

Hunters

Seeing the blood on the walls, I knew I was once again too late. Thankfully, there wasn't a great deal of blood to see here in the living room. That was good. Not that it meant the victim might still be alive. No. I had already learned through bitter experience there was no chance of that. Rather, it was good because less blood meant I had a better chance of maintaining my self-control. I hadn't been a vampire very long and lots of blood made it difficult for me to blend in with the humans. More so than it already was.

Walking carefully through the small apartment, I made mental notes to myself as I tried to use what I saw to understand what had happened. Broken locking chain on the door. A single red woman's shoe, size eight. The first blood I'd found was a thin splatter across an otherwise white wall. Several fat drops of blood had fallen into the brown carpet. This attack looked to be following the same basic pattern as the others. The victim had opened the door a little bit, the killer forced the door fully open, the victim turned to run, and he slashed her across the throat or neck with a knife or his claws. Staggered, she would have placed her hand to her neck, desperately trying to staunch the flow of blood as she ran.

Following the blood trail, I found the victim's body and her other shoe in the bathroom. Her legs were sticking up out of the bathtub at odd angles. She'd been pretty in life. Like all the others, she had long, black hair. Like all the others, she'd been bled dry. Gauging by the parallel wounds on her neck, I could tell she'd been clawed. There would be no bite marks. The killer was using

some other means of taking the blood from her. Perhaps something as simple as gravity and a cup. Maybe some sort of specialized machine. I didn't know and it didn't look like I'd find anything here that would tell me. With a disappointed sigh, I guesstimated that she'd been dead for five or six hours. Using a hanky, I turned on the water in the bathtub so that what little blood remained would flow down the drain and left it on. That way, when the police got here, they wouldn't wonder what had happened to the rest of her blood. They'd assume it had gone down the drain with the water. It wouldn't do to have the police looking for someone who was stealing the lifeblood out of young women.

That was my job.

So far the killer had struck nine times, I thought to myself, recycling what little I knew as I walked to a window looking out on the back side of the apartment complex. Nine beautiful, black-haired women. All of whom had a least a passing resemblance to the vampire woman who'd brought me here to find the killer. Nine women who regularly donated blood to local vampires. All killed by a vampire who'd wanted more of their blood than they could spare, rather than a pint or two. Looking around at the victim's stuff, I found nothing that particularly caught my eye.

The lady, who'd summoned me to track down the murderer, would get a complete list of what the apartment held once the police made their reports. She'd also get the coroner's report though I doubted that would help any. Cause of death was exsanguination due to a sliced up neck. No real question about that.

Looking out the window, I spotted a likely looking tree down below. I concentrated, stepped forward into a shadow, passed through a tiny little piece of what was most likely some other world or dimension, and stepped out of the shadow of the very tree I'd been looking at by the edge of the

property. Not a common vampire ability. Heck, not even an uncommon ability. No, I was special in this regard. Probably unique. The ability to travel from shadow to shadow had been imbued in me at the moment of my re-creation. At that time I had become what the knowledgeable in the vampire community called a *telum*. Basically, I was a weaponized version of a vampire. To a certain extent anyway.

Reaching out with my strange new sense that allowed me to literally feel shadows, I concentrated a long moment and found the one I knew to be next to my parked car about half a mile away. Stepping back into the shadow of the tree, I stepped out of the alley's shadow about thirty feet from my car, covered in sweat and with the beginnings of a headache. Shadow travel was *much* easier if I could see where I was going.

It really annoyed me to find a couple of teenagers busily removing the back tires from my Viper. Shaking my head, I pulled out my Mac-10 and with a little nudge from my boot pushed the first kid into the car. He muttered something rude, turned around, and loudly declared one of the more popular four letter words.

"Sorry, man," he barely managed to say, his eyes glued to the barrel of the machine pistol that I had pointed between his eyes. "We'll just be leaving." With a gesture of the Mac, I indicated his friend should come join us on my side of the car.

"Oh, you'll be leaving alright," I agreed, "But not before you put my damn tires back on. You steal anything else? Mess around with anything else?" They were quick to deny it of course. Once they got my tires back on to my satisfaction, I took their wallets and watches as repayment for the trouble. I received the distinct impression they were unhappy with this turn of events. Of course, I suspected that they would have been a lot more unhappy had I riddled them with bullets or lopped

a hand off for stealing. Driving towards the freeway, I tossed their crappy watches out the window and put the two idiots out of my mind. Back to concentrating on the murders.

Whoever the killer was, they were stalking other vampire's donors. There's not exactly a section in the yellow pages for women who donate blood to vampires. And these women weren't just donating blood to the red cross with a pint or two going to feed hungry vampires now and then. No. These had been women who each had some sort of relationship with a vampire. A connection which led them to voluntarily donate blood directly for said vampire. Those vampires they donated for would most certainly not have given these women's names out. Not as territorial as vampires tended to be about their feeding grounds or the people they fed upon.

Word had gotten out in the DFW vampire community that someone was killing off female donors. Top shelfers as they were sometimes called. A rather derogatory moniker referring to refrigerator or pantry shelves. Turning onto the freeway, I accelerated sharply.

This last tip had arisen from a vampire woman. She'd called her master saying that she hadn't been able to contact one of her pints, another derogatory term, although it was sometimes used as an endearment. Vampires were a strange lot to be sure. The master had immediately called the Lady Selina. She'd called me.

I'd been in town three weeks now. Long enough for four... five murders to take place. Selina had already been looking for an excuse to call me back into town. After the fourth murder, she came up with the bright idea of using me to find the killer. Up until then, I'd been in Atlanta. There, I'd been enjoying the night life and rediscovering what it was like to only have one set of thoughts and desires in my head. For you see, I was and remain very strongly attuned to the Lady Selina. Had been almost since the moment my spirit returned to this world. When I was close to her, I could hear

the thoughts running through her head. I felt her wants and desires. In those first days when she was close, I frequently hadn't been able to tell her thoughts and wishes from my own.

Now most folks would probably find that rather scary. A few folks who might not want to be bothered by thinking for themselves would certainly find it convenient. However, I didn't belong to either of these categories. I had a twin sister who was still living. Sonya and I had shared a strong psychic bond between us. We'd spent nineteen years building a bond that allowed us to start or finish each others sentences. And then she had suddenly been mostly supplanted by the Lady Selina Dupree. And I found that more than a little confusing. Six months time passing hadn't helped ease that confusion a great deal.

Arriving at my exit, I turned off onto a side street. Now that the word had spread across the metroplex's vampire population, it was going to be that much easier for the killer to find his victims. Most vampire's natural tendency would be to watch much more closely that which they wanted kept safe. And that would lead the killer right to them. Hmm. And that just might provide a sting opportunity. It was a longshot but so far it was the only shot I had at the moment. Turning down a side street, I drove into a wealthy residential neighborhood. A moment later I stopped at the security gate leading into the grounds of Selina's mansion. Or this mansion rather. She had several and moved amongst them almost continuously. This was the one she would be staying in tonight. I didn't have to ask, I just knew.

When the guard stepped out, I lifted up my sunglasses briefly. He waved me on through, stepping back quickly as though uncomfortable. It was strange, really. For the first three or four days of my new life, everyone had treated me basically the same as people had always treated me. This was despite the fact that my eyes were now completely black from corner to corner. A little side

effect of the weaponization process. Now, the more I got around, the more people were starting to act scared when they saw my eyes. Like the gate guy. As a soulless, young though he was, he still shouldn't have reacted at all upon seeing my eyes.

With a sigh I sped down the winding little lane to the mansion. Pulling up in front of the main doors, I stopped the engine but left the keys in the ignition. Anyone ballsy or dumb enough to steal a car from the house of the Lady Selina Dupree deserved the car as a consolation gift for their much shortened life expectancy.

Walking inside, my thoughts split between wondering about the vampire who was doing the killing and planning strategy for tomorrow night's big vampire council meeting. Since the latter thoughts weren't my own, I concentrated on the former.

First of all, I didn't actually know that the killer was male. However, for some reason I'd been assuming it was. And it was probably not a valid assumption at that. The women had just been killed, not assaulted, sexually or otherwise. Other than the killing blow, none of them had received any other wounds or injuries. It worried me that the victims all bore at least a passing resemblance to Selina. Considering the vampiric circles that the murders were all happening in, I didn't think it was too farfetched to assume that the killer might be working him or herself up to going after the raven-haired vampire who'd brought me back to this world. Whether my thinking about her was conflicted or not... and it was... I most certainly did not want her dead.

In fact, there were a number of reasons why I wanted her very much alive. Or as alive as vampires got anyway. Firstly, she was the one who'd re-created me. Therefore, she was the person who could tell me the most about what I might be able to expect as my peculiar powers grew. And they were indeed growing. Six months ago I hadn't been able to sense shadows nearly so far away.

Nor could I travel between them without being able to see my exit shadow. What might be next? This was just one of many topics we hadn't discussed. Second, she was hot. She only stood an inch or two over five foot tall but she always commanded the attention of those in the room with her. It wasn't just that she was beautiful with a perfect face, shiny black hair, and eyes blue as the daytime sky. Or her shapely figure, either for that matter. It was more than the sum of her good-looking parts. There was something about her. Everyone felt it. 'Hot' described it pretty well.

I felt a glow of pleasure well up from within me. I'd been thinking too strongly and she'd heard my thoughts... or the gist of them anyway... and they'd pleased her. Happy or not, I had more thinking to do about the killer. I'd devote more time to thinking about Selina later. Suppressing my thoughts, I walked into the kitchen.

"Could I get you a glass of blood, sir?" the only servant present asked.

"You sure could," I agreed, walking over to one of the refrigerators. "And grab me a plate while you're at it if you would?"

"Certainly, sir," the fellow agreed quietly. I pulled out a large, thick raw steak and some real, honest-to-God butter. Walking to the center stove, I fired up the built-in grill and tossed the steak onto it. The butter went on the steak. I mashed it around a bit so that it would melt quickly. I wasn't going to allow the steak to cook much at all.

"Would you like me to call one of the cooks, sir?" the fellow asked, setting down next to me my plate, wine glass full of warm blood, as well as the knife and fork I hadn't thought to ask for.

"No, thank you. In fact, I don't think I'll be needing anything else," I informed him, flipping the steak over with the fork.

"Very good, sir. Should you need anything else, just call."

“And who shall I call for?” I asked, trying not to drool from the smell the steak was giving off.

“Bernard, sir.”

“Thank you, Bernard. When or wherever you feel it appropriate, please call me Wallace,” I told him as I pulled the steak off the grill and turned off the stove.

“Very good, Wallace. Have a good evening,” he replied, before walking down the hall.

“You too,” I called rather distractedly around a large mouthful of very rare steak. Oh, it was good. Washing my first bite down with a drink of blood, I carried my plate around to the kitchen breakfast nook. Setting my sunglasses next to my plate, I took a long moment to enjoy the taste of a perfect steak, absently looking out the window while doing so. The thick, bullet-resistant windows looked out onto the perfectly manicured grounds and a smallish stock tank.

“I’ve asked you not to do that,” Selina reminded me from the doorway, sounding a bit put-out.

“What?” I asked, talking around another large bite of steak, “You mean that whole eating meat thing?” So my manners aren’t the greatest. Sue me.

“And didn’t your mother teach you not to talk with your mouth full?” she asked, following my thought about manners as she sat down next to me.

“Not really,” I replied, still chewing the large bite. I offered her a drink from my glass which she refused. “I had several aunts to teach me that. My mother taught me a variety of kicks and punches. Later she taught me a number of more complex fighting maneuvers and combination attacks.” And now my mother wouldn’t even look at me. All because I’d had the misfortune to be too close to an exploding rocket and had died. While I supposed it was ultimately my own fault that

I'd died, it most certainly wasn't fair to have one's own mother turn away from the sight of you.

"Perhaps your mother will come around," she stated more than asked. A moment later she added, "It may sound trite, but time does indeed heal wounds. Not all of them to be sure, but most." I didn't reply but instead took another bite of my steak.

"Why are you being so stubborn about eating flesh?" she demanded, suddenly on the verge of being angry. I knew this more from the heat of her thoughts than from her body language or nuances of her voice.

Before answering, I finished chewing this time. "I like steak. My body craves meat. And you haven't provided a good reason not to do so yet."

"When I asked you not to do that, we didn't exactly have time to discuss the matter. And then you ran off to Atlanta and that made it rather difficult to explain my reasons for not wanting you to eat meat," she said, her voice carefully neutral and her thoughts suddenly shielded from me.

"True enough," I muttered, staring at my fully laden fork. With a sigh, I set the fork down and drank half my glass of blood instead. "So, now we seem to be in much better circumstances for discussing my eating habits." We sat in silence for a long moment. When I began to suspect that she wasn't going to continue, I looked her in the eyes and then gave my fork a significant glance before looking back into her eyes.

"Oh, very well," she said with a sigh. "It has to do with the way you were brought into your second life. As you know, the circumstances were not normal and therefore you are not a normal vampire."

"Yeah," I agreed. "I don't even think I qualify as an abnormal vampire."

"You're closer to being a vampire than to being anything else," she told me quietly. I suspect

I'd finally managed to raise some mental shields of my own judging by the searching look she gave me. After a moment she began again. "You were dead when I got to you. Of course, you already know this." At my nod, she continued. "Your body was not in good condition. You and your cousin were both in a bad way so far as corpses go. You were missing pieces and had been skinned." I drank the rest of my blood down in a gulp and closed my eyes briefly.

"Yes," I told her. "This part I've heard before."

"Once they figured out which body belonged to your cousin, they were going to consign you to the grave. I, on the other hand, saw an opportunity there. I'd never had a chance to work with a doppelganger before. Finding you provided me with a unique chance to do something special.

"For you see, I had found a scroll three or four hundred years ago which described how to make a telum that I'd been wanting to try. It required the body of a supernatural. So, when the fireworks started down in Houston, I decided to bring you back as a telum... if I could." I had indeed been a supernatural. I belonged to a race that vampires and other supernaturals called doppelgangers. Shapeshifters, able to change minute details about ourselves or our entire bodies. But no longer. And I was finding that almost as hard to deal with as being undead.

Her hand gently cupping my chin surprised me. "You've demonstrated amazing strengths for a telum. This whole new life you have... it will get easier," she whispered. "I promise." Closing my eyes again, I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. I didn't actually need to breathe but it seemed to relax me a little. Taking her hand, I opened my eyes and kissed her knuckles.

"I know it will. It's just that discussing this isn't quite as easy as I thought it would be," I replied a bit more honestly than I'd actually intended. It's hard to be macho with someone who can hear your thoughts in between the peekaboo raising and lowering of rather sad excuses for mental

walls.

“I’d had a premonition that my chance to create a telum might have finally arrived,” she continued, knowing full well that I both wanted and needed to hear this all the way through. “So, I’d brought several pints of my own blood that I’d been donating a little at a time as well as several quarts of soulless blood from those attached to my lineage.” Just so you know, a soulless is a person who dies from the blood drain, is given vampire blood, and doesn’t turn into a vampire or remain dead. They become a weird mix that works in the daytime and has superhuman physical traits. Over time, they tend to lose all sense of emotion which led to their rather unpleasant moniker.

“I suppose I have Miranda to thank for most of my blood then?” I asked. Miranda being Selina’s soulless bodyguard, secretary, and all around companion. They’d been together for somewhere between three and six hundred years. Miranda was never far from her.

“Yes, indeed,” she replied with a pleased smile. “So, I soaked your body in Miranda’s blood first. Then I began adding my own. That caused your tissues to start healing. However, I didn’t have much time to work with. So, I used my talents with hemomancy to speed things along. That worked out well. Better than I had expected to be perfectly honest. I admit, I was rather surprised to find out that you had red hair. And a few freckles as well.”

“One thing I don’t miss about being dead is the lack of freckles,” I told her with a wry grin. “Never particularly cared for them. Looked alright on my sister, but I prefer to have them the way they are now... so pale as to be almost invisible.” I was rather surprised to find that I was still holding her hand. With a little caress I released it and returned my hand to join the other on the table in front of me.

“Well,” she said with a smile, “I suppose we’ll just have to disagree on that point. Getting

back to the story. According to the telum ritual, I had to have you at least somewhat alive. It suggested that the closer to dead you were the better. Therefore, I continued adding just a little of my blood until I was able to restart your heart with my hemomancy.” Although I couldn’t hear it in her voice, I could still feel her pride in this accomplishment. There were few if any who had ever mastered blood sorcery to the point where they could have duplicated this accomplishment.

“Most impressive,” I told her both because it was and because I knew it would please her to hear it.

She smiled again and continued, “Aside from conducting the ritual itself, there were two components that were needed beside yourself. One was my blood, the blood of an elder vampire. Not a difficulty. However, the other had been. It was a potion called the essence of death. A rather unpleasant blend of condensed necromancer blood as well as a few even more rarified components that we won’t go into now. I’d completed mixing the potion a couple of hundred years ago and it was finally ready for use as of last year.” Holy crap! A potion that took two hundred years to make? Wow. No wonder telum were rare.

“Yes, exactly,” she agreed, reading my mind. “Now, back to the second origins of Wallace McAlister. You were technically an official undead at that point... your heart was beating and there was some brain activity. Despite that, I don’t think you’d reached the point of awareness yet.” I certainly didn’t remember being so and indicated this with a slight shake of my head. “Right,” she agreed. “So, with you just barely hanging onto your second life, I conducted the first half of the telum ritual. Everything went well and I could feel the power building. Miranda poured the essence of death down your throat. And the sense of energy hovering over the area suddenly went away. I became very worried at that point. I was afraid that I’d somehow misperformed the ritual. Any

number of terrible side effects could have stemmed from this.

“Now, you may recall that I was doing this in a house that was on the front lines of a raging battle? At the same time, your cousin was across the house trying to reintegrate his way into his own body. That’s when the first of the mortar rounds hit the house and it’s grounds. We had you in the house’s master bathroom in the tub. When the explosion came, it rattled the whole house. I threw myself over you and Miranda threw herself over me.” I felt rather touched that she’d used her own body to protect me. “I was worried that even had everything actually been working properly with the ritual, that the interruption caused by the explosion might have screwed it up.

“And then you bit me.”

“I bit you?” I asked incredulously.

“You sure did,” she countered with a happy smile. “Here on my right breast.”

“No,” I just barely managed to say.

“Oh, yes,” she immediately contradicted. “You got me good. I figured out immediately that your fangs had grown nicely. Thankfully, it was just your fangs. Had you used all your teeth you’d have removed half my breast and that would not have been at all fun to mend.”

“Umm. No, I suppose not,” I managed to say.

“You’re embarrassed,” she stated with an amused smile. “Don’t be... despite the fact that you ruined one of my favorite dresses. You weren’t all there yet mentally and newborn vampires need blood. It is the way of things. That’s why we’re always careful around newly created vampires. It took me a minute to convince Miranda to get off my back so I could get off of you. And then you wouldn’t release me. I was afraid that Miranda was going to have to break your jaw to get you to let go me. Then it finally occurred to me that some of the blood in you was mine, so, drawing upon

that, I commanded you to release me. And you did.” She was right, I was embarrassed.

