Paraf? Escort our new property to the launch, if you would."

The slave handler shoved their helmets at her. "Put these on."

"Wait." Salo leaned heavily on Darea, and gasped each word. "There are - others - here. We will - not - abandon them."

Concealing her confusion behind a stony statement, Darea took the helmets.

"The others are all dead, and you left them back on the ship," the one called Paraf insisted.

"Not our - young ones." Salo met Darea's eyes, looked down at her suit panel, then moved his eyes in the direction of the lab they had abandoned. "They do - not register. We cannot - leave them - here."

Htok squealed with delight. "Children? How good of you to tell me. Are they yours?"

"Yes," Darea lied, and felt a strange sensation settling over her as the tips of her claws emerged. It was as if she could read Salo's thoughts, what he felt, and what he wanted her to do. "They belong to us."

"Another bonus for proof of fertility." Htok moved out into the corridor. "We will retrieve them, of course. Come now, my lovelies."

The spindly-legged slaver forced them to walk ahead of the obese one, and Darea watched Salo's gloves as he made several quick gestures. Her ClanBrothers had taught her the basic wordless signals used during battle, so she knew what to do. A deep, controlled violence seemed to gather between them, one that she did not understand - but she welcomed it.

Before she put on her helmet, she met his white eyes, and made one of the oldest gestures known to their people. *You honor our kin, warrior.*

He made another. *As we honor each other, warrior.*

No one had ever addressed her thus - she had always been called "lady" as was tradition between a male and female of different HouseClans. That Salo felt her his equal made her only more determined not to fail him now.

"You do not need to put on your helmets yet," the handler said from behind them.

"His stench is turning my stomach," Darea muttered just before she secured hers. A tendril grabbed her by the neck and hauled her backward until she was pressed against the slaver's soft, sticky upper body.

"You will grow to love my scent, darling," Htok told her, smearing her face plate with an oozing kiss. "I plan to supervise your breeding quite closely."

"We will have many children," Salo said, as if he was agreeing.

The words calmed the rage inside Darea, and she stopped struggling. As soon as the slaver released her, Salo encircled her waist with his arm. He used his glove to clear her helmet.

We are almost there, my heart, he mouthed. She could not touch his skin, so she pressed her face plate to his. *At your side, warrior.*

Salo remained close to her. As they came within a few feet of the lab, she carefully she raised her glove, and touched her chest panel, resetting the controls to equalize her suit with the moon's exterior temperature.

"What did you do to that door panel?" Htok demanded as they stopped in front of it. The surface bulged in a number of spots, and a small hole had appeared at the center seam. "Were you trying to seal them in, my lovelies?"

"Yes," Salo said as he stepped back against the corridor wall, and tapped the panel. Darea pressed against the opposite wall. "We were."

The panel opened, and thousands of hungry red coils sprang out.

* * *

Htok reacted to the attack as he would any other - he seized the closest body, and used it as shield. Paraf screamed and writhed in his arms as the bouncing spirals stabbed their pointed ends into his face, abdomen and legs.

"Idiots!" Htok thrust the shrieking handler into the mass of red pouring out of the lab, then retreated as he fumbled for his collar stimulator. "Your punishment will be long and agonizing for this."

The Jorenian male appeared in front of him, a long red coil in his glove. This one was unmoving, and he used it like a dagger on Htok's tendril. "I think not, slaver." The stimulator fell to the deck, where the blue female crushed it under her weighted boot.

Htok never allowed himself to feel pain, and the burning wound in his tendril made him bellow, "Verlu!"

"Captain!" His procurement officer tried to drag him back from the Jorenians, who were now gathering more of the vicious spirals. "We must leave."

"No slave prevails over Htok!" The Garnotan used another tendril to pry the spiral out, then screamed as it began burning again. He flung it at Verlu. "Get rid of these things!"

But Verlu was slapping at his legs, to which dozens of other red coils had attached themselves. He made a high, keening sound and fell forward, and was quickly enveloped in a seething mass of crimson.

"Fool!" Htok felt his harness begin to fail, and moved an eye stalk to look at the controls. Tiny red coils were eating into the grav controls, and he slapped at them, then cursed as they attacked the third tendril. The grav boosters slowly died, and his body landed on his legs for the first time since his adolescence. He was so busy trying to rid himself of the coils that he didn't realize it until his femurs splintered. "No!"

The two Jorenians walked past him, and he realized the cold surface of their suits were repelling the spirals. He clutched at the female with his tendril. The coils had become a scalding cloak, creeping up his crippled bulk, burrowing deep into his hide. "You will not leave me this way! I am Htok, a master slaver."

"No," the blue female told him as she shook off his limb. "Now you are merely food."

The last thing he saw before crimson filled his eyes were their gloves, joined together.

* * *

"The second Garnotan ship is secure, commander," a satisfied Torin reported as Xonea and the retrieve team approached the entrance to the science station. "All crew members are now imprisoned in one of the cargo holds."

"Guard them with care." Xonea scanned the interior of the science station, and frowned. "The interior temperature is below freezing. Signal our healers, have them prepare to receive our injured."

"No need for that, ClanCousin." Salo appeared with the Varena archivist, both in ice-encrusted envirosuits. "We are well."

Xonea grinned as he embraced him. "I told you this would be good for you, ClanCousin." He turned and bowed. "My thanks, lady, for saving our kin."

"Your kin has been the saving of me, commander."

He noticed the slave collar around her neck through her face plate, and stepped back, astonished. "They captured you?"

"Briefly." Salo gestured back toward the interior. "Keep our people out of the station until I relay the details."

"Why cannot you relay them now?"

Salo put a glove on Darea's shoulder. "We have a final task to attend to, do we not?"

"Yes." She took a deep breath, then addressed Xonea. "We must finish this business before your House, Commander Torin."

Xonea knew what she meant. Concerned that Salo and the young female were taking on much more than anyone would expect, he made a quick gesture. "We share the obligation of kin through bond, of course. We will be honored to assist you."

"No, Xonea. This is our right, and our duty," Salo said, and led Darea away from the station. "Take us to the slavers."

The retireview team escorted the pair to the Garnotan vessel, where they were greeted with joy by the other Torins. Darea and Salo acknowledged the welcome with evident reserve, and requested to be taken to the slavers' hold as soon as they removed their suits and one of the engineers pried the slave collars from their necks.

"There are fourteen of them in there," Xonea said as he indicated the panel. He had not realized the Varena female was as young as she was. Her innocent face made his heart twist. "They are unarmed."

"That is good to know," Salo said, removing his tunic and handing it to Kna. "Do you wish a blade, my heart?"

"No, Salo." Darea clipped her braids tightly to the back of her head. "We will not need them."

"ClanCousin?" Xonea blinked as Salo brushed past him as if he were invisible. His studious relative had never sought the path of vengeance, and yet his face

was filled with the killing calm. He glanced at Darea, and saw the same controlled rage in her eyes. "Lady, think. They will fight back."

"That is the way." Darea gave Xonea a ferocious smile and raised her claws. "Let them."

* * *

"He did not believe we would do it, did he?" Darea asked as she washed the last of the slavers' blood from her body. "Your ClanCousin thought us too young, too inexperienced."

"I think we were, until this day." Salo lifted her hair from her neck, and used his hand to separate the last of her braids. She had dense, beautiful hair that streamed unbound to her hips. "We did well. No one will question our honor to the Uyo."

"Not when they see the many entrails we strew as ClanSign for them. Mmmmm." She rolled her shoulders, clearly enjoying his touch. "My ClanBrothers told me how it felt, to hunt together, but they never mentioned this closeness that I felt." Her gaze met his. "That I still feel to you."

The fact that they were standing together, unclothed, in the same cleansing unit would have scandalized his kin. Salo didn't care. Being naked and close to Darea fed the growing need inside him, and if they were acting unseemly, it would only be for a few more minutes. "Know you the warrior's bond, my heart?"

"The bond formed and shared by a male and female during times of battle?" She wiped the water from her white eyes, then rested her palm against his chest. "Is that what this is?"

"If it is not, I do not care to know." He trailed his fingertips over her face, touching the bruises left by the slavers who had struggled with her. Despite being outnumbered, she had followed her instincts, and had chased them down, one by one. By the time they had finished the ClanKill, the deck had been littered with mutilated bodies. "Did you feel it when we were killing them? I knew every move you would make, before you made it. I felt your heartbeat in time with mine, even as you filled your claws with their viscera."

"Every breath you took, I felt inside me." She turned her face into his palm, brushing her lips over his wet skin. "Salo, I never wish to leave you again."

"Then you must not." He led her from the cleansing unit, and dried her body with great care. She was as beautiful in form as she was in mind. He could almost see the infant they would make together, and felt the surge of hot fluid inside his groin.

Tonight he would give her that child.

She felt the press of his erection against her, and instinctively cradled him between her thighs even as her statement grew serious. "Do you honor me, Salo Torin?"

"With all that I am, Darea Varena." He felt her tremble. "And you?"

"As no other."

"Then I Choose you, M'adeunal." He lifted her into his arms, and carried her to his sleeping platform. "Come with me to the eternity we share."

Skin Deep

Part One -- Nancy

Medical File entry dated 9/10/71:

Female newborn Nancella Carguitto, examined at age eleven days. Patient referred by obstetrician for diagnostic and therapeutic considerations.

Dr. Sylvan Kobori closed the medical file and regarded the veiled woman sitting silently in front of his desk. "How many treatment methods were you subjected to, Miss Carguitto?"

"All of them." She produced a second, thicker file and handed it across the desk. "Spironolactone, cyproterone acetate, and antiandrogen therapy. None of them worked."

"And the cosmetic treatments?" The doctor set the file aside and came around the desk. Gently he removed her hat and veil, and studied her face.

Patient possesses generalized symmetrical hypertrichosis, manifested prior to birth, with the subsets of hypertrichosis cubiti, anterior cervical hypertrichosis, posterior cervical hypertrichosis, gingival hyperplasia, bony diastatomyelia, and faun tail deformity. No evidence of spina bifida occulta, hermaphroditism, Cushing's syndrome, or any other underlying cause.

"Most of them." She didn't blink as he cradled her face between his palms and turned it first to the right, and then to the left. Her eyes were a startling pale green against the darkness of her face. "I had immediate, severe skin reactions to both electrolysis and laser treatments."

"I see." He gestured toward the adjoining room. "Would you permit a full body examination?"

"Yes, of course."

Delivery was natural and otherwise unremarkable. APGAR rating 10 at twelve hours old. Infant is alert, responds to touch and sound, reflexes normal, heart, respiration and temperature normal, urine and faeces production normal, breast feeds from mother with no difficulty.

She had remained very calm until this point, but Sylvan could sense her sudden unease. He gave her a soft cotton patient gown to put on, and a few minutes of privacy to undress before joining her.

Nancella Carguitto stood beside the exam table, completely naked. She turned in a full circle. "I thought it would be better for you to see everything first."

"It is, and I appreciate it." He immediately revised his opinion of her courage. *If she is to deal with Lucian, she will need it.* "Would you lift one of your feet, please?"

She complied. It confirmed that the only unaffected skin Lucian could see was on the inner rims of her eyes and lips, and the outer ear auricles.

"According to your medical file, you developed your condition in utero." He made notes, turning his back toward her to give her a moment to slip into the gown. "Do you have any Mexican ancestry?"

"No. Both of my parents are native Italians, and can trace their lineage back six generations."

"There are no other incidents of hypertrichosis in your family?" He glanced at her, saw her shake her head. "Very well. Please sit on the exam table, Miss Carguitto."

Conclusion: Primary hypertrichotic condition is of unknown origin. Although benign, this patient's permanent cosmetic disfigurement presents psychosocial trauma to her family. Advise parents of the available treatment methods. Signed Dr. Alan Parker, Chief of Pediatrics, Brooklyn Heights Hospital.

As he listened to her heart and lungs, she stared past his shoulder. Her condition made it impossible to read her expression, but her pale eyes appeared sharp and focused.

"I know it is hopeless, Dr. Kobori, but my mother seems to think your brother can do miracles." Now she sounded curious. "The brochure about his clinic doesn't say exactly how he does them."

"Lucian shall discuss treatment options when you visit the clinic in Romania." He finished charting her vitals and set her file aside. "Miss Carguitto, you have lived with this condition all of your life. If you go to my brother, he will expect absolute and unwavering commitment from you. Are you prepared for that?"

She didn't hesitate. "Yes."

At last Sylvan smiled. "Very well then. I will call my brother and tell him to expect you next week."

As soon as she left the office, he placed the overseas call. It took ten minutes for the various operators to get him through to the remote mountain clinic, but it was worth the wait to hear his brother's voice answer at last, and to tell him the news.

"Lucian, I have found her."

* * *

I'm going to kill my mother, Nancy thought. Slowly.

Outside the train window, snow-capped mountains and dense forests march by, unrelieved by even a single telephone pole. Of course, to have phones, you would have to have people, and from what the barely-English-speaking ticket seller at the station had told her, no one lived in the Kobori - not even the Russians.

No people, no towns. No towns, no stops. And that meant an entire day stuck on this rolling sweat box, smelling the delightful aromas of cabbage soup, unwashed bodies, and ancient fish. Ninety-nine percent of her fellow passengers didn't speak a word of English, and the ones who did stayed far away from Nancy.

There was no other option except homicide. If she didn't murder her mother, she'd end up taking trips like this every year for the rest of her natural life. Look at how easily she'd been persuaded this time - her mother had only worked on her for fifteen minutes.

"Nancella, *carina mia*," Lorena Carguitto pleaded, her dark eyes brimming with tears. "They say he has worked miracles. *Miracles*."

"Mama, I love you. Absolutely not."

Lorena produced a battered pamphlet showing a stark range of mountains at sunset. "Look at the brochure, per favore, mia, just a week of your vacation-

In Europe. In Romania. Where there were plenty of superstitious villagers, armed with pitchforks. "I can't afford it."

"Papa has bought the tickets for you - didn't you, Papa?"

Her father, in his favorite armchair, huddled down behind his paper. "She made me do it, Nancella."

"Threatened to stop cooking for you again, did she?" Nancy snorted. "Look, I really can't go, Mama. I have a job. Responsibilities."

"It's not Afghanistan, mia. It's Romania." Nothing intimidated her mother. "I called that nice Mr. Stokes, and he doesn't need you to come back until the middle of January. That gives you two months."

"Mama . . ." She glanced down at her hand where it rested on her mother's embroidered tablecloth. "When are you going to accept that there is no cure for me?"

Her mother's pretty mouth thinned. "When are you going to accept there is?"

Her mother's stoic faith in a cure was as unshakable as her love for Nancy - the same protective, fierce love she had for all five of her children. For years she had spent long hours investigating every possible treatment for Nancy's condition, then methodically saved up the necessary funds, packed their bags and dragged her daughter to whatever doctor or clinic offered hope.

Nothing had worked.

Now thirty-one, Nancy Rose Carguitto was convinced there would never be a cure for her. Only a handful of people around the world shared her condition, which was one of the rarest and most extreme birth defects ever documented.

"Think of how lovely it will be," her mother pleaded. "Touring the country in the winter-

"-the train being derailed by avalanches-

"-and all those lovely villages-

"-where they might burn me at the stake-

"Nancella!" Lorena Carguitto sent a reverent glance at the photo of the Pope on the kitchen wall. "Father Antonio says it is perfectly safe, so long as you are careful." She paused, then added, "Please, *mia*. Just this one last time, for me."

And so she had gone to see Sylvan Koberi, and had been talked into this trip, which would be the last, Nancy promised herself. The same way she did every time she went on one of her mother's wild goose chases.

"Aren't you hot?"

Nancy looked through her veil at the child peering around the door to her compartment. The girl had blond pigtails, blue eyes, fair skin with freckles scattered over her nose. She wore a pink tshirt with rhinestones that spelled out the word PRINCESS across the front. "No."

"I am." The girl edged around, not stepping in but not prepared to leave. "My mom says that they don't have air conditioning on these trains because the people here are so poor, but my Dad says it's because they're cheap. What do you think?"

Nancy immediately pegged the girl's parents - the couple in the Hawaiian shirts with all the cameras. The husband had refused to tip the porter, then yelled for a manager when his cases were dumped at his feet by the indignant Romanian. The wife had looked wilted and embarrassed and on the brink of divorce. "I don't know. Maybe they just don't like A/C."

"That's kinda dumb." The child pushed her damp bangs back from her forehead and inched in another step. "What's your name? Mine is Melissa Jamison."

"I'm Nancy."

"Hi, Nancy." Melissa glanced over her shoulder. "Can I come in and sit with you for a little while? Mom and Dad are having a whisper fight, and I hate that."

She never passed up the chance for company. "Please, do." When the child sat down on the seat opposite her, she added, "What's a whisper fight?"

"It's when they argue in whispers." Blue eyes rolled. "I'm not supposed to hear and if I do, I'm supposed to think they're not upset."

"Aha." Nancy opened her carryon case and took out a bottle of chilled water. "You thirsty?"

"Yes, but" -the girl's eyes darted toward the open door- "I'm not supposed to take anything from foreigners."

She would bet that warning had come from the father. "I'm as American as you are, kid. Born and raised in Brooklyn."

"Okay." Melissa took the bottle, uncapped it and drank half the contents greedily before smothering a tiny burp and grinning. "Thank you. Why are you wearing those?" A small finger pointed at Nancy's hands.

She glanced down at her black gloves, which disappeared under her long sleeves and covered her to the elbow. "I have this weird skin condition."

"Oh, cool. I mean, sorry." Melissa took another, shorter drink and peered. "Is it really gross and icky?"

Kids deserved honesty more than anyone else, because they were so honest themselves. "No, but it can be pretty scary if you're not prepared for it."

"Is it real bad?" Her voice dropped as her eyes widened. "I mean, is it all over and stuff?"

"It covers every single inch of my body." Nancy saw the sign for Campulung-Muscel through the window. "Are you and your folks getting off at the King's Stone?"

"No, the next stop." Melissa's mouth drooped. "Another dumb village where the water will taste funny and they won't have a McDonald's."

The snacks stashed in her cases were really for emergencies, but Nancy was happy to donate to a good cause.

"Well, I don't have any Big Macs, but" -Nancy reached into her case again and retrieved some of the chocolate bars- "these are almost like Milky Ways."

"Melissa!" A tired-looking woman in a crumpled Hawaiian shirt appeared in the doorway. "I've been up and down this train twice looking for you!"

"I was just talking to Nancy, Mom." Melissa jumped up and looked at her mother, then the candy bars Nancy held out. "She's American like us. Is it okay if she gives me some chocolate?"

"After what your father told you?" Mrs. Jamison turned to Nancy, all outraged motherhood. "Thank you, but my daughter doesn't need your candy."

"You can inspect them if you like. I bought them in Geneva, and they're sealed." Nancy placed the chocolate bars on the seat and held out her glove to the girl. "Bye, Melissa. I enjoyed meeting you."

"Bye, Nancy." Melissa awkwardly shook her hand, then whispered, "Before I go, can I, you know, see?" She touched the edge of the veil.

"Melissa Gwendolyn Jamison!" The girl's mother jerked her completely out of the compartment by one arm. As she marched her daughter away, Nancy heard her add in a fierce whisper, "Have you lost your mind? God only knows what kind of disgusting foreign disease that woman has!"

Nancy would bet money that in a whisper fight, Mrs. Jamison would win, every time.

"Stop freaking out, Mom," the child said. "Geez, she was nice . . ."

Nancy slowly gathered up the candy bars and put them back in her case, then got up, closed the door to her compartment, and locked it. Then, and only then, did she cry.

* * *

Eventually hunger won out over depression, and Nancy went to get a tray from the dining car. She had to eat, and if she ran into the Jamisons, she'd just act naturally. It wasn't their fault, and they were right to look out for their child, especially in a strange country.

And if she kept repeating that, she might even believe it.

Today the waiting line stretched out over two cars. Nancy sighed and decided to come back in an hour, when there wouldn't be so many people standing around staring at her. She didn't want to go back to the compartment right away, though. What her cramped legs needed was a little exercise.

Walking the entire length of the train took time, and some negotiating of people, baggage, and connecting cars doors. Outside the train, the mountains loomed all around and Nancy stopped before entering the last car, admiring the view. This car, which had no seats, appeared to be completely empty.

At least, it was until two men dressed in faded Russian uniforms entered behind her, with a familiar small figure between them.

"Nancy!" Melissa tore away from the soldiers and flung her arms around Nancy's waist. She glared back at the two men. "Hey, there aren't any video games in here!"

The biggest of the two chuckled and openly massaged his crotch. "We play other game with you." He squinted at Nancy. "And your friend."

The smell of vodka and lust made Nancy bend down quickly and hug the girl. "I'm going to scare them," she murmured next to Melissa's ear. "When I do, you run out of here, fast."

The child tensed. "Okay."

"You don't need this kid, big fella." Nancy stepped away from Melissa and trailed her gloved fingers over her breasts. "I can do both of you."

Both men grinned and moved to flank her, while the little girl edged toward the compartment door.

"Ready for this, boys?" She plucked at the edge of her veil as she shuffled back, drawing them away from Melissa.

"Take it off," the smaller one said. "Take it all off."

"You asked for it." Nancy ripped off her hat and veil, exposing her face, baring her teeth with a ferocious growl. As the men staggered back, she shouted, "Run, Melissa, now!"

Before she could do the same, a heavy, rawboned fist struck her squarely in the face. She sagged, then grabbed instinctive for the nearest rail.

The biggest one muttered Romanian obscenities as he dragged her across the car. The other man punched her in the belly as he shouted something vile. Cold air rushed in, giving her enough breath to scream as the soldier hurled her through the open door and off the train.

* * *

Cold. Why was she was so cold?

Nancy groaned as she opened her eyes, saw nothing but pine trees and snow all above her. Her veil - where was her veil? What if someone saw her?

But if someone didn't, she would freeze to death.

"Help . . . me . . ."

From the grinding, stabbing sensation in her side, she suspected the second punch she'd taken had cracked or broken some of her ribs. Those drunks had thrown her off the train. She should be dead. In these temperatures, she would be dead, soon enough.

Not like this. She made herself rock to one side. The pain was so enormous that the thought of trying to stand made her want to vomit. *I won't die like this.*

She blinked against the sting of her own blood in her eyes and saw a hazy shadow moving toward her. It made no sound, but a powerful, musky odor stung her nose.

Animal, she thought sluggishly. She was in the mountains, there were forests here. Something wild had smelled her. All the blood. It must have come to . . .

"No!" She rolled over, screaming as her ribs moved, but somehow got up on her good arm and pushed herself away from the snow. She looked around her for a branch, a stick, anything that she could use to defend herself with.

A shaggy black head bowed down, and she cringed as a cold, wet nose touched her cheek. With the dregs of her waning strength, she made a fist with her good hand, and swung, punching the animal with all the force she could summon.

Something heavy and powerful landed on top of her, knocking her back. A low, savage growl wafted in her face, and huge sharp teeth filled her graying vision.

"Bad dog," she muttered, then passed out.

At first the darkness engulfing her was cold and filled with pain, the agony of being stretched and pulled, the feel of her broken limbs being twisted. Was it eating her? She reached out, her hand grasping for something to stop the torture, and touched cold, solid stone.

The blood was pouring over her face now, and then a heavy weight crushed her to the icy flatness beneath her. Voices and the sound of odd cries penetrated the pain-filled blackness, but they made no sense.

"-the one . . . she is-"

"-at her face-"

"-the Master?"

The deepest, softest voice that she had ever heard spoke then, cutting through the din of the others with its beauty and power.

"Bring her to me."

The feel of warm, hard hands moving over her broken body roused her again, allowed her to open her eyes one last time. She could see almost nothing, except the silvery eyes looking down into hers.

"Don't hurt me anymore," she heard herself say.

Something touched her face, her mouth, and the deep rumbling voice spoke once more.

"No," he said. "No more pain."

Hands grasped her arms, then something sharp stabbed into her breast. There was pain - but not like her ribs or her head. This was like being burned from the inside out. Something was nuzzling her, sinking into her, pumping scalding heat directly into her heart. Nancy reached to push it away, and felt long, silky hair draped over a broad, bare shoulder.

After an eternity of night, another voice came to her.

"Can you hear me?"

Nancy's hand twitched, tried to rise from the heaviness holding it down. She couldn't move, and taking in a deep breath seemed impossible.

"Be still, mademoiselle." The woman's voice was heavily accented, but not by French. "You've had an accident. Do you understand? If you do, try to open your eyes."

It would have been easier to climb Everest, Nancy thought, confused. Why was she still alive? The details were fuzzy, but she remembered the pain. She remembered the heat-

"Oh, damn." She took a deep breath, and her eyes flew open. Immediately she squinted as light flickered over her face. "Where am I?"

The silver-haired woman in the white lab coat took the pen light away and smiled down at her. "I am Doctor Dulass. You are in the hospital."

Nancy frowned. "Hospital?" Something felt wrong. Something was terribly wrong. But she wasn't dead. She'd survived the fall from the train - and that weird thing that had happened after . . .

"A search party sent out from the King's Stone found you. You must have fallen from the train, Nancella. It is a miracle."

"I was pushed," she said clearly, then drew in a ragged breath as she thought of Melissa. "Two men - soldiers - they were going to hurt a little girl. When I stopped them, they threw me off."

The doctor paled, but nodded. "I will contact the authorities. In the meantime, you must rest. You lost a great deal of blood and were suffering from hypothermia when they brought you here. However, I'm sure with a few days of rest, you will recover completely."

"That can't be right." Nancy tried to look down. "My ribs - my legs - they were broken."

"You have no broken bones at all. In fact, you hardly have any bruises."

Nancy had broken her leg when she was a kid when she fell from a playground swing, and she remembered what it felt like. Then it struck her.

You hardly have any bruises.

Nancy jerked her hand up in front of her face, stared at it with wide, disbelieving eyes, and promptly fainted.

* * *

"I want a mirror."

The nurse didn't speak any English, but smiled and nodded as she left the room. Nancy waited until the door closed, then eased herself off the bed and stood on the cold linoleum floor. She had woken up alone, and looked at her hands and arms for nearly an hour. She touched her skin, her fingers, and then her face.

Then she wept again, for a very long time.

Dr. Dulass walked in as Nancy was yanking at the ties of the hospital gown that covered her body. The petite brunette looked at her with distinct disapproval.

"You should not be out of bed, mademoiselle."

"Get this thing off me." Nancy turned around and presented the doctor with her back. At last the thin cotton fell away, and she looked down at the pale skin of her body with blind eyes.

"How did you do it?" She whirled around to face the other woman. "Chemicals? Skin peels? Tell me."

Dr. Dulass recoiled from the fury in her voice. "I don't understand. No one has done anything to your skin."

Oh yes, they had. "I need a mirror. Get me a mirror."

The doctor went to the small chest beside her bed. From it she removed a small object and handed it to Nancy without a word.

Nancy looked into the mirror, and saw a stranger staring back at her. She threw it from her with a cry of pain.

"Why are you so upset?"

Nancy covered her face - her smooth, pale face - then dropped her hands and faced the other woman. "Do you know a Dr. Lucian Kobori? I came to this country to see him about a treatment for my condition."

"Of course, I know Dr. Kobori." Dulass frowned. "But he only treats patients with hypertrichosis."

"I know. I was born with it."

Dr. Dulass finally smiled. "That's nonsense. You are perfectly normal."

"I wasn't. Not until I woke up here." Nancy looked around. "Do you have my passport?"

"I believe so. Your cases were sent from the train station." The doctor went to the chest again, and from it took the thick leather case in which Nancy had put all her papers. "Here, it is." She opened it, saw the photograph, and gaped. "My God."

"Exactly." Nancy sat down on the side of the bed.

"This cannot be you."

"It is. Or, rather" -she looked down at her pale body- "it was." She moved her eyes to the leather case. "There are several full-length photographs in there, with my medical file."

Dr. Dulass drew out the file, opened it, and with increasing astonishment, studied the photographs. "This isn't possible. You saying you were like this? Before you were pushed from the train? You've had no treatment?"

"Until I was pushed off that train, every square inch of my body was covered with thick, black hair." Nancy smiled faintly. "That's how I make my living. I'm a performer in a side show." She stared down at herself, at the pale, perfect skin that didn't have a single black hair sprouting from it. "At least, I was."

Part Two

He was tired of waiting, and it was beginning to show. Shadows under his eyes. Lines around his mouth. And the fist he had just used to smash the mirror above the sink.

"That's seven years of bad luck, Lucian," a soft voice chided from the doorway. "Or is it fourteen for us? I've always wondered."

In the remains of the mirror, he saw the distorted image of the petite, attractive blonde standing behind him. He forced himself to concentrate on picking the glass shards out of his bloodied knuckles. "Go back to your patients, Hlin."

"And miss watching the Great Kobori vandalize his own bath? My rounds can wait. Here." The neurologist's cool hand touched his wrist. "Let me see."

Her touch, like everyone else's, had become intolerable. "I'm fine." He brushed past her and returned to his office. Case files were beginning to stack up but he ignored them and went to the window. "Has my brother arrived yet?"

"No, but Sylvan should be here by nightfall. As will the rest of the Clan." Hlin Gunnvors made an exasperated sound. "Lucian, this is ridiculous. Why do you not simply go and get her?"

He gripped the windowsill. "She must come to me willingly."

"Oh, yes, I forgot." Hlin joined him, and looked out at the patients who were strolling through the garden labyrinth. "In my homeland, we are not so bound to old ways."

His lips drew back from his clenched teeth. "Then go back to Denmark and be modern there."

Hlin chuckled. "You can't intimidate me, Kobori, no matter how much you snarl. Come, have breakfast with me. You may insult my people and my country all you like, and the staff will be able to stop tiptoeing for an hour."

"No." Lucian turned and strode out of the room.

Hlin watched him go before she sighed and went to use the phone. "Connect me with Dr. Dulass's office, please."

* * *

The doctor explained to Nancy that it would take time to run all the proper tests - weeks, even months. Even then she wasn't sure they would explain the abrupt and total disappearance of her hypertrichosis.

"I have checked with colleagues of mine in several different countries, Miss Carguitto," Dr. Dulass told her. "There have been cases of partial remission, but nothing . . . like this."

A tension headache had been drilling behind her temples all morning, and now it began to pound. "You can't even tell me if this will last, can you?"

"It is difficult to say. You are the first patient to experience such a complete reversal." The Swiss woman smiled a little. "Quite frankly, we do not know what to make of it at all."

"I want to go home now." Nancy rose to her feet. "Can you sign me out of this place and get me to the nearest airport?"

The doctor got up and came around the desk. "Please, Ms. Carguitto, if you would consider staying in Romania a few more days - Dr. Kobori wishes to see you."