“From that point, we completed the remainder of the ritual. Fed you the blood that you were supposed to have been given at end of the ritual. Since you’d already drank quite a bit from me, I hadn’t really expected you to drink any more, but you did. You drank everything that we gave you. All the blood we’d brought in fact. I was extremely pleased. It takes a powerful vampire to drink a lot of blood, particularly the blood of an older vampire, and not throw it all back up. At the end of that process, you woke up.” That I remembered. The fading sensation of a powerful thirst, the taste of blood in my mouth, and an incredible feeling of confusion. She’d been there to comfort me and help me regain my sense of who I was. Of what I was now. Of course, that conversation had only been the tip of the iceberg.

“Okay,” I said, mostly over my embarrassment. “That seems to pretty much cover my return to life. But, I still haven’t heard anything that should prevent me from eating meat. Aside from the close call with your breast.”

Rather than laughing, she turned serious. “As I said, it has to do with how you were created. You were re-created on the second night after you died. Vampires are normally created right there no the spot. Waiting more than a few minutes after the body is dead can ruin the already dicey chance of the person coming over... much less forty eight hours later. Once the vampire blood is in the body, if the conversion is going to work, it typically proceeds quickly. I know what the mythology says but in reality it only takes three days if the maker, the one doing the creating, uses too little blood. Or of the body is torn up badly. In your case, I’d already mended your body. Something not so easily done to a mangled, two day old, frozen and then thawed corpse... if I do say so myself. Usually, the vampire blood only takes a matter of minutes before the initial changes are well underway. So you

see, you started off with time as a factor working against you.

“Your manner of death was working against you as well. You said that you remembered an explosive going off near you.” At my nod, she continued, “Normally, a vampire-to-be only has some of their blood drained. You were killed and the majority of your blood leaked out.

“The fact is, if you were truly a vampire, you wouldn’t crave flesh at all. Water in small quantities now and again and blood in not-so-small quantities. There are only two types of undead that crave flesh for food. Zombies and ghouls. Zombies are mindless undead with the full strength of the dead. They crave living flesh the way sharks seek food. They will eat and never be full. They will never tire and have to be dismembered and allowed to burn in sunlight before the animating force is truly destroyed.

“Ghouls on the other hand are a little more of a mystery to me. I know that there are different kinds of ghouls. I know that some start off as living people and slowly become undead. I think some start off undead and remain so. All of them crave flesh. Living or dead makes no difference to a ghoul. Decaying, long dead, or still attached to a breathing person... they simply do not care. I don’t honestly know how much they are able to think or to what extent they are self-aware. They are the jackals of the supernatural world. Except unlike jackals, there is no place for them. I have standing orders that all ghouls found within my realm are to be destroyed upon contact.” A long silence fell on the breakfast nook.

“And you’re worried that my desire for eating meat might be a sign that I’m becoming a little more of a zombie or ghoul? That the more I eat, the more these traits might come to the forefront?” I asked carefully.

“Yes,” she said, obviously relieved. “That’s exactly correct.”

“I don’t think so,” I told her.

“Oh? You don’t think so? And just why do you believe this?” she asked with just a hint of a French accent creeping into her voice. I could plainly feel that she was becoming annoyed again.

“I’ve always craved meat,” I told her, trying to gauge just how upset she was becoming. “Death doesn’t seem to have changed that. And I assure you I have absolutely no interest in gnawing on any corpses.”

“You craved meat because you were an active doppelganger,” she explained slowly. While her words almost sounded condescending, I knew that she was actually trying to reign in her temper. “You are not a doppelganger at all now. You are one of the living dead. Vampire blood flows through your veins. But as I have explained, you are not a normal vampire. You must keep yourself on constant guard against any manifestation of traits from the other types of undead. Once those doors are opened, I may not be able to close them again.” It suddenly occurred to me that she didn’t know something. Something fundamental about my new state of being. Now, thanks to her explanation of my creation, I understood where it had come from. Six months ago I’d rather assumed it had simply come around as part of my becoming undead. Having heard her story of my creation though, I now knew it’s true origins.

In addition to being a vampire, I was also a necromancer. And now I knew why.

Hindsight kicked in to suggest that most of my special abilities were likely all based in that power in some way, shape, or form. In point of fact, I supposed my whole condition was based in necromancy. The magic of death. That probably explained how I was able to walk between shadows. It was likely some strange necromantic side effect. I had learned recently that my early ability to walk up walls had actually been a precursor to flying. Not that I was very good at it, but

I could do it now with a fair level of dependability. That, too, must have been done by somehow tapping the power of death. Although, come to think of it, I'd heard of a number of vampires flying so maybe that didn't fit into the same category after all. Oh, and of course there was the obvious one that was unquestionably necromantic in nature... I could speak to dead people.

Supposedly, if what I understood about necromancy was true, I should have power over all forms of undead as well. Perhaps that was where my meat craving came from. Some underlying attachment to all the varied forms of undead. Hmm. Magic wasn't really my field of expertise. While Selina was a hemomancer, I rather strongly suspected that hemomancy and necromancy were about as similar as a squid and a jet fighter. It seemed likely I was probably going to have to expand and hone my necromantic abilities through trial and error. Lost in thought, I absently popped a bite of steak into my mouth.

A powerful blow knocked me out of the chair to the floor. She'd slapped me.

Enraged, the vampire woman stood over me. "You will not eat meat again!" she commanded using all the incredible power of compulsion at her disposal. I was surprised to feel the force of her demand wash over me but not take hold.

"You will not strike me again," I told her flatly, standing myself back up. I tentatively rubbed my aching jaw. Damn, for such a small, little thing, she packed quite a punch.

"How did you do that?" she demanded. I felt a tiny thread of fear flash through her before being squashed by her indomitable will.

"Do what?" I asked annoyed, eyeing her cautiously as I sat myself back down.

"Ignore my command," she replied, smoothing her skirt before sitting back down in her chair.

"I'm growing stronger. All my vampiric abilities are," I told her working to squash my

smouldering anger the same way she'd squashed her fear. My throbbing jaw did nothing to help me with this endeavor.

"You shouldn't be strong enough to do that for centuries yet," she responded, looking me over as though she was just seeing me.

"What can I say?" I replied sarcastically. "You do good work."

"I shouldn't have been able to do so well," she said as Miranda walked into the kitchen. Selina's maid didn't say anything. After a moment she took up a position next to the entryway. Selina's surging emotions had brought her to her mistress. I knew this the same as Selina did which held no comfort. With a little concentration, I focused my blood on my jaw and healed the damage her slap had caused. Working my jaw a bit, I decided I was once again in good shape aside from now carrying a heaping pile of annoyance.

"Hmm," I mused aloud, "Judging by your behavior now and your behavior shortly after I was re-created, I don't believe you intended me anything other than another servant. Probably saw me as little more than another weapon in your arsenal. In fact, I do believe you said just that very thing some six months ago. I suppose it never occurred to you that you might have to work with your weapon rather than simply using him as you saw fit?"

She stared at me a long moment before replying, "No," she agreed, opting for honesty. "It never did. I have very few equals in this world." She was silent a long moment but I knew she was contemplating adding something else so I remained quiet. At last she whispered, "I never expected to succeed so well." From her I felt a small spark of hope that she squashed as quickly and as thoroughly as she had that earlier little thrill of fear. Before I could figure out what might have been at the root of it, her mental shields crashed down like a falling mountain.

I stood up, “I have an idea about how we might draw out the killer. Perhaps we can discuss it tomorrow.”

“Why not talk about it now?” she asked matter-of-factly.

“Because I’m still upset with you, both for slapping me and for trying to override my will in regards to my own personal actions. Not a good combination to mix with important business.”

“I’m sorry about slapping you,” she said.

“You’re sorry about the wrong offense,” I told her coldly. “The slap makes us even for the bite I gave you. However, I didn’t appreciate your commands down in Houston. I damn sure don’t appreciate them after you called me here from halfway across the country. You have a very poor way of treating those you want help from.” With that I turned and walked towards the exit. Miranda stood in the way and was in the process of looking past me to her mistress for orders as to whether or not she should allow me to pass. Annoyed, I stepped into a shadow and out of the shadow of one of the columns at the front steps. The sudden transfer left me sweating and set my head throbbing again. Still, I’d now done a sightless shadow walk twice in one evening. Another first.

Only after I started the car did I realize that I’d left my sunglasses on the table. Hmm. I wondered.... Reaching out with my shadow sense, I found an edge of shadow touching them and that was enough for me to reach into my glove box and pull them through. Wow. Now that was an interesting new twist. Putting my sunglasses on, I started the engine and roared off down the drive.

The guard at the gate barely got them open enough for me to squeeze the Viper through. Sliding sideways across the street, I stomped on the gas, making the tires scream and the engine roar. Without a backwards glance, I raced off into the night.

Three weeks ago, I'd never been to my Dallas home. A rather odd circumstance to be sure. A few days after settling in at my apartment in Atlanta, I'd received a packet courtesy of a member of the local vampire council. In it was all sorts of information and paperwork. Like titles to houses as well as keys. Numbers that led to some rather large bank accounts. Selina had been extremely generous. She'd made me a millionaire overnight. But the cost had been very high. Down in Houston, she'd taken away my free will and had sent me off to fight a war for her. If only she'd just asked.... And now she was doing it again, apparently having learned nothing from that series of encounters.

Pulling into the garage, I hit the remote which closed the door behind me. Jumping out of the car, I walked into my nice and shiny new house. When I'd first moved in, I'd wondered if it might be bugged or otherwise have built in surveillance. I'd come to the conclusion that if either was the case, I really didn't care.

Without looking at a clock I knew that there were still three hours until sunrise. I'd learned in my six months as a vampire that it was a good idea to know exactly when sunrise occurred. No. That's too understated. For me it was an absolute requirement. A literally vital necessity. When the sun rose, I lost consciousness and didn't awaken until sunset or close to it. It hadn't taken much thought before I came to the conclusion that I most certainly did *not* care to wake up in the middle of the day as a ball of fire from exposure to the sun. So, I'd honed my sense of timing and now made sure I knew exactly when the sun rose. Was pretty good at gauging time without a watch, too. But, aside from that, I slept much like I had in life. Not the same but not far different either. Here in the last month, I'd even started having the occasional dream. I'd had three of them so far. I couldn't

remember much of them but I did remember walking across a featureless, grey landscape. While it may sound bland, it had been an oddly liberating experience.

Tossing my long coat onto the couch in passing, I set the Mac-10 down on the coffee table, leaned the scabbard with my katana against my recliner, and stuck my scoped, long-barrel .44 mag in between the cushion and the side of the chair. That done, I leaned back in the recliner and worked at relaxing. With an effort I turned my thoughts away from the aggravating Lady Selina. I decided that the murders would make a much safer topic for my consideration.

I wasn't sure how many vampires there were living in the Dallas/Fort Worth metroplex but there were supposed to be a lot. Of them, the vast majority had human associates who donated blood to them. Some of these humans did so voluntarily. Some of them didn't have the faintest idea they donated blood at all. If they came up a couple of pints short every now and then, they just put the lack of energy down to a mild cold. Most of the vampiric blood supply came from people who donated blood thinking it was for some mobile blood center.

All the murder victims so far had fallen into the willing and knowing donor category. When a person became a knowing donor for a vampire, they were usually first hypnotized by an elder vampire and forbidden to communicate in any way knowledge that there really were vampires out in the world. Sometimes the vampires never actually visited the donors. They'd have an agent go collect the blood and deliver it. Depending on the vampire, they might not drink from the same donor for several months. So just how long had the murderer been watching these people in order to find nine pretty, black-haired women?

Years probably. And that was the problem with vampires. They had the time in which to plan their actions. Decades to plot. So with all the planning and forethought that had likely gone into

preparing for the murders, how was I going to get the killer to go after the one raven-haired woman I was thinking to use as bait? I wished I knew.

Okay, back to basic facts. Each woman had been killed in her house or apartment. All but two of the victims had been single, although two of the singles had been divorced. Collectively, they'd worked all over the metroplex. They'd also lived all over the metroplex. I had a map with a variety of pins in it. That hadn't helped. I'd put the locations into my laptop and had spent four hours drawing lines from pin to pin trying to discern some pattern that was in the works. Nada. Floating myself out of the chair, I lazily levitated my way across the room to the big flip board that had my map attached to it. I added another red pin at the latest victim's address, a black pin where the vampire she donated for lived, and a blue pin where she'd worked. Hands behind my head, I hovered there and studied the map some more. And once more I came up with nothing new. With a sigh I drifted back into my recliner.

Thanks in large part to all the shadow travel, I was thirsty again. And I was still hungry as well. Walking out to my back porch, I fired up the propane grill. Back inside, I poured a clear plastic packet of blood into a mug and removed a small steak which I promptly took out and placed on the grill. Returning for a plate, I wondered if I would feel guilty about eating the steak. It didn't seem likely at this point but I'd surprised myself before. Plate in hand, I returned to the grill and flipped the steak over. It smelled good already. I closed the lid and set the mug on it to warm a bit. Cold blood was only palatable if one's in a hurry and tonight I certainly was not.

My thoughts drifted back to Selina. In several ways, she reminded me of my sister, Sonya. Both were in my head a lot. Both were bossy as hell. Both were aggressive in their own ways. Despite the slap, Selina was much less physically forceful than Sonya. Sonya had happily led us into

any number of fights through the years. Some we won, some we lost. All of them we learned from. When the movie *Fight Club* came out, Sonya had been thrilled to find that someone else out there understood the value of losing a fight. Selina on the other hand couldn't abide the thought of losing. Not a fight, not an argument, not anything. She would always strive to win no matter what the cost. Sonya usually strove to win, too. But she enjoyed testing new tactics and strategies. For her a loss was just as valuable as a win. And Sonya was willing to pay the price for those losses. Selina on the other hand was quite willing to allow someone else to pay the price for her victories. It seemed a fundamental flaw in her otherwise generally good character.

I pulled the mug off the top of the grill and with a temporary claw grown from a fingertip, took the steak off the fire before it had a chance to actually cook. After turning off the gas, I went back inside in search of a fork and knife.

Sonya had a number of flaws but none of them as massive as Selina's. One of my sister's big ones was that she didn't know when to stop. On more than one occasion she'd annoyed the family warriors so much that they'd made a point of beating the snot out of us. Not just her, mind you, but us. Of course, that had been back when I was alive and still a shapechanger. With a sigh I took a large bite of very rare steak. Not as good as the first one but not bad either. The blood wasn't as warm as I preferred but it was close enough. My thoughts continued drifting as I sat and ate.

At least Dad would talk to me when I called home. Mom wouldn't. I think Sonya's still afraid to speak to me. I'd heard through the family grapevine that she'd suffered a terrible psychic backlash when I'd died. I couldn't imagine what that had been like. Traumatic in the extreme I'm sure. But I didn't call very often. Quite seldom now. While Dad might talk to me, I could tell he still wasn't comfortable doing so. Most of my rather large family felt the same way.

I felt a sardonic grin work its way onto my face. It was terribly ironic that my absolute least favorite cousin should be the one who truly accepted me for who and what I was now. Of course, he wasn't my least favorite cousin anymore... but he'd spent a long time at the top of that particular list. I'd died trying to get him to safety. Protecting him had been part of my duty to the clan and I'd done it willingly... even if it was Lou I had been watching over. I'd been blown up and he'd... died wasn't quite right but was close enough... soon after. Once we'd recovered from our previously dead conditions, we'd fought together again. Neither of us had died that time and we had both been surprised to find that we actually got along pretty well. I suspected that Sonya's absence had something to do with that. She'd disliked Lou even more than I had. And as I mentioned before, didn't know when to quit.

Okay, enough thinking about family. If I kept this up, I was going to end up maudlin.

With a sigh, I put my empty plate and mug into the dishwasher. Despite it being almost empty, I went ahead and ran the cycle on it. One of the first rules of vampire housekeeping: leave no bloody dishes where nosy people can find them.

Drawing my sword in passing, I walked into the living room and ran through various katas for the next hour. This did a wonderful job of clearing my mind and balancing out my emotions. Policing up my various weapons, I carried them with me down into my recessed bedroom. From there I went through the vault-like, secret door and continued down into the sub-basement where the bed I actually slept in was located as opposed to the decorative bed upstairs. Down here I was safe from daytime intruders. Even if the house above burned to the ground, I'd be just fine and dandy down here. Not terribly likely, but the Lady Selina didn't believe in taking unnecessary risks. Not even small ones. On this particular matter, we were in perfect agreement. On my way to the bed I

turned off the lights. Shucking off my clothes, I tossed them in the general direction of the laundry basket and crawled under the sheets. I lay there for a long time determinedly not thinking. Then the sun finally rose and all thoughts evaporated.

I found myself once more on the featureless grey plain of my dreams. However, unlike my previous visits, I remained wide awake this time. Umm, wide asleep? Whatever. Behind me, I could feel something almost tether-like stretching back off into the far distance to my body. And right now my body seemed very faint and very far away. Most interesting and a little scary.

Well, since I was here, I decided to look around a bit. Kneeling, I found I was standing on puffy grey stuff. It seemed to support my weight just fine but I discovered I could put my hand right through the stuff almost as though it were nothing more than a cloud. This went straight to the top of my disturbing discoveries list. For as far as the eye could see in any direction, the flat plain seemed to consist only of this same stuff. The sky was a slightly paler shade of grey.

Alrighty. If this was a dream then I should be able to do cool dream stuff. Like call up the cute, blonde actress I'd seen in that movie last week. That sounded like a most excellent idea, so I concentrated on her. And nothing happened. I concentrated harder. Same result. A little disappointing to be sure but not a tragedy. Time to learn from my failures. Hmm. What to try next?

Okay, I could now fly in the real world. Could I fly here as well? Time to find out. Concentrating, I could feel my balance shift a little. Suddenly, I shot up like a rocket. I'd mostly made short little flights before. Always low to the ground in case I abruptly stopped flying. Which

hindsight had proven to be a good idea because that very thing had indeed happened a few times. Those experiences left me totally unprepared for flying like this. Had there been wind or air here, I'd have been in trouble. At superhigh speeds friction is not your friend. As is, I had no idea how high I was or how far I'd traveled. Everywhere here looked the same as where I'd started. Willing my flight to stop, I was pleased to note it did so immediately. No sense of slowing down. No jolting to a halt. And I was more than a little surprised to suddenly find my feet on the grey stuff again.

That was confusing and more than a little disorienting. I'd flown up.... I'd gone.... The ground shouldn't be.... Letting out a breath I didn't remember taking, I relaxed myself. Okay, this place was really strange. However, it did seem to have a set of rules it worked by and so far those rules seemed to be constant. Now, if I could just find a rule book... or someone to teach me?

Yeah, that would be good. Someone to teach me. But how to go about finding that someone? I hovered just over the grey stuff and considered the matter for a while.

The actress thing hadn't worked. Why? Maybe because I'd more tried to conjure her up than find her. And she wouldn't be here anyway if my suspicions were right and this place was Limbo or some ethereal plane or something. Or... if it was the some sort of spirit world. As I was a necromancer, this last idea made a certain amount of sense. And if true, that made even more sense as to why she hadn't suddenly materialized. She was a living woman. Or an actress anyway, which was probably the next best thing. It seemed pretty likely that I wouldn't find her or any other normal, living person here. All of which sounded reasonable but I didn't know if it was true or not. Not with any great certainty. The only thing I knew for sure was that she'd failed to appear.

So, I decided to try finding a teacher rather than conjuring one up. I began concentrating. Something akin to my shadow sense seemed to spread out in all directions. For a long while I felt

nothing out there. It seemed like my senses were still expanding outward in every direction at once. The feeling was hard to describe and more than a little frightening in and of itself, but I held my will firm and continued concentrating.

And I felt something.

Someone in fact. He, and I was suddenly sure it was a he, was very far away. But distance here was not a problem. In fact, now that I had a location I felt sure I could transport myself through... shadows. Except there were no shadows here. And yet for some reason the feeling was quite similar. Not the same, but similar nonetheless. I decided to give it a try and stepped forward.

There followed a most peculiar rushing sensation and I found myself suddenly beside a man. He was dressed in clothing that seemed well suited to the nineteen thirties. Beyond him was the first difference I'd thus far found in the scenery: a huge bank of fog that rose in a straight wall all across the horizon from the ground at my feet all the way up as high as I could see.

"Hello," he greeted me pleasantly. "I felt your interest and thought I'd wait until you got here."

"Oh," I cleverly replied, looking the fellow over. He was a bit shorter than myself. Early twenties maybe. Stocky. With short blonde hair, and a pleasant face. "Umm, I'm kinda lost."

"Really?" he asked, clearly interested.

"Yeah," I admitted. "I've been coming here in my dreams sometimes of late. I don't know much in the way of how things work here. Or even where here is for that matter."

"Humph, yes," he muttered, now looking a little sad. "Well, I hate to break it to you but you're dead. Something happened and you died. You're currently in the spirit realm. At the moment you're right on the edge of where it borders on the realm of dreams," he said with a gesture at the

fog bank.

“Well,” I began a bit uncomfortably, “Yes, I did die. However, I’m not dead. I’m undead.”

“Really?” he declared. “Now isn’t that interesting?” He then seemed to look behind me at something. “So you are. Still connected to the world of the living, that is. So, are you a vampire, a soulless, or a hunter?”

“You know about all that?” I asked, immeasurably relieved I wasn’t going to have to try to explain all of that.

“Know about it?” he asked with a big smile, “I was one. I was one of the soulless. Came awfully close to losing my grip on my soul, at that. But enough about me for the moment. What about you?”

“I’m Wallace McAlister. I’ve been turned into some sort of undead hybrid. Not quite a vampire. Not a zombie or a ghoul either. Been this way for about six months now. But now, my powers are starting to grow. I suppose being here is some sort of side effect of that.”

“A hybrid?” he asked clearly perplexed, “How in the world did that happen?”

So I took the next while to explain.

“Ahh,” muttered when I was done. “So Selina finally got around to making her telum did she? And you’re the result.”

“Yeah. Hey, wait a minute... I never mentioned her name, just where we lived. You don’t actually know her do you?”

“Oh, I do indeed,” he contradicted pleasantly. “Got along quite well with her and Miranda. I suppose Miranda is still with her since I haven’t seen her on this side?”

“She sure is. Just as playful and cuddly as ever.”

He got a good laugh out of that. “I suppose that means not at all. Miranda lost her emotions very quickly, even by soulless standards. I don’t think she ever missed them. On the other hand, I missed mine very much.”

“I never got your name,” I said as soon as it occurred to me.

“Please, call me Jack,” he said, offering his hand. Shaking his I got a sudden, powerful sense of who he was. He was a good man. Very brave. Devoted to his friends. He’d lived a very long time before dying and he’d died on his terms. I released his hand as though I’d been shocked. And in a way I had been.

“Sorry,” he began sincerely, “I forgot you’re new here. And that in large part you don’t really belong here yet. You get used to the little glimpses into other people’s lives.”

“Umm, sure.”

He gave another little laugh. “You really do. I promise. Now, I believe you sought me out because you needed answers. As it happens, I was needing someone with your special circumstances. I suppose with both of us pulling, it was inevitable that we should meet.”

“You needed me?” I asked.

“Yes. I most certainly did and I still do. But more on that later. For the moment, let’s concentrate on getting you acclimated.”

“Alright,” I agreed enthusiastically.

He chuckled, “Very good. I’ve always found that eager students are the best. Now, why are you here in your dreams when no other vampires are?”

“I have no idea,” I admitted. So, there were no vampires here? Interesting.

“No vampires and no other undead either,” he confirmed apparently reading my mind or

perhaps merely guessing from my facial expression. “Only former vampires and such along with all the mortal souls. All those who have not gone on to other realms yet.”

“You’re waiting on your friends before moving on,” I said, knowing I was right.

“Indeed. You’re most perceptive,” he agreed. “But more about me later. I’ll go ahead and answer my own question. You’re here because Selina used a potion called the ‘essence of death’ when she created you as a telum.”

“She just told me about it last night,” I told him, still a bit disturbed by the thought.

“When she created you as a telum,” he continued, “She also made you a necromancer. Possibly a tenebromancer as well but that’s not really important. It’s the necromancer part that’s truly important. That’s the only thing that could have brought you through the crack in the great seal.”

“I figured that out for myself... the necromancer part that is. Although, I don’t think she has yet. And what’s a tenebromancer and a great seal?” I asked curiously.

“Enthusiastic but unfocused,” he muttered to himself. I felt my face grow red from embarrassment. “No, no. Don’t worry. I’ll take enthusiastic and all-over-the-place to incurious but focused any day. We’ll save the great seals for another day.”

“Okay, sure,” I agreed, relaxing a bit.

“Good, now let’s get down to basics.”

Noise dragged me groggily from sleep. After a befuddled moment, I realized it was my

bedside phone. Reaching over, I snagged it and managed a 'hello'. Barely. What time was it?

“As you know, the Lady Selina is summoning her court this evening along with the vampire high council,” Miranda informed me. After a moment I remembered where I’d put my clock and looked over. Just a couple of minutes before sunset. “All those titled lord or lady and above will be in attendance as will many others. She thought this might afford you a good opportunity to meet the court. And of course to see if you can spot any likely candidates for the murderer.”

“Okay,” I mumbled in a pretty good imitation of awakese, “When and where?”

“Eleven o’clock sharp at the Coliseum.”

“Okay, I’ll be there.”

“After you’ve looked things over inside and out, find me.” And with that she hung up.

It took me sitting there looking at the phone for several seconds before I figured out that I needed to hang it up. Damn but I was sleepy. It seemed that being active in the spirit world was quite similar to being active here. I certainly felt like I’d pulled an all nighter. Blood. I needed blood. That would help get me going.

Getting up, I meandered my way through the house to the refrigerator. Pulling out a packet, I used a kitchen knife to remove a corner of the plastic and began immediately sucking down the contents. It was cold but I needed a quick jumpstart tonight. Cold blood was just wrong but it certainly beat no blood at all. Hmm. There was a file folder on my kitchen table. A quick glance revealed it to be full of detailed information the police had gathered from the latest murder scene. I decided to save it for later as I remembered something much more important... I had more steaks in the fridge. After a little looking, I found some butter to melt over the one I picked. Ten minutes later found me happily eating my steak in front of a roaring fire in my den’s fireplace. Much better.

Flipping through the file, I found nothing that helped. A reiteration of the basic facts which I already knew. No, wait. Hmm. This was interesting and new: the crime lab found trace amounts of rock salt around the neck wounds. Something that had been under the killer's fingernails, possibly? Yet another clue that didn't help much at all. I flipped through the rest of the report and the accompanying inventory list without finding anything else of interest. Dropping it back on the table, I turned my thoughts back to Miranda's call. It was time to get moving.

Tonight I put on some very expensive, loose fitting clothing. The black and blue looked good on me and wouldn't hamper any fighting I might have to do. My black vest concealed to some extent the pistol and my leather long coat would do for concealing the rest of my weaponry. Ensemble complete, I went to the car, hopped in, and left for the general vicinity of the Coliseum.

The Coliseum was one of the largest gathering places you would never find on any map. The reason for this was simple. It was located underground. In this regard it was vaguely similar to what I'd seen in Houston. Houston had miles of subterranean tunnels and facilities that the vampires down there used. In fact, all that space was now being put to good use by their new ruling council. A coalition of supernaturals similar to the one that ran the nightside of Atlanta. Unlike both those cities, the DFW metroplex was ruled by a single vampire... the Lady Selina Dupree. And she always held her full court in the Coliseum. A variety of clubs and bars had been built over the large gathering place so that people walking around the vicinity at all hours wouldn't draw attention. There were over a dozen entrances to the Coliseum and the tunnels within them all converged at an underground choke point some fifty yards short of the building itself. According to those in the know, there was supposed to be a secret entrance known only to the current ruler of Dallas, which was where the coliseum was not so coincidentally located. Maybe later I'd ask Selina about it. Or perhaps simply

try to find it myself.

Summoned again, I thought shaking my head. Speeding down the freeway, I recalled the last time I'd been summoned to see Selina. At the time, I'd been sitting around my Atlanta apartment. I hadn't been doing anything in particular and had vaguely planned on going to one of the clubs in the vampire section of town. Sitting there on my couch, I realized that my hand was absently moving. Almost as though I had been writing something. Then suddenly I could see my name written in the air in front of me. It was written in blood in a beautiful cursive hand and everywhere I looked it hovered right in front of me. Then it suddenly burst into flames and the flames still spelled out my name. "Wallace," I heard her say from halfway across the country. "Wallace McAlister, I summon you from need. Wallace McAlister, I summon you by blood. Wallace McAlister, I summon you with fire." And just then, plain as day, I could suddenly see her. She sat at a very old, very fine writing desk. A sheet of thick paper was held up before her and traces of fire still licked at the page but did not consume it. Only my name was burned. Burned through the page three times in three neat, even lines. I somehow knew that she'd used her own blood for the summons.

She'd looked up, knowing I could see her and apparently able to see me. "Your time away has come to an end," she informed me quietly but firmly. "I have need of you and your unique services. Murder is being done within my realm. Someone is murdering young women. More specifically, I think a vampire is murdering these women. Come home. I need your help." And with that the vision had cleared and I had been surprised to find myself still in my Atlanta apartment.

Turning off the freeway, I felt a wry grin come over the right side of my face. 'Come home' she'd said. This place was a long way from home, yet. Up until three weeks ago, I'd only been to the area twice and both those times had been short visits at that.

Half a mile from the nearest entrance to the Coliseum, I pulled off the main road and found myself a parking place. As a general rule, I didn't like parking too close to where I was going. I preferred having a chance to check things out ahead of time and tonight was no exception. I noticed a big, black fellow sitting on the porch of the house across the street. Hmm. He looked pretty healthy even if he did have a little grey here and there. I walked partway into his yard which got me his full attention.

"You live here?" I asked.

"Yep."

"You gonna be up for a few hours?"

"I reckon so."

"You mind keeping an eye on my car and making sure nothing happens to it?"

"Why should I?"

"My friend Ben Franklin would really appreciate it."

"Oh? Well, now. I suppose if Ben were to become my friend, too.... Well then, we just might have a deal."

"Alright," I told him with an easy smile, walking the rest of the way to his porch. I pulled out a hundred dollar bill and handed it to him. "There's another one for you if everything's good with my car when I get back."

"I'll see to it," he replied agreeably.

"Then we have a deal," I stated. He nodded and smiled his agreement and I began walking towards my first destination.

So far as clubs went, the Tornado Shelter was your run of the mill, noisy rock club. It was

operated by vampires via their human minions... though no one but vampires knew this. Inside, one of the twelve Coliseum entrances could be found. I didn't plan on going in that way. I just wanted to see if anyone was hanging around who shouldn't be. Once I'd walked to within sight of the building, I stepped into an alley shadow and out of a shadow on the roof of the building next to the club.

A short step carried me back into the shadows where I concealed myself from anyone who might be looking. From there I watched and listened. This close to the club it was noisy. Down below, about a dozen people loitered near the entrance. They were all humans. One of the bouncers who stood near the club entrance was a soulless. No other supernaturals down there. What about up here with me? Looking around cautiously, I found no one. Nor did I spot anyone on the nearby rooftops. Other than an interesting view, this didn't seem to be getting me anywhere. Looking across to another club and another access point, I stepped through to another rooftop.

Here, I had an even better vantage point of the new club. From where I stood, I could actually see partway into the club. Again, one of the bouncers was soulless. The music here was hip hop but just as loud as the rock club had been. Two young-looking vampires were walking together towards the entrance, a pale, young black woman and a skinny, white fellow. Neither were particularly old and therefore not particularly powerful.

I felt a strong surge of anger flash through me. Ooh whee! Someone had just pissed off Selina big time. Not a good idea here in her place of power. Not a good idea at all.

Her ire triggered a surge of my own anger. I was wasting time. With twelve entrances, there was no way I would be able to find the killer even if he or she should be skulking around with a sign over their heads labeling them as the murderer. It would take a couple of dozen people running

surveillance on each place with multiple cameras to just stake the entrances out and do it right. Silently snarling to myself, I stepped off the side of the building and began floating down the shadow filled alley. Halfway down my ability to fly cut out and I dropped like a rock.

My landing was rough but since becoming a vampire I'd dropped from quite a bit further and suffered no physical injury. My pride was pretty sore though. At least I'd landed on my feet. The two vampires who'd been about to enter the club stopped and looked down the alley at me. Annoyed to no end, I walked out to meet them.

"I don't think we've met," the girl said cautiously.

"No," I agreed and started to walk on past them into the club. However, it occurred to me that I might need a few friends in this place. Friends who could go places without drawing the kind of attention that Selina and Miranda inevitably draw to themselves. "Sorry," I said, turning back to them. I caught fleeting looks of anger from both of them that evaporated at my apology, "I'm not having a very good night so far. It was rude of me to take it out on you. Please accept my sincere apologies."

"Oh," the woman began with a pretty smile, "I think we can both relate to that. I'm Blanche. This is my friend, Marvin. We're on our way to Oz. Care to join us on the yellow brick road?"

"Yeah," I agreed with a grin, "I was just going there myself. I'm Wallace."

"Good meeting you," Marvin said, looking me over with dark brown eyes.

"Pleasure, Wallace," Blanche told me, grabbing my left arm at the same time she grabbed Marvin's right. "Let's go." And into the club we went.

We'd no more than stepped through the door when another stab of anger ripped through me. This one was worse and I felt myself stiffen slightly as Blanche worked our way through the crowd. Someone had really pissed Selina off this time. There was going to be blood spilled tonight.

"Hey!" Someone grabbed my right arm and almost spun me out of Blanche's grip on my left arm. "Watch where the hell you're going, whitey." I casually twisted his arm around into an elbow lock.

"Don't touch me," I told him rather absently as I shoved him towards the exit. "While you're at it, get the hell outta here." I really felt that was the least I could have done. It was getting harder to control my anger... Selina's anger. And there was simply no way I was going to be able to concentrate enough to raise any kind of mental shielding while in this noisy place. Just wasn't going to happen.

"Let's hurry," Marvin suggested a bit nervously. I nodded my emphatic agreement.

We were almost to the entrance into the back rooms when my arm was grabbed again and someone punched me in the jaw. It rocked me back a bit. While it was mildly painful, it was nothing compared to Selina's slap from last night.

"What the hell are you doing?" Blanche asked the man and his four friends who were now standing behind us.

"I'm not going to let this ghost punk get away with disrespecting me," the same obnoxious fellow declared. "And we don't like seeing a girl like you disrespecting her people by going out with these white boys, either."

"Oh, really?" Blanche asked obviously mad now.

"I... I'll go get help," Marvin informed us just before running through the door into the back

rooms. Go Lassy, run and get help.

“I don’t have time for this crap,” I told Blanche. “We need to see the wizard before she kills someone. Or several someones.”

“Oh!” she declared, “So that’s why.... You’re right. She might need us. And I’m afraid if we mix it up with these bitches that we might get carried away and massacre their dumb asses right here in public. Wouldn’t do.”

“Just who do you think you’re talking about massacring and who you callin’ bitches?” he demanded, clearly astonished and becoming angrier.

“Where are the damn bouncers?” I asked annoyed. I was working hard not to let Selina’s anger control my actions.

“It’s a busy night and due to the big show, security’s got a lot on their hands,” she stated. “But it sure would be handy if they were here now.”

I tried focusing my attention on my desire for these punks to leave and tried to channel that through my voice, “You five. Get the hell out. Now.” I knew right away that it hadn’t worked. People around us were starting to back away as they realized something was going on.

“You’ve got to be kid....” Which was as far as he got when I hit him. Not stopping, I hit three of the other four in quick succession and followed those stunning strikes up with knockout punches. Blanche had been kind enough to put down the last fellow. It felt good to get a little stress out of my system. I was also pleased with the level of control I’d used. I hadn’t stuck my fist through any of them and they’d all eventually recover.

“Shall we?” I asked, holding out my arm to her. She blinked at me a moment before accepting my arm. We walked through the door to the back rooms just as I heard a bouncer ask what had

happened behind us.

Inside there was a crudely finished room with a folding poker table in the middle of it and five empty seats. A pair of cameras were mounted high on the walls. We walked to the only other door in the room and knocked. The door opened and we stepped through into a plushly appointed hallway. Thick carpet covered the floor and rich wood paneling the walls and ceiling. Quite a change. Next to the door stood a pair of Selina's guard. Both were dressed in heavy body armor marked with her fleur de lis over a sword and were each armed with a drum fed assault rifle and a sword. These fellows weren't bouncers. No, they were part of Selina's personal military. Once they let us inside, they returned to guarding the entrance.

We walked down the hallway at a good pace. After a moment, Blanche quietly said, "You're stronger than I thought you were at first. When we met outside, I thought you were a fairly young vampire like Marvin and myself. But when I saw you move back there. You weren't even trying were you? To move fast I mean."

"No, not really. But then, I'm not exactly your normal, run of the mill vampire, either," I sort of explained as we walked. We continued in silence for a good ways down the very long, downward sloping corridors.

"What were you doing up on the roof," she asked at last. "We didn't see you up there but we certainly heard you land in the ally."

"I was looking for someone. Someone where they shouldn't be. I realized I was looking in the wrong place and decided it was time to go see the Wizard, to continue with your Oz analogy. On another topic, shouldn't we have caught up with Lassy by now?"

"Lassy?"