"I don't need Kobori now." She rubbed her hands over her upper arms. The air touching her skin made her feel exposed, as if she were walking around totally naked. "And if this is only temporary, I want my mother to see me before the hair grows back." Maybe she should get someone to take some photographs on the way home, just in case.

"My dear, have you considered Lucian Kobori's other patients?" The doctor gestured toward the window, where the Kobori mountains loomed along the horizon. "They all suffer from some form of hypertrichosis, and could greatly benefit from what has happened to you. Would you deny them the hope of a cure?"

Nancy frowned. "You said it would take weeks or months to figure out what happened."

"Here, yes. But the Kobori Clinic is much better equipped to perform the type of tests you need." Dr. Dulass took Nancy's hand in hers. "If anyone can tell you what has happened to you, it is Lucian."

Which was how Nancy ended up in the back of a noisy, rusted Edsel, being driven up an unpaved road into the mountains by a man as old and battered-looking as the car.

They had been bumping along for two hours when Nancy finally leaned forward to ask, "How much farther?"

"Three miles." There was no rearview mirror, so he glanced back to show her all four of his teeth. "You beautiful woman. Kobori be pleased."

"Not as pleased as I am." She grinned back. "So what's this Dr. Kobori like?"

"Great man. Come from great family. Grandfather save my village from Nazis. Father fight the Russians when they invade. Now Dr. Lucian care for us, protect us." The old man shook his head. "We can never repay."

No wonder they named the mountains after the man's family. "Are there a lot of patients at his clinic?"

"Not many." He turned off the bumpy mountain road onto a narrow access road leading between two immense vertical cliffs. "His people very sick."

No one died of hypertrichosis, but Nancy didn't bother to correct him. The old man was probably chock full of old Catholic superstitions. Many of the old Italian women in her Brooklyn neighborhood had shunned her family. One had even told Nancy's mother that her condition was a mark of demonic possession.

As the Edsel came to a groaning stop in front of a tall, gray-stone castle, Nancy forgot about superstitions and simply stared. "That's not a clinic. That's a freaking *castle*."

"That Kobori Hold." The old man got out to open her door and help her from the car.

She'd seen plenty of castles and fortresses during her European tours with the carny, but nothing like this. Kobori Hold had been literally chiseled out of the side of a cliff, emerging from the granite as if the mountain was growing it. Twin towers soared above concentric walls leading to an odd, triangular gate house in front of a high-walled bailey. The window openings were also strange - short and wide instead of the long, narrow - and Nancy couldn't see any glass in them.

"Welcome to Castle Dracula," Nancy muttered under her breath.

As the door in the front gate house opened, she absently pulled the hood of the cloak Dr. Dulass had given her over her face and thanked the old man. He shook her hand, then climbed back into the Edsel and drove off in a cloud of dust before she could stop him.

"Great." She coughed and waved her hand in front of her face. "Leave me here with the vampires." Then a crinkly feeling hit her in the back of the neck, and she turned her head.

On the other side of the settling dust cloud stood a man. A very large, tall man dressed entirely in black. The expression on his hard-edged face was so remote and unfriendly that she thought she might be at the wrong castle.

Must be his, though, he's certainly king-sized.

His eyes and hair matched his clothes, and a small silver ring glittered in his left ear. Dramatic, but not as impressive as his size. Nancy was no midget, but he had twelve inches and at least a hundred pounds on her. If he was a vampire, she'd be like a kid's juice box. Slurp, slurp, goodbye Nancy.

So what do I say? Hi, nice castle you have here? Got any coffins downstairs?

A small, golden-haired woman in a white lab coat stepped out from behind him and smiled. "Welcome to Koberi Clinic, Ms. Carguito."

Before she could respond, the big man was towering over her. With a single flick of his hand, he tugged her hood back. Black eyes narrowed as he studied every inch of her face.

"Hi." She'd stick to single words until she was sure she wouldn't stutter. The blonde was somewhere close, but Nancy couldn't look away from that dark, unfathomable gaze, or escape the feeling she should say or do something. *But what? What's going on here?* She dragged in an unsteady breath. "Everything okay, big guy?"

Her voice made him blink. He lifted his hand, and his fingertips hovered above her cheek for a moment.

Unaccustomed to being touched by anyone, Nancy automatically took a step back.

The big man looked as if she'd decked him. Then he turned and strode off into the castle without uttering a single word.

"I'm Dr. Gunnvors, and that was our director, Lucian Koberi." The blonde rolled her eyes. "I apologize for his bad manners, I'm afraid he's feeling a bit out of sorts today."

"Really." She got the impression in the last two seconds of eye contact that Lucian Koberi wanted to slap her silly. "Look, I can't stay very long anyway. If this is a bad time—"

"No, we're very grateful you could visit us, Ms. Carguito."

"Please." She held up a hand. "Call me Nancy."

"I'm Hlin. You will a wonderful inspiration for all of our patients, you know." The blonde gestured toward the castle. "Now, let's go inside and I'll give you the tour of this drafty old monster."

Oddly, the staff - she assumed they were staff, from the white lab coats they wore, didn't come near them. Instead, as she followed Dr. Gunnvors up to the gate house, everyone smiled at her.

And as Nancy passed them, they bowed.

* * *

Lucian Kobori's home was an authentic medieval fortress, complete with mural-sized tapestries, suits of armor, and heavy battle axes hanging over hand carved mantles. The clinic itself was located at the back of the inner bailey, where Hlin showed her the old servants quarters that had been converted into treatment facilities and private inpatient rooms.

"We currently have seventy-two full time residents" the doctor said as they entered the wards. "We've discovered that hypertrichosis is due to a rare, recessive gene that developed in this region of Romania during the fourteenth century. All hypertrichotic patients are therefore distantly related to each other."

Nancy knew a lot about her condition, but this was news. "My parents are Italian, not Romanian. And there are plenty of other cases in other countries." Hlin nodded toward several patients who had come to stand in the doorways. "Our patients come here from all over the world, but their DNA all share the same marker. We believe Romanian natives visited or immigrated to their countries during some time in history, and it was their contributions to the local gene pool that ultimately resulted in these abberant cases."

Nancy couldn't help noticing the extreme cases of hypertrichosis, or the sweet smiles she got from every patient she passed. And like the staff in front of the castle, every single one of them bowed as she walked by. "Why are they doing that?"

"You mean, the bowing? They think you're a gift from the Gods." Hlin made an airy gesture. "Superstitious peasant nonsense, really."

"Really." She didn't like the way the doctor said that. "I thought the whole peasant thing died out about five hundred years ago."

"You're in Romania now, my dear." She snorted. "It doesn't get anymore primitive than this."

They finished off the tour by returning to the outer bailey.

"It's an incredible place," Nancy said, still looking wide-eyed at the museum-quality artifacts. "Thanks for showing me around."

"A thorough tour takes a few days, but this will suffice for now. You must be hungry and tired after your trip." Hlin led her into an enormous bed chamber where someone had set up what appeared to be enough food to feed a small army. "Lucian will send someone to collect you for dinner."

Stunned, Nancy turned around to take in the beautiful old furnishings. "This is *my* room?" When she glanced back at the door, Hlin Gunnvors was gone. "Okay, now the Twilight Zone theme music kicks in, right?"

She wandered over to the table, and examined the dishes. Everything looked like it had just come from the kitchen of a master chef, right down to the clever little sauce squiggles and pretty garnishes. Oddly every other dish was some kind of meat - cuts of ham, chicken, beef, veal - all beautifully but simply prepared. Behind the table was a large mirrored wall, which was responsible for making the feast look larger than it was.

Nancy, who had been a vegetarian from birth, sighed. "Two days." She picked up a celery stick and bit off the end before shaking it at her reflection. "Two days, and then I'm outta here."

* * *

Lucian paced back and forth in front of the observation panel. He had waited, he had been patient - to the point of madness. The burden was his, one he had endured for what seemed like an eternity, and now it was crushing him - now that she was here, only a few inches away. The one, the only one in the world who could save him, and he could do nothing but watch her.

She would not eat his food.

She did not like his home.

She had not welcomed his touch.

The door to his chamber opened and closed. "Brother."

He had sensed his sibling's arrival, but had hoped Sylvan would occupy himself with Hlin. "Not now."

"I am happy to see you, too." Dr. Sylvan Kobori put his medical case on a table and opened it. "You need an injection."

"I have already taken two today." Lucian stopped as she rose from the bed and stretched. Seeing the subtle grace of her movements through the double-sided mirror plagued him more than watching her sleep. "They did nothing for me."

"The third may be the charm." Sylvan brought over the prepared syringe. "Roll up your sleeve."

Lucian's hand lashed out and knocked the needle away. It hit the wall on the opposite side of the room and shattered.

"Or not." Sylvan folded his arms. "The Gods have a vicious sense of humor, Lucian. You of all people should know that. I was not happy to discover that this American girl is the one."

"You're sure."

"I inspected her from head to toe. There isn't another female in the world who is completely black-haired. Good scientist that I am, I also ran the DNA tests to be sure. She is your genetic match - blood, tissue, everything."

"I know. I can still taste her."

"You may have tasted her, but she has enough bad blood to prevent emergence." Sylvan waited until Lucian turned to him. "Yes, I was rather surprised by that as well. Her genetic structure, her isolation from the Clan, and some other unknown factor have kept her completely unaware. Will keep her completely unaware unless you tell her or you awaken her."

"I cannot." He watched her run her hands over her now-hairless arms. Saw the wonder and awe on her face. "Go away, Sylvan."

"I can end this right now, brother. Shall I go and perform your duties?"

Lucian went still, and turned his head to meet his sibling's calm gaze. "Try, and I'll rip your throat out."

His brother rubbed the back of his neck. "Hlin tells me that she has agreed to stay until Saturday. You only have forty-eight hours left, Lucian. I suggest you forget about the legends and get busy."

* * *

"This way, madam."

The butler - or whatever he was - escorted Nancy into a long dining room lit up by thousands of candles. There were three people seated at one end of the table - the blonde doctor, a second, older woman, and a man with a very familiar face.

"Ms. Carguitto." Sylvan Kobori left his chair and met her halfway. "It's good to see you again."

"You recognized the new me." She shook his hand. "What are you doing here?"

"Family business, and hearing about your miraculous transformation - I couldn't stay away. Come, let me introduce you." He led her to the head of the table. "Nancella Carguitto, this is my Aunt, Madam Nadia Kobori. You've already met Dr. Gunnvors."

The silver-haired woman smiled a little and raised her wine glass. "Welcome to Kobori Hold, my dear."

"Thank you." Nancy noticed the table was set for five as Sylvan pulled out a chair for her. The place setting at the head of the table was empty. "You have a beautiful home, Dr. Kobori, Madam Kobori. Nice to see you again, Hlin."

"Sylvan, please." He gestured toward one of the four hovering servants, who came forward with a bottle of wine. "Is your room to your liking?"

"My room would make royalty happy." She glanced at the platters of food being brought to the table. This time there was almost nothing she could eat. "Um, I hate to be a pest, but I don't eat meat."

Everyone went still for a moment, as if she'd said something obscene.

She glanced around at her dinner companions. "It's okay that I don't eat meat, right?"

Sylvan broke the spell with, "Of course. We'll have a salad prepared for you, if that would be acceptable?"

"Yes, thanks, that would be great." Why did she feel like she should apologize for her diet? "Sorry for the extra trouble."

"Have you always been a vegetarian?" Hlin asked, and flicked an odd glance at Sylvan.

"Yes, all my life. My parents are very health-conscious." She looked from one doctor to another. "But then you doctors know the benefits of a healthy diet."

Madam Kobori made a funny sound and drank down her wine.

The awkward moment passed when Hlin launched into a story about a recent trip to Denmark, and by the time Nancy's salad had arrived she was feeling much more comfortable.

"This is lovely, thanks," she said to the servant, who bowed and backed away - almost straight into Lucian Kobori.

He brushed past the servant and loomed over Nancy's chair. "Good evening, Ms. Carguito. I am Lucian Kobori."

Bring her to me.

"Um, hello." She could feel heat flooding her face. "Call me Nancy."

He stared down at her plate as if it was filled with worms. "What is this?" He turned to his brother, and his voice snapped like a whip. "Who served this to her?"

"Nancy is a vegetarian, Lucian." Hlin speared a piece of chicken with her fork, and made a little circle with it. "Has been, all her life."

Again, everyone acted as if that was some kind of vile perversion.

"I see." He sat at the head of the table, at Nancy's left, but waved off the servant with the wine. "I understand you had an accident on your journey here, Nancella. Perhaps you would be kind enough to tell us about it."

"Not much to tell, I was pushed off a train by a couple of drunks. And then a dog attacked me." She took a sip of her wine, a robust red with a faintly bitter aftertaste. "Someone dragged me out of the snow, and brought me to a hospital. When I woke up, my hypertrichosis had disappeared."

Lucian ignored the food being offered to him. "How do you feel now?"

"Fine. Great." She laughed at herself. "Well, a little weird. I can't get used to my skin - I mean, having so much of it exposed." She touched her cheek. "It's a little hard to describe the sensation."

"I remembering the way I felt when I shaved my head as a teenager," Sylvan put in. "I walked around for weeks positively that some unmentionable portion of my anatomy was hanging out."

Everyone but Lucian laughed.

That broke the ice, and dinner continued from there without a hitch. Sylvan and Hlin did most of the talking, sticking mainly to travel stories and amusing

anecdotes, with a few mild comments occasionally from Madam Nadia. Nancy couldn't help noticing that Lucian ate very little, and said almost nothing.

"No, thanks." She passed on the slices of multi-layered cakes the servant offered for dessert, and smothered a yawn. She felt so tired she could hardly hold her eyes open. Must be the mountain air, or the wine. "I think I'd better call it a night. Thank you for a lovely meal."

Lucian rose at once. "I'll escort you to your room."

"I can find my way." She didn't want to put him to any trouble.

"Let Lucian take you, my dear." Nadia made a vague gesture. "It's for the best."

"Yes," Sylvan said quickly. "The Hold is very big place, and we don't want you to get lost."

"Okay." She'd rocked the boat enough for one night. "Sure."

They walked together to her second-floor chamber, and by the time they got there, Nancy was ready to jump inside and bolt the door. There was something very wrong with Lucian Kobori - he seemed on edge, ready to snap. Was it her miraculous, inexplicable cure? She could see where a spontaneous, total remission might irritate a doctor who had devoted his life to finding a cure.

Exhaustion was making her dizzy. Maybe she should cut her visit short and leave for home tomorrow. "Well, thanks again." She reached for the door. "Um, it was nice meeting you."

"Nancella." He put up a hand, held the door closed. "Don't be afraid of me."

"I'm not." Yes, she was. She was seriously scared of him, right this minute, and she had no idea why. "It's just - have I done something to upset or offend you? I get the impression that I have."

He lifted his hand, exactly the way he had when they first met outside the castle, then dropped it when she backed away. "You do not welcome my touch."

Odd way to put it. But then, English wasn't his first language, and she didn't have to be so jumpy. "I'm not used to being touched." What was the big deal? And why was it so hard to concentrate? "Did you want to check my skin or something? Hlin said she'd give me a full exam tomorrow."

"An exam." He looked mystified.

"Yeah, you know. Check me, head to toe, like your brother did." She held up her arm and chuckled. "To be honest, now that I've lost my pelt, I think I'll be more comfortable with a female doctor."

He muttered something in his native language at the ceiling, then stepped away from the door. "Good night, Nancella." He gave her a short bow and strode off.

Lucian waited until the drugged wine took effect, then went to her. She had fallen asleep in her clothes, on top of the bed. Lifting her into his arms made every muscle he owned knot. He could feel her dreaming. She was in her home, in New York, where she was well loved. Yet here she was, trapped and helpless, and it infuriated him to be the cause of it. But she had left him no choice.

No contact. No knowledge. No blood. It was unthinkable.

"She neglected to tell me about her diet," Sylvan said as Lucian carried her from the bedroom. "A complete vegetarian. I never imagined" He shook his head.

Lucian headed for entrance to the lower levels. "It is not her fault."

His brother had to trot to keep pace. "Of course it isn't, but it does explain a great deal. Blood only wakens to blood."

Hlin met them outside the ceremonial chamber. "The Clan is gathered. I still think this is a very bad idea, Lucian. The Valium will wear off the moment she emerges."

"I will not let her transition."

"No." Sylvan stepped in front of him. "I forbid it. The last time nearly killed her."

"You, forbid me?" Lucian shoved him aside. "I cannot give her anything else. She is the one. She will have some choice in this." He carried Nancy into the chamber.

Hlin looked at Sylvan. "Your brother has lost his mind."

Sylvan rubbed a hand over his face. "Pray to the Gods that is *all* he loses."

* * *

Nancy's dream made no sense.

First, she was floating out of her room. Down the hall, past three doors, and into one on the right. From there she drifted down into a chilly, silent space. There

were voices, then something creaked, and then she was drawn inside a yawning black cavern.

The next thing Nancy knew, she was alone and naked, in the dark, and yet she could feel people watching her. Hundreds of people. Not the way they gawked at the sideshow - she heard no giggles or screams or whispers of disgust. There were only eyes and silence. It made her cringe in ways no crass spectator ever had.

She crouched down on the cold stone, squeezing her eyes shut, trying to cover herself with her hands. *Don't look at me this way.*

"Nancella." Warm, gentle hands lifted her, made her stand. She couldn't see him, but he was there, right there with her. "Don't be afraid."

"Taste." He was holding something to her lips. Something warm and sticky. Something that was twitching. Revolted, she turned away, but his hand urged her back to it. "Do this for me, it will help. Blood only wakens to blood."

He was hurting, she could feel it. She tried to apologize, but the moment her lips parted she tasted blood - and raw flesh. He was pushing her face into it now - something trembling and small and alive. Pain exploded in her head, in her jaw, and in the very roots of her teeth as she struggled, jerking her face from side to side, smearing her face against it.

Then her body tensed in a way she'd never felt before. She was on the brink of something so tremendous it was going to swallow her whole. At the same time, something was holding her back.

"Take it." The deep, beautiful voice sounded so tired and sad this time. "Nancella, you must do this."

Take what? Do what She pushed feebly at him, choking on the blood filling her mouth now.

"She resists." A taunting sneer from a lovely voice. "She does not take. She does not awake. She cannot change. She is not Clan."

"Wait." His arms tightened around her, and he lowered his voice to a whisper. "It is inside you, I know you can feel it. If you will not have me, so be it. But embrace what you are, Nancella. Take back what is yours."

The words made no sense, of course. But there was something to them. Some key in what he said that unlocked a nameless part of Nancy that she had never been aware of before. Slowly she stopped fighting, and opened her mouth. The

taste of blood made her gag, but she swallowed. Then she used her teeth. He let go of her, and moved away.

The pain expanded and twisted, racing through her like poison, changing into liquid fire. She was holding the thing now, digging her hands into it, tearing at it.

And nothing had ever felt or tasted so good.

Voices began to murmur, but she was too busy riding the waves of pleasure to pay any attention to them. At last that new part of her was satisfied, and she pushed away the now-dead thing she had savaged.

Finally, she could see - through eyes that didn't seem like her own. She stood on a long, flat stone, in some kind of dungeon. Torches blazed on the walls. People stood crowded around the base of the stone, looking up at her. People whose faces were covered with black hair.

"Nancella."

She jerked her head up. He stood before her, the man with the beautiful voice. As naked as she was. His hands, like hers, covered with blood. Between them on the stone lay a small, dead animal - a rabbit, maybe. It was hard to tell, from the way it had been gutted.

She had killed it. She had torn it apart. With her hands and teeth.

"You are one with the Clan again." He stepped toward her, into the light. It was Lucian, but something was happening to him. His face - it was changing shape - turning black - "Now choose."

It was too much. She closed her eyes and fell into the dark.

* * *

Nancy didn't mention the dream to Hlin the next morning. She didn't want to think about it. She was going home, to the people she loved. To the mother that had dreamed of this cure, to show her that she had been right. That it was possible.

Plus if she spent another ten minutes under Lucian Kobori's roof she might start screaming and never stop.

"I thought you had decided to stay," the blonde doctor said as she brought a tray to the bed.

"I changed my mind." Nancy closed her case and eyed the tray. It was filled with rolls, fruit, and a pot of tea - but after that Technicolor nightmare, the thought of

food totally revolted her. "Thanks, but I'm not hungry. Would you call a cab for me?"

The blonde gave her a sympathetic smile. "I'd be happy to drive you down myself. Let me go and get my keys."

"Terrific, I'd appreciate it." She watched Hlin go, then sat down on the bed, oddly shaken. "I have to get to get my act together, or I-" she halted as she stared at her hands. Then she ran into the adjoining bathroom and snapped on the light.

There was something under her fingernails. A thin line of something dark and dried. She grabbed a tissue and worked it under the edge of her thumbnail, then examined the stain.

Blood.

She crumpled the tissue. "It wasn't a dream. Goddamn it, what did he do to me?"

Nancy ran out of the room, and looked down the corridor. No one in sight. She retraced her dream-path, counting the three doors as she passed them, then opening the door on the right. It revealed a staircase that descended into utter darkness.

Before she could step down onto the first step, someone came up behind her, and pushed.

* * *

Lucian finished signing the last of the paperwork that would allow Sylvan to take over the estate and the running of the clinic. It was the least he could do, before he left.

"Is there nothing else to be done?" Now Sylvan was the one pacing back and forth in front of the observation panel. "Can't you talk to her? Explain what has happened?"

"You saw her reaction," Lucian said simply. "I will never force her to feel that way again. She has made her choice, Sylvan. The Clan is yours."

"I do not want the Clan." Tears filled his tired eyes. "I want you here, alive, with us. And she made no choice at all. She fainted."

"That, in itself, is a choice, little brother." Lucian capped his pen and rose to his feet. "Now I will . . ." he froze, and lifted his head. "Oh, no. *No.*"

"What is it?"

But Lucian was already gone.

* * *

Nancy woke up to find herself with a splitting headache. The fact that someone was dragging her by the hair across cold stone didn't help.

"I've been very patient, you know," Hlin said as she used Nancy's hair to haul her into the ceremonial chamber. "You should not have survived the fall from the train, but those drunks I hired were complete idiots. After you arrived here, I didn't have the chance to poison your wine or smother you in your sleep."

"Huh?" Nancy's limbs felt sluggish and heavy. And if the bitch didn't let go of her hair, she was going to rip her little blonde head off.

"Lucian's fault, of course. His obsession with finding the one and only black female. I should have known how closely he would watch over you." Hlin kicked a heavy door shut, then used Nancy's hair to jerk to her feet. "You still don't understand, do you? The Master of the Clan is always a full black. As is his only mate. He's been searching for you for years, you silly twit."

"A full black? What?"

"Shut up." She drew back her arm and punched Nancy in the stomach, sending her to her knees. "God, to think someone as backward and ignorant as you could become prime breeder for the Clan. It makes me want to puke."

"Why are you doing this?" Nancy gasped, clutching her abdomen. "I just want to leave."

"Stupid American bitch." Hlin jerked off her clothes, then crouched down naked in front of her. "My Clan is almost gone. You and Lucian have to die. Then Sylvan will become Master, and take me as mate."

Nancy crawled back, her eyes widening as Hlin's body began contort and shrink. Tawny fur grew out of her skin, forming a thick, shaggy pelt. Hlin's jaw and nose extended, forming a canine muzzle, and her teeth narrowed and lengthened into jagged fangs.

It wasn't possible - not outside of movie special effects. But Nancy couldn't blink. What had been a woman was turning into a large, golden dog. No, not a dog.

A wolf.

"Don't move, Nancella," Lucian said from behind her as Hlin finished her transformation, and lowered her head to growl.

She couldn't move. "I'm not going anywhere. Lucian, did you know your lady doctor friend is a real dog?"

He stepped out in front of her and began pulling off his clothes. As he stripped, a pelt of black hair raced down his back.

Now she couldn't breathe. "Oh, my god."

He glanced back at her, and his eyes turned silver. "Wait until I change, then get out of here. Go back to America, forget about this. You'll be safe there."

Hlin chose that moment to spring at Lucian, and knocked him flat on his back, and the two began a vicious struggle. Nancy inched back toward the door, trying to find enough strength to get to her feet. Then she saw Lucian, who had only changed halfway between a man and wolf, start to bleed from a dozen bites.

Voices began to clamor inside her head.

If you go to my brother, he will expect absolute and unwavering commitment from you. Are you prepared -

Don't hurt me -

He's feeling a bit out of sorts today -

Let Lucian take you -

The power inside swelled and rolled, but a strange calm settled over Nancy. She didn't understand, but she didn't have to. Lucian was in danger.

If you will not have me, so be it.

And Lucian was *hers*.

The bizarre tension swept over her, but now she knew what to do. She began shedding her clothes, and saw her skin was already changing back. To think she had dreaded it.

Embrace what you are, Nancella.

There was pain. Pain from muscles elongating and bunching, and beneath them bones collapsing and reforming. In a dim part of her still-human mind, Nancy understood the pain was necessary. Like childbirth.

Her other self had to be born.

When it was finished, the more primal consciousness embraced Nancy with joy. Then it took control, and went after Lucian.

* * *

He could think of no better way to die than defending the mate he would never have. Better that he end it this way, so that she would live freely and never be troubled by his kind again.

Then the black wolf sprang between him and Hlin, and drove the murderous female back, snarling and snapping.

"No, Nancella." His half-formed mouth garbled the word, and he drew on the last of his strength to return to human form. Staggering to the wall, he wrenched one of the torches down and went after the two females, trying to drive them apart.

"Lucian." Sylvan and the Clan entered the chamber, carrying the ceremonial blades. When he saw Lucian's wounds, his brother hurried over. "She attacked you."

"Hlin, yes." He tried to go after the females again. "Nancella changed."

"Then do not stop her." Sylvan held him back. "She defends you."

Lucian shook his head. "No, she rejected me last night. She was leaving. Hlin attacked her."

"It would seem, brother" -Sylvan smiled- "that she has changed more than her form."

The battle between the two females ended a few minutes later, when the black wolf mangled one of the golden female's back legs. The traitorous female went down, and could not rise again. She curled in on herself, desperately licking the crippling wound. The black wolf stood over her, and howled her triumph.

"The challenge is over." Sylvan handed a blade to Lucian. "You have a worthy mate, brother."

Lucian nodded and went over to the golden wolf, who whined as her body slowly changed back to human form.

Hlin Gunnvors looked up at him. "I would have killed you. You and your pathetic brother. The Clan would have been mine."

"I know." He handed her the blade. "Safe journey, sister."

She lifted her arm, and brought the knife down. As it pierced her heart, Hlin gurgled, then died.

Lucian turned to see the black wolf watching him steadily with her brilliant pale eyes. He knelt before her, and bowed his head until it touched the ground. "I owe you my life."

The Clan retrieved Hlin's body, and quietly filed out of the chamber.

He heard her body changing, but stayed where he was. He wanted her to see his tribute with her human eyes, as well. And he was afraid if he looked into her face, he would see nothing but disgust.

"Lucian, we need to talk."

He lifted his head. Like him, she was kneeling. Blood and wounds from the battle marred her white skin, but they would be gone by morning. Now that she had made a complete change, her life would never be the same.

"I want to know what just happened. What's been happening," she said, looking very solemn. "Right now."

He told her everything. How their kind had spread throughout the world over history, interbreeding with humans. How shape shifting became a rare recessive trait that only occurred once in every five hundred thousand births, and was now erroneously diagnosed as extreme hypertrichosis.

"Some are not able to emerge - to change completely into wolf form - and they come here for refuge. We try to help them. Others have to be taught to change."

She glanced at the blood on the floor. "No one taught me to do that."

"You had never been awakened. We become aware of what we are, and can tap into our abilities, but only after we make our first kill. You had never even consumed flesh before."

"Until last night. You made me kill and eat that rabbit."

He nodded.

"Okay. We'll discuss how gross that was later." She released a long breath. "What happened after I fell off the train?"

"I sensed you were in danger, and I tracked you until I found you." He nodded toward her breast. "I bit you. My saliva stimulated your immune system, helped you emerge enough to heal yourself. Unfortunately, one immediate side effect was that it reversed your hypertrichosis."

"So I have you to thank for this. And you can track me?"

He smiled a little. "I could feel you from a hundred miles away. You're a full black, like me."

"That's what Hlin said. What does it mean?"

"Legend states that the leader of our Clan must always be a full black male - his human body hair, and his fur when he emerged, is completely black. We're very rare. And he can only mate with a full black female." He watched the firelight play over her hair. "I've been waiting for you all my life."

Her expression softened for a moment. "Yeah, well, I like you too, but you really should have told me about this from the beginning."

"Would you have believed me?" He smiled a little. "How could I even begin to explain? Welcome to Castle Dracula, I'm not a vampire, but I'm a werewolf, and so are you? Kill this small animal so you can learn how to shape shift and be my bride?"

She laughed a little. "You heard me say that. That vampire thing."

He nodded. "Our senses are very acute."

"Ahhh." She wrinkled her nose as she looked down at herself. "Nasty bitch did a number on me. Why did she kill herself?"

"It was that, or be torn to pieces by the Clan." He reached out to her, then hesitated. "May I?"

"You've seen me naked, made me turn into a wolf, and you're still asking permission?" She grabbed his hand and pressed it against her face. "Touch all you want." Then the sensation of his mind blending with hers registered, and her eyelids drooped as she felt everything he felt physically. "Ho, boy."

"That's why I asked permission." He gathered her close. "Nancella, there is so much more I have to explain. Stay with me, be with me. Please."

"We'll have to negotiate on the killing the rabbit thing, okay?" She frowned. "Maybe I could just have a cheeseburger every now and then."

He thought of the delights of the hunt, which she had yet to experience, then pressed his mouth to her brow. "We'll work it out."

She pulled his head down to hers. "Now I only have one more question for you."

"Which is?"

Nancy grinned. "Just what the hell am I going to tell my mother?"

Contract Stipulations

Now granted, living on a dome colony on an airless asteroid orbiting a mostly-dead brown star has its drawbacks. There's no air, no heat, no grass, no water and the neighbors - who are used to homeworlds with all that stuff - are kind of twitchy. Being the only Terran on said airless grassless waterless heatless asteroid is no joyride, either. You're always meeting things that have too many heads, too many limbs, and expect you to spit on them instead of saying hello.

Unless you're me, of course.

I'm Mercy, owner of the Mercy House, and no, I don't give out discount coupons. My parents brought me to Trellus-6 when I was just an infant, trying to set up a future-ager colony where no one could bug them about what clothes to wear, what prayers to chant, or what food to grow. Unfortunately, they put more work into hydroponics than a colonial defense grid. A really nasty species of reptilian planetary raiders called the Hsktskt came by nine years after we landed. They wiped out everyone on planet but the youngest kids, leaving us to starve to death so as not to waste ammunition.