“Yeah, you know, Marvin. The fellow who ran off like Lassy to go get help?” Seeing her blank look, I asked, “Didn’t you ever see the show or at least hear of it?”

“No,” she answered sincerely, “I suppose I missed it. I was converted in the mid-nineteen twenties and spent a lot of time after that in North Africa and Southern Europe working against the Nazi’s with the Lady Selina. After that I stayed in Europe for a while. I’ve only been back in the States for a couple of years now.” Oh. Perhaps she wasn’t as young as I’d thought. As we walked, I explained about Lassy.

“Please don’t be mad at Marvin. He’s not a very strong vampire and hates violence. He’s an excellent linguist and mathematician though. And you should hear him play the piano. True world-class talent.”

“If everyone were the same, the world would be a boring place,” I muttered absently as we continued walking. I found myself working more and more to control my temper the closer we got to Selina. It occurred to me that this might be a good time to consciously work at raising my mental shields. So for the next hundred yards, I did just that. Though limited, I did have some success. Her continuing anger felt much more like it was someone else’s rather than an extension of my own angst.

A bit further along our corridor joined another. We continued on, walking in a slightly different direction but on the same basic course. Ahead of us in the tunnel another vampire strolled along. This fellow wore a grey pinstriped business suit. He walked at a sedate pace and we caught up with him in short order.

“Good evening,” Blanche said.

“I doubt it,” he replied dourly. Which pretty effectively killed any chance of polite conversation so we continued on past him without slowing. Before long our corridor was joined by

a third and then a fourth corridor. We were almost to the fifth adjoining tunnel when we found Lassy returning. He was actually running quite fast and had a couple of young vampires in tow. They hit the breaks and stopped before running into us... a fact I was personally pleased to note.

“Oh!” he declared, “You’re okay.”

“Yes, Marvin,” Blanche assured him with a hint of exasperation, “We’re fine. What took you so long though?”

“Well, the flower guard at the door refused to help. So I had to run all the way to the big corridor. Once I got there, yet more of the flower guards refused to help. So I had to find Nelson and Phyllis which added more time.” Flower guard? I was about to ask about that when I realized that he was referring to Selina’s personal guard. Their fleur de lis emblem. I rather doubted that he called them the flower guard when any of them were around to hear.

“Alright. I’d have preferred that you’d stayed with us but it’s no big deal. So? How are you two doing?” She asked the two new arrivals. Phyllis was a young looking woman with perhaps a touch of Cuban ancestry if I had to guess. Tonight she wore a blue and white dress with matching ribbons in her hair. She was athletic and cute but not in Selina’s league looks wise. Not many were. Nelson was a slightly pudgy stump of a man. He stood almost the same height as Phyllis, which I would guess to be about five and a half feet tall, and had a broad, barrel chest. I wouldn’t have called him handsome, but there was definitely something about him beyond the tattoos on the sides of his bald head. Perhaps enhanced charisma was one of the powers his vampiric blood conveyed.

“I’m fine,” Phyllis replied quickly, “But we need to get back to the meeting. There are all sorts of bad vibes floating around. Everyone seems to be on edge tonight.”

“It’s the Lady Selina,” Blanche explained. “She’s upset and it’s carrying over and down her

entire line.”

“That would explain quite a bit,” Nelson said thoughtfully. “Carue is here and his bunch are acting normal... though he is staying away from his brothers and sisters. He’s strong enough to shield those beneath him. However, Michelle is also here and she’s not. She and her people have been spitting and hissing for the last hour or so. A lot of the lesser nobility descended directly from the Lady Selina have also been much more obnoxious than normal. It all runs downhill.” I knew Carue from Houston. He was a vampire lord and had his own little army. His device had been a red lion rampant over crossed axes. I hadn’t been around him long enough to get any sense of what kind of man he might be.

“Francesca and Cora almost got into it earlier as well,” Phyllis added. “The entire Arlington delegation has been squabbling most of the evening. Likewise, the Fort Worth bunch appeared to be on the verge of attacking the Denton people. Hopefully the Lady Selina will calm down soon so they can settle down too.”

“Then let’s go see to it she calms down,” I said, starting down the corridor.

“Ha! You say that like we can just walk up and tell her to calm down,” Blanche replied with a sad shake of her head as she began following after me. The others exchanged glances and followed her.

“Oh, that’s exactly what I intend to do,” I informed her, walking a little faster.

“You’ve got to be...” which is as far as she got when a gasp escaped her and her face twisted in a mask of fury. I’d felt it too, through my thin shields. Another stab of rage pulsed through me causing me to inadvertently inhale. Looking back, it appeared as though Marvin would have collapsed had it not been for Phyllis and Nelson each grabbing an arm. Whatever was upsetting

Selina needed to be stopped before she started a riot or something.

“Enough of this crap. I’m going to go put a stop to this,” I informed them just a second before taking off. One of the others might have said something but I didn’t wait to hear what it might have been. While I had momentarily considered flying, I didn’t think I was up to it. Not after the long day of mental training or my previous failure at flying this evening. Instead, I ran. And I ran much faster than a mortal ever dreamed of running. Fast enough that thanks to the unchanging laws of physics, I had to run up walls a couple of times because there were turns along the way as well as people in the hallway and I wasn’t going to be able to stop in time to politely go around them. In fairly short order I arrived at the place where the corridors finally joined into the single entry tunnel into the coliseum. There I did have to slow down and eventually stop.

Everything went through a single security checkpoint and there was a backlog of vampires, soulless and even a few humans waiting in line here. There was no way to go through what had become a very large, wide hall without passing through the checkpoint. Not unless you could walk through shadows and appear somewhere on the other side of the checkpoint.

Which is exactly what I did.

Miranda had said that I should seek her out when I got inside. However, right now Selina and her raging temper had top billing. I turned right into the huge network of tunnels that ran beneath the Coliseum and began jogging. This took me in her direction. Just another something I suddenly knew. Slowing to a quick walk, I turned down a couple of well appointed corridors and soon found myself in front of a guarded door. Upon seeing me both of the guards raised their weapons. Almost without thinking, I stepped sideways into a shadow and out of a shadow on the other side of the door. Thankfully it had been a very short jump and even though I hadn’t been able to see my

destination, I was neither sweating nor did I have a headache which were both improvements over previous sightless jumps. I wondered what had the guards so upset but only casually as I rather suspected it had to do with Selina's mood. And she was very close now. Maybe I'd verify what had them so on edge later.

Continuing on, I passed through a door on the right, closing it silently behind me. This placed me in a decent sized sitting room. From there I walked across the room, through an open doorway, and into a good sized bedroom where Selina stood and Miranda sat patiently. Or rather where Miranda sat and Selina ranted. I didn't have time to get the gist of things... just a brief, unlikely, rude and decidedly unnatural bit of background about someone's lineage. Her tirade came to an abrupt end when she noticed me walk through the door. Miranda stood quickly, then seeing me, she slowly sat back down. I did however, remain the focus of her attention.

"What are you doing here?" Selina demanded angrily. "These are my private chambers."

"You're about to start a riot. I thought you might want to know," I replied as calmly as possible. This close to her, my little shields were doing me no good whatsoever.

"What are you talking...." was as far as she got when she figured it out on her own. And just like that her anger winked out of my head. I breathed a sigh of relief.

"Thank you," I told her sincerely, sitting myself down on the edge of a comfortable chair in front of a large desk. "That's much better. Care to share with me what has you so upset?"

Her eyes narrowed dangerously and she stared at me for a long moment. Just then Miranda's radio crackled to life. The guards outside the door announced that they'd seen an armed intruder but that he'd disappeared and security couldn't find him on any of the cameras. Security was now doing a check to try to figure out how he'd gotten into the complex in the first place. Selina's bodyguard

looked at me a moment and then demanded a description of the intruder. Caucasian, red hair, six foot tall, wrap around shades, wearing blue and black under a long, black leather coat, armed with a sword and some kind of machine pistol or submachine gun. Sounded familiar. I was rather impressed about the weapons they'd noticed. They'd missed my .44 but that was about it. I supposed they'd seen my carry strap for the Mac-10 and perhaps a crease in the coat from the sword sheath.

“He's one of us,” Miranda informed them via her radio. “His name is Wallace McAlister and he has full security clearance. Keep his name out of the computers.” Turning to me, she stated, “We need to introduce you to the security personnel. The sooner the better.” I nodded my agreement and returned my attention to Selina. The beautiful vampire woman had completely changed her mood in the interim; her intense gaze was now considering. It didn't make me feel any more comfortable than her annoyed look had. She was shielding so strongly, I wasn't getting any clues from her mentally.

I narrowed my own eyes slightly as I returned her gaze. No matter how much she worried me, I was determined that I wouldn't let her know it. “What's going on behind those pretty blue eyes of yours?” I asked cautiously. She ignored my question and continued her silent examination. After a moment, she closed her eyes and seemed to concentrate. Inside me, I felt something suddenly awaken. That part of me that I'd used to speak to the dead and to walk through shadows had become active. It had responded to something she'd done.

“I knew it!” she declared opening her eyes. Miranda turned her gaze to her mistress for a moment before returning it to me.

“And just what did you know?” I asked, despite the fact that I had a pretty good idea of what she'd just figured out.

“More than blood flows through your veins,” she stated almost excited. “Now magic does as well.”

“Actually, I’ve had magic of my own since I was reborn,” I told her quietly. “It just took me a while to distinguish between my vampiric abilities and my magical ones.” And there seemed to be quite an area where the two mixed together that I still wasn’t sure about. Like flying. And perhaps the shadow traveling as well. The whole speaking to the dead thing was not a grey area though. No, that was clearly a purely magical, necromantic ability.

“And just when did you figure this out?” she demanded on the verge of becoming angry again. “When were you planning on telling me?”

“You know,” I declared flatly as my eyes again narrowed, “You have this amazing ability to go really quickly from being a wonderful woman to being an obnoxious, overly demanding bitch.” She looked stunned. I expected her to drop right on back into her previous rage or to even attack me, instead she erupted in laughter. Well, that was a bit of a pleasant surprise.

“You’re right,” she informed me once she’d regained her breath. “Although I hadn’t realized that I’d been wonderful to you, before or after the demanding bitch in me had come out. You’ve been away learning about yourself. I suppose it was a bit unfair of me to demand answers to questions we haven’t even discussed yet.”

“Thank you,” I told her with a little bow. “Apology accepted.”

“Now, I’d like you to answer my questions. If you would,” she said with a smile.

“I’ll make you a counter offer,” I said with a little grin.

“Oh?” she asked as a lot of her good humor fled her eyes. It was only with a great effort that I did not allow my grin to fade as her humor departed.

“Yes. Right now you need to get on with Coliseum business. Half of the folks out there are probably wondering if you’ve been back here hacking up some of their fellows. The other half are most likely sure of it. I wouldn’t be at all surprised if there weren’t rumors of war spreading through your audience. Those folks need reassurance and guidance. However, after the show’s over, you can take me out on a date. If you feed me well and ply me with good conversation, I think I just might be willing to turn the topic towards magic and related abilities.”

“A date?”

“Yes, those are my conditions. You may feel free to accept or decline,” I informed her with a quiet, confident smile. There was a fine line I was walking here. Too much confidence and she’d likely feel the need to slap me down. Too little and she’d go back to simply demanding answers. She turned to look for a long moment at Miranda who returned her gaze. It didn’t take me long to figure out they were communicating psychically. After a bit, both women simultaneously turned calculating eyes back to me which I found to be a bit disconcerting.

“Very well, Wallace,” she informed me smoothly and perhaps a touch coolly. “A date it is. In the meantime, as you pointed out, I have a grand assembly to address. Look around, see what you can find. See what you can see. We will meet you back here after I dismiss the court.”

“I’m looking forward to it,” I replied with another little bow before turning and walking out past the very surprised door guards.

A very fine, very dangerous line.

While the meeting took place, I wandered around the three tiered coliseum keeping an eye on those attending and looking around in general. Structure-wise, It seemed very similar to an ancient Roman coliseum. One that just happened to be underground. The overwhelming majority of people sat in the southern section of the huge area. This area was laid out in a huge semicircle facing the slightly rounded face of the opposing northern side.

Built in three levels, the northern side was impressively decorated with statuary and frescoes. Hallways to the east and west separated the two sections. Selina and her entourage sat or stood in a well appointed box in the center of the northern side.

Sadly, the murderer had forgotten to turn on his or her neon sign identifying them as such. However, I still found quite the variety of vampires and soulless in attendance. Of the couple of thousand attendees, about one hundred of them wore heavy armor. They weren't armed... theoretically speaking at least. The security checkpoint had supposedly taken care of that. But I remained armed and so I was making no assumptions about anyone else. Regardless of whether or not they were armed, they were still vampires and soulless. For many, that was much more dangerous than any mere weapons could have made them. One vampire I spotted wore a belt decorated with werewolf ears. I personally didn't consider that a good thing but I knew a lot of vampires did. Another vampire I spotted wore a very nice teddy along with fishnet stockings on her arms and legs with a matching choker. And that was about all she wore. That, I definitely considered a good thing.

Other vampires ran the gamut of clothing and looks you'd find walking down any city street. Everything from business professionals to street toughs and everything in between. There were more than a few I'd have bet were soccer moms had they not been here in attendance.

After a while, I ended up behind Selina, back in the shadows at the edge of the tunnel network where it would take someone with truly exceptional vision to see me. While it was certainly true that there were a few such people in attendance, there were not as many as you might suppose. The Coliseum was large enough that seeing that distance, that clearly, in the poor lighting wouldn't be too likely. Selina, however, knew perfectly well where I was despite the fact she never looked at me.

Since shortly after I'd begun walking around, I'd gotten renewed feelings of anger from her. They came in little bursts or quick stabs. After a while, I'd figured out that these sensations were being caused by her gaze crossing the people who'd initially generated said feelings. I was back here now hoping to put a few faces together with the emotional upheaval. And I did.

I found it a bit distressing that there were so many of them that angered her so. A few over two dozen. Of course, when one considered that there were somewhat over two thousand in attendance, I supposed a couple of dozen wasn't too high a number. Except most of the two dozen were powerful. Much more so than the run of the mill vampire. Judging by the vampires I'd met in Atlanta, I estimated that the least of this little bunch were a couple of centuries old. Some much older. A bit over halfway through the process of recognizing these individuals, I almost killed one of them.

For figuring out which vampires were on her crap list, I'd simply waited for one of her little stabs of anger or resentment and then focused in on where she was looking. It turned out to be much less difficult than I would have suspected... had I actually thought this through before jumping into

it. Basically, all I did was relax and slide along my attunement to Selina. After a minute or two of this, I knew exactly where she was looking. I used a pair of field glasses I'd lifted off one of the security guards to follow her gaze and zoom in.

Alternately, when she was speaking more than looking around, I tried holding the mental image of the vampires I saw towards Selina. Her subconscious either approved or disapproved. How strong the reaction was told me all I needed to know.

These two processes were working out quite nicely. In fairly short order I had a mental catalog of slightly over a dozen faces that upset or outright angered her. Good information to have to be sure.

Then her gaze crossed the face of a dark haired woman and her entourage. The woman's face was pretty if a bit on the hard, cold side. Her raven hair was done up elaborately, held in place by a number of platinum and gem encrusted combs which added to the cold effect. She wore a deep green, velvet dress and I could see lace at her wrists and neck. This woman was powerful. One of the most, if not the most powerful vampire in attendance. And Selina hated her with a passion that ran all the way down to the core of her soul and literally took my breath away.

Her hatred washed over and through me like a lava bath. Without realizing it, I drew my sword and was about to step through one of my surrounding shadows and out behind the woman. At the same time I'd be swinging the sword. By the time I stepped out behind her, the sword would be almost to her neck with the full force of my swing behind it.

At the last moment, Selina sensed what I was about to do. With a tiny motion of her hand and a slight turn of her head, she told me not to kill the woman. And with that Selina's anger came to an abrupt halt. Sheathing my blade, I absently noticed several members of the audience breath a

sigh of relief that the flood of incensed emotions had once more ended. Selina continued speaking as though nothing had happened. And I suppose it hadn't. By a very small fraction of a second it hadn't.

So, with a sigh of my own I slowly relaxed and went back to cataloging faces who aggravated the Lady Selina. This time it was more difficult sensing her feelings towards the images I held up to her as she had her emotions firmly reined in. It took more of my concentration and correspondingly more of my attention. Therefore, it was with some measure of startlement that I realized the gathering had come to an end. Overcoming my surprise quickly, I watched the green velvet dressed vampire woman, whom I'd nearly killed, and her attendants begin mingling with some of the other guests. It was obvious she commanded a great deal of respect from those she spoke to.

Like silk brushing across my shoulders, I felt Selina walk through the corridor behind me despite the fact a wall stood between us. She too was going to talk with some of the attendees. I remained where I stood for the moment. It would be some time before Selina returned to her apartment for our date. These little discussions were where she'd sew up some of the loose stitches in her hold over the vampires who'd attended. She had agents out in the crowd listening for folks trying to undo those stitches as well as some hidden surveillance devices.

I supposed these and other facts were just bleeding over into my head through the psychic connection that linked us. Curious, I wondered what else might flow through such a connection. There'd be time for speculation and perhaps experimentation on that front later. Turning, I walked quickly through the corridors down to the coliseum floor.

Once there, I hung around the periphery of the slowly dissolving gathering. I spoke to a few people but not many and not for long. Mostly, I was interested in watching for anything that struck

me as being out of place or interesting. For instance, the fellow with the werewolf ears was rebuffed in his efforts to speak to the woman in the green velvet dress. I had the impression that the ears disgusted her. Personally, I agreed with her even if Selina did hate the woman's guts. The fellow was angry but left with a bow and without a fuss. My earlier, brief acquaintances, Phyllis and Nelson, spoke for a while with a rather plain looking fellow in a well-used business suit. Not strange in and of itself, but when Nelson noticed Blanche approaching, the guy in the business suit followed his gaze and melted away into the crowd before she got there. I made a mental note and continued my stroll.

A while later, I noticed the Daniels, Jeff and Veronica. These were the vampires who kept getting my cousin Lou in trouble. For that matter they now seemed to be getting my cousin Jenna in trouble as well. The two of them were speaking quietly with a shorter fellow with a wild mane of white hair. I wondered vaguely if I should talk to them about their continuing involvement with my family. They weren't a hostile influence to be sure. But they certainly brought along far more than their share of trouble and seemed to enable yet more of it. For the moment I decided to think on it. I continued my walk around the coliseum floor.

From this side of the gathering, I had a clear line of sight to the green velvet clad vampire woman. One of Selina's people approached her group bearing a silver tray. The servant offered the tray's contents to the woman and she picked up a small envelope from it. Tray in hand, the servant departed with a bow. The envelope disappeared. I think the vampire lady actually placed it up her sleeve but I wasn't sure. Regardless, the envelope was gone and the lady continued speaking with various individuals. And one at a time, two of those people talking to her turned out to be a pair of the more powerful vampires who Selina had reacted to poorly. Very interesting. I rather wished I

could have gotten close enough to listen but decided against it. Besides, here in public I doubted they'd say anything too interesting. With a little luck security's surveillance devices was recording their conversation for me anyway. Just in case.

Soon, the main coliseum area had emptied again. I followed the crowd for a ways and found that a great many of them now occupied a large side hall. This was where the refreshments were being served from a variety of interesting fountains. Blood flowed from all the fountains but one, which looked to be simply water. Expensive looking goblets were available at a number of adjacent tables. A few of the tables held huge piles of more substantial food for the soulless and the very few humans in attendance. Soulless had large appetites hence the large volumes. It all smelled very good but I decided to hold off until my date with Selina.

"Hello," a deeper-than-normal woman's voice whispered from right behind me causing me to turn quickly. Only thanks to my supernatural grace did I not fall flat on my face. "I don't believe we've been introduced. I am Telena Petrokovitch." It was the very vampire woman I'd almost killed earlier. Surprise.

"Hi, there," I replied with a grin. Looking like an idiot is a sure fire way for people to underestimate you. Sadly, I was very good at this. "I was wondering who you might be. I'm Wallace McAlister."

"It's a pleasure to meet you Wallace," she replied, sounding amused. I couldn't help but notice that her entourage had me mostly surrounded. I didn't think I was in any immediate danger but it certainly didn't help me relax any. "You are of Selina's lineage, aren't you?"

"Indeed I am, Telena," I replied smoothly, which caused one of her younger entourage to hiss at me. Probably for the impertinence I supposed. I took a moment to smirk at the girl before

returning my attention to her mistress. “I don’t believe I caught your own lineage?” I figured if it was polite for her to ask about mine, it was polite enough for me to turn the tables.

“I command my own line now,” she said as though this explained something. “However, I was created by a very powerful, very evil vampire by the name of Dominic Arkusinski. In fact, before he died the final death, he promised to come back and destroy your Lady Selina.” She gave a cold little laugh. “Personally, I don’t believe hell is ever going to give him up. He was a very bad man in both of his lives and died unlamented.”

“Oh,” I replied, which probably did nothing towards convincing them I wasn’t a complete idiot.

“Yes,” she said after a moment. She was about to add something when her gaze shifted to just over my shoulder. Looking back over my shoulder to follow her gaze, I found Blanche gliding around the last two people that separated me from her.

“Blanche!” I said with a smile, “Long time no see. Have you met Telena?” At her muttered negative, I continued, “Well, it’s about time you did then. Blanche, this is the Lady Telena Petrokovitch,” I began hoping I’d remembered her name correctly. “Telena, this is Blanche.”

“Blanche Locke,” Blanche replied a bit uneasily. “Pleasure to meet you Lady Telena.”

“The pleasure is mine,” the much more powerful vampire replied with no trace of sincerity whatsoever.

“Sorry to intrude,” Blanche began stoically, “But I’ve got to run off with Wallace.” Turning her gaze to me, she said, “We need you to settle a disagreement among our friends before they draw blood. A certain someone is becoming more and more aggravated and is likely to kill the usual suspect if the matter is not decided promptly.” I had the impression that Blanche was here to rescue

me.

“Oh, not again?” I asked, sounding slightly put out. Turning to the elder vampire woman, I said, “I’m afraid this matter simply cannot wait, Telena. It was a pleasure meeting you. Perhaps we’ll speak again soon?”

“I am sure we will,” She stated matter-of-factly. “I will be in town for a few more weeks. Rest assured, we’ll talk again before I travel back to Europe. In the meantime, I bid you good evening.”

“And you as well,” I replied courteously with a nod of my head. Looking back to Blanche, I sighed, “Very well, lead the way.” When we were just at the edge of what I guessed Telena’s hearing to be, I added, “I can’t believe they’re at it again.”

“You know them,” Blanche replied with a sigh, leading me through the crowd by my left hand. “Some people just can’t help themselves.”

“Boy, isn’t that the truth.”

After a couple of minutes of moving through the crowd, she led us out of the buffet hall and into one of the smaller corridors. Once we were past the main horde of people, she dropped my hand and picked up her pace. Curious, I simply followed after her without asking any of the obvious questions that came to mind.

Ten minutes later, she stopped in front of a door with a pair of familiar looking guards in front of it. I supposed it was time for my date. Hoped I wasn’t late.

“Thanks for your earlier efforts,” Blanch told me quietly before turning away. After a step, she stopped and half turned, “We sometimes hang out at NightWings if you care to join us.”

“Thanks,” I told her with a smile, “I just might at that.” I had no idea where NightWings was

but it sounded like a club, and if that was the case, I figured I could probably find it with a little poking around.

“See ya around,” she called just before turning and walking away.

“Later,” I called after her. Once she was around the corner, I turned my attention to the door and the guards before it. “Hello again, gentlemen.” Without a word, one of them pulled open the door. I paused a moment and then gave them a little bow. “My thanks and my apologies for any problems our previous meeting may have caused.” They didn’t reply and I didn’t wait around to see if they would come up with a response. I walked through the door and the guard closed it behind me.

From the small entry room, I walked across to the door on the right and knocked. A moment later Miranda opened the door. She now wore a beige, leather long coat which concealed most of the weapons she carried. Selina, sitting across the room at the desk, had changed into a dark blue, button up blouse that reached down to mid-thigh over blue jeans. A small belt across her narrow waist made it all look very stylish. I wondered for a moment if the blue of our shirts matching was a coincidence. I decided not to think about it.

“I’m always glad when these things are over with,” Selina announced. “While I typically do my best work at gatherings such as this one, I still find them tedious in the extreme.”

“I personally prefer my parties to be much smaller of scale,” I replied, slipping into a loose parade rest as I stood close to the door. “However, they seldom have such interesting people in attendance.” At least they hadn’t up until six months ago. I hadn’t hosted a party since. Considering what I’d seen tonight, I wasn’t sure I wanted to do so any time soon either.

“Indeed,” she said, standing up and walking over to stand a few feet away. “What did the Petrokovitch woman want with you?” she asked, crossing her arms under her ample breasts.

“I’m not really sure,” I told her truthfully, pondering that very question. “I wonder if she somehow felt what almost happened to her?” I more asked myself than her. A thoughtful silence followed and surprisingly, it was Miranda who broke it.

“What *did* almost happen to Telena Petrokovitch?”

Startled from my thoughts, I asked, “Hmm? Oh, yes. Well, I almost killed her.”

“You did?” she asked without batting an eye. “When? What led up to it?”

“During Selina’s speech. I had just focused my attention on Petrokovitch and *someone*, who won’t be named now because the guilty party is in this very room with us, felt such a powerful surge of hatred for that woman that by the time I thought about it, I had already drawn my sword and was a fraction of a second away from stepping through a shadow and beheading her.” Selina made a little moue for a moment but it was quickly replaced with a sardonic smile.

“That certainly would have complicated matters,” Miranda declared, turning to look at Selina who returned her look.

“Yes,” Selina agreed. “It would have. Fortunately, it did not happen. Now,” she said, taking my arm, “Let us leave this place.” I allowed myself to be lead out of her apartments, through various corridors, and eventually into the bottommost underground level of a parking garage. I supposed this was the secret exit but I wasn’t sure just how secret it really was. We walked across to a black Limousine next to which stood a woman in a sharp blue business suit holding a basket of some sort. When we arrived at the car, she handed the basket to Selina, threw me a quick, appraising look, and bid Selina a good evening before walking away.

Selina followed her with a look that was half thoughtful, half aggravated before gesturing me through the door Miranda had just opened. I slid inside and scooted over so that Selina could slide

in after me. Miranda walked around and got into the seat next to the driver.

“I hope a picnic is alright with you?” she asked as the car started moving.

“A picnic would be most excellent,” I replied with a smile.

“Good. I haven’t been on one in a while and I must admit, I’m looking forward to it.”

“In fact,” I added with a thoughtful frown, “I haven’t been on a date in quite some time either. I find that I’m looking forward to spending some time away from the guys.” I’d been to a number of taverns, bars, clubs and pool halls with some friends I’d made in Atlanta. But after a while they started to grow old. To tell the truth, I’d been looking for a change of pace when Selina had called and I told her so.

“So my summons didn’t tear you away from anything vital?” she asked curiously. That brought a surprised laugh from me.

“Vital? Hardly. I’ve learned a lot about the hidden world in the last six months. Learned things I never would have dreamed of. Solid information about werewolves, ghosts, trolls, angels and demons. Magic, the powers that be, and worlds other than this one. However, I’d pretty much learned what there was to be found on the surface. In order for me to have learned more, I would have had to get in deeper. That wasn’t something I was going to do casually. Truthfully, I hadn’t even figured out where to start with the process. No, your summons found me at a most opportune time.”

“Good,” she replied, looking pleased.

“Indeed,” I agreed quietly. My life here so far had been just short of fascinating.

“Are you still interested in learning more about the hidden world?” she asked, trying not to sound too eager. She didn’t quite succeed but she made a good showing of it.

“I just might be,” I replied easily, looking out the window so she couldn’t see the mischief in my eyes. “I suppose in large part it would depend on who I can find to teach me and what topics I might find to learn about. I need to find something that truly sparks my interest.” Since she brought up the topic, I rather suspected that she had a number of subjects already in mind.

“An eager pupil always makes for the best student,” she said, reminding me strongly of Jack, out there in the spirit realm. “But enough of that for the moment,” she said, surprising me by changing subjects. “I want to know more about you.” So we discussed me for a while. Everything from my favorite color to the kind of music I preferred to what I thought of various cars. This turned into a pleasant conversation as we exchanged thoughts on a wide variety of topics. I was a bit surprised when the limo stopped.

“Ah, we’re here,” she said with a broad grin. Opening her door, she snagged the picnic basket and slid out. “Right this way, good sir,” she indicated with a sweep of her arm. Following her out, I found we were now deep within a very large cemetery. How... interesting.

“Not quite what you were expecting?” she asked as she led me up a small hill and around some trees.

“No. I’m not sure just what I was expecting... but this certainly wasn’t it.”

“Disappointed?” she asked.

“No,” I answered truthfully, “But it may take me a few minutes to get used to the idea.”

“That’s certainly fair enough. I am a patient woman. I can wait while you adjust. In the meantime, how about we put down our blanket right up there? With the hill, we should have a nice view of the lake and of the woods to the left and right.” And of several thousand gravestones. We walked up the small knoll to the place she’d selected.

“This looks like a good spot,” I told her a bit distractedly, still working on getting used to the whole cemetery thing.

“Then we’re agreed. Here, you take this,” she said, handing me the basket as she spread out the blanket. Once it was down, I sat the basket on it and then myself on the edge of the blanket. I then removed my boots and laid down, propping myself up on an elbow. Looking up, I found her seated across from me tailor fashioned with the basket in between us.

“Thirsty?”

“What wonderful timing you have,” I smiled, “A drink would be perfect.” She proceeded to pull a bottle out of the basket as well as a pair of wine glasses. I reached over and held the glasses still while she pulled the cork and poured us each a generous portion.

“That’s... not blood,” I stated, more than a little puzzled. It smelled a lot like blood. Or like there was a lot of blood in whatever it was. But it definitely was not blood. This smell was... something more. Almost mouth watering.

She turned a beautiful smile on me. “No. You’re right. It’s not blood. I was hoping that I’d be the one to introduce you to this. This,” she declared, raising a glass, “Is bloodwine. And, if you’ve never had any as certainly seems to be the case, there is simply nothing to compare it to.” Holding up my glass, I checked to see if the moonlight would shine through, but it did not.

“Please,” she said with another smile, “Allow me to propose a toast?” I returned my full attention to her. “To finding what we’re looking for.”

“To finding what we’re looking for,” I echoed as our glasses quietly chimed together. Right now I was looking for a lot of things. A serial killer. Answers to what I was still becoming as a near-vampire. Perhaps more than a working relationship with the woman across from me. I wondered

what she was looking for. Then I took a sip.

The flavors were smokey and elusive and vibrant and incredible. Definitely like nothing I'd ever tasted. There were subtle undercurrents of a potent blood in there somewhere. Probably what had been used as a base for the drink.

"Wow," I managed to say aloud a moment later.

"I'm glad you like it," she smiled.

"Oh, yes indeedy do," I said with a return smile, taking a quick sip.

"Could I ask a small favor?" she inquired.

"Hmm? Certainly. Ask away."

"Would you take off your sunglasses?"

"Oh, sure," I agreed, folding them up and hooking them on the top of one of my nearby boots. "Most folks are pretty uncomfortable seeing my eyes. I suppose I've gotten used to wearing the shades most of the time I'm around people now."

Looking a little sad, she quietly said, "I wish I could tell you to leave the sunglasses off all the time but I can't. You have the eyes of a telum and they're intended to frighten people. Too many people will fail to see the man behind the eyes and only see the eyes. And what they signify. Rumors about you are already spreading. A few are even accurate. People tend to react badly around those who frighten them. Even vampires. Perhaps especially vampires. Within the hidden world, it's not safe for you to show your eyes. But I do like seeing them. The glasses hide too much of you. Please, tell me how you feel about them?"

"My eyes? I don't mind them," I answered thoughtfully, taking another sip of the bloodwine.

"I suppose they mark me as different and that's okay. When I was a doppelganger, I had to keep a

low profile. Blend in with the humans. Now I don't blend in at all. And it's kinda nice no longer being one of the crowd."

"And you don't mind standing out like that?" she asked, looking me in the eyes and taking a sip of her drink.

"Not so far," I told her, still opting for the whole honesty thing. "At first, everyone treated me like I was just another vampire. I was okay with that. A few days later, everyone started to become worried and cautious when they saw my eyes. Almost everyone," I amended. "And I found that didn't bother me either. Having black eyes doesn't change who I am. Not the important parts anyway."

"All that and you're wise, too," she said sincerely, taking another sip. I followed her fine example and took another drink myself. Wise was not one of the common adjectives used to describe me.

After a short, companionable silence, I began quietly, "If you don't mind my asking...."

"Why do I hate Telena Petrokovitch so much?" she replied, guessing correctly.

"If you'd rather not talk about it, we can save that one for another evening," I told her sincerely.

"I suppose I might as well discuss it now," she said evenly. "Maybe talking about it will help me work through it to some extent." She was silent for a time as we both sipped our bloodwine. "You know, when the whole Houston war happened, I thought I was done with the whole matter and could finally put it to rest. Telena woke it back up before it had even had a chance to close it's eyes so to speak."

"Telena is somehow related to Bertrand Gallet?" I asked tentatively. He'd been at the center

of the whole vampire war. It had only lasted one night but it had most certainly been a war.

“No. Not really,” she said with a little smile that never reached her eyes. “Bertrand Gallet was a demon in vampire form. One of the demonicus mortem. I loathe all demonicus mortem,” she declared with a spark of fire in her eyes.

“I understand that you were tortured by one some time back,” I said quietly.

“Yes,” she whispered softly. She was shielding her thoughts very strongly now. “His name was Dominic Arkusinski. He tortured Miranda and myself over the span of two evenings. He did it as an example to others. Vanessa, my vampiric mother, was directly descended from him though I do not understand how. She was a nosferatu like myself. The living dead. I do not understand how a demon can create an undead. Neither does anyone else. So far, for all my research has turned up, I can only guess it was some kind of accident or perhaps some dark ritual. However, there was another vampire descended from his blood. And she too turned out to be nosferatu.”

“Telena Petrokovitch,” I said, knowing I was right. In fact, Petrokovitch had mentioned the monster who’d sired her.

She nodded, a wry smile across one side of her face, “Indeed. Two nosferatu from one demonicus mortem. I can only surmise that the same incident created both Vanessa and Telena at the same time.”

“Have you asked her?”

“Hmm?” she asked, apparently coming out of a brief reverie. “What? Ask her? Absolutely not. I loathe the woman and want as little to do as possible with her. Rest assured, she’ll be leaving very soon. She’s only in my territory because of a pair of scheming lords who thought to cause trouble.” I remembered the older vampires who’d gone to speak to Telena after the meeting. I didn’t

know but I would have been willing to bet....

“But you sent her an invitation this evening,” I said a bit confused.

“How did you know about that?” she demanded sharply.

“I was watching Telena and her lot for a while after the show,” I replied, looking her in the eyes and allowing a little irritation to cross my face. I’d never liked being barked at by anyone. And it used to happen a lot.

“Sorry,” she muttered. “I should not have raised my voice. Though I do not like to make excuses, perhaps it is our topic. I’ll finish it and we can turn the conversation on to more pleasant subjects.”

“Only if you want to,” I told her quietly, completely mollified by her apology. “We can go ahead and change the subject now if you’d prefer.”

“Thank you, no. As I said, perhaps this will help me through this. We’ll see. Now, you have the background information. The real reason I detest the woman so much is that she was present when Miranda and I were tortured. For both evenings of it. She disappeared sometime during my rescue. I sent a few assassins after her later but finally stopped bothering a couple of hundred years ago. It obviously never worked and didn’t seem worth the effort anymore.”

“But now you have me,” I said quietly. “And yet you stopped me from killing her.”

“Sending an assassin into Germany or one of the Slovak states is one thing,” she answered in an equally quiet voice which was filled to the brim with undertones of fierce emotions. “But having someone killed in your own back yard. Especially, someone who was invited under a flag of truce. Well, even if it wasn’t *my* flag of truce but that of a pair of my lords, they still represent me. If I killed her here and now, it would cause me no end of troubles. Not the least of which would be

assassins sent from her friends in the hidden world and possibly a war with her successor. No, so long as she's here, she is perfectly safe from me."

"Was she one of the ones who tortured you?" I asked in a near whisper.

"No," Selina nearly snarled, "She stood and watched like some sort of vulture, always hovering around the periphery."

"So she was there to enjoy the show?" I half asked, half stated, as I carefully tried to figure out just what had happened so long ago.

"No. Yes. I don't know!" Her confused declaration was accompanied by a blast of anger as her shields collapsed. Wincing, I knocked back the last of my bloodwine and quickly sat the glass down before I accidentally broke it.

"Sorry," she whispered, as she slowly built back up her shields. This close to her, I could feel the emotions raging through her very clearly. Anger, frustration, resentment, and humiliation. On top of that a smaller dose of embarrassment for having allowed her shields to drop and thus allowing all this to spill into my mind. It seemed hard to believe that so small a body could hold so much in the way of powerful emotions.

"It's quite alright," I told her. I wanted to comfort her but knew that if I touched her, it would only magnify the amount of her inner turmoil I was feeling. If I did that, I wouldn't be able to think clearly at all. I settled for trying to mentally project calmness down our psychic link. Send a little something back the other way as it were. I remembered calming one of my young cousins who'd become frightened during a thunderstorm a few years ago and tried to send the same feeling that all would be well to Selina.

After a while, she calmed down a bit. Knocking back the last of her drink seemed to help.

She pulled out the bottle and was going to pour more but seeing her shaking hand, I gently took the bottle away from her and poured the drinks myself.