Nice guys, huh?

Other aliens moved in to salvage what was left of the colony, but they weren't too interested in saving orphans. We starved for a while, until some missionaries came along and set up the Shelter. That's where I became an apprentice and learned my trade. And while I enjoyed my work, I figured the real money could be made running my own place versus working for someone else. So I acquired some property, set up my business and went into upper management.

Today I've got over three hundred extremely skilled beings from a wide range of species working for me. As Mercy House is the only place in five solar systems that offers both quality and variety, we get most of the transport trade as well as servicing the entire colony. I'm the second wealthiest being in the quadrant and have established a nice reputation as someone you do not want to mess with. A few months ago, I discovered falling in love wouldn't kill me, and my manager/lover Cat and I have decided to get hitched.

Basically, that's my life story. I'm rich, I'm famous, and I'm engaged to an Omorr.

Stop snickering.

Running Mercy House is never dull, and when it is, I look for trouble. Or trouble finds me. Hey, can I help it if I like things to be a little exciting? Not like I can go outside and take a nice long walk through the basalt fields, right? The problem is, I never get the trouble I want. I get the trouble no one else wants. Like the time this slave trader shows up at my front door....

I was waiting for Cat to get back with supplies for the big seasonal mine-shutdown party the local union was throwing, and thought the signal chime was him, being too lazy to key the panel to open - and him with three arms. I waved off the front desk receptionist, punched the console, and folded my two arms.

"Where the hell have you --"

"Hear you work females," a large smelly blob with one big nostril said. Then he rattled a chain at his side.

I looked down the chain. It was attached to four of the most miserable-looking slaves I'd ever seen in my life - a huge brutish-looking Zonam, a scrawny little Pmirsa, a badly-wilted Psyoran, and a bug-thing with a cracked carapace. "Let me guess. They're on special."

The blob, which I finally tagged as a Ramathorran, grinned. Or did something else gross with the bottom of his face. "For you, Miss Mercy, I make best deal."

The Ramathorran's idea of a best deal meant they'd stay alive for another twenty-four hours. Maybe. I looked back over my shoulder. "Lisela? Clear out a conference room for the gentleman slaver."

The odorous blob oozed past me, dragging his miserable females after him. They all gave me that tired, who-fucking-cares look slaves get after they've been knocked around a few cycles. I'd bet he brought them to me because he couldn't get his cost covered on the block anywhere else. I'm so lucky that way.

After the four went past, the chain didn't end, and I peered out to see one more blocky form approaching. Crawling -- no, gliding along the ground, with some kind of frame around it.

"You're selling *handicapped* slaves?" I yelled back at the Ramathorran.

The rickety, rusted glide chair rolled past me, and the slave sitting in it raised her head. His head.

A memory of a tall, broad-shoulder man with a deep laugh and huge hands made me grab the chain and yank it to a halt. This wasted wreck of being couldn't be - "Drefan, is that you?"

The former owner of the only abandoned mines on Trellus-6 nodded politely. The one eye he had left didn't meet mine. "Nice to see you again, Mercy," he said, his voice a raspy ruin.

I let go of the chain, and my jaw, but he simply glided on after the others.

I went to close the door panel, still in shock over seeing Dre on a slave chain, when a spade-shaped hand caught the edge of the door and shoved it aside. The being was tall, pink, three armed, one-legged, and had a mouth like a mop. "Excuse me, is this Mercy House?"

"Yep." I gave him the once-over. My fiancé Cat is also an Omorr, so maybe it was a friend of his. "Um, can I help you?"

"I'm here to see Cataced. He has a female he wishes me to inspect."

Nice of my boyfriend to tell me he had pals dropping in. "He's not here right now." I thought of my employee roster, which didn't include any Omorr females. Hey, I'm in love, but I'm not *stupid*. "Did he mention a particular name?"

The Omorr's gildrells, which were like a long beard of writhing snakes, turned to spokes. "No, but he informed me she was quite adept at her profession."

That would be Julanna, my veteran multi-species handler - she was so good I didn't trust her around *me*. "Gotcha. Right this way."

I escorted the Omorr to Julanna's room, and left him with her after a simple introduction -- it's best not to try to sell the customer the product, if you know what I mean. Then I went to deal with the disgusting slob in my conference room. I picked up a pulse pistol from one of my supply lockers on the way, just in case.

He was already helping himself to the prep unit, gobbling down handfuls of whatever Ramathorran find appetizing (not like I wanted to check), and grinned through his food at me when I came in. "So, Miss Mercy. I sell you my beautiful females, yes?"

"When was the last time you had your vision checked?" I paced up and down the line of slaves he'd made stand against a wall. "And I count four females, one male here."

Mr. Manners spat out a bone onto my floor. "He give himself to me. I throw him in, no extra charge."

"Really." I knelt down in front of Drefan, who was calmly staring at absolutely nothing with his one good eye. The scarred crater where the other one should have been didn't bug me as much as his missing legs. When had all the mutilation happened? "Is that right."

"Say you give me ten thousand credits, we call it a deal," the blob said, making an expansive gesture.

I stood before I laughed. "Disposing of them would cost more. In your dreams, slaver."

"They are finest stock!" He drew himself up, in a blob kind of way. "In four quadrants!"

I chuffed out some air. "You could scrape the bottom of four quadrants and find better scum than this. One thousand, and only because I like you."

He clutched at his pudgy chest. "You kill me, Miss Mercy."

No, but I might have to, if he tried to leave with his stock. "Take it or leave it."

"I go half -- five thousand -- and will starve my younglings by that."

"You probably ate your younglings. Two thousand, and run fast as soon as I give it to you."

"Four." He belched out loud, like that would impress me. "Four and I will make up my losses somehow."

"My final offer." I drew out a currency chip and slapped it on his sticky palm. "Two-fifty, cash in hand. Or get out and take your dregs with you."

We stood like that in silence for about half a minute. I heard one of the slaves make a low, mournful sound. Then the slaver's eyes shifted, and he turned bright purple around the snout.

"Fine." He thrust the chip into his stained tunic. "You are hard woman, Miss Mercy."

I leaned in. "You bring scum to my house again and you'll find out just how hard I can be. Now, get out."

He oozed out of the room, right past my boyfriend, who was leaning beside the door panel, fingering his best fighting knife.

I arched a brow. "I thought he gave in a little too easy."

Cat sheathed his blade and folded all three of his arms. "What are you doing, buying slaves again?"

"I'm not buying them." I fired the pulse pistol at the chain between the first two, making them jump. "I'm freeing them." I sighed. "Like always."

It took a minute to do the rest, then I signaled my floor manager. "Garn, I've got a cleanup job in conference room one. Five to cleanse, feed, and treat for injuries."

The biggest of the four females stared at me. "Are you going to make us . . ." the Zonam gestured toward the corridor.

"Uh, sorry, no. My customers like their pleasure-givers to be . . . willing." I could be diplomatic. On occasion. My wristcom pinged. "What is it, Garn?"

"Julanna's got a problem with her plug."

That meant the Omorr wasn't behaving himself. "On my way." As I passed Cat, I gave him a nudge. "What's with this friend of yours? I thought he was looking for skill."

"What friend?" he asked, bouncing after me.

"You know, the Omorr. The guy you sent here." When he kept looking blank, I sighed. "Come on, I mean besides you, how many Omorr are there on Trellus?"

"None."

By then we had reached Julanna's room, and I could hear things crashing inside. Cat pulled out his knife as I did the same with my pistol, then he punched the door override code. We rushed in.

Julanna was hiding under her hospitality table, at which the guest Omorr was throwing whatever small objects he could lay his membranes on.

"Filthy creature! Never, I say! I will kill him with my bare hands first!" the Omorr yelled at Julanna.

"Hey!" I stepped between him and the table, and had to catch a pot of massage oil fast. "Knock it off!"

Behind me, Cat made a strange sound. "Mercy."

"Look, if you didn't like her, all you had to do was walk out and ask for someone else." I bent down to help Julanna to her feet. "What's the problem?" I murmured to her.

"He's crazed. The minute I touched him, he went berserk." Julanna wiped a splatter of flavored body cream from her face. "I'm taking the rest of the day off, Mercy. He scared my pheromonal glands shut."

My top performer didn't get shaken that easy. I eyed the furious Omorr. "So what's the deal here? You don't like girls?"

"The deal, madam, is off." The Omorr bounced toward the door panel, paused, and glared at Cat. "You may apologize to me later."

Before I could ask what in God's name that meant, the Omorr left. Cat's girdrells looked like icicles, also not a good thing. "Would you mind telling me what that was all about?"

"Sure," he said in a toneless voice. "That was about our bonding contract. He came here to see you."

"Our bonding contract?" I scratched my head, and then I froze. "Oh no. He wasn't -- he couldn't be --"

"Yeah." Cat rubbed his eyes with one membrane. "That was my father."

* * *

I had four slaves -- five counting Drefan -- to deal with, so we didn't get to talk about Daddy's Unexpected Visit until later that night. Then I sat in our quarters while Cat bounced around me and ranted.

"He said he came here to inspect a girl," I said, in my own defense.

"That would be you, Mercy. On Omorr, bonding contracts aren't even put to ink before the families perform personal inspections."

Like I was property, or some herd animal. *How flattering.* "Okay, so I messed up. It was a perfectly understandable mistake, and I'm sure he'll forgive me." I watched him shake his head. "Eventually, he'll forgive me, right?"

He stopped bouncing. "Do you know who my father is?"

"Why, no," I drawled. "You never shared."

"My father, Storshba, is prayer leader for my home territory, and five others in the vicinity."

I rolled my hand. "And that is...?"

He frowned for a moment. "What is the name of the highest religious leaders on your homeworld?"

My heart sank down to my heels. "He's the Pope of Omorr?"

"There are not one, but six prayer leaders on my world. My father is the eldest, and most learned, of the six." His pacing increased speed. "He advises governors from every territory, administrates over all the twenty-nine thousand prayer centers, and counsels in mass services held every fifteen days. My father also serves as spiritual liaison to the Allied League of Worlds and about a hundred individual world governments and councils."

Oh, boy. I bet the Reverend was just thrilled to find out that his future daughter-in-law owned and operated a colonial brothel. And that his own son managed it, for that matter - "Didn't you tell him what we do for a living?"

"I left Omorr because he wanted me for the church." His gildrells flared. "What I do is none of his business."

It hit me then - I'd gone and fallen in love with, of all things, a Preacher's son.

Could be worse, I supposed. *Cat could be Ichthorii*. I went over and programmed the privacy lockouts on our quarters. Then I glanced at Cat, and increased it to three before I started taking off my clothes. "Why didn't you tell me about him before?"

"I intended to. He wasn't supposed to jaunt here for another cycle. He should have signaled." Cat made a frustrated gesture. "I wanted to prepare him. And you."

He always worried about stuff like that. It was sweet. "Come here."

He bounced over and took me in his arms. "All I wanted his signature blessing on our contract. That'll it. That's what is important to me."

I closed my eyes as his gildrells caressed my face. "So we'll convince him to sign the contract."

Our terminal chimed an urgency signal, and I reluctantly untangled myself to answer it. "What?"

"Sorry to bother you, boss." It was my night manager. "This guy in the glidechair wants to leave. Says he's got business over at the mines. You said to signal, no matter what."

Drefan. "All right, I'm coming." I grabbed my clothes, and Cat started bouncing around again. "Give me a couple minutes, okay? Then we'll do something to get that look off your gildrells."

He didn't answer me. He was that depressed.

Drefan, on the other hand, was in fine form when I found him trying to rewire the front entrance access panel. I cleared my throat. "Did you fail slave training?"

He didn't look back at me. "I'm no good to you, Mercy. I just take up space someone else could put to better use."

"Bullshit." I grabbed his chair and wheeled him around to face me. "I'm your owner now. I'll decide what you're good for." I let my gaze wander south. "You weren't paralyzed in that mining accident, were you?"

He laughed, and from the rusty sound it was probably the first time in years.. "No, but I thought your tastes ran more toward the big, mean, pink type lately."

"They do, and he's not that mean." I knelt down so we were on an even eye level, and took one of his gaunt hands in mine. "We were friends once, you and I."

His fingertips traced a delicate path down one side of my face. "I used you, little girl. I even tried to buy you, just before you left the Shelter. Believe me, the irony of this situation is not lost on me." He lifted one of my hands to his lips, then released it. "Let me go, Mercy."

I didn't like the look in his eye. "To do what? Roll yourself out an airlock? Not going to happen."

"I want to go back to my mines."

I felt my face turn into a mask, but I couldn't help it. "They haven't been yours since the Quadrant judge sentenced you to work in them."

"Just let me go before they come for me," he said, and wheeled around to fiddle with the panel again.

"They who?"

My night manager appeared at my side, her eye clusters rolling in agitation. "Merc, we got another problem."

I never have one problem - they always come in droves. "What now?"

She flipped on the exterior viewer, which displayed a group of ex-miners headed up toward the house from the main glidepath. They were all armed. They were all drunk. They were all pissed.

"Too late now." Drefan propped his scarred face against one hand. "They've come for me."

* * *

"So you're sure the slaver took the crip with him?" the former senior mine manager, a spiky Emsalmin, demanded.

"That's what I said, Spike." I looked him up and down. "How about I introduce you to one of my special girls? She's P'Kotman."

He retracted his hundred-or-so claws and grinned, displaying razor-sharp teeth. "The kind that spontaneous heal, no matter what you do to them?"

"Uh-huh." I gestured for my night manager. "And wait 'til you hear her scream - you're going to love her."

That took care of the last of the cantankerous ex-miners, all of whom were enjoying a night on Mercy House drilling whatever took their fancy. I left the empty selection room and went back to my personal quarters, where I'd sent Lisela to stash Drefan. I was hoping the boys hadn't gotten into talking about old times - I'd never told Cat about Dre, and I wasn't sure I wanted to.

When I went into my quarters, I didn't find Drefan or Cat. On the floor was a small puddle of pink and white blood -- Omorr blood.

"God damn it." I pulled on my outergear and yanked an extra firearm from my bedside storage unit. The terminal chimed, and I almost fired at it. "WHAT?"

"Cataced's father is out here. He wants to talk to his son."

Didn't that just make my night complete. "He's busy." Bleeding somewhere else, no doubt, and how the hell had Drefan overpowered a Omorr twice his size and weight? From a glidechair? "Tell him to come back tomorrow."

"He's not taking no for an answer, boss." Lisela squeaked and some static came over the channel. "Uh, he's on his way to you now -- should I send security?"

I'd already thrown the Reverend in with a prostitute. Having him roughed up by one of my guards wasn't going to endear me any further. "No."

I intercepted Storshba just outside my quarters. He looked at me like I was a communicable disease. "Where is my son?"

"Not here." I debated on whether I should draw my pistol or take his arm and turn him around. I opted for a gesture toward the bar. "You're welcome to have a drink and wait for him."

Storshba peered down the corridor. "Is this where you keep your other whores?"

"No, this is where we keep the farm animals. Whores are on the *first* floor." When he didn't react, I sighed. "Okay, bad joke. Do you want me to give Cat a message when I see him?"

He sniffed. "You have blood on you."

I automatically wiped my hand on my trousers. "I cut myself shaving."

"It is Omorr blood." He pushed past me and stalked into my quarters, then came back out. "What have you done to him?"

"Nothing." I showed him my pistol. "In fact, I was just going out to find him."

Storshba pulled one of the most impressive Omorr blades I'd ever seen from his tunic. "I will accompany you."

I'd seen Cat in the same mood, and I wasn't arguing with all that steel. "Come on."

He didn't demand to know where we were going, not even when I slapped a breather in his hands and pointed out my glidecar. He just followed me, all pokey gildrells and disapproving silence. As I drove out of the dome toward the mines, I set my scanners on auto and tried to pick up a signature. There was a faint trail leading past the outer city perimeter toward Drefan's old stomping grounds, so I decided to follow that.

"Why do you not send one of your employees?" Storshba finally asked,

"To do what? Look for Cat?" I shook my head. "He's my problem, not theirs."

"Is that how you think of my son? *As your problem?*"

I gripped the steering controls a little harder. "No. I think of him as just *mine*. Same way you do."

"I see." No, he didn't. I could tell. "On my homeworld, your wealth might be enough to secure a mate, but I expect more for my son."

"Nice to know where I can find someone else if we ever break up."

I turned off the glidepath and switched the controls to hover, so the asteroid dust wouldn't clog the intake vents. The huge derelict drill platforms rose like dead saurian bones above the pits.

"What is this place?" Storshba looked around.

"Hell." I shoved a breather in his hands. "Let's take a walk in it."

In the old days, I first came out with a group of girls from the Shelter to entertain Drefan and his investors at the mine site -- once. After I looked into the pits, and saw how the workers were treated, I politely refused to make another house call. Not used to a female playing hard to get, Dre he came to see my manager, and bought out my schedule for months. He came every night, and stayed with me until dawn. We did things to each other, and said things to each other, and . . . well, in the end it went way beyond contracted sex.

And although I'd never admit it to anyone, one of the reasons I went into business for myself was to get away from Drefan, before he ended up owning my soul.

"Why would they come here? What is this place?" Storshba demanded as we passed the first of the open ore shafts.

"Drefan - the man Cat's with - used to own this. It was an arautanium mine." I checked over the edge of the shaft, then moved on.

"Arauntanium mining was outlawed ten years ago," Cat's Dad said.

I thought of the thousands of bodies buried in the tunnels beneath our feet.
"Yep."

"Why would he want to come here? What has this to do with my son?"

"Drefan wants to die," I said, skirting around another shaft. Little puffs of dust made a floating wake behind us. "I think he wants an audience."

Something clanged to the right, a mechanical sound that made me ready my pistol. It was coming from the tram tunnels. "Stay close to me."

Storshba caught my arm in a hard grip. "When we are through here, I am taking my son back to Omorr."

I could have grabbed a handful of his gildrells and woven a basket out of them, but I'd save it for when he tried to shanghai Cat. "Whatever."

He let go, and we proceeded into the tunnel. Half-filled ore carts sat rusting on the tracks that once transported them to waiting haulers. New light emitters lined the shaft, which meant someone had been out here scavenging. Or something. The clanging sound echoed around us, louder this time, and I motioned for the Reverend to get against the other wall.

Storshba ignored me, and barreled down the tunnel before I could stop him. He yelled Cat's name over and over.

So much for the element of surprise. "I can't kill him. We're going to be related," I muttered under my breath as I followed, as silently as possible.

The tram tunnel lead down to the central drift, a parallel section hacked out of solid rock to provide cross-section access to the ore shafts. The deteriorating remains of worker walkways criss-crossed the drift like jagged teeth, and the inadequate emitters cast deep shadows anyone could hide in.

Storshba stopped yelling, his voice cut-off in mid shout. I pressed up against the tunnel wall and inched toward the drift, peering around the edge.

What I saw made me bite my lip, and up the setting on my weapon to a lethal charge.

Storshba was standing at the transfer platform, in the grip of a large figure. I saw the gleam of a hoist chain around his throat and heard him struggling for air. Beyond them, my love hung in mid-shaft, his long leg and two arms pierced by core drills.

Drefan was nowhere to be seen.

I could shoot the one strangling my prospective father-in-law, but the impact might send them both over the edge of the platform. There was no way to free Cat unless I climbed up on the drill units and physically removed the steel shafts crucifying him.

But if I didn't move, and fast, Cat would bleed out and Storshba would asphyxiate.

It didn't help when a voice called out, "I know you're here, Terran. Show yourself, or we'll break the old one's neck."

I grabbed something I could use from the tunnel floor and shoved it up my sleeve before I stepped out into the light. "Fun's over, ladies."

The Zonam released my future Dad-in-law, while the Pmirsa stepped up and took the pistol from my hand.

"You think?" She examined the pistol, then turned and fired it. The Ramathorran, who I hadn't spotted, made a guttural sound before he fell over with a plop onto the platform. He didn't move again. "I'd say the party's just getting started."

"My son has nothing to do with this," Storshba said, choking out the words as he rubbed his bruised neck. "Let him go."

The little Pmirsa cocked her head as she looked at him, then chuckled. "No, sorry."

The Psyoran came and took my second pistol and the rifle I had slung over my shoulder. "What was it you called us?" she asked me as she hit me across the jaw with the butt of one weapon. "Scum?"

I went down on my knees, checked my face to see if it was broken, then got up slowly. And Psyorans are supposed to be so nice. "Yeah. Guess I was right."

"She buys slaves to free them," I heard Cat say in a low rasp. "Mercy would have helped you."

"She didn't help him, did she?" the Pmirsa said, nodding toward another shadow. The bug-thing slave appeared, pushing Drefan out into the light. "She made him into a slave."

I nearly said something, until I saw the bruises on Drefan's face and arms. He'd struggled with someone, and if it had been Cat, he'd be dead. "Yeah, I did, but that was a long time ago."

"Anyone who turns people into slaves deserves to die. Whether it's a slaver or a pimp, like you." The Pmirsa smiled. "That's what we do."

"No wonder I got you so damn cheap." I measured the distance between me, Storshba, and Cat. "I don't suppose you'd be willing to make a deal. You're probably above all that, being slaver-killers and all, right?"

I got my answer when the Psyoran slammed the flat of the rifle into my back.

"She didn't make me into a slave," Drefan said, wheeling forward. "Let her go. Let them all go."

"But you said she was the one who turned you in. Who got you sentenced to the mines," the Pmirsa said, walking toward him. "Dre, this is our chance. We talked about it."

"You talked about it. I just wanted to come here and die." Drefan wiped some blood from his chin, then looked at his hand. "Mercy knew what I was doing to the miners, and reported it to the trade commission."

The little slave stopped in her tracks. "What?"

"I owned the mine," he said, gesturing around him. "I ran it with slave labor. I killed thousand of workers here."

"You paid for what you did," I reminded him.

"An eye and two legs hardly seems like adequate compensation." He gave me a twisted smile. "I thought sentencing me to work in the pit was inspired, though. Was that your idea?"

I shook my head. "I didn't know they would do that to you."

"Enough of this," the Pmirsa said. "The slaver's dead. She and her pimps die, and we get out of here."

I looked at Storshba, who had been watching me inch around behind the Psyoran. I flicked a glance at the Zonam behind him, then at the bug-thing, who had crouched beside the dead slaver to dip her proboscis into his blood. He gave me a small nod.

Then I looked at Drefan, who held out his hand to the Pmirsa.

"Ravilla, give me the pistol," he said to her.

"Only if you shoot her with it," she said.

Drefan nodded.

As soon as the pistol was in his hand, I pulled out the hand pick I'd tucked in my sleeve, and slashed the Psyoran across her central frill vein. She went down with a cry, and the weapons she'd taken from me went flying.

Storshba bounced sideways, knocking the Zonam right over the platform. She went down the shaft with a horrible scream. By the time the bug-thing shot up, he

was almost on top of her. I helped by grabbing one of the pistols and shooting her in the back.

That left Ravilla, and Drefan.

"Shoot her!" Ravilla screamed, whirling around, lunging toward me. "Now Dref--" she stiffened, she went down face-first on the rock. There wasn't much left to the back of her head.

I climbed up onto one of the walkways, and used it like a springboard to jump onto the drill unit nearest Cat. "Hang on, babe."

He looked over at me, then nodded and closed his eyes.

"Mercy." Drefan wheeled to the edge of the platform. "Key in four-seven-nine. It's the shutdown code."

I looped a rope around Cat's waist, tying him to me, then punched in the numbers. The drills retracted simultaneously, freeing his body to slump against mine.

By that time Storshba had maneuvered one of the platform lifts under us. "Climb down. How do we notify colonial security?"

I waited until we were back on the platform before I answered. "We don't. Get Dre, we're leaving."

"My son needs medical attention!" Storshba shouted in my face.

"He'll get it. At my place." I put my shoulder to Cat's midsection, and carefully lifted him. Damn, he was heavy. "Let's stop bitching about this and get him there before he bleeds to death, okay?"

"If he dies, I will kill you myself," the Reverend promised me.

I glanced at the dead slaves. "Well, at least you won't have to stand in line."

* * *

Cat wouldn't die. I wouldn't let him.

We got back to Mercy House in record time, and my staff went into action as soon as we burst through the front entrance. Keeping a physician and nurse on full-time staff was something I'd insisted on for the girls, and had never been happier I'd done so when I put my lover on the exam table in the infirmary.

"He's lost a lot of blood," the doc told me after doing the initial scans.

Storshba was already rolling up his sleeve. "We're a matched type, take mine."

I would have stayed, but I guess the way I looked was freaking everyone out, and the nurse gently led me away from the table. "You probably have another mess to clean up, right?"

"Right." I looked back over my shoulder, and met Storshba's eyes. "Let me know if -- if --" I couldn't put it into words.

The nurse nodded. "Of course."

Drefan was waiting outside the infirmary, and went with me to my office without protest. As soon as the door panel closed, I slapped him across the face, hard.

"That's for Cat," I said, and went to my console.

He rubbed his jaw. "You'd do me a favor by killing me."

I eyed him. "Oh, no, you son of a bitch. You're not getting off that easy."

I checked the status on the Ramathorran's vessel, and the bill of sale I'd entered in the colonial database confirming my purchase of five slaves. The sale was easily wiped from the system. The ship was going to be a problem.

"What do I do with the slaver vessel?" I sat back in my chair. "It's got to go."

"I can program it to take off on remote. Set it to detonate once it's out of the system."

I shook my head. "Waste of a ship." I turned on every trace-jammer I had, then input a signal code only I knew, and waited for a moment. The return signal was data-only, but the Worm preferred not to talk over any channel. "Squish? It's Mercy."

What can I do for you, my sweet?

"I've got a slaver vessel you might be interested in acquiring. It'll need a hose down -- it's Ramathorran -- but the owner is quite willing to turn it over to you at no cost."

Is he dead?

"As a doornail. Can you use another vessel?"

Yes, thank you for thinking of me.

That took care of the ship. The bodies I'd have removed from the mine and disposed of by my clean-up crew, who were used to that kind of thing.

That left Drefan, who was watching me in silence.

"You should have told me they were slaver-killers, Dre." I got up and came around the console.

"Yes." He wheeled forward and offered me the pistol he'd used to shoot Ravilla. "I should have. All I can say is, it's been very hard to care about anything."

"That's going to change, and this bullshit about wanting to die stops right now." I ignored the weapon and propped myself on the edge of the console. "Are we clear on that?"

His mouth curled, and for a moment, I saw the ghost of the handsome man he had been. The man I'd nearly given myself to, body and soul. "You can't stop me, Mercy."

"Wanna bet? You remember my old pal, Squish. He could always use another caretaker around his place. And I still own you."

"Not since you deleted the bill of sale." He frowned. "Squish -- you mean you're still friends with the Worm?"

I showed him some of my teeth. "He sends me his poetry to read."

"Good God, that isn't friendship. That's torture." The glint of humor left his good eye, and he sagged a little. "I'm tired, Merc. I haven't got a leg to stand on anymore. Let me rest now."

"You can catch up on your sleep here." I pulled a datapad off my console, pulled up a client file, and handed it to him. "Meet Coureep, one of my johns. Nice-looking guy, right?"

He glanced at the display, and nodded.

"He's a reconstruct, Dre. Nothing but a human brain and spinal cord inside a drone chassis." I nodded at the space where Drefan's legs should have been. "I think you two should have a talk."

He took the datapad, and for the first time since he'd wheeled in on a chain, I saw a little hope on his face.

That was enough for me.

Then I went back down to the infirmary, because not being there was driving me out of my mind.

The doc had just finished sewing up all the holes in my boyfriend, and Storshba was lying on a berth next to Cat, in mid-transfusion.

They let me in because I'm the boss, and I told them to or I'd fire their asses. My tough act lasted for the four seconds it took me to get to Cat.

Cat's dark eyes blinked open when I called his name. "Mercy. You okay?"

"I was scared to death. Don't you ever let someone try to crucify you again, or I'll hammer the nails in myself. Got it?"

"Got it." He turned his head and saw his Dad. "Father?"

"I am well. Rest now, my son." The Reverend gave me the "we need to have a little talk" look.

Well, I was marrying into the family, I might as well start being nice to him. "When you're done here, how about we have some dinner?"

Storshba nodded.

Dad and I had dinner about two hours later, in my best conference room. I served him all of Cat's favorite foods (personally, I might add) but he only picked at things and stayed quiet. I shut up because let's face it, a great conversationalist I'm not.

Finally he cleaned his gildrells off in the bowl of citrus-scented water I'd provided (kind of like a Terran finger bowl, only larger, because Omorr had to stick their faces in it) and blotted off the excess with his napkin. "My son could have died in that mine tonight."

I nodded. That he could have.

"Associating with you has placed him in great danger before, I believe."

"Plenty of times. This isn't a family theme park, Storshba."

He cleared his throat. "You were a whore."

I smiled. "I was. The best in the quadrant."

"You could have any male you want. Why do you wish to mate with Cataced? He is not Terran. You can never have children together."

"I don't want Terran, and we can adopt kids." I could tell him about the thing Cat did with his gildrells to my feet, but maybe I'd save that for when we visited over the holidays. "I love him."

"He tells me the same." Storshba took an odd device out of his tunic, and ran his membrane over what looked like a keypad. "I will have to consult further with our family members, but this should allow you to draw up the necessary preliminary agreement."

He switched it to read Terran before he handed it to me. It was a statement of approval, written in a lot of flowery language. Basically, his first contractual blessing.

I was, to say the least, stunned. "You're going to let me marry him."

"I'm going to think about it." Storshba rose. "Examine it, discuss it with my son, and signal me. I will be returning to Omorr tomorrow."

I got up too. What did I say to this man, who so obviously didn't want me as a daughter-in-law? "Thank you."

You can't see Omorr smile, exactly, but his eyes crinkled the same way Cat's did when he was pleased about something. "Read the contract, Mercy." Out he bounced.

I sat down, took another look at the device, then burst out laughing.

Beneath the blessing, Storshba had added a final contract stipulation: "The bride will provide a place of worship at her place of business for all employees, and will attend services once a week."

Nature's Decree

"... features should fulfill their offices according to nature's decree.." Gaspare Tagliacozzi, 1597

"Got another letter from that rich guy in New Orleans," Ginny said as she placed the mail in front of me. "He upped his offer."

"Again?" I set aside the weighty nightmare that was Luisa Lopez's medical file. "You're kidding me."

My office manager eyed me over the top rims of her glasses. "I never kid about one and a half million dollars, boss."