“Thank you,” she whispered. “For everything.”

“You are most welcome,” I replied quietly. As I took a sip of my bloodwine, she drained off half of her glass. I was a little worried about her becoming drunk. I don’t know if it showed on my face or if the mental connection was still open but she smiled.

“Bloodwine does not make vampires drunk. Some of the effects are similar to a human’s reaction to wine or other intoxicants, but most of those are surface similarities.”

“Oh. Well, that’s good.”

“Yes.”

“I have a suggestion but you’re not going to like it,” I told her slowly and quietly.

“What?” she asked as though she really didn’t want to hear.

“Talk to her about it. Listen to her side of what....” which was as far as I got before she exploded.

“How dare you take her side!” she screamed with a suddenly heavy French accent. “You don’t know what they did! You don’t understand what that does to a person!”

“Pipe down dammit!” an old man yelled from the edge of the woods.

Turning to him with a sudden anger of my own, I yelled back, “Bugger off! Can’t you see we’re working some stuff out?” He shook his head angrily. “Well we are and we don’t need you interfering, so take a hike or I’ll send your sorry butt packing!” Throwing up his arms, the frowning fellow turned and stumped back into the woods. Obnoxious old bastard.

Selina, I noticed had gone suddenly silent. Turning to look back at her, I found her face blank

and her closely watching me.

“Are you alright?” I asked. “I know going over this isn’t easy for you and random assholes jumping in can’t be helping.”

“I was yelling at you,” she told me quietly and clearly, “Who were you yelling at?”

“That obnoxious old man,” I answered a bit puzzled. “Didn’t you see him? He was right over there.”

“No, Wallace,” she replied evenly. “I did not see anyone else. I don’t think there’s another living soul in the entire cemetery. In fact, I’m quite sure there’s not. Miranda has security posted all around the perimeter and a team did a sweep a little before we arrived. You and I are the only ones here.”

“Just you, me, and all the dead people,” I breathed just barely audible to my own ears.

“Yes,” she agreed, obviously possessing better hearing than I did. “Just you, me, and all the dead people.”

“And our collective issues,” I added after a moment. That brought a small smile to her face but it faded.

“I suspected,” she began quietly, “But I didn’t know. I originally thought that you might have gotten some of my hemomantic talent. But when I touched you with a sensing tendril, the response felt different. Since you could move through shadows, I thought you might have been a tenebromancer. A worker of darkness. But you’re not are you?” She asked in a near whisper, already knowing the answer. “At least not entirely. No. You’re a necromancer. The man you just spoke with was a ghost or a remnant or something. I know I neither heard nor saw him.”

“Probably,” I replied, trying to remember if the man had looked transparent or anything.

Selina had been screaming at the time which had rather hindered my powers of perception. Maybe he had. I didn't remember. "And yes, I am a necromancer. Have been since evening one. I just didn't realize it wasn't part and parcel of the usual vampire package." Now that I was thinking about it, I felt my necromantic powers flaring up. I first became aware of little bundles of energy buried in the ground beneath us. That was interesting. Slowly, I realized there were more of these energy packets. Dozens... hundreds even. And each of those represented a dead person. Or a body. Hmm. Actually, after thinking about it for a moment, I arrived at the conclusion that I was not sensing any souls or anything. Just the energy that those people dying had embedded into their worldly remains. I felt pretty sure I could use that energy. If I only knew how to do so. Once again, I realized that Selina had been quiet for a long time and I refocused my gaze back onto her eyes.

"What's wrong?" I asked because from the look on her face it was obvious that something was indeed very wrong.

"This is bad... and it's wonderful," she observed miserably.

"Could you possibly make that a little more confusing?" I asked with a little grin. "I don't want you to make understanding all that too easy for me."

A sound escaped her that was half laugh and half sob. Despite that, her shields were so firmly in place it was hard to sense she was even there psychically. "Okay," she began with a wan smile. "The good news first. Being an active necromancer makes you very powerful. Potentially at least. You're already undead. As a result you are literally swimming in your own elemental power."

"Okay," I sorta agreed. Being a nigh unto completely ignorant necromancer didn't seem to convey much power to me but in theory I supposed it might at some point in the future. "What's the down side?"

“Vampires as a whole do not like necromancers,” she answered softly. “While it seems that my own lineage was somehow demon spawned, some if not all of the other nosferatu lines were created by various necromancers. That’s one of the reasons different nosferatu lines have such diverse abilities. Anyway, necromancers of long ago used the vampires they created most poorly in several cases. By definition, necromancers have command over the magics of death. Vampires exist because of those magics. Theoretically, a powerful enough necromancer could take command over any undead. Even a vampire. And that theory combined with horror stories from the past are why there are no more really powerful necromancers. Vampires have killed them off over the years. Took down most of the living tenebromancers as well. Folks were afraid the two magics were too closely linked and were not willing to take any chances.”

“So training is gonna be hard to come by,” I muttered half to myself.

She sighed. “No Wallace McAlister. There is no one available to train you at all. We will have to keep this a secret. I don’t think there’s been a practicing necromantic vampire arisen in the last five hundred years. And much more than you being a telum, this we absolutely must keep secret.”

“Do you think someone would actually come after me if the word got out?” I asked more from curiosity than from dread.

“Yes,” she stated firmly. “No question. There are a great many people out there who would do literally anything within their powers to prevent me from having a necromancer on my side. Word is already filtering around that I created a telum. Of course that was six months ago, so the furor over it has probably died down.”

“Okay,” I agreed rather non-committally. I had the feeling there was something else in there

that hadn't been said but decided to let it drift for the moment.

“Alright,” she began again after a momentary silence, “We keep that little fact secret. And while there's no one available to train you, that doesn't mean that training aids aren't accessible. I've collected quite the little arcane library over the years. I have a number of books that came directly from necromancers. I believe these will be able to help you learn what it is to be a worker of death's magic.”

“Oh, that would be very cool,” I told her sincerely. In fact, the more I thought about it, the more I thought that would be a really good idea. How to be a necromancer in five easy steps. I wouldn't even have to make the four monthly payments of only twenty nine ninety five. It would certainly fill in the gaps in my spare time when I wasn't hunting down serial killers. Might even give me something to do after the killer was caught. “Yes,” I said with a smile, “I think that would be very good. So, when and where do I get a couple of these books?”

“Ah,” she muttered with a little frown. “There might be a little hitch.”

“Hitch?”

“How many languages do you speak?”

“English and a small spattering of Gaelic. Why... oh, damn. They're not written in English, are they?” I knew the answer before I finished asking the question.

“No. Not one of them. Latin, German, Italian, French, and Arabic. And I can't risk having someone translate them for you,” she finished with another frown.

“Perhaps....” I began and then stopped.

“Perhaps?” she asked, looking back at me.

“Maybe you could translate them for me while I write them down? Or enter them into a

computer. That way the information goes directly from you to me. No middle men to worry about.”

“That is a possibility,” she conceded. “However, my schedule is very busy. There is a lot to do when you run a territory as large as mine is. I do not have a lot of free time.”

“Perhaps you need a little more free time,” I suggested. “All work and no play makes Selina a grumpy girl. Although I admit, it will be interesting trying to match up our schedules. Serial killer hunting has some very peculiar hours.”

“Grumpy, eh?” she muttered. In a more normal voice she asked, “Speaking of the killer, have you had any luck?”

“Yes,” I replied with a frown. “Lots of luck so far. Sadly, it’s all bad. But don’t worry. I’ll find whoever it is. I am tenacious if nothing else.”

“Do you think going to court helped you any?”

“With the investigation? Maybe. I discovered that there were a lot more vampires around that I’d previously thought. Finding out which of the powerful ones you didn’t like might have helped with the suspect list a bit. Particularly for those who don’t like you either.”

“And just how could you tell which ones I supposedly did not like?” she asked curiously. Hmm. I decided that the truth here would not help me. I didn’t think that her knowing just how closely we were psychically linked would aid her peace of mind. Assuming she hadn’t figured out just how closely linked we were. Best to take no chances.

“Observation, both of yourself and those attending.” While basically truthful, it certainly came nowhere near the truth of the matter. And she knew it.

“You are lying to me,” she declared. Her gaze focused on me and her eyes narrowed in aggravation. Six months ago that would have frightened me. Heck a day or two ago I’d have been

discomforted. Not anymore. For the last couple of months I'd been becoming much more comfortable with who I'd become. And apparently, sometime tonight in the midst of the powerful vampires, I'd decided I was completely comfortable with them as well. Even if I was still finding out just who and what that was in regards to myself and all those vampires. However, despite my newfound confidence, I wasn't throwing caution to the wind. There was still a line to be walked. Perhaps now more than ever.

"Lying, not telling the whole truth, something along those lines," I vaguely agreed. Standing, she snatched up the basket.

"We are done here," she stated coldly as she turned and began angrily stalking back towards the limo. I hurriedly put my sunglasses and boots back on and grabbed the blanket. With a bit of effort I caught up with her at the edge of the hilltop where it began descending.

"Aren't we a great pair?" I asked happily. At her annoyed sniff, I continued, "Yes, I am mysterious and a part-time liar. You are temperamental and a part time bitch. Yes, quite a pair we make." She looked at me a long moment as we walked down the hill. When we got to the limo, I opened the door for her. She got in, snatched the blanket out of my hand, closed her door and rolled down her window.

"I believe we'll say goodnight here and now. I'm sure you can find a ride with one of my security team." And with that she rolled up her window. A moment later the limo drove away. Hmm. That hadn't gone quite as I'd expected it to. Still, I felt I'd held my own ground. Granted, I'd have much preferred a more genial goodnight with a kiss on the cheek at the very least, but this way worked well enough.

Walking back up the hill, I wondered just how far it might be to my car. Hopefully, it was

still being watched by the fellow I'd paid. He'd certainly better hope it was still there and in good condition anyway. Hmm. I wasn't really interested in riding back with her security team. I wondered if I could fly the fifteen or twenty miles to my car. The bloodwine had certainly revitalized me enough that I felt I had a good chance of doing so. Floating up a bit, I took off into the night sky.

Flying was incredible as it always was. And I flew really well except for one little incident with a tree I fell into while trying to correlate what I knew of the city streets with what I was seeing from the sky. Just a little lapse in concentration that I'd almost rectified before I hit the tree. Almost. Still, there was no doubt that flying through the night sky with the wind in my face was well worth the occasional mishap. And for the first time, I had to admit to myself that there were parts of being a vampire that I wasn't simply comfortable with... I outright enjoyed some of it.

Landing some distance away, I walked the last mile to my car. I found it in the same condition it was in when I left it. The man watching it was asleep on his porch chair but his presence had evidently been enough to run off any would be thieves. I left the second hundred dollar bill in his shirt pocket without waking him. When I started the car, he woke up. Indicating my shirt pocket, I pointed at him. He figured it out quickly and waved a cheerful goodbye. I drove back home in no particular hurry.

With the night slowly drawing to an end I decided to think over what I now knew that might help me track down the killer. One, I had far too much information about the victims. Aside from their connection to vampires and the general physical description that matched Selina, most if it was extraneous.

Second, I now knew a lot of faces that upset said vampire woman. Back at the house I had a small file cabinet in my real bedroom that contained information about some of those faces. Names

I had not committed to memory yet but faces I had. The ones who were powerful enough to be committing the murders anyway. Some of them matched faces from this evening. Many of them did not.

Selina had said that a pair of her lords or whatever they were had invited Telena. Presumably, those were the two who'd spoken with the powerful vampire lady right after the meeting. But, I didn't like presuming. Pulling out my phone, I called Miranda. She answered on the second ring, and after a brief lead in, was able to confirm that those two were indeed the pair who'd invited Lady Telena. Since I had no files on those two, I asked for them. She promised I'd have them by the time I woke up tomorrow. I thanked her and turned off the phone.

Alright, that helped a little. Hmm. Perhaps I needed an outside viewpoint. Someone who might be able to add something that I hadn't thought of yet. I thought about it for a while as I finally turned the car towards the house. Yes. Two birds with one stone. I could get my alternate viewpoint and at the same time move a step further in deciding whether or not I should warn them away from my cousins. Tomorrow night I was going to visit the vampires, Jeff and Veronica Daniels.

Waking up tonight was much easier than the previous night had been. I'd slept straight through the day without dreaming which apparently helped considerably. While I hadn't learned anything, neither did I feel wiped out. It seemed I was going to have to find a happy compromise to that situation. I wanted to learn all there was to know about the spirit world. I just didn't want to feel like I'd run a marathon afterwards.

Once I'd bathed and dressed, I found a pair of file folders waiting on the kitchen table. After pouring a packet of blood it into a glass and nuking it, I read through the two files as I slowly drank a mediocre breakfast. Nuking blood wasn't much better than drinking it cold. For some reason the microwave just did something to the taste. But if you're impatient or in a hurry, the time savings was worth the degradation in flavor.

Gladys Wright and Hugh Hausse. According to the files, both were powerful vampires. Her being three hundred years old and him being about fifty years older. Each of them controlled over fifty warriors and twice that in non-combatants. He was into the stock market amongst other things and was ridiculously rich. Her money came from a variety of investments which were supplemented by various illegal businesses she and her people ran in Arlington. Selina didn't care about that sort of thing so long as it didn't draw attention to her or to the shadow world. Both had been turned by Selina and according to the information before me, both appeared to be extremely loyal to her. That didn't quite jibe with their apparent betrayal of her by inviting the Petrokovitch woman into town right under her nose. More investigating seemed in order. Maybe I'd go talk to them.

But first, a visit with the Daniels.

On the drive over, I stopped by an expensive steak place and ate a nice, tender steak that had just barely had a chance to kiss the grill. They seasoned it a little more than I would have but it sure tasted good regardless. I left a nice tip beside the untouched side items before getting back on the road.

Jeff and Veronica Daniels lived in a suitably nice part of town surrounded by the extremely large lawns of half a dozen suitably nice neighbors. They were married which was somewhat unusual by vampire standards. From what I'd heard, most vampire marriages failed after the first thirty years. The novelty just wore off for the majority. The Daniels by comparison had passed their eightieth year together and showed no signs of separating.

Not sure just how this conversation was going to proceed, I hadn't called ahead. As I rang their front doorbell, I took my sunglasses off. The subtle or not-so-subtle intimidation factor my all-black eyes added might be handy.

The missus answered the door. Upon seeing me, she froze for a moment. Veronica Daniels was shorter than myself by a good bit with good looks and shoulder length black hair. If the murderer expanded his hit list to include vampires, she'd be a prime candidate.

"Hello," she finally said.

"Good evening," I replied seriously, "I would like to speak with yourself and your husband."

"Umm, sure," she said gesturing me inside. "Please come in. If you'll just wait here?" she said, gesturing towards a well appointed living room, "I'll just go and get Jeff."

"Certainly," I agreed quietly. Had I still been a doppelganger, I'd have augmented my hearing so that I'd be able to hear anything that might have been said in the house. But I wasn't a doppelganger anymore. Still, I sat on the edge of a comfortable looking chair and concentrated on listening.

Sadly, a quiet murmur of voices was all I managed to overhear before she returned with her husband. Jeff Daniels was a little taller than myself, with an athletic build, and short brown hair. Together, they were well respected members of the vampire community. Selina didn't particularly

care for them one way or another due to their tendency to remain on the fringes of her society. With no expression on my face, I stood to greet him.

“Good evening, thank you for agreeing to see me on such short notice.”

“It’s no problem,” he replied politely as though he had indeed agreed to such a thing, face carefully neutral as he gestured for me to return to my seat. Once I had done so, he and his wife sat down on the couch opposite me. “So, what can we do for you?”

“For starters, I’d like an outside perspective on a few matters.” He nodded and she muttered her agreement before I continued, “As you may or may not have heard, I’ve been asked to investigate the murders.”

“The donor murders?” Veronica asked. At my acknowledgment, she gestured for me to continue.

“Can either of you think of any reason why someone would be killing dark-haired donors? I know word travels fast in our circles. Do you know why someone would be willing to upset nine different vampires?”

“There are two things that I’ve thought of while pondering that very question,” Jeff told me, leaning forward intently, apparently forgetting that he was supposed to be worried about me being there in his sudden enthusiasm. “Item one: I believe it most likely that whoever is performing these murders is an elder vampire and therefore not worried about retribution from any or all of the nine vampires who’ve lost donors. There are other possibilities but this seems the most likely.” This pretty well jibed with what I’d been thinking myself.

“That sounds reasonable. Please, what’s your second item?”

“Item two is another supposition. I don’t believe that these murders are random at all.

Someone is either sending a message or leading up to a message of some kind.”

“Yes,” I agreed quietly. “I believe you’re correct on both points.”

“Have you found any leads?” Veronica asked.

“Not really. No real leads to speak of. Most of the camera footage from ATMs and surveillance cameras located near the murders has been no help at all. No one witnessed anyone skulking about except for one person near one of the crime scenes whom the police interviewed. He was a neighbor and had a reason to be there. I considered leaking the word that he saw someone but decided against it. That fellow was at the scene of the third murder. The opportunity he represented turned cold before I even got into town.”

Jeff nodded, “That might have worked too. Damn shame you weren’t around.”

“Just out of curiosity,” Veronica began, “Where have you been? “In Houston we heard something about Atlanta. Did you go there?”

“Yeah. I’ve been there for the last six months. Met a few people. Made a few friends.”

“Have you noticed... any effects... from your condition?” she tried to ask delicately with mixed success.

“Effects?” I asked, trying to figure out what angle she was coming from before answering.

“Yes. New power manifestations. Problems such as aches and pains that won’t go away? Visions? Anything along those lines?”

“I’ve noticed some of that,” I replied rather vaguely. “However, I can’t help but think that you are looking for something specific. If you would please tell me what it is you’re fishing for, we can save a good deal of bush battering.”

She turned and looked at her husband for a moment. He shrugged and she turned back to me

looking... cautious and definitely a bit sad if I had to guess. “How many living telum do you know of?” she finally asked me.

“Hmm?” I asked, surprised by her question. When she was about to elaborate, I held up a hand to forestall her, since the question had finally sunk in. “I can’t say I know of any other living telum.”

“Nor do we know of any others,” she said quietly. “Making telum was something of an art from everything I’ve read. At least it was eight hundred or so years ago, anyway. The knowledge of how to make them was rare even then and to continue the metaphor, there weren’t many talented artists around in the first place.”

“Okay,” I agreed. “I’m with you so far.”

“Today there are almost no vampires who would even try to make a telum,” she continued, apparently choosing her words most carefully. “Most have neither the knowledge nor the arcane talent required in order to succeed. Even those few who have the talent are rather loathe to create a telum.”

“Because we become powerful by vampire standards much faster than vampires normally do?” I half asked, half stated.

“Yes,” she agreed. “That’s certainly true. Also, if a telum is not created just right and from a proper... host, donor... I’m not sure what the proper terminology is for a person who is created as a telum. Regardless of the terminology, according to what I’ve read, if something goes wrong, chances are good that the telum will go insane. Vampires do not like having their weapons outside their control.” There followed a short silence as I thought about what she’d said and the two of them carefully watched my reaction.