"Send him another no thanks and a copy of the referral sheet."

"I've done that three times already - *and* left two messages on his machine." She extracted a letter and pushed it into my hands. "Want to take a shot?"

I had two car accident survivors, a cleft palate and Luisa at the hospital to see that morning. Plus two tricky surgeries to perform in the afternoon. I certainly didn't have time for J.S. Cyprien and whatever he wanted tucked or tightened - no matter how many zeroes he added to his check. But like most rich men, he probably wouldn't believe that unless he got the shove-off from me personally.

"All right." I pulled out the letter, which was typed on beautiful buff linen paper with an important-looking gold crest at the top. A faint, sweet smell drifted to my nose, like he'd sprayed it with rose perfume.. "I'll call him."

Ginny pointed at my phone. "*Before* the Maloneys get here."

I scowled at her. "Bully."

"Battle dodger." She headed back out to reception.

I dialed the number listed under the fancy gold crest, and a woman with a pretty French accent answered. "*Le Petit Jardin*, ...Élaine Selvais.."

"This is Dr. Vanessa Whitman." An old boyfriend had taught me a few words in French, but none of them could be used outside the bedroom. Hopefully she understood English. "Is Mr. Cyprien available?"

"I'm sorry, madam, he is not. May I take a message for him?"

I checked the bottom of the letter, and saw the initials ES. "Sure.. You can tell Mr. Cyprien that my answer is still the same. I can't fly to New Orleans and I can't perform his surgery."

"*C'est une honte*." She didn't sound quite so friendly now. "Are you quite certain there is no exception you can make? Mr. Cyprien is in great need."

What a weird way to put it. "As I've indicated before, I don't make cross-country house calls. I'll be happy to perform a preliminary consultation here in Chicago." The flowery perfume was starting to get to me, so I balled up the letter and tossed it at the trash can across the room.

"Mr. Cyprien is unable to leave New Orleans." Éleine sighed. "Doctor, it would only require a few days of your time, and of course money is no object."

Oh, of course. For guys like Cyprien, it never was. I thought of Luisa, who couldn't have paid for the box of Kleenex in my waiting room. "I'm sorry, it's just not possible. There are several very qualified plastic surgeons in New Orleans, and I've had my office manager send Mr. Cyprien a referral list." I could still smell roses, even stronger now. It must have gotten on my hands or something. "That's all I can do, Miss Selvais."

"I will give Mr. Cyprien your message. Thank you for calling, Dr. Whitman." She hung up with an abrupt click.

I did the same, then went into the adjoining exam room and washed my hands. The smell of roses faded. Although I had had often received outrageous requests from the spoiled and wealthy, Cyprien's persistence bothered me. It wasn't as if he knew me or I knew him, and I wasn't the only reconstructive surgeon in the world. Once or twice I'd been contacted by men who wanted very specific, private work done. The kind of work someone had when they were trying to switch identities and/or elude prosecution. I'd turned them down, too.

I don't do criminals.

Ginny buzzed me on the intercom, and I returned to my desk. "Guess who's here fifteen minutes early?" she asked over the sound of a man and woman bickering.

I sighed. "Send back the happy couple."

Andrew Maloney and his wife Patricia looked anything but happy as they entered my office, still arguing with each other.

"Come on, Patti." Andrew ran a hand over his shaved scalp, under which I'd implanted a steel plate to replace part of the skull the crushed roof of his car had pulverized. His entire head was bright red, as if he'd been badly sunburned - but I saw no blisters. "I told you a million times, the freaking accident wasn't my fault!"

"If you'd bought the new tires like I told you, cheapskate, it never would have happened!" Patricia shouted, giving her husband a shove. She hadn't been wearing her seatbelt, and I was a third of the way through rebuilding what flying headfirst through the windshield had done to her face.. She glared at me from under her pressure mask. "You tell him, Dr. Whitman!"

"We didn't have the money!"

"Because you blew it drinking with your dumbass friends!"

"Hey!" I pointed to the chairs in front of my desk. "Stop yelling and sit, or I send you both back to see the therapist."

"She needs the shrink, doc, not me," Andrew said as he dropped into the chair. "See what she did to me last night?" He gestured at his reddened skin. "She dumped five packages of cherry Kool-Aid mix in the shower head. Real cute, huh?"

Patricia jerked her chair a foot away from Andrew's. "That's only because I couldn't find the rat poison."

* * *

I got the Maloneys checked out, told Patricia to lay off the Kool-Aid, and scheduled an appointment for them with their family therapist. My next patient was Bryan, a quiet, polite four year old boy who should have been bouncing with energy. The Department of Children and Families had referred him, and after three years of red tape and multiple foster care placements, I now had permission to repair the disfiguring birth defect that had divided his upper lip, nose and palate in two. They had not approved removal of the other scars from the beatings his young prostitute mother had given him as an infant, but I was throwing them in for free. Bryan's foster mother, who took in foster children so she wouldn't have to work, only needed assurance that his Medicaid would cover the cost of the surgery.

"Does his bio mom want to talk to me about any of this?" I asked her before they left. "I can explain the procedures to her over the phone." I didn't want to meet her in person, not knowing what she could do to a six month old baby with her fists.

"She don't care." The foster mother picked up the boy and placed him in the ancient umbrella stroller she'd brought. "She pregnant again, you know."

Bryan had six half brothers and sisters in the foster care system. Like him, all of them were born addicted to heroin. The last two were born HIV-positive. "Someone needs to sterilize that woman."

"Only fix she wants is the kind she can stick in her arm." She pushed Bryan out of the exam room.

After I told Ginny to call HRS and make a report on Bryan's mother, I headed over to the hospital to check in with surgery and see the most critical of all my patients. I'd been to her room a hundred times, and still I had to force myself to go.

And with every step, I felt the invisible weight on my shoulders increase.

Luisa Lopez had lived in the projects on Chicago's west side all her life. Pregnancy at sixteen entitled her to the welfare and her own apartment, but the building she moved into was much older than her mother's. The tenants were so vicious that cops would not even enter the building without backup. But Luisa was determined to live on her own and do better for herself and her baby. One night after finishing GED class and picking up her son from her mother's, six men attacked Luisa just outside her door. They forced her into her apartment and ransacked it. When they found nothing of value, the six turned on Luisa and her child.

What they did to them was translated into clinical terms on the ER intake report. It took five pages, front and back, to complete the comprehensive list of horrors.

Police later theorized that Luisa's attackers had set fire to her apartment to hide their crimes, but someone on the same floor had smelled the smoke and called 911. I'd spoken to the fire fighter who had found Luisa curled up on the floor, her clothes on fire, still cradling her dead baby in her arms.

The men who had murdered her son and mutilated her were still at large.

Burn wards are quiet places, and I kept my voice low as I checked in with the charge nurse. "How's she doing?"

"Bad night, ripped out her IV twice." The nurse handed me a chart. "Got her catheter out, pissed all over the cradle and called me a stupid cracker bitch when I rolled her after breakfast."

"That's my girl." I noted how much morphine she'd been given, then wrote up a script for Valium. "If she gets feisty tonight, tranq her."

Because the fire had left Luisa with third degree burns over forty-five percent of her body, which had already been brutalized beyond belief, she had not been expected to live. I'd been called in on the case by her mother, who had been infuriated by the other staff physicians' apathetic treatment. Sancha Lopez told me she'd do whatever it took to keep her daughter alive.

And every time I looked at her, I wondered what kind of life that would be. "How's it going, Lou?"

Her face turned slowly toward me. I'd covered her jaw and neck with a layer of cadaver skin, which would not replace the derma she had lost, but would protect her exposed muscles until we grew enough of her own skin in the burn lab to begin grafts. Her lips, which had been cut off by her attackers, would be restored in the cosmetic phase of treatment. If we made it that far.

"Shi. Dee." Heat damage to her larynx and lungs made her gasp out words in a strangled whisper. "Drik."

I brought her water cup and straw to her ruined mouth, but she turned away. "Come on, take a sip for me."

"Real. Drik," she rasped out. "Whis. Key."

"On top of all the drugs you got for ripping out your lines?" I made a tsking sound. "I do that, you'll float right out of this room."

"Fuh. Kig. Crack. Her." She showed me the jagged remains of her shattered front teeth.

"Not me, babe." I stroked a finger across her forehead, one of the few places on her upper body where she hadn't been beaten, stabbed, or burned. "I'm more caramel than cracker."

"You. Sis. Der?"

Explaining my mutt lineage would take forever, and sadly, she would never see the color of my skin. "Yeah, I'm a sister."

"Hell. Me." One of her bandaged arms jerked up, batting mine. Heat had fused all her fingers together, but she managed to rest them on top of my wrist. "Hell. Me. Go. Sha. Eel."

Shawneel was her son's name. From the autopsy report, I knew the men had taken their time killing him. "You'll be with him again someday, Dee. Not just yet, though."

She didn't like that, and began choking out abbreviated screeches and fighting the foam cradle holding her body above the hospital bed. Her movements created stress on her deep burns, and scarlet-tinged suppuration bloomed over her bandages. The resulting pain made her vitals spike, setting off three monitor alarms, bringing the charge nurse came in with a crash cart.

"All right, hon, you've got to chill out for me." I quickly prepared a syringe and injected her through the IV, then watched the monitors. "This will help, now, settle down."

She struggled to take a deep breath. "Give. Me. More." Low, hitching sounds came from her chest. Luisa couldn't cry tears anymore, but she could sob. "Hell. Me. Die."

"Try to get some sleep." My own eyes blurred as I turned away from the bed. "I'll see you tomorrow."

* * *

My afternoon surgery began with Debbie Johnson, a fifteen year old female with comminuted nasoethmoid orbital fractures from a bad fall. According to the original trauma report, the teenager had fallen down some stairs at home and landed on her nose, breaking it. The intake ER physician had simply slapped a bandage on her face and sent her home.

Deb's mother had brought her back when the swelling disappeared and they took off the bandage. And saw the entire right side of her face sagged two inches lower than the left.

The complex union of bones in the central midface were the most difficult to reconstruct. Early open repair to reduce and stabilize bone fragments would have prevented that, but the damage was done, and now I was on cleanup. Two hours later, I told her parents that I'd been able to successfully restore contour and support. With one more soft tissue operation and no complications, Debbie would likely regain her preinjury appearance. How long she would keep it was up to her mother, and me. After reviewing Debbie's x-rays and medical history, I'd taken a little ride past her home. Then I chatted with a neighbor, and confirmed that Debbie Johnson lived in a single story house with no basement.

There were no stairs in her house.

I pulled Mrs. Johnson to one side. "I'd like you to call my office later, if you would." I felt Debbie's father, who was a factory worker and built as if God had followed World Wrestling Federation guidelines, watching us. "I'll need some other information from you."

She tensed. "Like what?"

I turned my back toward Mr. Johnson. "Just some standard medical questions. I want to make sure Debbie doesn't suffer a reinjury." I pressed the card listing the number for the abused woman's shelter into her hand. "Here's the number to call."

Debbie's father clamped one of his paws on his wife's thin shoulder. "We'll do whatever it takes to get our little girl better, doc," he said, bending to kiss her cheek. "Won't we, sweetheart?"

She nodded and quickly tucked the card into her purse.

"Good." What Mrs. Johnson didn't know was, if she *didn't* call the shelter in the next twenty-four hours, I'd report both of them for aggravated child abuse.

My second operation did not go so well. Like Debbie, Luther Marton had experienced severe craniofacial trauma - in his case, an ex-wife wielding a baseball bat. She should have tried out for the Yankees; her one slug to his head had blown out and destroyed all four walls of internal orbits of his skull.

In order to fix his crushed eye sockets, I had to extend the surgical exposure of the fractures, reduce and rigidly stabilize the bones with dozens of microplates, an entire sheet of metal mesh and delicate split calvarial bone grafts. If the patient's eyes were ever going to function normally again, total orbital reconstruction was the only way to go.

"Shit." I tossed aside a bloody probe and looked into my scope again. Because internal orbit bone was so thin and weak, it was easily damaged - the same way Humpty Dumpty would be, after being pushed off the Empire State Building. "Luther, you're making me want to Teflon your damn head back together."

It took another five hours to complete the basic foundation building, then I closed and sent him off the recovery. It would be a week or two before I'd know if the combination of plates, mesh and grafts would hold, and Luther was still going to need more work. A lot more.

Once I'd followed up on both patients and spoke to the cops about Luther's prognosis (the ex-Mrs. Marton was pending trial for assault charges) I was more than ready to drag myself home. I stopped outside the burn unit, then forced myself to continue out of the hospital. The charge nurse would page me if anything changed - and seeing Luisa twice in one day would only agitate her mental and physical condition.

And if I keep repeating that, I thought as I walked out into the private physician's parking lot, *I may even convince myself of it by Christmas.*

I could fix my patients on the outside, but I could never erase or avenge what had been done to them. I couldn't heal the wounds that didn't show up on the CT scans and the x-rays. And while I could deal with the victims of accidents, I couldn't really help the Bryans and Debbies and Luisas.

No one could.

I didn't see the two men approaching me until they were only a few yards away. I didn't recognize them, but they were well dressed in nice suits and looked like a couple of doctors.

"Good evening," one of them said, nodding to me as we passed each other.

Before I could reply, something hard and blunt hit me in the back of the head, sending me staggering forward. Pain went off like a landmine inside my skull as the two men caught me by the arms. Then the one who had spoken covered my face with a square of damp cloth.

What the hell. . . I tried to hold my breath, too late. Roses filled my head. *Is that . . . perfume?*

Whatever it was, it knocked me out four seconds later.

* * *

Later I found out that the men had stuffed me into my own Jeep and drove me to the airport. I remained unconscious throughout the ride, and the chartered flight from O'Hare. I didn't wake up until the next morning, and found myself locked in a gorgeous but unfamiliar bedroom filled with pricey antiques. The headache that woke me up was extensive and only enhanced by my abductor's use of the flowery-scented chemical anesthetic.

Plus someone had undressed me down to my bra and panties.

Once I found my clothes (clean and neatly folded on the end of the bed) I spent the next hour pounding on the door and screaming myself hoarse calling for help. There were no windows, and the only other door lead into a private bath that had no windows.

My watch told me I'd been unconscious for eleven hours.

Once my voice started reaching freedom, I sat down on the bed and tried to piece together what had happened to me. My last clear memory was being attacked and knocked out in the parking lot. I had no idea where I was, or who the two suits were. Someone had gone to a great deal of trouble to abduct me, but why? I was financially secure but by no means wealthy. Neither was my family. What few relationships I'd had in the past had ended amicably, and I hadn't dated anyone for the last two years. I hadn't ever fired anyone, so it couldn't be a disgruntled ex-employee, and as far as I knew none of my former patients held a grudge. And who dumps someone they want to hurt in a bedroom with Queen Anne furniture and red satin bed sheets?

I should have figured it out when the door opened and a pretty blond woman carrying a tray walked in, but I was still stunned at the thought of me being abducted.

"*Bonjour*, Dr. Whitman." She set down the tray, then came over to me and held out her hand. "Welcome to *Le Petite Jardin*."

Cyprien's secretary.

Sitting there with my mouth open wasn't going to get me out of here, so I jumped to my feet and ran for the door. And smacked face-first into one of the suits, who had a chest like concrete.

"Phillipe will not permit you to pass, doctor." Éleine Selvais sounded almost apologetic as the goon gently turned me around to face her. "I've brought you a salad and sandwiches for lunch. Blue cheese dressing is your favorite, is it not? And turkey with mayonnaise and romaine lettuce on whole wheat."

"Your boss had me kidnapped?" Dull heat rose into my face. "Is he out of his fucking mind?"

"That you must discuss that with Mr. Cyprien tonight. For now, you should eat something." She gestured at the tray like one of the showcase models on *The Price Is Right*. "I brought water, but would you prefer tea, coffee, or something else to drink?"

"I prefer to be in Chicago." Since she was in *LaLaland*, I turned to Phillipe. "Kidnapping is federal rap, pal. Let me out of here, right now, and I won't press charges." Oh yes, I would. *Everyone* was going to jail for this little stunt.

"Regrettably, Phillipe does not speak English." Éleine smiled at me. "Nor do any of the other staff." She went to the door. "I will return for your tray in an hour. *Bon appetit.*"

"You can't do this." I tried to follow, but Phillipe blocked me again. "Get Cyprien and tell him I want to talk to him," I called over his shoulder. "Now!"

Éleine came back for my tray as promised, but only repeated that her boss would see me later that evening. I tried a different tact and told her about Luisa and the other patients who were depending on me back home.

"These people, they will go to another doctor," she told me, dismissing everything with a wave of her hand. "Mr. Cyprien cannot."

"Of course he can see another surgeon, there are thousands of them in the South -"

She shook her head. "None of them are quick enough."

Everything became clear in that instant. Six months ago, the medical editor of *Time* magazine had sent a reporter to interview me about Luisa. I'd brushed him off, but someone at the hospital talked about me, and how quick I was with a

scalpel. The reporter decided on speed as his angle, and surreptitiously timed me against twelve top surgeons performing the same procedure around the globe.

The article had been titled, "**Vanessa Whitman, Fastest Scalpel in the World.**"

"Just because I'm quick doesn't mean he'll heal faster." I grabbed her arm as she went to the door. "Tell him that."

"You can tell him yourself." With a surprisingly strong grip, she removed my hand from her arm. "Tonight, at dinner." She waved at the armoire across from the bed. "You'll find suitable garments in there. Please be ready by seven p.m." Out she went, and Phillippe shut the door in my face.

I stalked around the room for a few minutes before sheer curiosity made me open the armoire. There were dozens of fancy-looking gowns in a rainbow of colors hanging inside, a row of low-heeled pumps sitting beneath them. The drawers at the base contained piles of silk lingerie.

The assortment didn't bug me as much as discovering everything, right down to the high-cut panties, was exactly my size.

* * *

I stayed in my own clothes, which earned me a frown from Phillippe when he opened the door at seven p.m. on the dot.

"*Vous êtes très têtu,*" he murmured, sounding almost miffed.

"Yeah, you're a laugh a minute, too." I looked down both sides of the hallway outside the door, but all I saw were more doors. Wherever I was, the place was huge. "Where is he?"

Phillippe gestured toward the left, and paced me as I stomped off in that direction.

We went down some old stairs, through a labyrinth of more pricey antiques, and ended up in a cavernous formal dining room. Only one place had been set at the end of the table.

"Uh-uh." I shook my head as Phillippe pulled out a chair. "Go get your boss."

"Sit down, Dr. Whitman," a deeper male voice said from behind me. When I whirled, there was no one there. Then I spotted the intercom set into the wall. "My assistant has prepared a delicious meal for you," the disembodied voice said over the little speaker.

"I'm not hungry. Can we get on with it? I have patients waiting for me." *And cops to call. And charges to press.*

"Perhaps it is better that you not eat yet. *Phillipe, apportez-la moi.*"

Phillipe guided me back out of the dining room and down another flight of stairs, this time into what appeared to be a basement level. It was cooler and darker here, the furniture older, the floor tiled with what appeared to be gold-shot black marble. No hot water heaters or tool racks in Cyprien's basement; in fact it was nicer than the upper levels. As if this is where he really lived.

Maybe he's afraid of being bombed. I saw a strange arrangement of red velvet curtains hanging from the ceiling, all draped around a boxy four poster bed. A familiar smell hit my nose, and I scanned the room, trying to identify it.

"I am here, Dr. Whitman." A curtain twitched. "Please prepare yourself before you look."

Prepare myself. I'd seen people so badly injured and mutilated that they no longer resembled anything even remotely human - and he was worried his sagging jowls would shock me? I strode up to the bed, tugged back the curtain, and looked inside.

J.S. Cyprien didn't have sagging jowls.

He didn't have a face, period.

"Dear Christ." I leaned over him, reaching for the mass of twisted scar tissue that covered the front of his misshapen skull. It was completely healed, and had covered his forehead, eyes, nose, cheeks and chin. His straight hair was black from crown to nape, but had turned completely white all around his face. His ears were gone, and his mouth was an uneven hole at the bottom. "What the hell happened to you?"

"It is difficult to explain."

"Try." I began gently palpating the raddled flesh to feel the distorted bone beneath it. His twisted skin felt cool and dry to the touch, and the smell of roses between us intensified.

"I had an unfortunate accident." The hole stretched out, as if Cyprien was trying to smile. "You're not frightened by my appearance."

"I'm not easily spooked." But I was. I'd never seen a patient with such injuries who had been allowed to heal like this. Next to him, Luisa was a supermodel. "Mr. Cyprien, am I the first physician to examine you?"

"No." His mouth might be a mess, but his voice came out clear and beautiful. "I had thought a female doctor might be too sensitive, so I sent for one of your male colleagues. He told me he could do nothing for me." The hole twisted. "And then he threw up all over my bed."

My cast-iron stomach was fine, but I wasn't too sure about how my ears were working. "Are you saying you were never treated for these injuries at the time you received them?"

"No. It was not possible." His voice softened a degree. "As you can see, I am something of a medical challenge."

"To say the least." I performed a more thorough examination, surveying the map of ruin from the top of his cranium to the rather precise line at his throat where the scars abruptly ended. What my hands were telling me couldn't be true. "Who or what did this to your face?"

"I was severely beaten, then subjected to . . . immersion in an acidic liquid." He lifted a hand - the long, pale hand of a clever artist - and touched what had been his right cheek. "I remained unconscious for some time, and when I awoke, my injuries had healed."

That he wasn't dead was a miracle, but what he was telling me didn't make sense. "Do you suffer from Paget's disease?"

"No."

Yet I was feeling intact surfaces under the skin. "Did someone treat you while you were unconscious? Operate on you?"

"No."

I took my hands away and sighed. "If you're going to lie to me, Mr. Cyprien, I can't help you."

"I spontaneously heal."

I couldn't help the burst of laughter that came out of me. "Uh-huh. And I can set fires with the power of my thoughts. Want me to light the fireplace?"

"Phillipe, j'ai besoin d'un couteau."

The *couteau* turned out to be a long, sharp dagger, which Phillipe placed in Cyprien's hand.

"Wait a minute." I stepped in, trying to grab the knife. "I don't need you to hurt yourself on top of this."

"I am willing to prove my claims, doctor." Cyprien lifted the dagger and slashed it across his palm, then turned it toward me. Blood ran sluggishly down to his wrist.

"Oh, for God's sake." I grabbed his wrist, and applied direct pressure.. Then my fingers tensed as I watched the edges of the deep gash pull together and close. In less than a minute, the wound disappeared, and I let go of his wrist. "Nice trick - how did you do it? Rubber knife?"

"I am not deceiving you." After a small hesitation, he handed me the dagger.

I studied the blade, which seemed real enough, but looked like it was coated with bronze or some kind of dark alloy. "Pretty. But it doesn't prove anything. Come on, tell me, what did you use? A packet of blood under some fake skin? How did you get it to close like that?"

He extended his arm. "Cut me yourself."

Did he think I'd get all female and shriek that I couldn't? I was a surgeon, for Christ's sake. "Give me the other one." When he did, I made a quick, shallow slash just above his elbow.

And watched the cut I'd made close and disappear.

I probed the newly-healed skin, looking for latex, rubber, and a fake blood packet - and found only flesh, tissue and bone.

"God." I dropped the knife and shuffled back a few steps. "What are you?"

"I am a victim of brutality, doctor. Nothing more." Cyprien sat up, and the sheet fell away from his bare chest. From the neck down, he could have easily graced the cover of any romance novel. From the neck up, he was a poster boy for Clive Barker. "Because of my . . . ability, I cannot seek conventional treatment. Surgery is almost out of the question."

Almost. All the pieces fell into place as I processed what he was telling me. "That's why you brought me here. You think I'm fast enough to beat that kind of healing?"

"If you are not," Cyprien said, "then my face is lost forever."

* * *

I made several demands that night. Some of them Cyprien agreed to, others he refused.

"I cannot travel to Chicago, and I cannot be admitted to a hospital. Tell Éleine what type of equipment you will need, and she will have it brought to the mansion." He lit a funny-looking black cigarette, which I snatched out of his hand. "You object to me smoking?"

"Not if you're on fire. Otherwise, yes." I dropped it on the ground and stomped it out. "Look, there are some things I can't do unless you're in the hospital. I'll need x-rays, blood work, CT scans - and we won't even discuss what the surgery itself will entail."

"Give a list of what you need to Éleine." He sounded tired, and made a weak gesture. "I must rest now. Go and have your dinner, doctor."

I thought of the bedroom I'd been locked in. "Am I still your prisoner?"

"I will speak with you tomorrow." He closed the curtain.

Phillipe escorted me back to the dining room, where I picked at a plate of designer food. Éleine reappeared, but ignored my protests and asked me for a list of equipment and supplies. Recklessly, I gave her a comprehensive list of enough stuff to fill a trauma clinic. She wrote everything down, thanked me, and departed.

I was locked in the bedroom after that, which answered my question about my residency status. I didn't sleep well, but things other than my own kidnapping were bothering me. How could I reconstruct that face if he healed as soon as I cut into him? What kind of physiology allowed a patient to spontaneously heal like that? He should have been at one of the top research hospitals in the world, being worked on by the finest surgeons on the planet, not me.

And then there was the question of me. Cyprien had already gone as far as kidnapping. What would he do if I failed to fix his mess?

Not know, and not being able to sleep because of it made me grumpy. So did being kept in that room for a second day. I paced, I brooded, then I took a long hot shower. Phillipe silently delivered my breakfast and lunch, and escorted me downstairs for dinner again. This time, there were two place settings, and Cyprien sat waiting for me.

He wore a red velvet robe with a generous hood pulled up to completely hide his face. "Good evening, Dr. Whitman. I hope you are well."

I ignored the faint, sweet smell of roses coming from him and yanked out my chair. "If I spend one more minute locked up in that damn room, I'll turn psychotic." I sat down, and glanced at his empty plate. Mine was filled with some kind of shrimp concoction. "Aren't you eating?"

"I cannot see to eat normally" -he gestured toward the space where his eyes should have been- "and my dietary requirements make it an unpleasant business to watch. Please, enjoy your food. I merely wished to provide you with some company."

I jabbed my fork into a shrimp. "Have you been able to do this all your life? Heal right away, I mean?"

"Regrettably, no. I acquired the ability as a young man."

"Does it run in your family?" I ignored the wine goblet Phillippe filled with something golden and bubbly and drank from my water glass. "Did either of your parents have the same ability?"

"No." He lifted his wine glass to his slash of a mouth, and sipped.

"It still could be genetic." I lost myself in the fantasy for a moment - being able to isolate a gene that enabled a human being to heal like that.. It might even lead to a cure for diseases like cancer and AIDs. "Mr. Cyprien, if I restore your features, will you allow me to run some tests on you? All I need - "

"No."

I began to explain the enormous benefits medical research could gain from studying him, until he held up one of his hands.

"Dr. Whitman, I appreciate your enthusiasm, but my ability does not come without a heavy price." He finished his wine and rose. "If you're finished, perhaps we can adjourn to my chambers? You can inspect your equipment."

He lost me. "What equipment?"

"Élaine obtained what you requested." He came to me and offered his arm, and I realized he was a lot taller than I'd thought. "Come, I'll show you."

Ten minutes later I sat down on the edge of the surgical table, unable to grasp anymore. All around me, diagnostic equipment hummed and blinked. A glass-paneled cabinet sat full of the latest supplies and tools. There was a portable lab and x-ray machine with their related processors, and the latest in alloplastic and autogenous grafting materials, the most perishable of which were stowed in a refrigerated case.

"I can't believe this." I stared up at Cyprien. "This isn't equipment. This is a field hospital."

He sat beside me and looked around. "It is what you will need, is it not?"

"Uh, yeah. I could treat a hundred patients here." I pushed myself off the table and tapped the surface. "You get to be first."

I took blood and tissue samples, using syringes that appeared to be made from the same bronze metal as the knife. "Why aren't these needles stainless steel?"

"Copper is the only metal that can penetrate my skin."

"Get out of here." I took out the needle and watched the tiny hole it had left disappear. "What moron told you that?"

He sighed and rubbed his arm. "Think of it as a severe allergy."

To keep from snickering, I rolled over the portable x-ray and did a half dozen plates on his head. Luckily I still remembered how to develop them from my intern days. Once the films were developed, I placed them on a light table and studied the results.

The results were unspeakable. "Oh boy."

"How bad is it?" Cyprien got off the exam table and joined me.

"This might be your skull. I think." I followed the jagged contours of his distorted bones with a finger, then remembered he couldn't see. "Sorry. It looks like someone put a puzzle together with all the pieces jammed in the wrong places." I glanced up at him. "How are you able to walk around without bumping into things?"

"I have retained an excellent proximity sense." He reached out and tapped the end of my nose with one finger. "And your voice is very easy to follow."

"Mom always said she could hear me a block away." I studied the films for a few more minutes. "I'll need to see any other x-rays of your head, prior to the accident - "

"There are none."

It wasn't my lucky night. "Okay, then I'll need to see a photograph of what you looked like before this."

"I've never been photographed."

"You're kidding." I released a frustrated breath. "You're not. Great. How am I supposed to restore your face if I don't know what it looked like?"

He turned in the direction of our chaperone. "*Phillipe, obtenez la peinture de la bibliothèque et apportez-l'au docteur.*"

Phillipe disappeared, then returned carrying of all things, a huge painting. It looked to be a few hundred years old, and featured a man dressed in some kind of dark-colored armor sitting on a black horse.

The face of the man in the painting was handsome, if a little cruel. Maybe he was upset about all the dead bleeding bodies around the feet of the horse. "Nice picture, but that's not going to help."

"Before the accident, I looked exactly like the man in the portrait."

"This badass knight on a black horse?" I asked, to be sure - after all, Phillipe could have picked the wrong painting. "He looks like he wants to kick some serious butt."

His mouth bent up on the ends. "He was considered to be a rather handsome, dashing fellow in his time."

"The Mel Gibson of the Dark Ages." The painting was actually quite detailed for its time, I saw as I got up close to it and studied the face. "I can't give you back the mustache and beard, and you'll need to dye your hair to get rid of the Cruella DeVille effect, but I can work off the features. If I can keep you from healing around my scalpel."

"I have also had all the instruments coated with copper." He gestured toward the cabinet, then made a three-sixty. "Is there anything else you require for my surgery?"

"Yeah." I laughed the word. "Some interns, plenty of nurses, an anesthesiologist, a sterile environment and at least a week to prepare the graft materials."

"I will serve as your nurse," Éleine said as she joined us. "The alloplastic grafts are already prepared."

This situation was a chuckle a minute. "I prefer to harvest my own, thanks, and what do you know about surgery?"

"I know enough to hand you the correct instruments." She turned to Cyprien. "Shall I set up the trays now, *monsieur*?"

Cyprien nodded. "Dr. Whitman, if you would prepare for surgery, please.."

"Now?" I looked at both of them, aghast. "But I haven't even had time to check your blood work."

"That is not necessary. You have everything you need, and the skill to do the work." Cyprien went back to the table. "We will do the rest."

"And what if you die under the knife?" I demanded. "What happens to me?"

His faceless head turned my way. "I can promise you only one thing, doctor. Whatever you do to me on that table, I will survive." There was a click behind me, and I turned to see Phillipe holding a sizeable gun pointed at my head. "I cannot say the same for you, if you do not operate on me tonight."

* * *

I don't argue with guns, but I did make one final protest to Éleine as we scrubbed. "I can't keep him anesthetized and do the cutting."

"That will not be a problem." She tugged on my gloves for me like a pro. "Mr. Cyprien does not require anesthesia."

I ripped the gloves off. "That does it, I'm outta here."

"*Vous l'aidez,*" Phillipe said, making a jabbing motion with his gun toward the operating table, where Cyprien lie waiting.

"I can't operate on a conscious patient," I said, through gritted teeth. "He won't be able to stand the pain. He'll *fight* me." The big French goon simply cocked his gun. "I'm a doctor, not a butcher. Go ahead and shoot, I'm not going to do it."

"He will not move," Éleine said, putting fresh gloves on me. "He will enter a trance state, and remain in it until you are finished." She held out a mask. "You must trust us, Dr. Whitman. We know what we are doing."

Phillipe have me a shove toward the table.

I went along with it, figuring on getting a scalpel and slashing my way out of there. Yet when I checked Cyprien, he appeared to be unconscious - heart rate and BP were low, and his breathing was regular and steady. There were some doctors who advocated using hypnotism to put patients under for minor procedures, but I'd never heard of one doing it for comprehensive cranial surgery.

The blonde pushed the instrument tray between us. "Shall we begin?"

Sweat ran down the back of my gown, and my hands were shaking so much I didn't think I could hold a suction tube. Then I felt something touch the back of my neck, and a weird, tickling sensation on the inside of my skull. The smell of roses was so strong I almost vomited.

Then I watched my now rock-steady hand stretch out. "Scalpel."

What happened then was unlike any surgical experience I'd ever had - I seemed to go on some kind of autopilot. Peeling back Cyprien's facial scar tissue had to be done in sections, but I knew the severed blood vessels would seal off themselves and the flaps would heal out of place. Testing a theory, I created a tiny flap, allowed it to heal, then abrading the underside of the flap and the foundation site, then pressed them back together. The reattachment was almost instantaneous. Once I'd confirmed that, I sliced off Cyprien's face, pulled it out of the way, and began the work to repair the massive damage to his skull.

Distorted bone stretched from his upper cranium down to the mandible, but his eyes were intact and the pupils reacted to light. One part of my mind was screaming at me that he could see, hear and definitely feel everything I was doing to him, but something larger and stronger than that kept me functioning.

I snapped out orders for instruments as my hands flew. The bone healed at a slightly slower rate than his tissue, but still required me to operate at top speed. As I excised and grafted, I began to create new surfaces that meshed and hardened beneath my fingertips. It was more like sculpting marble than operating on bone. I rebuilt each zygomatic arch, each lateral orbital rim, and reinforced the nasion. The distribution of healed fractures went far beyond any LeFort III case I'd ever seen. Once I extended the length of his cheekbones and got to the upper mandible, I found two unusual bilateral abscesses in his upper palate that appeared to be congenital.

"He has two holes in the top of his mouth," I muttered. "Was he born with some form of cleft palate?"

"His *dents acérées*," Élaïne told me. "You must not close them."

"Right." I accepted that like she was Chief of Surgery and went on to repair the damage to his jaw. The little voice inside me shrieking for me to stop and think about what I was doing had finally gone away, which was good - his jaw was a real bitch to put to rights. Once the bones were finished, I reattached Cyprien's face and went to work on his facial scars..

My patient never twitched a muscle.

Twelve hours later, I put the final tuck in one corner of Cyprien's new mouth, waited for it to heal into place, then set aside my scalpel. "Give me some saline on a sponge." When the blonde handed it to me, I began wiping the blood and bits of bone from his newly-healed skin. "How does he come out of this trance?"

"Call his name."

"Mr. Cyprien - "

"Jacques-Sebastien."

"Jacques-Sebastien," I repeated dutifully.

The eyelids I'd remade for him blinked, then opened. "It is over?"

"*Oui, maître. La chirurgie était un succès.*" Éleine sounded like she was ready to burst into song. "*Vous êtes vous-même encore.*"

Cyprien reached up and tentatively touched his face, then gazed at me. "Do I look like the man in the painting?"

I should have been exhausted, grouchy, and ready to deck someone. Someone who wasn't me smiled with my mouth and talked with my voice. "You look wonderful." I, however, was about to keel over. The floral scent overwhelmed me, as if someone was stuffing roses into my mouth and nose.

"*Merci, docteur.*" He sat up, swung his legs off the table and gestured for Phillipe, who hurried over. His new face looked wonderful, but he was deathly pale, and trembling. "*Je dois chasser.*"

"You are too weak for that." Éleine clamped her arm around my waist and guided me toward him. "Don't you agree, Dr. Whitman?"

An invisible string made my head bob. "He should definitely rest for at least forty-eight hours."

Cyprien made a weary gesture. "Stop it, Éleine. She has done enough."

"She will not mind this one last service." A slim hand stroked my hair.. "Will you, Vanessa?"

I couldn't reply, I was too busy staring into Cyprien's eyes. When I was operating on him, I could have sworn they were blue. But now they had darkened, as if the pupils had expanded to crowd out the pretty irises. A delayed reaction to the trauma of the surgery, or maybe something else . . .

I stopped smelling roses, and started smelling him.

His scent was like his eyes, deep and dark and filled with secrets. Secrets that tugged at me like unseen hooks in my chest and pelvis. His eyes seemed to be bottomless, stretching straight back through his skull into eternity, like those two abscesses I'd seen, endless and enigmatic and swallowing up the light . . .

His hands were still shaking when he cradled my face between them.

"*Pardonnez-moi, cherie.*" He was lisping a little, but maybe it was because he had grown two enormous fangs.

Funny. I frowned a little as strands of his white hair tickled my cheek. *I don't remember giving him those.*

Then he turned my face to one side, and used them on me.

* * *

"I think I called every emergency room in the state of Illinois," Ginny was saying when I woke up. "Don't ever do that to me again, Ness."

I looked around the hospital room, then at my office manager. "Won't," I croaked out.

"Shit!" She jumped up from the chair beside my bed and grabbed my hand. "You're awake, oh thank God, I told them you were too tough, damn it." She burst into tears.

My throat hurt, my head hurt, my eyelids hurt. "S'allright, Gin." I had no memory to explain why I was an inpatient, but something told me I was lucky to be breathing. I closed my eyes and held on to her hand. "Be fine."

I stayed in Intensive Care for another day before they moved me down to a regular room. Gin was the one who told me how I'd been found, unconscious and near death, in the ladies room at the airport. Several of my colleagues had appointed themselves to my case and were quite eager to know what had happened, and how I'd nearly bled to death when I had no physical wounds to speak of. The last thing I could remember was leaving the hospital and walking to my Jeep. The next thing I knew, I was in ICU, listening to Ginny cry.

According to the police officer who took my statement, I'd been missing for three days.

After undergoing every possible test under the sun to explain my blood loss, my colleagues threw up their hands and discharged me. Ginny drove me home and stayed to fix me dinner and settle me in.

"I'll stay the night, if you want company," she offered.

"No, I think I need to be alone." I smiled at her. "Thanks, hon."

When she left, I turned off all the lights, and sat in the dark. I should have been hysterical or at least a little upset about whatever had happened to me, but something inside me seemed to be waiting. Like I was keeping an appointment I didn't know I'd made.

I didn't even jump when the front door bell rang.

I opened the door to find a tall, good looking man in a dark coat on my threshold. He was carrying a briefcase like an attorney, but wore his long hair in a ponytail. Strange how all the hair around his face was white. "Yes?"

"Good evening, Dr. Whitman." His voice was soft, and he had a distinct accent. *French?* "May I come in?"

I never let a stranger in my house in my life, but I felt as if I knew him - and knew he wouldn't hurt me. "Yes, of course."

I thought I smelled roses as he walked past me into my house. Maybe he delivered flowers on the side. Wouldn't mind getting a bouquet from him myself - he was really cute.

The man refused my offer of a drink and a seat, and placed the briefcase on my coffee table. "This is yours."

"I don't think so." I examined the case. "Mine is brown, not black."

"I mean, I brought it for you." He walked up to me and briefly pressed his fingertips to the back of my neck. "It is time for you to wake up, Vanessa."

Mr. Cyprien is in great need - Your boss had me kidnapped? - I am something of a medical challenge - Jacques-Sebastien - She will not mind -

The smell of roses. The touch of his hands. The brush of his hair over my skin.

Pardonnez-moi, cherie

I remembered everything - the abduction, the house in New Orleans, the terribly scarred man, the illegal surgery I'd been forced to perform. And something

worse. Something so horrifying that it couldn't have happened outside of a nightmare. But it had.

The son of a bitch had torn out my *throat*. With his *teeth*.

"You." I stumbled backward, banging into a chair and nearly falling on my backside. "What did you do? How did you make me forget all that?"

"It was necessary, to bring you back here." He watched me from the grave, beautiful face I'd given back to him. "Vanessa, I am so sorry."

"Sorry?" Rage pumped into my veins. "After what you did to me? After what . . . you did . . ." I touched the side of my neck. The skin was smooth and unbroken. My last memory was of him turning my face to the side and ripping into my throat with his teeth. No, his fangs. "You're a monster."

"Yes, I am." He didn't seem too worried about it. "You must make a choice now, *cherie*. I can make you forget everything for good, or you can agree to keep what happened confidential."

He'd torn into me with his teeth and drank my blood, and he wanted me to make that doctor-patient privileged?

"I am not so different from your other patients." He circled around me. "You operate on abnormal structures of the body, to improve function and approximate a normal appearance. In repairing the damage to my face, you restored my identity, my ability to function."

"Your function being to tear out the throats of women and drink their blood." I couldn't look away from his eyes. They were bright blue now, but I remembered them from before - those terrible, twin pits of black hell that had dragged me to him. "I can't believe these words are coming out of my mouth, but you're a . . . a vampire, aren't you?"

"I am *vrykolakas*. It is almost the same. I am what Nature decreed me to be." He studied me for a moment. "Without my features and my sight, I could not hunt. You gave me back my purpose, Vanessa.."

I felt sick. "And you tried to kill me for it."

"That was a mistake. My need was too great. I was only able to stop before I killed you because . . ." he trailed off and shook his head. "I cannot explain this now. Can you keep the matter private and tell no one?"

No one would believe me if I told them, and someone would have me committed if I ever tried. "Yes, damn it!"

He smiled. "Thank you."

"You're welcome." I pointed to the door. "Get the hell out of my house."

Cyprien took a card from his pocket, and dropped it on the table beside the briefcase. "You will need to talk to me soon. Please call me.. *Au revoir*, Vanessa."

I didn't breathe until the door closed behind him. Then I kicked the coffee table, and the briefcase bounced to the floor and popped open. I didn't have to count the stacks of money that fell out to know how much it was.

One point five million dollars, cash.

* * *

Time passed, and things changed. Not for the better.

I never really recovered from my ordeal, and then I became very ill. I did some discreet tests and discovered that the transfusion that had saved my life also gave me a rare blood disease. Research to cure my condition obsessed me, and I spent long hours in the office at night, performing private tests. I lost weight and didn't sleep much at all. What I eventually learned from my experiments left me speechless.

If what I suspected was true, I had no options.

Two months after my abduction, I removed myself from the hospital call list, closed my office, found jobs for my staff, and referred my patients to other surgeons. I gave Cyprien's money to Luisa's mother, in trust for her daughter's treatment, and walked out of the housing project before she could finish sobbing out her thanks.

Then I did less orthodox research, and flew to Greece. There I spent a week mangling Greek from a phrase book until I found an elderly village Priest who could speak English. He and I discussed ancient superstitions about damned and corrupt souls in the garden outside his church. He gave me the last of the answers I needed before I returned to the States.

I never stopped smelling roses, the entire time I was traveling.

I knew I had reached the final stage of my disease when the taxi delivered me to *Le Petit Jardin*. Elaine met me at the door, and for a moment, I thought she might slam it in my face.

"Don't even think about it," I said, and pushed past her. I was so weak I could have happily dropped to the floor, curled up and died, but I thought of Luisa and kept shuffling forward. Phillipe appeared and, after a worried look at Éleine, helped me down the stairs to Cyprien's private chamber.

"Hello, Vanessa." Jacques-Sebastien was painting something gorgeous on a canvas, but set aside his pallet and dropped his brush in a jar of solvent. "I expected you to arrive weeks ago."

"I bet you did." I lowered myself into a comfortable chair, then sighed. "The condition is an interesting one. I had to burn about ten pounds of research notes before I went to Greece. I assume there are others?"

"Yes." He wiped his hands with a paint-stained cloth before coming over to sit across from me. He was barefoot, I noticed, absently admiring his feet. "You want to know how it will be."

"I've guessed most of it. My human blood cells are being replaced by some very unique aberrant cells. They look a little like cancer, but they're a hundred times more invasive and destructive. They in turn have altered my bone, tissue and nerves cells to accept my altered metabolism." I folded my arms, ignoring the gnawing pain in my limbs. "What I want to know is, why? Why did you transfuse me with your own blood?"

"I took too much from you, that night, after the surgery. You would have died without it." He stared at his toes. "It was wrong of me, I know."

I could see why someone would want to beat and burn the face off him. "So now I turn into what you are."

"Yes."

I already knew the answer to the next question, but I wanted to see him squirm. "There's no cure, no way to stop it, is there?" He shook his head. "When you came to me in Chicago, you weren't going to wipe out my memories. You were going to kill me before I transitioned. While I was still human enough to die."

"Yes."

"Why didn't you?"

"Kill you?" He met my gaze. "I thought if you could accept me being a monster, then you had a chance to accept what was happening to you."

I touched the tip of my tongue to the two abscesses forming in the roof of my mouth. Inside them were my newly-formed *dents acérées*.

AKA my fangs.

"I'll never be able to practice medicine again." I wondered how hard it would be to decapitate him. The Priest said that was one of the few ways we could be killed, and I was truly tempted. "You took that away from me. You took my life away from me."

"You are still alive. We have long needed a healer among our kind." Jacques-Sebastien leaned forward. "You can even continue to help humans, if you wish."

"By feeding on them, and killing them?" I rubbed my aching temple. "Terrific idea. I can see them lining up outside my new office in droves."

"There are other ways." He smiled a little. "I will teach you."

Phillipe came up to me, and knelt down beside my chair. "*Vous ferez un beau chasseur, Vanessa.*"

I didn't have to know French to understand what he was saying - a little side benefit of the disease, I could read people's thoughts, whatever language they spoke.

You will make a beautiful hunter, Vanessa.

I thought of Bryan's mother, Debbie's father, and Luisa's attackers. "Maybe I will."

A Personal Injustice

*"A personal injustice is stronger motivation than any instinct for philanthropy." -
From "A Son of the Circus" by John Irving*

"She's a little young for you, don't you think?"

The man kneeling over the unconscious teenager scowled up at me. "Get lost, bitch."

"As it happens, I am." I scanned the filthy alley from end to end, but we were alone. I set my medical case down, out of the way where it wouldn't get kicked or stomped. "I don't suppose you could stop assaulting that girl long enough to tell me how to get to Johnson Avenue."

He jumped up and came at me with the knife he'd been using on the girl's clothes. "I'll cut your fucking throat."

Child rapists. Always so cranky when someone interrupted their fun..

I waited until he was close, then grabbed his wrist. The knife quivered between us, a quarter inch from my neck. He grunted, pushed, then froze in place - just like his blade.

"Where's this famous southern hospitality I've heard so much about?" I tightened my grip. "You're giving Atlanta a bad rep, you know."

"Fuh-uh-" his eyes bulged out, and the knife fell from his fingers. "Uh-uh-"

My probe rendered him temporarily incoherent - none of the other rapists, abusers and killers I'd met had been very chatty when I'd picked through their memories. I didn't like digging through his mind trash, but I needed to know if he had any other girls stashed elsewhere. The one in California had locked three little boys in a cellar, and I'd barely gotten to them in time.

Happily, my attacker preferred the one-on-one approach, with desperate runaway girls as his main victim of choice. He was a real gem, too. None of his victims had ever come forward; only being caught in the act had earned him any jail time. He'd just been released from prison yesterday, after spending twenty months as a model prisoner and chaplain's aide.

"You're a bad boy, Raymond." I clamped my other hand around his neck, and walked him back toward the wall. "Swearing you found Christ when you hadn't even been looking for him." I tsked. "That parole officer of yours is going to be so disappointed."

Because I wasn't letting him have any air, all he could do was make little squeaky noises. His head bounced a little as the back of it hit brick, then he tried kicking me with one of his work boots. I pinned him with my knees, watching as fear and pain made his face into a cartoon. I could almost see the question mark form over the top of his head.

How? How? How? He was screaming behind his face.

"See, I don't look like it, Raymond, but I'm pretty strong." I broke his wrist and felt his carotid jump under my fingertips. "Bet that hurts. Well, you're really not going to like this part." I released him, then cradled his face between my palms. As he brought his good arm up to punch me, I jerked his head hard to the left. What breath there was left in his lungs emerged in a low liquid gurgle as he slid down the wall.

.. . warmth, sympathy, and understanding may outweigh the surgeon's knife . . .

I stepped over his body, retrieved my case and went back to the girl. A quick exam revealed a nasty bump on her crown, some cuts and bruises, but no signs of oral or genital penetration. Since Raymond was not only a monster but also HIV positive, that was a small blessing.

The scent of her blood made me swallow hard.

I took out my cell phone, dialed 911 and requested an ambulance and the police. Before the operator could interrogate me, I ended the call. Climbing up to where I could observe without being detected was a bit of a bitch - I was wearing heels - but I refuse to use the other methods available to me. The paramedics arrived three minutes later, and once they had the girl strapped to a gurney I slipped down and silently retreated back to the street. That was where I smelled roses - deep, dark, full-blown roses, the kind you wanted to bury your face in.

"Vanessa."

I ignored the low, accented voice and kept walking.

"You promised to return and speak with me."

"I lied."

I knew he'd catch up to me. Cyprien never had learned how to take a brush-off. Of course, being five hundred years old and strong enough to toss a dumpster into orbit might have had something to do with that. "I don't need a coach. Go back to New Orleans."

He didn't. He caught up with me and paced me. I didn't have to look at him to know he was dressed in the usual black trench coat and Armani suit - standard uniform for the tasteful but trendy omnipotent immortal. Sometimes I wondered if they all went shopping together, like best girlfriends.

"We need you to come back to New Orleans."

I skirted around two prostitutes who eyed Cyprien like Santa had delivered early. "Do I really look that stupid to you?"

"You are a brilliant woman."

"I wasn't smart enough to dodge you, was I? And now look at me." I crossed the street against the light, making a taxi swerve. The driver stuck his head out the window and shouted his poor opinion of my mother. "Living the new life you gave me. Which sucks, by the way. Thank you very much."

He tugged me to a stop at the edge of the curb. "The child in that alley would disagree, I think."

"Would she? I was a heartbeat away from making her corpse number two." I finally looked up into his beautiful face - the face that I had reconstructed for him - then dragged in a deep breath. "You got what you wanted, Cyprien. I didn't. Fuck off."

"I would respect your privacy, but there is no one else who can do this." He dragged a hand through his hair, scattering the white strands around his face into the rest, which was long and black. "Some of our kind were captured and tortured. We need you to-"

"Our kind? We?" I wanted to grab the gun from my case and shoot him, but I hadn't loaded it. Stupid me. "You might want to rephrase that. Fast."

His brows, which had grown back in dark and nicely shaped, arched. "You cannot deny what you are, Vanessa. You are my sygkenis."

"You don't own me, you jerk. You victimized me." As the words left my lips, Phillipe and another of Cyprien's French thugs flanked me. "I won't be so easy to kidnap this time." I looked at Phillipe, who was giving me that faintly disapproving look. "What's your problem?"

"Vous ne devriez pas insulter le maître."

Good old Phillipe. Always the epitome of the devoted manservant. "He's not my master, and I can insult anyone I damn well feel like insulting." The threat of violence broke my shaky self-control, and two hollow, pointed teeth - my dents acérées - punched through the bilateral abscesses in my upper palate. I flashed my fangs for them. "Take a walk, boys. I'm hungry, and you're starting to resemble a double cheeseburger."

When Phillipe advanced, Cyprien lifted a hand, halting him in his tracks.. "You still wish to find the ones who attacked your burn patient in Chicago, don't you, Vanessa?"

I thought of Louisa Lopez, who had been raped, tortured, and nearly burned to death in a fire set to hide the crimes. Did I want to find the men responsible for that?

Hell, yes.

"I can find them myself." No, I couldn't, although I intended to keep trying.

"Your resources are limited; mine are not." Cyprien made a casual gesture. "Do this thing for me, and I will deliver these men into your hands.."

He had me. He had me and he knew it, the son of a bitch. "What thing? I want details this time. All the details."

"Come." He held out his arm. "I will tell you everything."

* * *

Cyprien whisked me off to Louisiana in his private jet. Another bonus of living for five hundred plus years, he had plenty of expensive toys. On the flight to New Orleans, he told me about the other vampires - he called them vrykolakas - whom he'd met in Europe five hundred years ago.

First he told me a about the fourteenth century, which had not been a happy time.

"Plague invaded every country through tainted meat and on the backs of rats. Twenty million died in only a few years, and most rotted where they dropped. Those of us who survived scattered. We traveled to exotic lands, hoping to escape the pestilence." He paused and looked out the small window at the rising sun. "Life was briefer then. Most women died giving birth. A man was old at thirty. It is ironic that the vrykolakas were born in such an age."

"Uh-huh." Daylight didn't instantly turn me to ash, but it did sting my eyes and irritate my skin. I reached over and pulled down the little window shade. "That would be when you and your pals became drunks, thieves, and murderers, then damned souls, doomed to rise from your graves, walk the earth forever, invade the dreams and live off the blood of the living."

"Yes."

"Excuse me for not weeping over this part of the fairytale." I yawned.

"Fairytale?" He stiffened. "You think I am lying to you?"

"I think you're a legend in your own mind, Cyprien. Have you or any of your fanged friends ever seen a doctor?" When he began to nod, I added, "Not the guy who doubled as the village barber - I mean a real, modern doctor?"

"No, of course not. We could not risk exposure." He leaned forward. "Why?"

"I've seen a few since you infected me, and guess what? Damned souls have nothing to do with this."

"Indeed." He sounded mortally offended. "Then what, pray tell me, has made us what we are?"

"Disease. Five hundred years ago, you and the other members of the Dracula Club were all exposed to anthrax and bubonic plague. Your immune systems developed some very unusual antibodies that kept you from contracting those diseases. These same antibodies later became impregnated with another, as of yet unidentified virus - something much nastier than mad cow disease or the black death. Together, the viral-mutated antibodies accelerated your immune systems, eradicating cellular erosion, and did some even wonkier things to your DNA. You evolved into what you are as a result.

"Photo sensitivity is a bitch, but it doesn't kill you. The only thing that does that is dismemberment, burning or exposure to copper."

"There are other ways to kill us."

I folded my hands. "Name one."

"Holy water."

"It's not the holy part, Cyprien, it's the copper content that causes the dermal damage and, if ingested, poisons you." I closed my eyes. "Sorry to dispel another myth, but God really isn't pissed at you. You're just walking, talking pandemically-created mutants."

He was silent for a moment. "That does not explain how we are able to turn others into vrykolakas."

"Your blood passes the antibodies and the viral infection along." I opened my eyes and saw his expression. "Most people you try to turn don't make it, though, do they?"

"They do not. You are one of the few who have lived." His mouth curled. "Why, do you think, that is?"

"Not because I've been a bad girl. I went on a humanitarian visit to some Ethiopian refugee camps a few years ago. Before I went, I received vaccinations for anthrax and bubonic plague. I carry some of the same antibodies you did when you were infected." I felt the plane shift into a descent angle. "We're almost there. Cut to the chase and tell me what's happened."

He studied me for a moment. "Considering how quick you are to dismiss the mysteries of our kind-

"Providing a rational explanation for our condition is not dismissal, Cyprien. It's called medical science."

He put his cold hand over mine. "Science is not everything, Vanessa."

"You thought it was okay when you didn't have a face." When I'd first met Cyprien, someone had repeatedly crushed his skull and mutilated his face until he was no longer recognizable as anything remotely human. Recalling his injuries made me sigh. "Just tell me what's going on."

"The Church has long devoted itself to hunting the agents of Satan on earth - that would be us. In the fifteenth century, the Vatican created an order of soldier-priests to identify, locate and destroy all vrykolakas. They are now called the special inquisitors."

I felt a surge of sympathy, and squeezed his hand. "And one of these wacko priests caught you."

"They did. They imprisoned me and tried to compel me to tell them where others could be found."

"But you got away."

Cyprien nodded at Phillipe, who was minding his own business at the front of the cabin. "I had help."

It was positively medieval. "What kind of torture do they use?"

"Beatings. Burnings. Long immersions in holy water. We do not drown, but as you say, the copper content has a detrimental effect on our skin. I was weakened from inadvertently swallowing some of it, as well." He studied his shoes. "Recently the inquisitors captured other vrykolakas. Phillipe and I were able to retrieve them."

Vampire medevac. I shook my head. "How many?"

"Four - Thierry Durand and three members of his immediate family. Thierry's condition is more critical than the others."

"Define critical."

He removed an envelope from his breast pocket and withdrew a folded paper. "I made this the night we brought him to New Orleans."

Cyprien was an artist, and since vrykolakas have an aversion to being photographed, he had sketched what I assumed had once been a man.

"This is not an abstract, is it?" I stared at the wrecked, twisted body.

"Sadly, no."

The plane jostled us as the landing gear met runway and we touched down at New Orleans airport. "I'll take a look at them, but that's all I'll do."

Cyprien nodded. "Thank you, Vanessa."

* * *

An immortal alive since the dark ages had plenty of time to amass wealth, and Cyprien had used some of his to buy a beautiful mansion in New Orleans's Garden District. I'd only seen the grounds of Le Petite Jardin briefly, and at the time I hadn't been in the mood to appreciate the gorgeous gardens and manicured hedges of white tea roses.

It made me a little curious about him, too. "Why live in New Orleans? Wouldn't Paris be more suitable for an immortal artist?"

"I lived in Paris for three hundred years. America intrigued me." As the limo passed through the gates, he gave me a sideways look. "As do you, Vanessa."

I wasn't falling for that haunted thing he did with his eyes. "I'm here on business, Cyprien." I slid on my sunglasses. "Let's keep it that way."

Not everyone was happy to see me. Éleine Servais, Cyprien's human secretary/companion/chief gopher looked down her nose as we walked in. She hadn't liked me from day one, but it was a girl competition thing.

"Dr. White, what a pleasure to see you again." She inclined her head, showing off the smooth twisty thing she'd done to her pale hair.

Liar, liar, pants on fire, I thought back at her as I breezed by. "How's tricks, blondie?"

"We have been very busy since your time with us." Her mind and face remained serene, but her voice chilled a few thousand degrees. She brushed some invisible lint off the sleeve of her immaculate navy blue suit. "I see you are well."

"Peachy." I was busy eyeing all the new guards. There were about a dozen of them manning the entrances and exits, and they were all carrying large caliber weapons. I glanced at Cyprien. "I haven't seen this many guns since I changed planes in D.C."

"A minor precaution. Thierry and the others were not supposed to escape. Rome wants them back." He guided me to an elegant drawing room filled with polished antiques. Everything was pale green and pink, with enough stripes and flowers and fussy things to make a house porn junkie foam at the mouth. "It will be a few hours before they wake. Would you care for some refreshment?"

"No thanks." Rather than sit, I put down my case on the nearest flat surface and opened it. "I brought my own."

Ever since I'd stopped being human, I had refused to bite people, and instead carried around copper-tipped syringes (stainless steel needles wouldn't penetrate my skin) and a small supply of plasma on ice. Experimentation made me discover that I could survive comfortably on 50 CCs of whole blood every day, or 100 CCs of plasma. I had no problem injecting myself in front of Cyprien, who watched with fascinated eyes.

"You use needles."

"It's like being a diabetic," I muttered as I felt the rejuvenating effects of the injection. I hated that part; I didn't want it to feel good.. "And most days, I almost believe that." I took out my other packs. "Would someone put these in the fridge? I don't feel like knocking over another blood bank today."

Phillipe came forward, took them from me, and disappeared.

Cyprien had poured himself a glass of very dark wine - from the smell, mostly blood with a little wine mixed in to preserve and/or dilute it. "I thought as a doctor, you could have free access to what you require."

"Since I'm no longer practicing medicine, I have no choice but to steal it." Another part of my new life that I despised. I watched him sip from his goblet. "Who did you kill to get your fix?"

He made another of his elegant gestures. "We don't kill anymore, Vanessa. We convince humans to donate willingly."

"You mean, you hypnotize them, then you bleed them."

His mouth hitched. "You insist on putting everything into such stark terms."

"While you romance everything." The afterglow of transfusing usually made me languid, so I got to my feet and paced around the room. "What do you expect me to do for this Thierry guy and the others who were hurt?"

"Restore them, as you did me, if you can." He drained the glass and set it aside. "There is something else."

"I figured there was." I made a rolling motion with my hand.

"Thierry suffered a great deal of pain during his ordeal. He is" Cyprien thought in French for a moment. Fou . . . aliéné . . .

"He's gone crazy?"

"He is . . . unbalanced." He met my gaze. "Thierry lost his wife to the inquisitors. They made him watch as they tortured her to death."

Like Louisa Lopez had watched her attackers murder her infant son. I rubbed a hand over my face. "Great."

* * *

Cyprien thought I should examine the other, less injured vrykolakas before assessing Thierry, but I overruled him - I wanted to see just how long I was going to be stuck here, and that meant taking a look at the worst case first. Éleine escorted me down into the basement level, which had once been Cyprien's private bedchamber and my makeshift trauma center. All my old equipment remained where I left it, and he had hired - or hypnotized - a human nurse to monitor the patient.

Thierry Durand was nowhere in sight.