“That makes sense,” I agreed. “However, considering the money grubbing, power hungry lot that I’ve met since I started moving around in the upper echelons of the vampire political world, I find it rather difficult to believe that they’d allow something as simple as a weapon possibly going crazy to deter them from making a telum if they thought they could do so. I don’t think most of them would hesitate long enough to blink before starting the ritual if that was the only possible drawback.”

“Well,” Mrs. Daniels began with a wry smile, “In that regard you are probably correct. There’s a great many of them who would not hesitate at all... if they had the knowledge. And if the chances weren’t also so good that their efforts would be for naught.”

With a frown I asked, “Could you explain that a little more?”

“Yes,” she agreed, perhaps a bit reluctantly, “You see, there are other problems involved with creating telum...”

When she didn’t continue I made a little circular gesture, “Aannnd?”

“Making a telum is difficult,” she replied. “It takes a great deal of knowledge both to perform the required magics but also to prepare the needed ingredients. Most people do not have this knowledge. Most telum do not work out as planned. If the potions or magics are not done correctly, they warp the would-be telum. More than one vampire has been torn to pieces by the telum they incorrectly made.”

“Okay,” I mused.

“There’s something else,” she added reluctantly.

“Please,” I asked.

“Most telum have very short life spans,” she nearly whispered. “For all the time, effort, and expense that goes into creating telum, most do not live more than a day or two. Even in the old days,

very few telum lived past their first month of service. You are a rarity. And the longer you live, the more people are going to take notice. As I'm sure you are aware by now, in our world people taking notice is usually a bad thing." Well, that was certainly disturbing. And at the same time it made a lot of sense. Explained a lot about the behaviors of certain people since I'd been around.

"There were two other telum successfully created during the Houston war," Jeff Daniels said into the silence. "Both of them were created by the enemy. Once they realized that the invasion was imminent, they tried over a dozen times to create telum. Both of the successes were paraded around as much as possible to boost troop morale in the brief time they had before the battle came to them. An hour before our forces reached the Nachtmusik compound, one of the telum turned on the troops she was traveling with and killed most of them before being destroyed."

"Oh," I muttered. A moment later I asked, "What about the last one?"

"That individual had the distinct misfortune to run across the Lord of Chaos on the field of battle. Telum are strong and fast," he said, "But not that strong and not that fast." Since I'd had my neck broken shortly after I'd come back as a telum while trying to kill a vampire lord, I knew exactly what he meant and just how very true his words were.

"Okay," I told them after rubbing my neck and taking a moment to reflect. "That clears up a great deal about the whole telum thing. Now, lets change topics again." I rather strongly suspected I wasn't going to sleep nearly as well tonight as I usually did.

"What would you like to talk about?" Veronica asked. She seemed quite a bit more friendly now. I wondered if she'd feel the same by the time I left.

"Why would two, supposedly loyal, vampire lords invite their mistress' archenemy into town right under her nose?" I asked, allowing none of my thoughts to touch my face.

“Oh,” Veronica frowned while Jeff made a face, “That is a good question.”

“And you have theories about this?” I prompted the two of them, trying to look a bit more friendly.

Jeff nodded reluctantly. “Yes,” he sighed. “We have a couple of theories. One, it’s part of a plot by the two of them to either take over or allow another to take over.”

“Alright,” I agreed. “That seems pretty straightforward.”

“Exactly,” Jeff said intently, “And that’s why we don’t think it’s likely to be true. When you get up to that level of vampire politics, nothing is typically what it seems to be.”

An image of Selina popped into my head. Undoubtedly the most complex woman I’d ever come across in any number of ways. I nodded my acceptance of this statement.

“The second theory sounds very similar to the first,” Jeff told me, “And that is that the two vampire lords have been maneuvered into inviting Telena Petrokovitch into town. Should this be the case, then it is most likely that this person is the one doing the nefarious plotting. As you said, the lords Wright and Hausse have been loyal to the Lady Dupree for centuries. It seems unlikely that they’d change their allegiances now that she’s succeeding so well.

“This also,” he continued, “Brings us back to the plotter being another powerful vampire. The level of sophistication required to get elder vampires like Wright and Hausse to invite their mistress’ enemy into town is most impressive. Almost frighteningly so.” We sat in silence for a while thinking about that.

“Well,” I began, standing up. “Thank you for your time and your insights. I’ll make sure the Lady Selina knows how helpful you’ve been.” Right now they were helpful. It seemed likely that any dealings they’d have with my cousins would have followed a similar vein. And if they became

too much of a nuisance, I could always warn them away at that time.

“Actually,” Veronica began as the two of them stood with me, “We’d prefer that you didn’t mention us to her. People who are helpful to her tend to find themselves entangled in her world and her affairs. We’d rather steer away from those ties.”

“As you wish,” I agreed easily, putting my sunglasses back on as we walked towards the front door.

“Thank you,” she said sincerely as she opened the front door.

Walking out onto their front porch, I told them, “You’ve provided me a lot of information. Some of it was information that I should have received six months ago. If you don’t want your names bandied about, that certainly poses no problem to me.”

“Where are you off to now?” Jeff asked.

“I’m not sure,” I replied honestly. “Probably to find a quiet place to think about what you’ve told me.”

“Best of luck,” she said.

“Yes,” Jeff agreed. “If you need anything, you know where to find us.”

“I appreciate that,” I told him as I walked to my car. “Who knows? I might even take you up on that offer. Thanks again and have yourselves a good evening.” Both waved goodbye before returning into their house.

I drove much more slowly than normal back to my house.

The next evening found me once more thinking over what the Daniels had told me. Both the political aspects as well as that little thing about telum not lasting long. I must admit that the latter topic took up the larger part of the thought processes.

While asleep I'd managed to fumble my way back into the spirit world briefly and had found Jack. He'd pretty much agreed with what I'd been told by the vampire couple. When asked about why he hadn't told me, he'd responded by saying that we never knew how long our lives would last. Why interfere with actually living them by concentrating on when we might or might not die? Frustrated, I'd left the spirit world and slept. I had the impression that Jack was very wise which added to my aggravation in no small amount.

And I had to admit that he probably did have a point. It would likely take me a little while to get past that particular point before I could actually appreciate it, but I felt given a little time I probably could do so. So long as I actually had the time in which to do so.

I had just stood to try to find something to do to break the circle in which my thinking had become stuck in when the phone rang.

“Hello?”

“One of the elders has had a premonition that one of her donors might be next,” Miranda informed me. “This donor matches the same general description of the other victims.” I began gathering my weapons and keys as she gave me the address. It wasn't far from my own house and while a premonition sounded iffy at best, it was the best clue I had right now. It sure beat a couple of calls that vampires couldn't reach so-and-so. Those had yielded only dead bodies so far. In a couple of cases almost certainly after the vampires had actually found the bodies and then pretended no to have done so. As long as they didn't kill the donor, I didn't really care about little things like

that. With a little luck I'd get there while this one was still alive. Maybe even find the killer.

Three minutes later I found me roaring down the freeway at well over one hundred miles per hour. Four minutes after that I was almost to my exit traveling in excess of one hundred and eighty but I'd picked up a highway patrol car who followed gamely along well behind me with his party lights and siren on. Cresting a hill, I took my exit still driving far too fast and hoping the cop would pass it by. Down at the intersection where the road went under the freeway, I still hadn't slowed down enough and skidded into - and with a sudden swerve to the right, back out of - oncoming traffic. Well, that certainly beat caffeine as a way to wake up quickly, although, I think I honestly preferred the caffeinated beverage method of waking. Back in my own lane once more, I floored it and the Viper leapt forward in response.

Two blocks later everything turned into middle-class residential housing. Three blocks after that I turned onto a quiet side street, pulled into a darkened driveway, and hopped out of the car. In the distance I heard sirens. The house I was looking for was three streets over. With a leap, I took off flying.

From the air most houses look the same. Therefore, I flew fairly low and had to use the curb numbers to identify the house I sought. It didn't take long. The potential victim's name was Eileen Connors. She lived in a nice brick home with a blue sedan in the driveway. I didn't know if the sedan was hers or not. Looking around, there were several vehicles parked on the street as well as the neighboring driveways. If the killer really was after this woman and was here, he or she could have driven any of them.

I landed on the walk halfway to the house. Or perhaps a semi-controlled crash would be a bit more accurate description. Standing up, I dusted myself off and limped towards the front door.

By the time I knocked, my ankle had finished healing. Maybe thicker socks would help.

A pretty, black-haired woman opened the door to the extent of the security chain. “May I help you?”

“Yes, I’m Wallace McAlister. Miss Miranda Cassell suggested that I might check in on you. There is a security concern.”

“I don’t know a... oh, wait. Does she work with Perle Medea?” she asked, sounding suspicious.

“Perle Medea?” I asked in return. “Probably, but to be honest I don’t know. I’m just here on Miss Cassell’s orders.” I wasn’t sure just how much this donor knew and I wasn’t about to drag Selina’s name into this.

“Do you mind if I call Perle?” she asked, still from the other side of the door. “And what is this security matter you’re here for?”

“Not at all, in fact, please do call. And to answer your second question, there’s been a number of violent attacks on young women recently. Most of these young women have fit your general description.”

“Uh, huh,” she said not sounding any too sure about the story as she pulled a cell phone out of her pocket. Turning, I strolled a short ways down the walk, scanning the area again. No signs of anyone lurking around. Not really surprising but it didn’t hurt to check. She talked on the phone with a woman who worked for Perle. Shortly thereafter, she spoke with Perle herself.

“She wants to speak to you,” Eileen informed me. I’d been busy pretending that I couldn’t hear both sides of the conversation from the place I’d walked to some ten feet away. I closed the distance between us rapidly and took the phone she handed through the gap in the door.

“Yes?”

“Are you the telum?” a quiet, female voice asked.

“Yes.”

“I’ll be there in ten minutes. Please put Eileen back on.”

“As you wish,” I replied, handing the phone back to the dark haired woman. She’d be here in ten minutes? I began to wonder if this wasn’t some elaborate ruse for her to meet me. Absently, I listened in as Perle told Eileen to trust me and do whatever I told her to do.

Fourteen minutes later a black BMW sedan pulled up in front of Eileen’s house. A vampire woman with curly, strawberry-blonde hair stepped out. She wore an expensive dress and carried an equally expensive purse. I suspected that the diamonds on the buckles of her shoes were real which placed them in the extravagantly expensive category.

“Wallace McAlister?” she asked.

“Perle Medea?” I countered as I nodded.

“Indeed. It’s a pleasure to meet you. I just returned from a little trip to Greece. Lovely country. I was born there, you know.” Before I had a chance to comment, she continued.

“Just a short while ago, I had a strong premonition that Eileen was in danger for some reason. Are those dreadful murders still happening?” It was hard to get a read on this woman but I had the vague impression she was putting on a show for my benefit. Some of my cousins had done something similar from time to time. They’d come up and tell the most outrageous lies and try to convince me

they were true. For instance Olivia once claimed that it had finally been uncovered that she was actually the true royal heir to the French throne. She'd gone on for almost ten minutes about how she'd help the little person and that her elevated status of queen wouldn't go to her head. Sometimes they did better than others. And Perle Medea was pretty darn good.

"Yes, ma'am," I replied without hesitation. "There was one only the other night." As though she didn't already know that. Perhaps she thought that telum were dumb as well as short lived.

"Oh, that's terrible."

"Yes," I agreed. "It is. Since I don't know the exactly relationship you have with Miss Connors, perhaps you'd better explain this visit."

"That's good thinking," she agreed, stepping past me. She knocked on the door before letting herself in. Apparently Eileen had undone the chain on the door. I could hear them talking inside but nothing of interest was being said.

I pulled out my cell phone and called Miranda as I walked out to the street. Not seeing anyone around, I flew up a few hundred feet into the air. On a dark night like this, no one would see me. Off in the distance, three police cars had my Viper boxed in. Dammit.

"Yes?" Miranda said, answering her phone.

"The girl's alive," I told her. "Perle Medea is here now."

"Oh? So she's back in the country," she replied not sounding surprised. Of course, since she was soulless that didn't exactly come as a big shock.

"Yeah, she's back. Something rings distinctly false about her. If you have the resources, I'd like you to have someone run surveillance on the Connors house and on Perle Medea. Oh, and could you have my car declared stolen? I broke a few speed laws getting here and it seems that the police

have found where I parked.”

“No need to have it declared stolen,” she replied. “I’ll take care of it. Watching the Connors woman shouldn’t be a problem. However, running surveillance on Medea does.”

“Let’s just have someone setup on the front and rear doors of the Connors house,” I suggested. “So far that’s how the killer’s gotten in every time and home is where all the murders have taken place. I take it there’s some sort of political BS involved with keeping tabs on Medea?”

“Hold just a moment,” she told me, “I’ve got the police on the other line.” There followed a lengthy pause. “Okay, your car’s been cleared. The officers on the scene should be getting the call momentarily. I’ll arrange the stakeout for the Connors house. And you are correct. Politics prevents me from running any operation that might be construed as being against Perle Medea. To get that done, you are going to have to come in and speak with Selina. She’s the only one who can authorize that sort of operation against a noble.”

“I was afraid you’d say something like that,” I muttered.

“You’ll know where to find us,” she said. “Is there anything else?”

“No,” I told her seeing the Medea woman step outside and look around, “That’s about got it for the moment. Oh, have your surveillance team page my phone when they’re in position. I won’t leave until they’re here.”

“Affirmative,” she agreed just before hanging up.

Shaking my head, I flew down and landed at the side of the house. This landing was actually a landing rather than an impact. Quite the improvement. I walked around to the front of the house where Perle was still looking around.

“Oh, good,” she said, “There for a moment, I thought you’d left already.”

“Not yet, still poking around.” Though I suspected that there was little or no chance of Eileen Connors being killed.

“I’m glad to hear you take your job seriously.” Rather than reply, I simply nodded. “I heard that you were at court last night.”

“Yes, I was there.”

“So you got to witness some of the emotional anarchy that has become our norm? And I understand you also got to meet the Lady Petrokovitch. She’s an interesting one. Shares a common lineage with us,” she said, watching me from under her curly bangs.

“It seems like I may have heard something along those lines,” I suggested as though I couldn’t quite put my finger on exactly where I’d heard it.

“Oh, indeed,” she replied enthusiastically. “This common ancestor was quite a man. Of course by the time he sired our lines, he was no longer a man. Not even a vampire. Just a blood sucking demon. A powerful one to be sure but just a demon all the same. Now how do you think a demon could sire a line of undead vampires? Not demonicus mortem, but true nosferatu? That, I think would be a truly interesting explanation. Don’t you?”

“Yeah,” I agreed. “It would be.” This was why she’d arranged for us to meet. This conversation about the demonic vampire, Dominic Arkusinski. But to what end?

“As a telum created by the Lady Selina,” she said a bit more slowly, “You have a deeper connection to her than those of us reborn of her bite, save for Miranda. The past is the key to the future, Wallace. While Hugh Hausse and Gladys Wright may have been misguided in whatever insanity led them to invite Telen Petrokovitch into town, they *have* provided us with a once in a lifetime opportunity.

“You see, the Petrokovitch woman won’t discuss how she was sired. Won’t tell anyone how she and Vanessa both came to be nosferatu instead of demonicus mortem. Vanessa certainly won’t be telling anyone. She’s been dead quite some time now. No, the only one who can tell us is Telena Petrokovitch. And the only one she might tell is our lady, Selina Dupree.”

“And you expect me to convince her to meet Telena and talk about it?” I asked, keeping my face and voice neutral.

“No,” she replied, “I expect you to try and fail. But the potential payoff is worth the risk... even if failure is all but assured.”

“Why do you think she won’t meet with the Petrokovitch woman?” I asked. I knew why but I wanted to know if she did.

“The first and only time Selina Dupree ever met the ultimate sire of our bloodline, she was very badly traumatized. She’d just killed Vanessa and had suffered the backlash caused by her death. At that time Selina was quite young by vampire standards, little more than one hundred years old. Therefore, even as she fired the crossbow that killed Vanessa, the death of her creator almost killed her in return. The backlash sent her into something akin to a coma. When she awoke from this coma, Dominic Arkusinski had her in chains. Evidently, he’d been coming to town for a visit. Vanessa had been getting progressively more and more upset by this. She’d acted more and more erratically. When Selina killed Vanessa, Arkusinski and his companions hurried on into the city while Selina and most of the other survivors remained unconscious.

“Arkusinski wanted the city. And just in case you’re curious, the city in question was Paris. A nice prize to be sure. So, in order to help convince the others he would be in charge, he locked away as many vampires as he could find. He then beat their soulless servants and chained them up.

This served to weaken the vampire's only daytime protection and the vampires themselves as well via the psychic link they held with their soulless. Then, with all those battered soulless watching, he tortured Selina for the murder of her mother."

"Was Vanessa her birth mother as well or just her vampire mother?" I asked. I thought Selina might have mentioned something to the effect that she had been her sire but couldn't remember with great certainty.

"The only one that counts," she replied with a wave of her hand, "Her vampire mother."

"Right. Except the soulless weren't the only ones witnessing the torture, were they?"

"Oh? You've heard this story? No, you are quite correct. Arkusinski's traveling companions were there as well. And one of them was Telena Petrokovitch."

"What can you tell me about her?" I asked.

"She's about ninety years older than Selina from my understanding. Of course, when you get that old, a few years difference doesn't matter much. Telena shares many of our lines' common traits. A lack of reflection, a tendency towards the powers of persuasion, the ability to shapeshift. Rumor has it that she can fly as well. Telena has the speed and power of an elder vampire. According to the grapevine, she doesn't like physical combat but she's quite good at it nevertheless. Within her realm, she's well thought of. Respected and loved even." I nodded again but didn't say anything. Didn't trust myself to say anything just then.

"Selina seemed to recover quickly from her ordeal," Perle continued, looking sad. "However, appearances can be deceiving. She'd been rattled and badly. Afterward, her so-called brother helped install her as the head of Paris' night side. Once Selina was on her feet again, he left to pursue his own endeavors. But Selina's confidence had been damaged by her torture. Her orders became

erratic. She became a bit paranoid. And control of the city slipped right out of her hands.”

“And you’re afraid that’s going to happen here?” I asked, trying to figure out just what this woman wanted.

“There are certainly a number of similar signs as were reported from that time. She is much more powerful now though. Both militarily and vampirically. A fall from power certainly wouldn’t happen the same way now as it did then. The Paris coup that deposed her was almost bloodless. Selina and her top people fled the city with what they could carry. Today? Today there would be a bloodbath. She’s far more powerful than Vanessa was when Selina killed her. Chances are, if Selina was to die by violence, there would be hundreds of vampires killed by the psychic backlash. Most of her line that were anywhere close to her in fact. One of Selina’s strongest talents is High Control. She’s imbedded into the hearts and minds of her people. No, if Selina Dupree falls from power and dies... it will be a lot different. Indeed, it will be much, much worse. And it’s your job to see that this doesn’t come to pass. After all, if she dies, you and Miranda will be the first killed by the backlash.”