"Debra," Éleine called out, and a young, redheaded woman in a nurse's uniform appeared. "Dr. Whitman is here to see your patient."

"Hello, doctor." The pale woman gave me a dreamy smile. "Nice to meet you." She handed me a chart. "This is what I have so far on Mr. Durand."

"Thanks." I opened the chart and read the top page. The well-written assessment made my stomach turn. "We need to prep the patient for xrays and an abdominal ultrasound."

"That will be difficult." Something growled behind her, and she made a little face. "Mr. Cyprien said poor Mr. Durand be kept in his restraints."

"Under no circumstances is Mr. Durand to be released," Éleine added, stepping into my path as I headed for the sound. "Do you understand, doctor?"

"I understand that you're annoying me. Why don't you go make coffee or something?" I nudged her aside and saw an open section of floor with a copper grid over it.

Something hit the grid, and metal screech against metal.

"Debra, would you go upstairs and check on Madam Durand for me?" I heard Éleine ask.

"Yes, ma'am."

I felt like calling the nurse back, just to flex my authority, but decided to have a look at the patient first. I went over to the grid, knelt beside it, and looked into the recessed cell. A ruined body lurched beneath the grid, hobbling back and forth in the restricted space. There were lined copper manacles on his wrists.

Poor Mr. Durand snarled up at me.

I looked back at Éleine. "Was this your bright idea?"

"No." Cyprien appeared on the other side of the cell. "It was mine. He tries to kill anyone who comes near him." He gave me a troubled look. "No drug can anesthetize us. It took four of us to hold him down long enough for the nurse to assess him."

"Terrific." I pulled off my jacket and rolled up my sleeves as I went for my case and snapped on a pair of latex gloves. "Éleine, get me a bottle of saline."

Blondie's little nose elevated. "I am not a nurse."

"You are until Debra comes back. Get it."

Cyprien shadowed me, and eyed the vial of blue salts I took from my case..
"What is that?"

"Nickel sulfate hexahydrate. It's used to plate nickel, dye and print fabrics, and to blacken zinc and brass. Nickel happens to be copper's next door neighbor on the periodic table of elements." I took a sterilized pyrex beaker and shook a few blue crystals into it, then added 20 ccs of saline that Éleine brought to me and swirled it. "It's toxic to humans, but for us, it's more like a dose of Valium."

Cyprien's secretary made a hissy sound. "You cannot inject that into him - you don't know what it will do."

"I know exactly what it will do." I lifted the beaker to the light to make sure the salts had completely dissolved. "I've been using it to treat my insomnia."

"You tested this substance on yourself?" Cyprien sounded appalled.

"Why not?" I filled a pressure dart and took out my tranquilizer gun to load it. "I've had a lot of time on my hands lately." I went back to the grid. "Open it up."

"You mean to shoot him?"

I gave him an ironic look. "I don't think he's going to hold out his arm and let me stick him, do you?"

Cyprien knelt down and pressed some switch in the floor, and the copper mesh slid back. The man inside screeched like a furious animal.

I aimed and fired. The dart hit him squarely in the chest, and five second later, he dropped to the floor of the cell, unconscious.

"We've got about an hour before it wears off." I jumped in, lifted the crippled body into my arms, and jumped back out. "Élaine, get Debra back down here. Cyprien, put Phillipe and some of your muscle to standby, in case he wakes up early." I carried the unconscious vampire over to an exam table, laid him down, and switched on the overhead light. He was only wearing a pair of ragged trousers, so I cut those away.

And wished I hadn't, when I saw what they had done to him.

From the waist up, Thierry Durand was completely normal - a little thin, but well muscled and uninjured. The scar tissue started just above the groin area and extended to what might have once been the soles of his feet.

The blackened, jagged ends of his leg bones stuck out in various places where the flesh had healed around them. His feet had been crushed, his genitals badly burned.

Given the severity of his wounds, how he had been able to move at all was a terrifying miracle.

"I'll get pictures of the compound fractures first." I gently rolled him over, and saw what they'd done to his back. Hung him from a couple of meat hooks and left him there, from the nature of the deep tissue damage. "And a spine series." I looked up to see the pair still staring at me. "Clock is ticking, folks, get a move on."

Élaine and Cyprien disappeared. Debra returned a few minutes later and helped me positioned the xray over the table, and we got to work.

* * *

It took fifty minutes to complete some quick prelims, after which I put the unconscious Thierry back in the floor cell and left Debra to watch over him.

Cyprien hadn't made another appearance, so I went upstairs to find him sitting and brooding in the fancy green and pink drawing room.

"Come here and look at this." I went to the glass doors that led out to the garden, and propped Thierry's xrays against the panes. "Twenty-seven major fractures in his legs and most of them are compound." I pointed to the worst breaks. "His feet have been pulverized; there's no viable bone left. If he were human, I'd have to amputate. As it is, he'll need extensive bone repair, tissue grafts to fill in the holes in his back, and dermal restoration from the hips down. I'm not sure what I can do about the feet." I turned. "Where are the people who did this to him?"

"They are deceased."

"Thank you." I didn't feel a twinge of guilt about that. "The surgery will take time; I don't know how long. As for his mental state, the pain he suffered can only be classified as beyond imagination. Add watching his wife die to that . . ." I shook my head.

"Then we must let him go, Jacques-Sebastien," a low, unfamiliar feminine voice said.

I turned to see Éleine standing just inside the room, with a woman who looked like her mother. The latter had silver-blond hair swept up in a complicated do, and wore a nice lavender suit. One of her arms was in a sling someone had fashioned from a matching lavender silk scarf.

"Liliette. You should not be up." Cyprien went to her and guided her to one of the velvet-covered sofas, then sat beside her. "Vanessa, this is Madam Liliette Durand, Thierry's aunt. Liliette, this is Dr. Vanessa Whitman."

"I'm sorry, I didn't know you were listening." I went over and shook the uninjured hand she offered to me. "Let me take a look at that arm."

"Later." She made an imperious, shoo-shoo gesture, dismissing me. "Thierry's mind is gone, Jacques-Sebastien. Losing Anna was enough; I cannot bear to see him suffer any more. Let us release him from his pain."

"Perhaps that is the most compassionate thing we can do for your poor nephew," Éleine said, and gave me a pitying smile. "Seeing as the doctor cannot help him."

Just as I couldn't help Louisa Lopez. Blondie certainly knew where all my buttons were, and just how hard to punch them.

"I didn't say that." I ignored the urge to rip out the secretary's larynx and concentrated on Liliette. "Madam, your nephew has been through a terrible ordeal, but I wouldn't write him off just yet. Once he's free of pain, he may

become more lucid and rational. Right now, his body is telling him that he's still being tortured. His behavior is quite understandably, under the circumstances."

"You can repair his body, but not his mind." A big man in dark velvet robe hobbled in, followed by a slim teenage boy. The man wore a black eye patch and used a cane; the boy's hands were covered in bandages. Both were dark and resembled Thierry. "He will never be whole again."

Cyprien rose to his feet. "You don't know that, Marcel. We must try."

"Here, Denys." Marcel guided the silent boy over to stand beside Liliette. His hesitant movements made me wonder if Denys had gotten the hung-by-meat-hook treatment, too.

While Cyprien made the obligatory introductions, I scanned the minds of the group. Marcel and Liliette were convinced Thierry would not recover, and that killing him would be merciful. Oddly, I couldn't read the boy's mind at all.

"I should do the other exams now, Cyprien." I caught his gaze. And I'm not taking them downstairs. They don't need to see Thierry in that cage.

"Élaine has prepared a treatment room for you on this floor," he said, and offered his hand to Liliette. "Come, madam, let Vanessa see to your arm."

* * *

The other members of the Durand family had also been tortured, but their injuries were nowhere near as bad as Thierry's. Liliette's shoulder and elbow had been dislocated, so I only had to manipulate the joints so they could heal in proper alignment. Although she had the vrykolakas' natural ability to spontaneously heal, I hated causing the old lady new pain, and said as much.

"Nonsense, my dear. This is nothing compared to what I endured when I was imprisoned in the eighteenth century." She extended her arm to test it. "Happily, the Bastille had a plentiful supply of slow rats and stupid guards."

My jaw sagged a little. "The Bastille as in The Tale of Two Cities Bastille?"

"That imbecile Dickens. He memorized Carlyle to write that wretched novel - as if plagiarizing a history book made him an authority on the Terror." She sniffed. "It was not, I assure, the best or worst of times. It was years of endless butchery, especially for our kind."

I gently bent her arm at the elbow to check her range of motion. "So they went after vampires, too?"

"Vrykolakas," she corrected - just as picky as Cyprien about what you called them. "They wanted us more than the artistos. Rome actually commissioned Joseph Guillotin find an efficient way to dispatch our kind. We discovered this only after he submitted his proposition to the Assembly in 1789, recommending decapitation as the standard form of capital punishment in France."

"Nice guy." If she'd witnessed the French Revolution, Cyprien must have been there, too. It boggled the mind. "Everything seems to be working now. Try to get some rest, and take it easy on your arm for the next twenty-four hours."

Marcel limped in after Éleine escorted Liliette back to her rooms. "My eye was burned out of my head. You cannot fix that."

I nodded toward his cane. "What about the limp?"

"I am cursed by God." He scowled. "I do not need your help."

God must have been really pissed off during the Dark Ages. "Too bad, I've been hired at the group discount rate. Get up on the exam table." I changed my gloves, and when I turned around, he hadn't moved. "What, did they do something to your ears, too?"

He trudged over and planted himself on the table, sweeping back the robe.. Instead of the wounded leg I'd expected to see, he showed me something quite different.

I went and took his foot in my hands, and manipulated it gently. "No midtarsal mobility, transverse crease, displaced navicular, calceneocuboid and subtalar joints."

"What does that mean?"

"You weren't cursed by God, Mr. Durand. You were born with a clubfoot." I thought for a moment. "Under the circumstances, I should be able to perform an osteotomy of the distal part of calcaneus combined with a plantar fasciotomy and posteromedial release. I'll need a couple hours to correct and rearrange your joints, maybe a little wedge of skull bone, and a whole lot less lip from you."

His one eye rounded. "You would do this for me?"

The man had a congenital birth defect that had nothing to do with being a vampire. I could fix that without a crisis of conscience.

"Sure." I patted his cheek, then tapped his eye patch. "How about you show me what's under here now?"

He took off the patch. His eye and eyelid were missing. The healed eye socket had rough edges and burn scars, as if the inquisitors had gouged out the eyeball, then cauterized the area.

I tilted his head up and used a scope light to probe the cratered socket.. "What did they use on you?"

"A poker. They heated the end until it glowed red." He swallowed, and his voice went low. "They cut off my eyelid first."

"Bastards." I lowered the eye patch back into place. "You're right, I can't help you out with this. Your tissue will reject any type of prosthesis I try to implant. I'm sorry." I felt someone watching us, and saw Debra and Denys hovering in the doorway. "And my next patient is here."

"I should tell you what happened to Denys," Marcel said as he climbed down from the exam table.

"He can tell me himself."

"No, Dr. Whitman, he cannot." The big man took the boy's hand from Debra, and led him forward, and then he showed me why.

* * *

After I finished Denys's exam, I went upstairs to my old room, and showered. When I came out to dress, Cyprien was waiting for me.

"I need another lock on that door," I told him as I went to the closet. It was still stocked with the clothes he'd bought for me the last time I'd been here. "One that works from the inside."

"Marcel said you were upset."

"Oh, I'm way past upset. I'm cruising right around fully enraged." I marched back into the bathroom, slammed the door, and dressed. When I came back out, he was holding two glasses. The smell made my fangs emerge. "I told you, I don't drink blood."

"It will calm you." He waited a minute, then sighed and set the glasses down. "Very well, I apologize again. I should have prepared you."

Going over to the window seemed like a good idea - I needed some distance between us. "How many people have you killed over the years, Cyprien?"

"I never kept account of it, Vanessa."

"No, you wouldn't." I looked out into the garden. White roses were blooming - thousands of them - and the last rays of the sun were gilding their petals. "How about the Durands? You figure they've probably wiped out the equivalent of a small city by now, right?"

"We don't kill humans anymore."

I could feel him behind me. His thoughts were almost as snarled as mine. "I was human. You killed me."

"Yes, I did." He didn't sound sorry, just sad. "I tried to recompense for that, but you gave my money away."

His millions had bought Louisa Lopez the treatment I could no longer give her. "You can't purchase my forgiveness, Cyprien."

He didn't say anything for a long time. "If it were in my power to make you human again, I would."

I hardly hear him over the pounding inside my head. "I made my peace with this, you know? I didn't have to practice medicine anymore. I figured if I stuck to needle transfusions and nailed some bad guys hurting kids, that would be enough. If things got unbearable, I could even end it. Now you bring me here and show me these people and say, 'Hey, Vanessa, be a doctor again.'"

His hands touched the sides of my arms. "It is what you are."

"Do you know exactly what they did to that boy?" He shook his head.. "They crushed Denys's fingers, and whipped his back down to the bone.. But that wasn't enough." I shut my eyes tightly, but the images wouldn't go away. "They tore out his tongue, Cyprien. They ripped it out whole."

"What can be done?"

"Liliette's arm is fine. Marcel's eye can't be replaced, but I can straighten his foot and maybe get rid of his limp. I can fix Denys's hands and back, but he'll never speak again."

"Will you help them, Vanessa?"

I wanted to say no. I had every right to walk out of there. I didn't owe Jacques-Sebastien Cyprien a damn thing.

Denys's eyes - the same dark velvet brown as his father's - burned in my mind. I opened my own eyes so I wouldn't have to see them.

"All right," I said, forcing the words out. "I'll do what I can."

* * *

Setting up to perform the various procedures and surgeries the Durand family required was not a problem, as Debra turned out to have considerable experience in and out of the operating room. The fact that she was helping a vampire operate on other vampires didn't bug her at all - but then, nothing really bothered her.

"Let's work on Remy in the mornings, and Thierry in the afternoons." I dictated the surgical protocols to her and outlined what I'd need for the first setups.

"I'll make out a procedure schedule and requisition what you need, doctor." She floated off to prep the exam table, humming a little under her breath.

I had Phillippe and the boys move what I needed to the first floor, so I could begin the work on Denys without him having to see his father in the basement cell. Liliette came with him that first morning, and politely demanded to know exactly what I'd be doing to her great-nephew.

I went over the techniques I'd first perfected on Cyprien and explained how the muscles of his back could be restored by seeding the damaged areas with grafts from his thigh muscles. The grafts would act as scaffolds, upon which his accelerated immune system would build new muscle tissue.

"All I know of doctors is that they were dirty, drunken men who were inordinately fond of leeches." She shook her head, then went over to kiss Denys's cheek.

"We've progressed a little but since then." As Debra positioned the instrument trays, I led the old lady to the door. "I'll be out to tell you how it went as soon as we're through here."

Once Liliette left, I scrubbed, then took out a syringe of prepared blue salt solution. Debra already had Denys on a whole blood IV and stretched out on his stomach.

I still couldn't read the kid's mind, so I couldn't tell if he was worried or not. "This is going to help you go to sleep," I told him, "so you won't feel anything."

He only stared at the door, and didn't so much as blink when I injected him. Then his eyes fluttered closed and his breathing slowed.

His reactions bothered me on a couple of levels. Marcel and Liliette had shown a healthy amount of fear toward me. Given the amount of trauma he'd suffered,

Denys should have been jumpy as a jackrabbit on amphetamines around a stranger who intended to mess with his body. Instead, the boy acted like I was invisible.

I knew what the inquisitors had done to his body - but what had they done to the boy's mind?

Debra dragged me back to reality. "Doctor? Is something wrong?"

"No. Let's start with the upper lumbar and work our way down," I said, and tugged my mask up over my mouth and nose. "Watch the monitors, we'll need to dose him again in sixty minutes to keep him under. Scalpel."

After I harvested the first graft from the back of his right thigh and immersed it in a blood-saline bath, I had to literally peel the scar tissue back from his spine, and prep the ruined muscle. The flap I'd cut away healed as I was placing the graft, but once the new tissue had attached itself to the damaged muscle, I abraded the underside of the flap and the foundation site and pressed them back together, forcing them to heal together.

"BP and heart rate low, but regular," Debra murmured. "The first unit of blood is nearly gone, doctor."

His body was sucking it up like Pepsi. "Rig two more units, but decrease the drip." Too much blood would saturate his tissues and make it harder to place the grafts.

I couldn't operate on too large an area, as the derma would close faster than I could cut, but I made steady progress. Debra administered blue salt solution into his intravenous line twice more before we finished the final grafts, and I began repairing the surface derma. I'd discovered from working on Cyprien that sanding the scar tissue in small segments, as if it were rough wood, actually eradicated it. New, unblemished skin immediately formed and healed in its place.

Even with her mind clouded, my nurse reacted with gratifying awe. "That's incredible work, Dr. Whitman."

"He's doing most of it." I frowned, picking up something coming from Denys. Images, dark and distorted. None of them made sense at first, but slowly they coalesced into more coherent order. What I saw made me take in a shaky breath and shut down the connection. "Clamp."

At last I tossed aside the copper-plated scalpel and pulled down my mask, eyeing the length of the boy's back. "Keep him quiet and on his belly until three, then I'll be in to check the grafts and see how they're doing.."

I stripped out of my gear and left Debra with Denys. Outside in the hall, Marcel, Cyprien, and Liliette were waiting for me. "Denys did very well. Barring complications, I should be able to begin the work on his hands tomorrow."

Marcel muttered something heartfelt under his breath. "And my brother?"

"I'll be performing the first of his surgeries this afternoon." I glanced at Cyprien. "Can I see you downstairs for a minute?"

We left the Durands and went to the basement level. Thierry wasn't making any noise, and I went over to the grid to check on him. He lay curled in a tight ball of misery in one corner.

Cyprien joined me. "What is wrong, Vanessa?"

"Have you been able to read Denys since he came here?" When Cyprien shook his head, I sighed. "He started dreaming while he was under. He was reliving the weeks they spent being tortured - him, his mom and dad. He saw everything, too. I think the reason none of us can read his thoughts is because he's not having any. He's shut down his conscious mind."

"I don't understand. He has shown no sign of distress."

"No apparent signs. Everyone reacts to trauma in different ways. What the inquisitors did drove Thierry crazy, but it's rendered Denys catatonic." I went to the fridge and took out a blood pack. "I should have picked it up from the way everyone has to guide him around. He's like a robot." I used a syringe to withdraw what I needed. "There's something else. I don't know what it is, but I can feel it, hovering at the edges of his dreams. It's not the torture - it's worse."

"What could be worse than what he endured?"

"I don't know. I'm simply passing along the warning." I went to stab the needle into my arm, but Cyprien caught my wrist.

"If you keep taking it like that, you'll never make a full transition."

"Give Dracula a cigar." When he didn't let go, I glared up at him. "I told you, I'm not drinking blood." He was concentrating on something - my brain. "And you can stay out of my damn head, too."

"My God, you've never tried." He snatched the syringe from my hand and tossed it aside. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"Tell you what? I'm not a happy blood sucker?" I threw up my hands. "How many ways do I have to say it?"

"Very well." He pulled back his sleeve and bared his wrist. "You can practice on me."

I recoiled. "I'll pass, thanks."

"You cannot pass. This is what you are." He grabbed me by the back of the neck, held me in place, and pressed his wrist to my lips. "Take my blood, Vanessa."

Because of the grip he had on me, I couldn't turn my head. Saliva pooled in my mouth, and my fangs emerged, full and aching with emptiness. And still I kept my jaw clamped shut.

"With you, it is always the hard way." Cyprien bit his own wrist, then pressed it against my lips again. "Stop resisting, and take it."

A little of it seeped between my lips. From the movies I'd seen and the books I'd read, it was supposed to be like drinking ambrosia. Only it didn't - it was blood, and it tasted like blood.

So much for the Anne Rice bullshit. That made it a little easier to keep my mouth shut.

"Femme têtue." He took his wrist away, put it to his mouth, then kissed me.

It wasn't a kiss, though - it was just another way to get his blood down my throat. I used my fists on him, hitting whatever I could reach until he pinned my arms by clamping his free arm around me. I tried to spit the blood out. He held on through it all, keeping his mouth sealed over mine, his pretty eyes staring directly into mine.

Take my blood, Vanessa.

Why I caved in, I would never know. I just did. I drank Cyprien's blood, felt it slam into my desiccated stomach like a hot fist. I didn't taste it anymore, I only felt it spreading through me, a lot like a really good orgasm. Better than an orgasm.

Way better.

I drifted back to reality to find the blood exchange was over, but Cyprien was still kissing me. His thoughts were a tangle of French and English.

J'ai besoin de vous - I need you.

Je vous veux - I want you.

J'ai honte de ce que j'ai fait à vous, mais j'ai voulu que vous restassiez avec moi
- I am ashamed of what I did to you, but I wanted you to stay with me.

Je suis si seul - I am so alone, Vanessa.

Maybe it was the combination of blood and French that demolished me, I didn't know. I just held on and lost myself in that kiss.

He had my hair in his fist and his other hand was sliding up the front of my blouse. He lifted his mouth to bury it against my throat, and I braced myself, arching my head back to give him what he wanted. "Jack."

Thierry suddenly screamed in wordless rage.

That worked better than a bucket of iced holy water. Cyprien wrenched away and shuffled back a few steps. It took me a fraction of a second longer to recover, and then a red mist descended over everything.

Son of a bitch. He'd done it to me again.

I didn't waste time with words. I closed the gap between us and hit him in the face. Drinking the blood he'd forced down me put a little extra power behind the punch, and he went flying across the room, where he crashed into a storage cabinet. Glass shattered, liquid splashed. He was back on his feet in a blink, but fresh blood trickled from his mouth.

He didn't yell, he didn't try to hit me back. He held out his long, slim artist's hand. "Come to me, Vanessa."

Oh, shit. This was the part Anne Rice got right.

I wanted to. I might be a blood-dependent fanged mutant, but I still had nerve endings, and every one of them had gone to Code Red. He could deal with that for me, just as he'd dealt with my not drinking blood.

And somewhere along the way, I was pretty sure I'd lose what was left of my soul.

With the taste of him still hot in my mouth, I stalked back upstairs and strode out of the mansion.

Cyprien didn't chase me down himself - he sent someone else to do his dirty work. Like always.

Phillipe found me in a tourist bar in the quarter, where I was sitting in a dark corner pretending to drink Corona and listening to a Billie Holiday wannabe slaughter "I Cried for You."

I'd scanned the minds of the patrons, and found a heavysset man guzzling Jim Beam like it was water and planning to go home and kick the shit out of his wife for the third time that week.

"Le maître a besoin de vous, docteur."

I ignored Phillippe so I could further study the red-faced drinker. Should I add wife beaters to my list? He'd already put her in the hospital nine times since they'd gotten married - and last time, she'd nearly died.

"Vanessa."

"I heard you." It took a minute to switch my scanners to translate the French. The master needs you, doctor. "Your master can bite my ass."

"He try, but you break his nose." He made a face and sat down beside me. "My joke, not so good. Like my English."

"No, actually, it was pretty decent." I sighed. "Tell me something, Phil. Did Cyprien make you?"

"Oui."

A waitress paused by the table, but I shook my head. "When?"

"When he come back to Athens. From his grave."

"So you're five hundred years old, too?" He nodded, and I clenched my fist around my lukewarm beer. "Why have you stayed with him all this time?"

"No other place for me."

"But you're just as strong as he is." I gave him the once-over. "You're not bad-looking, for the strong, silent tank type. Women love French accents. You could go anywhere, do anything, be anything that you wanted."

"I not say it right. Cyprien is master, but he is also . . . ma seulement famille." He covered my cool hand with his. "Comprenez-vous?"

Unfortunately, I did, and I tugged my hand away. "I didn't ask for this, Phillippe. My human life was fine, more than fine."

"Not so fine to be alone, no purpose. Marcel, the boy, Thierry - they need you for now." He hesitated for a moment before adding, "Cyprien need you for always, I think."

I made a disgusted sound and took a swig of the beer. I'd been able to tolerate small amounts of liquid before, but after a second I realized it wasn't going to stay down. Courtesy of Cyprien's bloody damn kiss, I'd bet. "Your boss should get some therapy."

"You are docteur." He shrugged, like that was all it would take.

Which reminded me - no matter how much I wanted to turn my back on it, forget about it, I was a doctor. And I had patients waiting for me. "Excuse me, I have to go throw up now."

Phillipe waited at the table while I went to the ladies and regurgitated the beer. Then I washed my face and stared at myself in the mirror - another myth, I could see myself just fine. There was a window above the sinks; I could climb up and out of it easily. Cyprien wouldn't chase me; it wasn't his style. He was a seducer, not a hunter.

Come to me, Vanessa.

I walked out of the ladies' room, and nearly bumped into the Jim Beam guzzler.

"Git out my way, ya twit." He gave me a hard shove to the side.

Not the wisest choice of action, given my mood. I grabbed a handful of his flannel shirt and used it to push him back into the mens'room. As his face turned dark purple, I kicked the door shut behind me. "You sure like knocking women around, don't you?"

He knotted a fist. "I'll knock you on your silly ass."

"You'll find" -I took his right forearm, and broke it- "it's a little harder" -I did the same to his left- "to do that, when you're in traction." As he shrieked and doubled over, I jerked him upright, then drove my foot into one knee, then the other, shattering both.

"You crazy! What you done to me!"

"This is called payback, asshole. I'll be checking on you, so be nice to your wife from now on." I let him fall to the floor and bent down. "Because if I see so much as a fingerprint on her, I'll hunt you down and break your neck. See how you like being helpless for the rest of your life."

I left him writhing on the floor and went back to Phillippe, who was standing and staring like everyone else at the men's room.

"Okay," I said, and took his arm. "We can go back now."

* * *

My disappearing act had one immediate benefit; Cyprien stayed clear of me. I split my days between Denys and Thierry, performing the operations to repair the boy's crushed hands in the morning and working on Thierry's shattered legs in the afternoon. Complicated bone graft procedures kept me totally preoccupied, and I ran poor Debra between both patients until she was staggering with exhaustion. I requested a second, backup nurse to spell her, and the next day Phillippe brought down a young black woman with the same dreamy expression in her eyes.

Marcel and his aunt hovered outside the separate operating rooms, both anxious to hear whatever progress I'd made that day. Denys remained in his catatonic state, but I was pulling more images from his subconscious every time I operated on him.

They weren't fun. He repeatedly dreamed of a lovely young brunette - his mother, I assumed - and his father Thierry, both being slowly tortured. Whatever else was in his head stayed out of the memories, but I could still feel it, skirting along the edges of his mind.

He had felt horrified at seeing his parents tortured, but that wasn't what had sent him into this vegetative state. It was the thing in the shadows, and if I didn't find out what it was, there was little hope of ever bringing him back.

When I finished repairing Denys's injuries, I went to work on Marcel. By then he was so enthusiastic he practically jumped on the operating table. I was able to correct his deformed foot with two procedures, and he walked normally for the first time in his life a day after the second one.

He made one trip down the hall and back, then pulled me into his arms and cried all over me. I held on, patted his back, and made some soothing noises. Over his shoulder, I saw Cyprien watching us from a distance. He kept his expression blank but I could tell he didn't like Marcel hugging me.

Tough. I accepted Marcel's watery thanks and gave him a little peck on the cheek for good measure. We're not engaged, Cyprien.

I got a jolt when he replied, the same way. I must speak to you later, Vanessa.

Later came after I finished checking on Thierry, and Cyprien summoned me to his library. I stayed near the door and braced myself for another go-round, but he merely shuffled some files and placed four on the edge of the desk.

"These are for you." He tapped the top folder. "They concern the men who attacked Louisa Lopez. As I promised."

Slowly I went over and picked up the first file. Inside were photographs and an in depth report on a convicted burglar/rapist who currently resided about five blocks from Louisa's old apartment. The others were just as detailed.

"I will them kept under surveillance until you are finished here," Cyprien said. "Then my people can either deliver them to you, or you can go to them."

I picked up the rest and tucked them under my arm. "I thought you'd wait until I was done before giving me these."

He wouldn't look at me, and his thoughts were locked behind some kind of shield. "Consider it a gesture of faith."

I didn't like that. At all. "What do you want now, Cyprien?"

"Nothing but what you agreed to do." He got up and walked out.

I stuck the files in my room and tried to forget about them. Once Marcel was done, I could concentrate on Thierry's lower body exclusively, and began restoring form and function every inch of the way. Finally I got to his feet, which were the biggest challenge I faced.

"I would think this to be the simplest part of it," Liliette commented one afternoon after I'd given her a progress report. "His feet are small compared to his legs."

"They're small, but they're complicated," I told her. "Each foot has twenty-six bones, which together represent one-fourth of all the bones in the body. There are also one hundred and seven ligaments, thirty-three joints, thirty-one tendons and nineteen muscles, too. All of them work together, not just to hold the bones in place but to allow the foot to move and support the body." I put up the xrays of Thierry's feet. "As you can see, the inquisitors wrecked just about all of them, too."

"Mon Dieu." Liliette paled. "How can you hope to fix this?"

"I'm going to build him new ones, from the inside out." The work involved was tedious, nerve-wracking and risky, but the only alternative I had was amputation, and that was strictly last resort. "I'll be honest, I don't know if it will work, madam."

"Do what you can for him."

There was no piecing Thierry's original bones back together, so I set out to sculpt him new ones out of the old bone material. Harvesting the pulverized fragments, I slowly grafted and formed seven thick, short, tarsal bones to give him a new heel and back instep. From there I formed five parallel metatarsal bones to form the front of the instep and serve as a platform for the front and ball of the foot.

As I progressed to the smaller phalanges, I realigned his torn muscles and repaired his shredded ligaments, allowing them to heal in place to connect and hold the new bones. After harvesting grafts from his buttocks and lower abdomen, I recreated the thick layer of fatty tissue under the sole of his foot, which would serve as shock absorbers when Thierry walked, ran, or jumped.

Assuming that he ever would.

When I finished with the right foot, I didn't wait but repeated the entire process on the left. It took another week of eighteen hour days over the operating table. I only left Thierry to transfuse myself or sleep for a few hours, but at last, his feet were whole again.

I left him with my nurses, gave Marcel and his aunt a brief report, then went up to my room.

Cyprien was waiting for me, but I was too tired to chase him out. "What?"

"Phillipe told me you finished with Thierry." He tucked his hands in his pockets. "Do you wish to return to Chicago? I can arrange a flight out tonight."

I stripped off my lab coat. "Jacques-Sebastien is too damn long to yell. What can I call you for short?"

"I liked it when you called me Jack."

"Right. Jack." I started unbuttoning my blouse. "Here's the deal, Jack: I'm tired, I'm grumpy, and I'm in no mood to fly, hunt down rapists or tango with you. So do I have to yell, or will you be a nice guy and leave now?"

"I would like to stay with you tonight."

I rubbed the back of my neck. "No mood to tango includes-"

"Sex, I know." He came over, swept me off my feet and carried me to the bed. "I want to hold you, Vanessa. May I do that, for this night?"

The romantic gesture didn't impress me, but his thoughts did. He was worried - about me leaving, even though he expected me to.

"I'm not going to run out on Thierry. I want to see him and Denys snap out of this, same as you." There was something else, but all I could pick up was Rome and betrayed. "What's the deal with Rome?"

"I will tell you later." He tucked me up against his side, where I fit quite nicely. "I can feel how tired you are. Relax, you are safe with me."

I blinked and yawned. "No biting."

"No biting," he agreed. "Go to sleep, Vanessa."

And that's exactly what I did.

* * *

Since I'd become vrykolakas, I didn't have any dreams, but that night I had a whopper. I was standing over Thierry, grafting bone and snapping out orders to Debra, while everyone stood around watching - Phillippe, Marcel, Éline, even Denys. The only one missing was Cyprien.

We agreed you'd call me Jack.

I said I'd call you Jack when I yelled at you. I tossed my bloody scalpel aside and watched Thierry's leg heal shut. Can't I have a nice dream, like being on a beach surrounded by four nearly-naked lifeguards feeding me Piña Coladas and frozen grapes?

The operating room disappeared, and I found myself stretched out on a lounge chair. It was sitting on a completely deserted white-sand beach. The only thing in the immediate area besides sand and sea was a small table with a frosty white drink sitting on it.

Whoa. Be careful what you wish for, squared.

Motion caught my attention; someone rose from the turquoise water and walked up onto the beach. A very familiar, gorgeous male who was only wearing a brief pair of black swimming trunks.

A very wet and near-naked Jacques-Sebastien sauntered up over the sand to join me and looked around. This is a nice dream. What kind of grapes do you like? White? He produced a handful of picture-perfect green grapes. Concord? The grapes turned a dusky purple.

The edges of the beach were hazy, sort of wavering. I really was dreaming, and he was somehow manipulating the dream. Okay, so where are my four nearly-naked lifeguards?

I told them to go away or I would eat them.

I laughed. Cute.

He knelt beside me. Vanessa, I must tell you something about the Durands. I could not risk doing it outside of a dream; that is why I asked to stay with you tonight.

I stopped grinning. What about the Durands?

I have friends in Rome - human friends who have infiltrated the Vatican. They were the ones who saved me when I was imprisoned, and later alerted me when Thierry and his family were captured. Now they have sent me an urgent message, warning me that the inquisitors are coming here, to Le Petite Jardin. They are coming for the Durands, and for me. They will arrive tomorrow night.

I sat straight up. Then we need to get everyone out of here now.

I cannot take the Durands to another vrykolakas for safe-keeping. Not until I know who has betrayed us.

Betrayed us?

From the information I was given, someone in the Durand family made a deal with the inquisitors. They led them to Thierry's home in Paris in exchange for protection.

But they were all tortured . . . I thought of Liliette, and her dislocated arm. Of all the Durands, she had sustained the least amount of injuries.. Could it have been the old lady? They hardly touched her.

I do not know, but I intend to find out. Will you help me?

The beach scene abruptly faded away, and we were standing together in some kind of dark, featureless place. I couldn't move and I could barely think. Something was hovering at the edges, the same thing I'd felt inside Denys's mind.

Too late, I heard Cyprien think to me. We have been drugged.

* * *

My eyes didn't want to open, but I made them. I was downstairs, strapped to an exam table, and a dark man in a weird robe was looming over me.

"She is awake."

Élaine appeared and smiled down at me. "Doctor, how are you feeling?"

"Like biting off your face." I tested the restraints, which were evidently copper, from the way they were burning into my skin. "So you're the traitor?"

"One of them." She took a syringe and filled it from a vial of blue salt solution. "We need you to sleep a little longer, it is not yet your turn for questioning."

Somewhere to my left, Liliette cried out in agony.

"Where is Cyprien?" I jerked, but they had me clamped down good, and I couldn't break through the cooper. "Where's Denys, and the others?"

"Locked in the floor cell, with Thierry. When they wake up, I'm sure he'll be very happy to do some of our work for us." Élaine jabbed me hard in the arm with the needle and gave me a double dose. "There, that should do it. This zinc sulfate works quite fast, Father Ignacio.. You and your three companions should have no trouble with this one." She gave me a significant look.

The dark man grunted something that sounded like "good."

What was she talking about? Zinc sulfate wouldn't give me so much as a skin rash. As I stared up at her, she lowered her right eyelid in a slow, deliberate wink. At the same time, I felt warmth flooding over me..

From my internal reaction, I guessed she'd stuck me with plasma, dyed blue to look like the real solution.

You're not a traitor.

No. I must free you. Pretend to sleep.

I played along, and let my eyes flutter closed and went limp. I felt her squeeze my arm, and through the touch felt more rapid-fire thoughts streaming from her mind.

All the guards are disabled. Six more inquisitors remain upstairs, searching for evidence. I will lure this one away. Go to Cyprien and free him immediately.

"Let me check her bonds." Élaine 's cool fingers slid down to my left wrist, where she did something to the copper restraint cuff. I felt air on my burning skin. She

went around and under the pretense of checking, released all the others. "She won't slip out of these. You wished to see Cyprien's library, did you not, Father? Let me take you upstairs; his collection is breathtaking, and quite valuable."

I waited until I heard the door at the top of the stair open and close before I turned my head and saw two other men in robes standing over Liliette, who was also strapped to an operating table. I didn't see anyone else in the room, only a couple of still bodies on the floor. One of them looked like Phillippe.

A noise came from the floor cell. It sounded like someone groaning. Thierry, waking up?

My fangs stretched out into my mouth as I slid my arms and legs free, then sat up and eased myself off the table. The other inquisitors were so busy poking at Liliette that they never saw me coming. I smashed their heads together and tossed their unconscious bodies aside.

The old lady's face was all battered and cut up; they'd been using their fists and maybe one of my scalpels on her. I covered her with a sheet of linen.

"They are coming," she whispered, her tired eyes moving in the direction of Thierry's cell. "Please, hurry."

I ran over and released the copper grid. Thierry, Marcel, and Denys lay unconscious in the bottom of the cell, but Cyprien looked up and reached for the edge. I helped him out before I grabbed a pair of scrubs and yanked them on, then went to the biggest body on the floor. It was Phillippe, also beaten and drugged, but still alive.

Something crashed behind me. "Vanessa!"

A heavy weight knocked me over and jumped on top of me. Thierry, his eyes filled with hatred, latched his hands around my throat.

"Anna," he screeched, and shook me like a rag doll. "Where is my Anna!"

"Anna's . . . dead," I wheezed. "I'm a . . . doctor . . . friend . . ." Everything turned a little gray.

Cyprien tackled Thierry and knocked him off me, and I rolled over, coughing and gasping for air. The two men fought like vicious animals, fangs bared, hammering at each other without mercy.

No, Papa! It was not Jacques-Sebastien.

Thierry lifted his head and looked at the floor cell. Denys was holding onto the edge, staring back at him. The boy's eyes moved to a point past his father and me, and widened.

"I knew you would tell." A lovely, dark-haired woman walked down the stairs, followed by a trio of men in dark robes. She smiled at Denys. "You never could keep a secret, you naughty little boy."

Thierry released Cyprien and slowly rose to his feet. "Anna," he said, smiling at her, the craziness leaving his face. "My Anna, not dead."

Anna Durand.

I spotted the tranquilizer guns the inquisitors were holding, and hoped Éleine had mixed up a really big batch of the fake drug, or all of this was going to be for nothing.

"Yes, darling, I'm quite alive. Sorry for the trick I played on you." Anna Durand turned to Cyprien. "Monsieur, you have a lovely home here. I shall very much enjoy living in it."

Cyprien edged away from Thierry. At the same time, Phillipe lifted his head and looked at me.

Somebody had to take this traitorous bitch out, and I'd be more than happy to do it. I picked up the spare, copper-plated blade to my rotary bone saw.

Wait, Vanessa, Liliette thought to me. Let her tell him first. He must hear this, for his own sanity.

"Anna?" Thierry frowned. "We live in Paris."

She made a shushing sound. "Not anymore, my dearest love. You see, they left me no choice." She spread her hands in a helpless way. "The inquisitors caught me two months ago, when we were vacationing in Provence. I had to make a bargain with them. You, Denys, and Liliette in exchange for my life, and my solemn promise to help them hunt down others like us. They're quite pleased with my performance so far."

"I saw you." Thierry scrubbed at his face. "I saw them hurt you."

"That was charade, darling - all part of the torture. I made a mistake, though, by coming to watch work on you after my 'death.' You didn't see me, but the boy did." She gave him a limpid smile. "That's why I had them tear out his tongue. He would have spoiled everything."

Now I understood what had shut down Denys's mind - the knowledge that his mother was still alive, and had faked her own death. Hearing her admit it made the boy jump out and launch himself at his mother, but Phillipe staggered up in time to stop him.

Good thing, too, because she produced a wicked-looking copper dagger.

Thierry staggered forward, then stopped and looked down at his legs. His eyes met mine for a moment. "You did this."

"Yes." I saw Cyprien moving into the shadows to one side of Anna, but he wasn't close enough yet. Plus he was unarmed. I, however, wasn't, and I had the perfect position. "Let me do one more thing for you, Mr. Durand." I curled my arm in, then flung the bone saw blade out like a Frisbee.

At first I thought I'd missed her - Anna only gasped, as if startled. Then a little trickle of blood appeared on her throat, widening as she bowed her head. It would have looked like she was praying, had her head stayed on her neck. Instead, it tumbled to the floor, followed by her body.

Things got a little hairy after that. The inquisitors rushed downstairs, shooting darts at Cyprien and Thierry, who just kept coming. I went to release Liliette and protect her. Denys, Phillipe and Marcel went by me in a blur, following the other men upstairs. There were some distant, human screams.

I concentrated on Liliette, who had lost a great deal of blood. I didn't bother with an IV, but fed her directly from a whole unit bag. Her wounds were already closed, but it took a few minutes for the bruising to fade and the swelling to go down.

She sat up, still trembling, and let me help her dress. Then she took my hands in hers. "You are a brilliant docteur, but tonight you saved more than our lives. Merci, Vanessa."

"You're welcome, madam."

* * *

We stayed downstairs, out of the way, and talked about her life in France. Because of Anna's treachery, Liliette and her family would have to abandon their chateau in Provence, but she didn't seem too concerned about it.

"I have always wanted to live in America. Florida, or California. I hear they are lovely places to reside." She cocked her head to one side. "Jacques-Sebastien will have to leave this place as well."

I tried to imagine Cyprien living anywhere other than New Orleans. And failed. "Probably. I wonder where he'll go."

She patted my hand. "Anywhere you are, I imagine." She glanced at the ceiling. "You should go to him now; they are finished up there." When I offered to stay with her, she waved me off. "I will be fine, my dear. Go to him."

So I went, and ran into Éleine along the way. "Nice work, blondie. Thanks."

"You're welcome. I am leaving Mr. Cyprien's employ, tomorrow," she said, startling me. "He was never mine. I had hoped, but now . . . there is no reason for me to stay."

Admitting that had to hurt. "I'm sorry."

"I am not." She gave me one of her snide smiles. "He has given me more money than I could ever spend in one lifetime. That will be enough for me, Dr. Whitman."

I hoped so. "Take care, Éleine."

Whatever bodies there were had been removed, but the signs of violence were everywhere. Blood pretty much splattered through every room. I heard low voices in the kitchen - Thierry's and Marcel's voices, and caught some of Denys's thoughts. The Durands were angry and sad and happy - and they would survive this, together.

Cyprien was somewhere above me. I followed the feel of him, until I stopped in front of an open door down the hall from my bedroom. From the looks of it, it was his studio.

He was standing at the window, but he wasn't looking down into the garden. He was studying a picture sitting on an easel beside it. The half-finished portrait was a study in black and white and blue - and it looked a lot like me.

"Nice, but my skin is a little more on the caramel side." I joined him, and examined the canvas. "Does my hair look that long and messy? Ick. I should stop by SuperCuts or something."

"You came to say good-bye." He sounded depressed. "I didn't think you would."

"You kicking me out now?"

"I know you must go. Be careful in Chicago. Don't attempt to take on more than one of those men at a time." He glanced at me. "I would go with you, but I must relocate my household."

"I'm not going back to Chicago." I wrinkled my nose at the painting. "Come on, my hips aren't really that wide."

"You are not going back." He said that carefully, like it didn't make sense.

"I'm mailing the files to the Chicago P.D. The detective in charge of Louisa's case will be happy to get them. And, if justice fails, I can catch up with them later." I nudged him with an elbow. "You and me have unfinished business, Jack."

"We do?"

"Yeah. Like the fact that we haven't done anything but sleep together yet." I grinned. "You gotta at least show me how this vamp thing improves my sex life."

A beautiful smile appeared on the face I'd made for him. "I can do that."

"As for moving, how do you feel about Northern California? They have otters, sunsets, private art galleries, mountains, beaches, redwoods, the works." I thought for a moment. "In one place there's twenty-three miles of mansions to choose from. You could do Le Petite Jardin Deux."

The brows went north. "You'd live there with me?"

"I'd set up my lab there. Nothing too fancy, just a private research facility where I can study certain rare blood disorders and maybe help some other people like the Durands." I threaded my fingers through his. "If you can deal with that, you can live with me."

"I can deal with that - later." He lifted my hand to his lips. "Now about this vamp thing . . ."

Untouchable

"We're here, Brenda," Aunt Macy said as the paramedics lowered me out of the back of the unit.

I turned my head, saw "The May-Harris Center" spelled out in flowery letters on a big concrete slab. Seemed like a dinky place for a research hospital, only five stories and hardly any cars parked outside. Lots of bars on all the windows, though, and big steel double doors at the main entrance.

"Looks nice." And secure, which was strange. People in my condition are hard to deal with, not threats to national security.

One of the paramedics jostled my gurney a little too hard, and my aunt went off. "Be careful with her!"

"I'm okay." I'd have some major bruises just from making the trip, but the triple-padded suspension frame around my body buffered most of the worst jolts. "So do I get ice cream for being a good girl and not whining?"

Aunt Macy forced a smile. "Fudge ripple, as soon as I find a microwave."

I knew she was lying - she'd be out of here as soon as she could sign the release forms. It was a shock to see how old she looked in the sunlight. Every wrinkle on her careworn face seemed to be running together, like cracks in a vase getting ready to collapse.

Too many years of taking care of me had done that.

Ever since she'd told me about May-Harris, I wondered what Macy would do while I was gone. My aunt was such a virtuous, decent, self-sacrificing woman that I was pretty sure that God was afraid of her. Still, for the first time in almost thirty years, she wouldn't have to get up every three hours to check me, turn me, inject me, feed me, or do any of the other ten thousand tasks involved in my daily care.

I tried to imagine her smoking pot or drinking Tequila or entertaining a large, hairy lover, but she'd probably just sleep in late, watch soap operas and order in Chinese. So maybe she'd break out the champagne to go with her pork lo mien. She was certainly entitled.

"Almost there, honey." She paced the gurney up the handicapped ramp and into the building, and stood guard as the medics turned in my paperwork to a middle-aged nurse at the front desk. "I sent your computer on ahead for them to set up in your room. You remember to IM me if you need anything, anything at all."

She was acting really guilty - maybe she intended to leave me here permanently. It wasn't like we were actually related; Macy's sister and her husband had adopted me as an infant, before I'd displayed any serious symptoms. When I'd gotten really bad, they'd dumped me on Macy, who had been a nurse, and had never come back for me. The thought of living out the rest of my life in a hospital scared me - these people didn't know me from Adam - but I'd understand if Macy left me here.

And if she abandons you, you've still got Chris.

"Welcome to the May-Harris Center, Ms. Sheehan." The middle-aged nurse appeared over the halo that supported my head. "We've heard so much about you."

"Poor thing. Better get her right to her room." One of the paramedics reached out toward my face - the only part of me exposed by the frame - and brushed my cheek with his fingertips.

Pain exploded all over my face.

"Are you crazy!" Macy grabbed the guy's wrist and wrenched his hand away. "I told you, don't touch her! Don't ever touch her!" She shoved him aside. "Hold on, Brenda, I brought a syringe with me. Just one sec, honey."

It had taken two years for my body to heal around the special shunts that doctors had installed in my right arm, nasal passage and abdomen, but it came in handy when I needed morphine, feeding or siphoning. As my aunt medicated me, a doctor arrived, and filled in the stunned medics.

"Ms. Sheehan has type eight Ehlers-Danlos syndrome. Any contact with her body causes wounds, bruising, and spontaneous hemorrhaging of her skin, muscles, arteries, and organs." He made a hmphing sound. "Didn't anyone brief you before the transport?"

I felt the rush of the morphine and began breathing through the accompanying nausea. Chris had taught me to do that - he'd read about the technique in an article about pain management. From the feel of the rupture on my cheek, it wasn't too bad this time. If I was lucky, it might heal in a few weeks.

"It also hurts her," my aunt snapped at him. "Make them understand how it *hurts* her."

"Yes, well, the patient's condition is complicated by severe polyneuritis." The doctor cleared his throat. "Any injury also causes her intense pain."

Macy snorted. "What you did was like stabbing her in the face."

The young man gave me an appalled look. "How are you going to treat a patient you can't touch?"

"Very carefully," I said through the haze, then sank into a drugged sleep.

* * *

The accidental touch turned out to be a good thing. I didn't feel anything when they transferred me to my room and removed the suspension frame from my body. Because of my condition, I couldn't lounge around on a bed like a normal patient - I got bedsores the size of Nebraska - and Aunt Macy had mostly kept me in a specially padded upright support unit she'd gotten from a burn hospital.

May-Harris handled things differently, I discovered when I woke up in a chest-high transparent tank of what looked and felt like chilly blue Jell-O. It felt a bit thicker than the famous gelatin, and held me suspended without any part of my body touching the sides or bottom of the tank.

This was new. And kind of pretty.

A bunch of people in lab coats came into the room.

"Our latest admission," the one who seemed in charge told the rest of the group. "As with most of our candidates, the skin is very thin and translucent, with the veins clearly visible." He absently rubbed a hand over the back of his bald scalp. "She displays the classic facial characteristics as well - note the large eyes, thin nose, lobeless ears, short stature and scant body hair. Subcutaneous tissue, particularly in the face and extremities, is usually negligible. Good afternoon, Ms. Sheehan."

"Hey." Being naked didn't embarrass me - I'd never been able to wear clothes in my life - but Bald Guy might have introduced me before my symptoms.. I did a Queen Elizabeth wave from the wrist. "I'm Brenda."

"Remember that even minor surface contact will result in extensive bruising, and arterial/intestinal/uterine fragility or rupture are frequent. If they survive childhood, most adult patients exhibit spontaneous arterial ruptures, which is the most common cause of sudden death. Barring arterial complications and other adverse reacts to the immediate environment, life expectancy is still only thirty to forty years. Ms. Sheehan is" - he consulted a chart - "twenty-nine years of age, so we shall be monitoring her closely."

"What's with this tank and the blue stuff?" I asked when he paused for breath.

"The suspension material is a prototype, antibacterial gel, originally designed for short-term treatment of patients with auto-immune deficiencies and third degree burns." He nodded to one of the lab coats, who started fiddling with my monitors, then added, "We're hoping it will help prevent injuries and allow you a degree of comfort during the testing phase of your stay here at May-Harris."

Comfort. Ha. Not a word in my vocabulary. "When you're through, could someone bring a table over here and plug in my computer for me?"

"Of course." Bald Guy took my chart and flipped through it. "Ms. Sheehan has a voice-operated computer, which we've allowed her to bring to the facility. She uses it to play audio e-books."

"When I'm not checking out the porn sites or having cyber-sex orgies," I said. No one cracked a smile. *Ouch, sense of humor all around, stat.* "So when do the tests start?"

"We'll begin in the morning." Bald Guy took my vitals by punching some buttons on the outside of the tank while he lectured a bit more. About the time I was ready to nod off, he wheeled my computer over on a table, plugged it in, then led the group out, still talking.

"Nice meeting everyone." Not that I'd actually gotten any names, but it was hard to compete with the mesmerizing glamour of my bod. I waited until the door closed before I started up the computer. "Hiya, Pierce.."

The screen blipped, then coalesced into an image of Pierce Brosnan's face. "Hello, Wren. It's Wednesday, November 20th, and the time is 3:43 pm." His accent made everything he said sound like Shakespeare. "What would you like to do?"

After all the hoopla I needed a little reassurance. "Message Chris, please."

The screen for my internet provider popped up while the system software dialed up my access number. My IM window opened, and showed that Chris was not online.

"I'm sorry, Wren, Chris is not available."

He was probably still at work. "Open new e-mail to Chris, please."

"New mail open."

"Subject line: **Guess who's swimming in blue Jell-O.** Message text: **Hi Chris, I'm at the hospital, they stuck me in a tank like a lobster, testing starts tomorrow. Enough whining about that. I'd rather find out what you thought of Pride and Prejudice. Best, Wren.** End message text, send e-mail."

"Your message has been sent," Pierce said. "You have one new message, shall I read it to you?"

"Like I'm going anywhere," I muttered. "Yes, read mail."

"New message from BritReader, received November 20th at 7:30 am, subject: **Off Running About Again, Are You?** Message text: **By now you're in your new accommodations, so I hope this finds you intact and resting. Don't flirt with any handsome doctors, you know you're all talk. Have finished P & P, lovely novel, although not quite enough car crashes and sex for my taste.**

I'll message you later; we can discuss your appalling obsession with alpha males. Yours, Chris. End of message."

"Save message to filing cabinet." I saved all of his e-mails, even the little ones. Sometimes reading them was better than a double shot of morphine. "Close e-mail, open instant message screen. Enable voice option." That way, when he messaged me, I'd hear it. "Open Audio E-Book Program, open file Structures, Medieval, page 68, begin." I might as well get in some reading myself before someone came to administer my dinner.

The stalwart castle with its pointed turrets and gap-toothed machicoulises surrounded by a dark moat as seen in movies and DisneyWorld's infamous entranceway edifice actually represents a later stage of development . . . 1

A nurse showed up promptly at five p.m. with a feeding tray. "Are we feeling hungry?" She began prepping the tube to stick into my esophageal shunt.

"Oh, yeah." I didn't see anything that resembled melted fudge ripple ice cream, and sighed. "Starved."

* * *

Wren.

"Hey, Chris." I stopped counting the cracks in the linoleum and smiled at the computer. "Working late again tonight?"

Downtown traffic was a bit of a challenge. Bloody lorry collided with a bus, no one seriously hurt but thirty people wandering about the road. You haven't been waiting up for me, I hope?

Of course I'd been waiting up for him. Didn't help that the damn nurse had misfed my tube and lacerated my throat. From the feel of it, I'd be spitting up blood all night.

"Nah. Just hanging around, waiting for the doctor on graveyard rounds. He's young, rich, and single; I'm naked in a tub of Jell-O. How can he resist me?"

Gold digger.

"You know me so well."

Seriously, love, how is it there?

"It's nice. I have my own room with a breathtaking view." Of a dumpster and two maintenance trucks. "They gave me filet mignon and baby asparagus for dinner."

I had to swallow a little blood, and made a face. "Tomorrow I think I'll try out the tennis courts and the Olympic pool." I'd go through testing, get all kinds of new and interesting wounds, and maybe enjoy the excitement of a spontaneous hemorrhage, or an embolism, or blow out another artery . . .

I'm so sorry, Wren.

"No, really, it's okay. I'll be fine." I didn't like complaining about my situation; Chris and I talked about it enough already. "So you think Jane Austen could have used a little more action in P & P?"

Darcy certainly could have shot Mrs. Bennet while he was out hunting with Bingley. So sorry, terrible accident, thought her hat was a pigeon, that sort of thing. Would have cleared the way for him to pursue Elizabeth much earlier in the novel, and removing Vulgar Mama would also have eliminated most of his inner conflict about proposing to her.

I laughed. "You're a sick boy, Chris."

So speaks the girl lolling about in colored gelatin.

We chatted a little more, then I made an excuse to get offline. From the amount of blood I was producing, I was pretty sure I'd need a transfusion before midnight. Before I signed off, I asked him, "Will you be around this weekend? I'd like to get your take on Medieval Structures."

Oh, dear. I was rather hoping you'd develop a sudden fondness for Stephen King novels.

He was such a genre-junkie. "You'll never improve your mind reading about abused telekinetics destroying high school proms, pal."

I won't tell anyone if you won't. Sweet dreams, Wren.

"Night, Chris." I waited until he signed off before I told Pierce to shut himself down and turned my head toward the room monitor. "Hello? Anybody with a medical degree out there?"

A female voice answered at once. "Yes, Ms. Sheehan?"

I spat over the side of the tank. "Could you bring me a unit of whole blood and a doctor, please?"

* * *

"I heard you had some excitement here last night," Bald Guy said as he came in on morning rounds.

"Yep." No interns with him this time. "Uncontrolled bleeding being such a big thrill and all. I didn't catch your name yesterday, doc."

"George Harris." He gestured around. "My father built this facility with Dr. May."

"That's nice for job security." Bet his Dad was a laugh a minute, too. "So will more bleeding be on today's agenda, or do you figure I need a little rest between exsanguinations?"

"I'm sorry, Ms. Sheehan." No, he wasn't - he was annoyed. Probably wanted me to be Tragic but Stoic Patient, not Snappy and Smartass Patient. "I'll make sure the nurses clearly understand the correct procedures when handling your feeding tube."

"My throat and I would appreciate it." I tried to see what was on the top page of the chart he was holding, but he angled it toward his chest. "What's up first on the schedule?"

"We're going to do some immersion testing this morning."

Uh-oh. "You do know that I don't sweat and I don't get dirty, so I don't have to bathe." Even sterile water always felt weird on my skin, and I shuddered at the distant memories. "Also, putting me in anything doused with chlorine would be like you taking a dip in hydrochloric acid."

"We've arranged to use chemical-free water for the tests." George scribbled something down. "Can you swim, Ms. Sheehan?"

Man, he just wasn't going to listen to me. "No, but after all the bouts I've had with pneumonia, drowning shouldn't be too difficult."

"That is unfortunate." His lips thinned. "Most of you have a natural instinct for it."

"Most of who?"

"Our other patients." He thought for a minute. "I'm afraid I can't have an orderly go into the tank with you, that would . . . alter the test results."

"A swimming buddy would have to hold on to me anyway," I reminded him. "Remember, touching me, not a good thing."

"Perhaps we can arrange some sort of padded flotation device." He made a dismissive gesture, as if the prospect of me drowning was a minor detail. "You

needn't worry, Ms. Sheehan, we understand the hazards involved with your condition and will make every effort to prevent further injuries." Before I could say another word, his beeper went off and he strode out of the room.

Who does that bloody bastard think he is?

If I could have jumped out of my skin, I would have. "Chris? That you?"

Yes, it is. Sorry, love, didn't mean to frighten you. You left your mike on. I couldn't resist eavesdropping.

"Now I'm really glad I didn't pretend to be Cindy Crawford or Jennifer Anniston when we met."

Cindy has enormous thighs, and Jennifer appalling taste in men. I'd have ignored you completely. Have you asked why they're conducting these tests on you?

"No." I never asked doctors much of anything, because what answers they had came in words with too many syllables. "They promised my aunt they'd try to find a treatment."

By immersing you in water?

"Maybe they're measuring things like weight and body fat ratio."

Wren, you haven't any body fat.

Yep, Chris knew way too much about my disease. I glanced down at my frail, emaciated body. "I have extremely chubby toes. Donald Duck looks like a Chinese woman next to me."

You know what Elizabeth does when she receives news of Lydia's elopement with Wickham? You should do the same.

Why was he talking in book code? We did it sometimes for fun, but it seemed a little strange now. "I think Mrs. Bennet's poor nerves need a rest."

Then perhaps I should follow Darcy's example.

Instant panic. "Gotta go. Talk to you later. Message off."

God, I was such a wimp.

Chris and I had met in a book lover's chat room a year ago, during a discussion debating the delicate restraint displayed in Jane Austen's "Sense and Sensibility"

to the modern need for instant gratification. Chris and I had been the only people in the room who had thought Eleanor should have gotten a little satisfaction and pushed Fannie down the staircase at Norland on day one.

Or perhaps Mrs. Dashwood could have poisoned her tea, then blamed it on John, Chris wrote, outraging half the purists in the room. **No one who knew Fannie would have turned him in. I dare say they'd have thrown a party celebrating his liberation from that harpy.**

We'd both gotten silly from there, and eventually had been booted from the chat. At the time, I'd identified myself by my e-mail handle "Wren." It only made sense - you never knew who you were talking to on the internet, and if anyone ever came after me, it wasn't like I could fight them off.

Chris and I exchanged e-mail addresses, and started corresponding about books. When he offered to send me a first edition "Emma" that he'd picked up for a song, I'd finally told him about my condition. I wasn't worried about him dropping by to see me; there was an ocean between us, and his job seemed to keep him busy most of the time. But just to be sure, I kept my location and real name secret, and kept a firewall so he couldn't perform a trace. I'd never met anyone who liked me just for my mind. Everyone who met me saw only my condition, and never bothered to get to know what was inside the lousy package.

Perhaps I should follow Darcy's example.

I never wanted Chris to do that - to come to me, to see what I was. Having him pity me just like everyone else would break my heart.

By the time my minor anxiety attack had mostly evaporated, a nurse and two guys in whites came into my room. The men were pushing a large and weird-looking machine between them. It had a square body, long adjustable hinged arms, and two wide, flat blades at the bottom.

And no padding, anywhere. "That looks very uncomfortable."

"This is a transport lift, we'll be using it to move your tank." The nurse directed the orderlies, who positioned the machine and switched it on. Hydraulics whined as the blades pushed under the bottom and the arms clamped around the sides of the tank. Metal groaned, then me and the tank were moving toward the door, blue gel jiggling all around me.

I hadn't yet seen the ward, so I inspected everything as they pushed me down the corridor. All the other patients' room doors were closed, and it was very quiet - the faint squeal of the lift's wheels seemed the shriek in the stillness. We passed what appeared to be the nurse's station, with a wall of monitors, but it didn't look like the ones I'd seen on ER. Fifteen computer monitors were set up

around the L-shaped desk, and each workstation was manned by a man or woman in a lab coat.

Maybe this is a teaching ward. "Morning," I called out as I passed them. "You guys get HBO? I missed the last episode of Sex and the City."

A few looked up with startled expressions. One gave me the same look Aunt Macy did when I missed the port-a-potty. People, I decided, really needed to lighten up around here. It wasn't like they were deciding the future of mankind or anything.

The orderlies pushed my tank out through a wide pair of auto-open doors, down another corridor, and into a much bigger open area filled with more computers and funny-looking equipment. One looked like an old-fashioned camera that had been welded between what looked like an x-ray machine, part of a car engine and a shrouded box with plastic gloves built-in.

What commanded the most attention was the six-foot tall octagonal glass room, built right in the center of the room around a recessed, round pool of light blue water. Wisps of steam chased each other around the glass-smooth surface, and the outside of the glass walls were misty with condensation.

If that was as hot as it looked, I'd be poached in ten seconds.

George Harris came over, along with a woman with thick black hair and eyes made little and beady by her thick eyeglasses. Her thick brows met and merged over her nose, forming one long black line. "Ms. Sheehan, this is Dr. Rachel Katzenberg. She'll be conducting all your tests."

"Hiya." I nodded toward the pool. "How hot is that?"

"Not hot at all." George exchanged a look with Dr. Solo Brow. "In fact, you might find it a bit cool."

I'd better, or someone was going to be scooping bits of boiled Brenda out with a net. "Nice how well it matches my Jell-O."

"The color comes from a special type of radiopaque dye, Ms. Sheehan," Rachel told me. She had a deep, accented voice that reminded me a little of Natasha from Rocky and Bullwinkle. Two interns in white coats flanked her, and hung on her every word like groupies. "It will help us map a schematic of your specific dermal issues."

"Okay." No, it wasn't. "But I can't swim."

"Dr. Harris informed me of that." She gestured to an orderly, who brought over a heavily padded harness. "We'll use this to lower you into the tank."

"Getting me into that harness is the problem. By the time I'm strapped in, I'll be hamburger in a dozen places." I studied the pool for a minute. "Have you got more of this gel stuff?"

She pushed her glasses higher with the tip of one finger. "Why?"

"You could tip over my tank and pour me in. If I start to sink, you can throw me something to hold onto." And my hands would be totally wrecked, but the rest of me would be okay, which was better than the alternative..

"Very well." Rachel motioned to the orderlies. "Move the containment unit into position. "Put on your masks and gloves."

Containment unit. Like I was something dangerous. And the masks and gloves the two men pulled on were pretty heavy-duty. "Do I smell that bad?"

The doctor was already flipping through a chart. "Our precautions are to prevent the spread of infection. Please close your eyes before you enter the water."

The orderlies maneuvered me into the glass chamber, over to the edge of the pool, then slowly eased over my tank. Me and a little of gel plopped over into the water, which wasn't warm, but *cold*.

I remembered to hold my breath and not open my eyes until I surfaced. Then I started moving my arms and legs slowly, hoping that would keep me floating. The water wasn't just chilly, it felt weird - not that I could say exactly why - but at least I wasn't sinking. My body for once adjusted quickly to the temperature and it even started to feel pretty nice.

Solo Brow walked over and pressed a button on the panel by the door. "How do you feel, Ms. Sheehan?"

"Like ordering a Piña Colada." I turned my head to see the men exit and flank Rachel, who was scribbling something on her clipboard. The glass walls were apparently sound-proof, as there was an intercom speaker near the floor. Then something floated by my face, and I frowned. It was some lumps of the blue gel, which had turned into little blue rocks.. "I don't think the Jell-O likes it much, though. Why don't you jump in, doc? The water's great."

One of the orderlies smothered a laugh.

"Thank you, but we must begin testing." Her voice sounded tinny and pissed over the little speaker, but her thin lips crimped at the edges. "Please, enjoy your swim."

Whatever tests Dr. Katzenberg performed didn't require me to do anything, so I floated and paddled around and otherwise stared up at the ceiling. They had also turned off the intercom, so I couldn't hear what anyone was saying,

I managed to paddle my way from one side of the tank to the other without stopping, then lifted my arms over my head. "Brenda Sheehan wins the gold for America. And the crowd goes wild."

I checked out the crowd - there were three lab coats watching me through the glass wall. They're weren't exactly going wild, but they seemed surprised about something. Maybe it was seeing an EDS patient do the breast stroke - if that was what I was doing - or the way I was turning all blue from the dye.

"I'll sign autographs in my room after the press conference," I told them, then giggled when they started scribbling more stuff in their little note books. "As long as you guys hold the pens."

After a long time, Dr. Katzenberg told me I'd have to get out, which I hadn't given much thought to. It was one thing to be poured into the water, quite another to be lifted out of it. On the other hand, I was probably turning into a big blueberry-colored prune.

"How are we going to do this?" I eyed my tank, which had been removed from the chamber.

"Walk up the steps and stand on the deck," she told me, pointing to the little semi-circular stairs at one end.

Hadn't she bothered to read my files? This was a hospital; you'd think they would at least skim them. "I don't know how to walk. I've never been able to."

"You didn't know how to swim this morning, either."

Couldn't argue with that. I swam over to the steps, took a deep breath, then placed my right foot on the first one. Any kind of pressure against my body instantly caused outrageous pain, but for some reason, nothing happened.

"It doesn't hurt," I muttered, swaying a little. Excitement made me get all hot and flustered, but the water seemed to be supporting me, so I took another step. "Shit, doc, it *doesn't hurt!*" My skin was doing something weird, though. The water wasn't dripping off, it was hardening - all over me. "Uh-oh, new problem."

"It's the gel reacting with the dye, Ms. Sheehan." Rachel made a quick gesture, and two orderlies in the heavy-duty masks and gloves came in and flanked me. "Step out of the tank, please."

I got nearly to the top before huge knotting cramps hit my legs and I started to fall over. The orderlies grabbed me so hard I screamed in anticipation of the pain. No reason for me to scream this time, though. No blood. No torn flesh.

No pain.

Pain just didn't going away. Not after being a daily perk for the last twenty-nine years. Not feeling it shook me up so much I practically tripped over my own jaw.

"What's happening to me?" I looked from one orderly to the other as they guided me out through the glass door. "What was in that water?"

The air outside the chamber was stuffy and hot, and something knotted inside me. Suddenly I couldn't catch my breath, and the hardened gel on my skin started to melt and run off me. Now I felt pain, dim and distant but getting worse, right where the mens' gloves were touching my arms.

"Easy now, Ms. Sheehan." Rachel stuck a needle in my shunt and depressed the plunger. "This will help."

"I'm so hot," I panted the words. "Why am I so hot?"

The pain hit me on the inside then, so hard that I doubled over, unable to breathe.

Everything went from bizarre to black.

* * *

Brenda.

I opened my eyes, found myself back in the tank of Jell-O, in my room.

Brenda, if you're there, please answer me.

I started to say something, but my eyes widened as I saw my computer screen flicker on to display an error screen. My anti-virus software had been breached, and he was inside my system.

"Who the hell are you?"

It's Chris.

I couldn't say anything. Chris didn't know my real name. Chris wouldn't hack me. Not possible.

You're angry.

"You're a genius." I glanced down to see what kind of damage Rachel and her boys had inflicted on me. There were no visible wounds, but I felt feverish. "Go away now."

Darcy never abandoned Elizabeth. Did you like his solution to Lydia's elopement?

I'd trusted him, and he'd hacked into my system. Now he had access to everything about me. "Darcy paid off a gigolo. He didn't lie to Elizabeth."

He didn't want her to suffer as a result of Lydia's mistake. Darcy loved Elizabeth. He would have killed anyone who tried to hurt her.

"Message off."

And when the time was right, Darcy went and got Elizabeth, didn't he?

"Message off!" Why wasn't Pierce picking up my commands? "Computer off!"

It only took Darcy a few hours to reach her. Nothing can keep a man away from the woman he loves and wants to protect, especially when she's in danger.

What was he talking about? Elizabeth hadn't been in any danger - and why was I trying to figure out his stupid book code?

"Damn it." He had my computer under some kind of remote control. I turned my head. "Nurse, I need some help in here!"

Elizabeth trusted Darcy because he proved himself to her, but only after she discovered his activities. It's good to check in with relatives.

The nurse came in. "Yes, Ms. Sheehan? Is something wrong?"

I glared at the computer, and almost asked her to pull the plugs. Then I noticed the phone had been removed from my nightstand. "Could you bring my phone back in here? I'd like to call home, please."

The young woman looked at the floor. "I'm sorry, Ms. Sheehan, but Dr. Katzenberg left orders for you not be disturbed."

"But I'm disturbed now." I smiled to cover the sinking feeling in my belly. "I just want to say goodnight to my aunt. It's not like I'm a prisoner or anything."

"You can ask the doctor about reinstating your phone privileges when he comes by on morning rounds." She eyed my computer, then slipped out.

Elizabeth couldn't do anything about Lydia by herself.

I waited until the door was shut. "Okay, so let's say she couldn't contact her relatives. She wouldn't know what Darcy was really like, so she still wouldn't trust him."

She knew Darcy loved her, and that he was an honorable man.

"So she'd just sit there and let him come and rescue her?" I laughed. "No way. Darcy had no idea how bad her situation was. Even if he could convince the Bennets to let him get near Elizabeth, taking her away from Longborne might have killed her."

Darcy knew what to do, and had the power to do it. All Elizabeth had to do was trust him.

I was debating how to respond to that when the door opened again, and George came in with the same nurse. "Hello, Dr. Harris. Since your Dad built this place, maybe you can approve a phone call for me?"

"Not tonight, Ms. Sheehan." He went over and yanked the modem line out of the wall jack while the nurse grabbed my laptop and closed it.

"Wait a minute." The phone was one thing, but Pierce was mine. "You can't take that."

"You have six hours of testing tomorrow, and you must rest. It's for your own good." George paused at the door, lifted his head and nodded at something, then marched out.

I looked up and for the first time saw what they'd put in the corner where the wall and ceiling met. A security camera, focused on me.

* * *

With all that had happened, sleep seemed unattainable, but a nurse came in near dawn, injected me with something she refused to identify, and I finally nodded off. Thin dreams filtered in and out of my head, filling my mind with strange colors and smells. As soon as I felt I'd recognize something, it shifted into

another form. The one constant was the fact that I was swimming in blue gel they'd stuck me in, only now it was over my head, and I was swallowing it.

I woke up in the test tank, my body slowly floating across the surface. Just like the first time, it felt so good that I instantly relaxed. The only thing that hurt was my right hip, and when I looked down, I saw a new, deep open laceration. What had done that, and how had I gotten here without waking up? Why would they put me in the water with such a wound, and while I was unconscious?

"I thought I saw a blip on the monitor," I heard someone say over the intercom. Rachel Katzenberg, and from the sound of her footsteps, she was pacing. "Check and see if she's awake."

I closed my eyes and kept my breathing regular.

"No." That was George Harris. "I told you the sedative would keep her unconscious until this afternoon."

"She's metabolizing the drugs already. We can't risk moving her out of the tank again." The sound of Rachel's heels hitting the floor stopped. "The tissue sample is in place. Flood the DCA cell and initiate the compression sequence."

Machines started to make noise, and I risked opening my eyes to slits and turning my head. Through the glass, I could see everyone gathered around the funny-looking camera/thing or staring at some of the monitors on the wall. The screens were filled with graphs and scrolling data. Only one had a picture, and it looked very odd - a little blob of something in a dark square, and the square was slowly shrinking in on it.

"Pressure now at fifty gigapascals," one of the men at the screens announced.

Everyone stepped away from the camera/thing and put on little dark-lensed swimmer's goggles.

"Maintain pressure, begin laser application," Rachel said. "Target temperature is three thousand Kelvin."

Part of the camera/thing equipment hummed, then a bright red beam came out of one part of the machine and hit the camera. Things started to glow red too, and it hurt my eyes, so I squeezed them shut.

"Reading two thousand Kelvin," the man at the monitor said. He began counting up by one hundreds until he finished with, "Target temperature reached, three thousand degrees Kelvin."

"Shut down laser, begin depressurization." The doc sounded excited, and I looked through my lashes to see her trot over to the monitors. "Sample status?"

"Remnant hydrocarbon showing black diamond flecks. Spectroscopy indicates sample conversion is complete." The man took in a quick breath. "Weight remains unchanged at eighty-four grams."

"As I predicted." Rachel had a really annoying laugh - the high-pitched, snorty kind. "We'll harvest nearly five hundred carats from one sample. Korloff will be so disappointed."

"His best black is only eighty-eight," the guy told her. "Three more samples, and we can enlarge the chamber surfaces a thousand percent."

Someone turned and stared at me. "Doctor, the subject."

Which would be me, so much for my possum act. I lifted my head and watched as the doc strolled over and stopped by the wall nearest to me. She reached for the intercom button, stopped, then regarded me. "You've been listening in."

"Yes." I would have said something more clever, but her monobrow was doing the watusi about her beady little eyes, and the combo seriously scared me. *I could sure use an insanely rich, infatuated Englishman right about now.* "I'd like to go home."

"That would take a very long time." She put on a mask and stepped into the chamber. "Even if you could survive the journey, present conditions would kill you a few seconds after you arrived."

"My aunt will be upset, but she'll get over it." I swam over to the steps, but Rachel motioned for someone and a new guy stepped into the chamber. He had the standard issue mask, gloves, and some kind of big, ugly gun. I paused on the second step. "You can't be serious."

The guy pointed the business end at my head. "Get back in the tank."

He was afraid of me. Me, Spontaneous Bleeding Girl. "I'm not staying in here."

He reached out to shove me back, and I sidestepped to avoid the contact. That made him lose his balance, and he screamed as he fell into the tank.

The water he splashed out of the pool hit the deck as solid blue pellets of ice. A few seconds later, the man bobbed to the surface, silent and stiff as a mannequin. I grabbed his arm, but it wouldn't move.

"Help me!" I shouted.

"Don't bother," Rachel told me as I tried to pull him to the side. "The temperature of liquid methane is one hundred degrees Kelvin - that's minus two hundred eighty degrees Fahrenheit. He's frozen to death."

I looked down at the liquid, which wasn't turning me into an ice cube. "Huh?"

She didn't answer me. Other guys came in with long hooks and fished the body out of the pool. I lifted my hand from the water, and put it right in front of my eyes. The water solidified on my skin, then seemed to melt into it.

Not water. Liquid methane.

I nearly fell over, steadied myself and sat on the steps. I tried to come up with an explanation. And failed.

Solo Brow came over to the side of the pool, and crouched down. "You're shocked and upset. I understand."

"I just killed that man." I watched them carry out the dead frozen guy. "And you *understand* how I feel."

She took off her glasses and polished them with a pretty little hankie. "We always assumed that the oxygen in our atmosphere would poison you, but the nitrogen content evidently keeps you alive. It's the lower gravity and lack of methane that creates the connective tissue disorders. You wouldn't have this problem on Titan."

"Titan." That finally got my attention. "On Titan where?"

"Titan is Jupiter's largest moon. It's where we found your species."

Oh, boy. I stared at her for a full thirty seconds. "And Fearless Leader sent you there to, what? Find moose and squirrel?" I burst out laughing.

"You were born on the wrong planet, Ms. Sheehan." She replaced her glasses and pocketed the hankie. "Your ancestors were designed to function normally in a methane-nitrogen atmosphere, at very cold temperatures, in utter darkness. Earth's proximity to the sun and lower gravity, not EDS, is what has created your condition. You can't go back to Titan, naturally, the surface conditions would kill you."

Well, we definitely weren't on the same planet now. "Gee, when I was training with Yoda, he didn't mention any of that. Wonder why."

"Even with your physical problems, it's taken us thirty years to find you, and the other children like you." She smiled, showing me her little white teeth and great big gums. "Now we'll take care of you."

I touched the wound on my hip, and eyed the funny-looking machine. She was lying, and I was in trouble. "You put a piece of me in that thing, didn't you?"

"Tell her the rest of it." The new voice was male, ice-cold, and crackled with contempt.

I looked over to see a man in an electric wheelchair escorted by a lot of other heavily armed men in camouflage uniforms come toward the chamber. A pair of them walked in to hustle Rachel out.

"You are not authorized to be here!" She struggled between the men and their very efficient-looking machine guns. "Security!"

"Security is having a nap." The wheelchair stopped in front of Rachel. "Tell the young lady about your plans for the new pressurization chamber."

More soldiers with guns came in, and herded the other lab coats up against one wall. My gaze was riveted to the man in the chair. He was almost naked, didn't have much hair or weight on him, but his eyes were large and really pretty. Another guy with EDS - and his own platoon, apparently.

He noticed my interest, and gave me a nice smile. "Hello, Wren."

I nearly keeled over for the second time. "Chris?"

"In the flesh. What there is of it." He slowly rose from the wheelchair and shuffled into the chamber, leaving a trail of bloody footprints. "I can't say I enjoyed the trip very much, but then people like us should be homebodies." He came to the edge and jumped into the pool, went under, then surfaced - not frozen. "Ah. Much better."

"How did you get here?" I glanced at his thin limbs. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I traced your modem line. As for telling you, would you have believed me?" He reached for my hands, and I jerked out of reach. "I won't hurt you. Nothing can hurt you in here but them."

This was way too much for me to handle all at once. "You're sick, like me, and you never said a word."

"We're not sick." He swam toward the steps. "If you come with me, I'll tell you why."

* * *

Chris and his well-armed buddies tied up everyone in white, then took me and a bunch of other patients out of the May-Harris center in a weird-looking pods filled with more of the blue antibacterial gel. I was loaded into the back of a huge van next to Chris.

No one seemed to be panicking about this situation but me, but then, everyone else looked sedated. "So you're from this moon near Jupiter? How's the commute to London?"

He grinned at me. "I'm from Sussex, actually. My grandparents - and yours, for that matter - were captured and brought back from Titan. My parents were the ringleaders of the group who escaped and took refuge in the South Pole, where they established the first settlement." He looked down. "You lied to me. Your toes are positively skinny, Miss Elizabeth."

"Very funny, Mr. Darcy." I wasn't sure I'd ever laugh again. "What were they going to do to me in that place?"

His mouth flattened. "What they do to every Titan they apprehend. They were going to dissect you, and use the parts to make large black diamonds."

The whole Jupiter-moon thing was hard enough to swallow, but this? "You can't make people into diamonds - and even if you could, why would you want to?"

"Diamonds made from our flesh are a thousand times harder than crystallized Terran diamonds. They have a very low specific gravity, no cleavage, and the highest thermal conductivity of any mineral known on Earth. Nothing can shatter a black Titan." He lifted his hand out of the gel, and made a fist. A clear liquid oozed out of his pores, like sweat. "The scientific applications alone are worth billions."

I glanced at the soldier sitting on the floor of the truck, guarding us. "While the military has no interest in them at all, or course."

"That depends on the government behind the military. Some have less hostile intentions."

For a moment, I wished I was Elizabeth Bennet, and Chris was Darcy, so we could be something that I understood. "This isn't some kind of joke television thing, then. I'm really not human."

"There are several theories about a founding race, but while we appear human, our bodies aren't water-based, like theirs. When our kind come to the end of our

biolives on Titan, we assume mineral form." He turned his hand around, studying it. "I've tried to imagine what that will be like, but since it won't happen for another five hundred years, it's a bit difficult to picture it."

"We turn into black diamonds when we die." I wanted to make sure I had this right.

"Ah, we don't actually die."

That did it - I closed my eyes. "I think I'll take a nap now."

I slept for a long time - all the way through the trip to the airport, where someone must have sedated me, because I kept sleeping all the way across the Atlantic.

Chris's "someplace safe" turned out to be a huge industrial complex in the heart of London, where there were a lot more armed guys took us into what appeared to be a lab combined with ten Olympic swimming pools. There were more people in the pools than at the lab equipment, but everyone smiled or waved at me as Chris and I were poured out of the pods and into one of the pools.

I didn't smile or wave back. There were so many of them, and they looked exactly like me. Which meant none of them were human, either.

"You needn't worry, Wren. We're all children of the original captives brought back from Titan," Chris said as he swam up to me. "The British government signed a treaty with the polar settlement twenty years ago, and created a number of sanctuaries like this one to study and protect us. We're safe here."

I studied the lab coats, who seemed just as happy as the people in the pools. "They're not into the black diamond thing."

"We're helping them develop the technology they'll need to colonize our homeworld." He nodded to one of the lab coats passing by. "We're not specimens to them, we're partners."

I learned a lot that day, and in the weeks that followed. My parents and I had been captives in an American lab, from which they had escaped soon after I was born. Too weak to care for me, they left me with a sympathetic woman but told her nothing about me, and left the country to find other Titans. When my symptoms grew worse, evidently the woman had taken me at a police station and then disappeared, probably to avoid prosecution for abandoning me.

My parents were still alive, and had been searching for me for years.

"They want to see you very much," Chris told me. "As soon as weather conditions clear, they'll be traveling up from the pole."

Being abandoned had actually protected me, as no one in the foster care system suspected I was anything but a baby with EDS. Not until Aunt Macy had called the May-Harris Center to see if they would accept me had anyone even questioned my condition. Chris became grim as he explained how Harris and Katzenberg had victimized dozens of genuine EDS patients, offering treatment while they were really only looking for more Titans.

The image of the floating, frozen man made my stomach churn. "They don't just drop everyone into a tank of liquid methane, do they?"

"No, that would be difficult to explain to the relatives." He shook his head. "They promise EDS patients treatment and therapy to lure them in. When they test negative as Titans, they simply discharge them."

That wasn't the worst part. If the patient proved to be of Titan descent, then the scientists at May-Harris slowly dissected them alive, and transformed the body parts into black diamonds. Their plan, Chris told me, was specifically to create gradually larger pressurization machines, using the Titan black diamonds to build bigger and better anvil surfaces. Once their machine was large enough, he believed they intended to pressure-reduce an entire person into diamond form.

"They're convinced that we hold the key to human immortality." Chris swam with me through the series of liquid methane canals that led to the chamber I'd been given. "Even with our current alliances, we'll really can't stay here and live normal lives. That's why we've decided to go back."

"To Jupiter? I mean, Titan?" He nodded. "But Solo Brow - I mean, Dr. Katzenberg told me that would kill us."

"This habitat's environment is identical to Titan's, minus the extra gravity we need," Chris said as we climbed out onto the deck. "Do you feel like dying?"

"No." Actually, I felt better than I had in my entire life. "Am I invited?"

"You have a choice, actually - you can come willingly, or I could call my friends with the automatic weapons and abduct you again." He glanced down at my arm. "May I?"

I let him take my hand in his. "Darcy never resorted to guns."

"Elizabeth was willing." He raised my hand and kissed the back of it.

I wanted to melt, but unless someone tossed me into the sun, that wasn't going to happen. "Someone told me that was because she knew Darcy loved her, and

that he was an honorable man." I threaded my fingers through his. "So I don't think you'll need to call your friends."

1 "The Medieval Fortress - Castles, Forts, and Walled Cities of the Middle Ages" by J. E. and H. W. Kaufmann, published by Combined Publishing.

La Matanza

Pay attention, nieto.

Abuela Rosa gave me a clout with her hand, the one she'd used to slap me when I forgot to watch her mouth. She'd stolen me and my sister Nani, using only her hands, pushing us to creep past the eyes of the machines and across the river, taking us deep into the trees on the other side, far from everything we knew. She'd taught me how to climb and nest. What to gather and eat. When to run and hide.

This is where you belong, niños, she had told us, our first night in the trees. This is your true home.

Nani didn't like Abuela Rosa or our true home. She told me it smelled bad. It was cold and wet, or hot and wet. There were bugs. She didn't want to eat or learn. She spit out the brown water and cried for her *encargado*, and no amount of slaps could quiet her. When the machines came, she waded out of the river and ran out waving her arms and calling to them.

You're thinking about your sister again, aren't you? I can see the sadness in your eyes. She could not adapt to the wild. That happens, many times.

There was still a hole in the canopy, a perfect circle of sky. There was still a mark on the ground where nothing will grow. That was where the light held Nani still and made her scream.

Abuela Rosa tried to drag her back into the water, but the light from the machine ate her left hand, along with Nani.

I should have guessed she would reject her native biosphere. One trial run, and I would have known, but there was no time. I had orders to terminate both of you the next day, to make room for new acquisitions.

Today I brought termites and grubs I'd picked out of a rotting log and rolled in a broad leaf back to the nest, and fed them to her as she talked. I didn't understand

everything she said. Her words were harder to follow now as well; sickness had taken her teeth and hair and eyes. Chewing made her gums bleed, but she ate and talked and stroked my arm.

They captured most of the seminómadas in this region, nieto, because your kind were starving. They knew what time of year brought shortages that divided the tribes. Before the machines, your people knew how to climb and nest, how to gather seeds and grains and roots. They watched your parents eat insects and larvae and called them primitives, but I sensed there was more.

Abuela Rosa had come with the machines, had seen my parents brought in from the trees to the compound. Nani and I were born there later, in the main cage. After my parents were taken to another compound, they sent Abuela Rosa to me, to be my *traductor*. She gave me words to understand her, but not the machines. That was forbidden. Because my throat did not work the same way as hers, she taught me to speak to her with my hands.

She didn't wrap me up in cloth like Nani but the others said I must cover my privates, and she made me put on *pantalones*. She taught me to release my waste into a receptacle and wash with water and soap and to eat with utensils, too.

The others had much praise for this.

He's taking to training well, doesn't he? Excellent work.

Shave his buttocks and teach him to walk backward, and he could pass for the commander.

Ma'am, you've pulled off a miracle. Second generation sapient. Absolutely amazing.

At first I thought it was strange the others admired her for things that I did. I was the one doing it, not her. Then Abuela Rosa told me that her teaching was more important to the others than my learning. That if she could teach me to be civilized, then she could teach all the seminómadas. That was important so that the others and my people could do something together.

Everything depends on it. Without you, we are finished.

I pushed the last of the termites between her lips, but she was too tired to chew now. She wouldn't take anymore, not even when I bit off the end of a star fruit - her favorite - so I could squeeze the juice into her mouth. She huddled against me, small and thin, a broken bird.

They wouldn't listen to me, the fools. Too caught up in the idea of rejuvenation. We tried to crossbreed you in captivity, but the second generation were all sterile. They didn't believe the test results. They blamed it on centuries of inbreeding. Said we could take more from another, better populated region. Idiots!

Some of the others came into the compound in the middle of the night and took away Nani and other females. They came back sore and sometimes bleeding from their privates. Nani could not tell me what had happened, but she smelled like the others. Whatever they did, it had made Abuela Rosa very angry. She came one night by herself, and woke me and Nani.

Come with me, now. Hurry.

She took us away, to teach us what we were. After the light took Nani, Abuela Rosa taught me other things, too. The forbidden language of the machines. How to kill and cook flesh as the others did, and eat small pieces of it until my belly accepted it, so I could hunt when forage was lean. She drew a map of the compound and showed me how to get back in without attracting the machine eyes. She told me of the other compounds.

Now I am dying. You must leave me and free the other children. You must bring them here and teach them as I have taught you, or the light will take all of you.

I wanted to know where Nani and her hand had gone. *Where?* I signed.

The place where all the failures are sent. The place where they will cut into your body and take out your insides and examine all the pieces of you. La Matanza, the largest compound. The slaughter house.

I knew what *slaughtered* meant. That was what the others did when they sent the machines to catch smaller things and kill them. The others liked to eat the flesh of the dead things. They had tried to make us eat it, too, but they had shoved too much in our mouths and we had puked every time.

La Matanza.

I felt angry. Why keep us and train us only to make us their *meat*? We had not failed. We had worn their cloth and learned their words and kept ourselves clean. I became angry, shoved her away and hopped around the nest.. I tore at my head and howled my rage.

Adam.

That was Abuela's training name for me - it meant I had to stop now. I went to her, looked down at her pale face, and blew a fly away from her sticky eyelid.

Adam, you have to think the way they do. To them, you are nothing but a stupid animal, so they will treat you that way. I've taught you how to avoid detection. Go back, free the children and keep them safe . . .

She began to cough, and dark blood spilled from her lips. I held her and watched her mouth, waiting for more words. They never came. She coughed and choked up bloody foam, and then she went still.

I stayed with her until dark. I closed her eyes and covered her with leaves.. Then I climbed down and went to the river.

Free the other children.

Bring them here. Teach them as I have taught you.

The machines were stupid. Abuela Rosa had taught me that they could only see what they were told to see. I slipped through one of their blind spots into the compound, and went to the main cage. Some of the children smelled me as I approached and would have called out greetings, but I made the sign for silence. I used Abuela Rosa's code to release the gate, and beckoned for them to follow me. I did not tell them where we were going until we reached the river. When I did, some of the females wanted to go back, but I told them of Nani and why we were being kept by the others.

They did not understand all of it, but they came with me into the trees.

It was hard at first, because we were many, but we had also been taught to listen and learn. So I taught them. I taught them how to climb and nest. What to gather and eat. When to run and hide. I made them eat cooked flesh until they could stomach it.

The others searched for us, many times. When we heard the machines, we waded into the river and sank down below the surface, and breathed through reeds until they were gone.

We changed. We grew taller and thinner and stronger. Our hair grew long, and we found new ways to clean ourselves. Some of the females gave off a strange odor, and their privates became swollen. We saw small things pair off, male to female, and imitated them. It felt good. Two females' bellies swelled, until they squatted and forced little ones from themselves.

The little ones scared us, until we saw how helpless they were. Then we all cared for them, and they grew bigger.

Seasons passed. We became a *seminómada* in our true home.

I taught them the forbidden machine words. It helped me explain to them how we had been used in an experiment. I told them what the light was, and how it would take us from our true home to another, larger compound, where we would be slaughtered. Like the small things the others killed for their flesh.

We are not meat.

We are people.

If we are meat, why make us like them?

How can we be safe? We have no machines.

We looked at our little ones. They could not yet care for themselves. They did not know what the others would do to them. They had never seen the others. The females were frightened. The males, scenting their fear, became angry.

As long as the others remain, we will never be safe.

And then I understood what had to be done.

We already knew what the others did in the small compound; we had lived there all our lives. We slipped through the blind spots in the dark. We killed the others as they slept, stabbing them with pointed sticks, as the machines used their sharp ends on small things. We released the new ones they had captured, but they were still wild, and they ran away.

We dragged the bodies of the others into the trees. We cut up their flesh, and we ate it. Then we brought back their bones and fed them and their blood-stained cloth to the waste receptacles.

We hated the machines, but we didn't destroy them. We still needed them. I used the language Abuela Rosa had taught me to send a signal to the next compound.

Our humans have escaped. Send help at once.

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