“And you think that getting her to talk to Petrokovitch about what happened then might prevent this?” I asked just a little short of stunned by the woman’s peculiar sense of logic.

“The past is the key to the future,” she told me sincerely. “Building upon a damaged foundation is guaranteed to lead to a collapse. It’s only a matter of time. Think about it.”

Driving to Selina’s I did just that. Could Medea be right? Might we be, psychically-speaking,

sitting on top of a ticking time bomb? I remembered the near riot the other night in the Coliseum. That anger had been caused by two of Selina's nobles inviting her arch-nemesis into town right under her nose. In her place, I'd have been mad too. But what was she like under more normal conditions? Did she broadcast confusion and rage all the time? I didn't know but I rather suspected she did not.

What I did know was that she was a dominating, manipulative bitch. She was also sweet and generous person with a good heart. The melding of the two made her interesting at the very least if not fascinating. And it didn't hurt that she was so easy on the eyes either.

Tonight she and Miranda were staying at an estate in Fort Worth. After passing a number of large, historic homes, I stopped at the gate to her home for the night. The guard was a different soulless from the other night and was probably on a semi-permanent assignment for this property. I lifted up my sunglasses as he approached.

He stopped cold and for a moment I thought he was going to draw his weapon. Instead, he spoke into a radio. Without a second glance at me, he turned, walked back to the guardhouse, and opened the gate. Damn. Just what I needed, something else weird to further complicate my life.

Pulling up at the side of this house, I went ahead and parked in the garage. It was starting to look like rain and I didn't want the car getting wet if I could avoid it. After walking under the breezeway that connected the garage to the house, I stepped on inside the main house.

Selina was on the other side of the place. Right now she was thinking about something to do with hemomancy. While I might be interested in learning about blood magic later, I didn't think jumping into it in the middle of whatever it was she was working on would help that endeavor one little bit. No, should that time ever come, I'd start at the beginning and work myself up from there.

In the meantime, I was hungry and thirsty, having skipped breakfast in favor of fruitless thought. A rather poor choice as it turned out.

In the kitchen, I found an old human woman.

“Can I help you my lord?” she asked. Lord?

“Umm, yes. Perhaps you can. I am quite thirsty. I’d like either a couple of large glasses of blood or a medium glass of a potent blood. Also, I need a nice grilled steak. Rare and in the sixteen to twenty ounce range.”

“Oh, I can certainly help you with the blood, milord. However, the steak poses a problem.”

“Really? How so?”

“The Lady Selina ordered them removed from the house, milord. We have tuna steak and chicken but no beefsteak.” I stood there fuming for a moment.

“Where were the steaks taken?” I asked. “And please, by all means go ahead and get the blood.” I was hungry enough that my fangs slid out over my bottom lip. Not answering my question, she hurried out of the room. Dammit, I’d scared her. It certainly hadn’t been intentional. Control over little things like that was evidently going to remain an ongoing project for the foreseeable future.

“What’s got you so upset, Rosie?” a male voice asked as the old woman walked quickly back into the kitchen with a green wine bottle in hand. The fellow was a human guard and he too stopped in his tracks when he saw me. “Sorry for the intrusion, Lord McAlister,” he stammered.

“No problem,” I told him, annoyed about all this lord stuff that seemed to have suddenly cropped up. “Glad to see you’re looking out for Rosie.”

“Yessir,” he replied, relaxing just a little. “I’ll just be getting back to my post.” At my nod he turned and walked quickly away. The smell of blood reached me and it was only with an effort

that I kept my fangs from running out again.

“Is that bloodwine?” I asked, working to maintain control. It smelled better than blood but different from what Selina and I had drunk the other night.

“No milord,” she replied seriously. “This a trice decanted blood slurry. Three times the potency of blood in one third the volume.” I took the glass she offered and sipped. Nice. I drank deeply. Very nice.

“That’s a good start,” I told her with a smile. “Now, about those steaks?”

“I’m afraid they’re gone milord.”

“Hmm. Can you spare someone to go get me one?” I asked.

“And why would she do that?” Selina asked, walking into the kitchen, “When I so specifically made sure that there were none here?”

“Didn’t we have this discussion the other evening?” I asked, swallowing the last of my drink.

“Indeed,” she replied with narrowed eyes, “I thought we had done just that. You don’t seem have gotten the point though.”

“Have a good evening Rosie,” I told the obviously anxious woman. “Sleep well.” She left quickly with a bow to us both. Once she was gone, I turned back to Selina. “I understood your point quite well. And I choose to ignore it.”

“I will not have my people blatantly defying me,” she snarled obviously angry.

“You have bigger problems than micro-managing my menu,” I told her.

“Yes,” she agreed, “I have nobles who suddenly feel it is alright for them to invite my oldest enemy into my lands right under my nose. The root of that problem would seem to be nobles who refuse to mind my orders. Which brings us right back to *you*.”

“No,” I disagreed. “That’s not the root of the problem. It’s a symptom, not the source.”

“Oh? And what makes you so sure of that?” she demanded. Her French accent was beginning to show a little. Damn she was hot. In both the sexy and angry senses of the word.

“Everything I can find about Hausse and Wright suggests that both were extremely loyal to you. Aside from inviting Petrokovitch, I haven’t heard of anything to change that. Both benefitted greatly from your Houston campaign. They have been and are continuing to prosper. Therefore, the most likely answer is they *think* they’re acting in what they see as your best interests.”

“How in the world could anyone be stupid enough to think that bringing that bitch into my city could be in my best interests?” she asked angrily.

“Because they both spoke with Perle Medea,” I said, suddenly realizing that it must be true. A strong influence to get them to go against Selina’s wishes was just what the Daniels had suspected. Perle Medea was not only a strong influence, she also had a pretty good argument. Even if the logic was a bit on the confused side.

“What?” she demanded. “What does Perle have to do with this?”

“Maybe everything,” I replied slowly as I considered the possibilities.

“You are not making any sense,” she declared when I didn’t continue.

“I think Perle Medea spoke to both Wright and Hausse,” I began quietly. “She has a pretty convincing argument for why you should speak to Telena Petrokovitch. With their deep loyalty to you, that might have been enough for them to go against your wishes and invite her here under a flag of truce.”

“I will not speak to that monster any more than necessary to rid my territory of her presence,” she snarled.

“Which, in Perle Medea’s eyes makes you weak. Hence, you have bigger problems than micro-managing my menu.”

“How dare you call me weak?!” she demanded, suddenly furious.

“If you had been paying attention,” I said coldly, “You’d have noticed that I never called you weak. However, that’s exactly what Perle Medea thinks you are. At least in respect to those events that happened so long ago. My impression is that she believes your inability to face the past means you are doomed to repeat the mistakes of the past.” Selina didn’t respond immediately. Instead, she just stood there glaring at me.

“You know,” I told her calculatingly, “I’m beginning to wonder if maybe she isn’t right. It’s hard to build upon a cracked foundation as she said. The one real crack you seem to have is your inability to face Telenia in civilized conversation. To face what happened there head on and to realize that it happened hundreds of years ago. To lance this wound and let time finally start healing it.” She was furious now and only moments away from exploding. “Of course, I think Perle is more concerned with knowing how our blood line came to be formed from the demon. While I admit a lack of knowledge can create problems, I don’t typically consider that to be a flaw.

“No,” I continued as her eyes turned red with her fury, “I think that’s why you’re spending so much time worrying about whether I eat steak or if I’m trying to content myself with blood. There’s a wound in you that prevents you from quite being perfect. And it’s easier for you to distract yourself with me than it is to face that flaw within yourself.” And that was apparently the last straw.

She screamed at me. In a mostly incoherent babble she yelled at me for nearly five minutes straight. Partway through her tirade, Miranda walked in glaring at me as did six other soulless guards. I didn’t care about them and kept my focus on Selina. Eventually, she wound down.

“You’ve needed to do that for quite some time, I’d wager,” I told her as I poured her a glass of blood from the bottle that was still on the table. This set her off again and I waited politely until she again wound down before handing her the glass. She looked like she wanted to throw the glass in my face but instead drank the contents in one long drink. When finished, she stood there staring at me with a decidedly hostile look.

“This is the first time in quite a while that you can’t just use your powers to order someone else to fix the problem, isn’t it?” I asked. Yes, I’ve been known to throw gasoline on fires before. Usually with predictably bad results.

“What are you trying to goad me into, Wallace McAlister?” she demanded coldly.

“I’m trying to goad you into clear, rational thought,” I replied. “Since it’s become impossible lately to have a conversation with you that doesn’t involve you going off like a time bomb or stalking off in self-righteous indignation, I decided it might be easier to go ahead and set you off at the beginning of a conversation. Get it over with so to speak. Was I right or would you rather yell some more... or perhaps use your talent of command to override someone’s will?”

“Say what you came to say and get out,” she told me in a quiet, threatening voice.

“You’re still too angry,” I replied with a sigh, “And since you don’t want to hear what I have to say in the first place, my words would just follow the one’s I’ve already spoken by going in one ear and out your other.”

“You dare mock me in my own home?” she demanded furiously.

“I dare to try to get my point across,” I countered. “At least now I fully understand why two of your lords went behind your back to invite the Petrokovitch woman here. There is a fear in you. You hide it well most of the time and under normal circumstances it’s probably deeply buried. But

now... now it's just below the surface and it's clouding your judgement. Powering these sudden rages of yours. They sensed it just as I do now. And after listening to Perle Medea, they came to the conclusion that the only way for you to be rid of this fear is to face it. Something you can't even listen to, much less visualize or do."

"Throw him out," she snarled. The six guards moved to do just that.

"Back off boys," I told them coldly, "We're not quite done here." They ignored me. I didn't want to fight and possibly kill them. So I tried something new. Reaching inside myself, I found that part of me that was a necromancer. The part that could speak to the dead. And I tried commanding the undead. I felt the same power within each of the guards. "Stop," I commanded. Backed by the full force of my will, the magic flared. And the six of them stopped. Across their faces were mixtures of shock and surprise. Quite an accomplishment when dealing with the soulless.

Selina's anger had gone from hot to cold in an instant. She knew exactly what I'd done.

"I warned you about showing your powers," she hissed. "And I'm not going to allow you to turn them on me."

"Dammit woman!" I yelled, having finally reached some internal boiling point of my own. "Don't you get it? I am not your enemy and I damn sure am not your slave! You don't like the prospect of being commanded by someone who can override your will? Well neither does anyone else! Yet what do you do on a daily basis? You override people's willpower. I'm sure you've convinced yourself that you're the only one who truly understands what's going on. They're not immortal. What could they know? Rationalized your actions by saying that they're for the greater good and all a part of your grand design that will make everyone's lives better. After all, you plan years ahead. Decades and centuries even. What could these little people know about living their

lives? You know best!” A brief silence followed this.

“Do you feel better now?” she asked coldly.

“A little,” I conceded, still somewhat pissed off.

“Good. Now get the hell out of my sight.”

“Not until you understand a couple of things,” I replied walking towards her. Miranda drew her sword and moved to intercept me.

“Back off Miranda,” I told her quietly. “She needs to hear this and I won’t hurt her.” She stayed where she was with her sword in a ready position. “You have my word,” I added. Miranda never took her eyes off me but did take a step back and halfway sheathed her sword.

“Item one,” I said, looking down at the still furious woman from less than a foot away, “I will do what I think is best for you. Your welfare is at the very top of my priority list. In whatever time is left to me in this life, I will do my *damndest* to make sure that no harm befalls you. When that means protecting you from yourself, that complicates things a bit but I will still try as hard as is inhumanly possible.” Her look softened and she started to say something. Before she did, I placed a fingertip across her lips to stop her. I removed the finger with a caress.

“Item two,” I murmured, just before dipping her backwards and kissing her for a very long, very passionate moment. Standing us back up again, I murmured, “Mmm. Oh, yeah. Item two, I really like you. I might even be falling in love with you. Hard to believe since you’re such a lousy date. Didn’t kiss me goodnight and then drove off and abandoned me in a cemetery. Still, it’s something that just might to be happening and you needed to know. And on that note, I’ll bid you ladies a good evening.” It seemed I’d managed to catch her completely off guard. And with that I stepped into Selina’s shadow and stepped out in the garage.

Wiping cold sweat from my shadowport off, I hopped in the car. Wow. What an evening. I drove home at a nice sedate pace.

Since I awoke the next evening, I quickly arrived at the conclusion that I had not been assassinated in my sleep. This automatically started the evening off on a much brighter note than it might otherwise have begun. While heating the blood portion of my breakfast, I noted that I was all out of steaks. Five minutes later while drinking breakfast, I remembered that I'd bought enough meat the other night to last me well into next week. I'd been robbed. And it didn't take much effort to figure out who'd robbed me.

Fuming, I began planning and plotting just what I might be able to do that would most annoy Selina while simultaneously getting my point across to her. When my fangs slid out, I gave it up for the moment and went to take a cold shower.

After my shower, I was less irked and more hungry. I drove over to a good steak place and ordered their largest. It was big and it was tasty. Halfway through the substantive portion of breakfast, my phone rang. Annoyed, I answered it, despite strong urges to the contrary.

"Hello?"

"Wallace?" Miranda asked. Great, I should have turned the damned thing off.

"Yep," I replied, sounding cheerful despite my absolute lack of good humor.

"Where are you? There's a lot of unusual background noise."

"I'm at a steak place. It seems that someone stole all the steaks I had in the fridge last night,"

I told her with a frown as my false cheer evaporated away.

“Oh. Selina’s not going to be happy about that,” she sighed.

“And I’m not happy about those stolen steaks,” I countered.

“Right. I’m actually calling about business. The murderer struck again... just a short time ago apparently,” she said in her usual, emotion-free voice.

“Dammit,” I muttered quietly as I looked up at the ceiling. No comfort there. Returning my gaze to the table, I said, “Alright. Give me the name and address as well as quick and dirty directions. Have the police been notified yet?”

“No,” she replied, “They have not. You won’t need directions, you already know where the victim lived.” That sent chills down my spine.

“Who?” I asked, closing my eyes for a long moment.

“Eileen Connors,” she told me. “Perle Medea found her, just a few minutes ago. I tried to contact my surveillance team and they have not responded. I’ve sent out two teams to check on their condition. You have two hours before the police are called. Do not allow yourself to be seen in the area.”

“I understand,” I replied shortly, “Do we have any reason to believe that Perle didn’t disable your team and then kill Eileen?”

“Why would she have done that?” Miranda asked, sounding almost curious.

“That’s a good question,” I replied. “Should that turn out to have been the case, I’ll see if I can’t get back to you with the answer.” Leaving enough money to cover the meal and a nice tip, I quickly left the restaurant.

Angry with myself that I hadn't somehow been able to prevent this murder as well as the others, I parked the car at a shopping center almost two miles away from Eileen's house. Pulling on a pair of driving gloves, I flew the rest of the way. With a thump I landed on her back porch. Since the back yard had a privacy fence on all sides, I felt this would probably be the best way to get into the crime scene. I must admit to being surprised when Perle Medea walked across the living room and opened the sliding back door for me. For whatever reason, I had not expected her to still be here.

Stepping inside, I paused just past the door to take in the scene. Splash of blood across the wall and the floor of the entryway. A thick, dark-red trail across the off-white carpet across led to the hallway. Through the open doorway I noticed a pair of legs were just visible.

Eileen's blood smelled good and I was glad I'd eaten as much as I had earlier. Shaking my head at this rather backwards thought, I walked across the living room to look down the hall. There, I found our victim laying face down on the floor. A large bloodstain had soaked into the carpet around her neck. The trail of blood from the living room ended here.

It looked like the victim been dressed for work. A navy blue blouse and skirt combination with nice shoes. I suddenly sensed that Perle was right beside me but I didn't turn to look at her or otherwise acknowledge her presence. Instead, I hopped across the body so that I could get a look at the wounds on Eileen's neck. I knew what I'd find before I saw it. Claw marks. In this case, horizontal slashes close enough together that they almost formed one wound. There were four deep gashes all less than a half inch apart. At least one of them had severed arteries. For a human there would have been almost no chance of survival. Too much damage to vital blood vessels. Death had

come to her very quickly.

Hmm. It looked like most of her blood had been spilled. There was more blood here than in any of the other crime scenes. As though whoever murdered her had not taken any blood this time. I supposed the police crime scene unit would determine the accuracy of my guess when they arrived.

“What killed her?” Perle asked from across the body though I felt sure she already knew the answer.

“She was clawed,” I replied quietly, “Just like the others.” I wasn’t going to mention to her that three of the victims had been opened up by a knife rather than claws. Maybe she’d slip up and drop me a clue to what had happened here.

“Why would someone kill Eileen?” she asked sadly, gazing down at the body with a look of loss. “What could someone hope to gain from this?” To that, I had no answers.

“Did you park your car nearby?” I asked.

“What?” she replied, surprised by my change of topic. “Oh. Yes. I’m parked out front.”

“It’s going to be a bit over an hour before the police are notified. I suggest you move your car and coordinate with Miranda what is going to be reported, when, and by whom. Timing is going to be important. We can’t have you being implicated in Eileen’s murder in any way.” And hopefully that would get rid of her for a while. While she’d lost a servant and perhaps a friend, I still was not comfortable with her. Most especially under these circumstances.

“Yes,” she agreed hesitantly. “I suppose you’re right.”

Once she was gone, I resumed looking around. Unfortunately, I found nothing of interest. Much the same as I’d found at the other murder scenes.

Closing the door to the back porch behind me, I took a deep breath. Here I'd had my chance. Two of them in fact. I'd been here both before and after the crime. And now I had nothing. Nothing to show for my efforts except another dead, dark-haired woman. Frustrated and angry, I leapt up into the night sky.

"Both of them had been rendered unconscious," Miranda informed Selina and myself some forty minutes later. The three of us were sitting in a well-appointed den inside a country estate some distance south of Arlington. "Neither of them saw who did it. We'll have to wait on the blood analysis, but it appears that they were both gassed while in their surveillance vehicle. Once they had been rendered unconscious, all the recording gear was turned off. No fingerprints were found on the equipment." Selina muttered something surprisingly rude. I raised an eyebrow and grinned at her. In turn she gave me a dark frown which amused me greatly.

"What's our next step?" Selina asked.

"Perle is notifying the police now," Miranda said, however Selina waved her words away. "No, I meant in tracking down the killer. What do we do next?"

"Well," I began slowly, "I suppose we'd better get the usual camera shots from around the area. Security cameras, ATMs, and all that good stuff. I doubt that we'll have any more luck than any of the other times but we might get lucky. I'm sure the police will be interviewing the neighbors and such on the off chance they might have seen something. What I really would like..." No. It couldn't be that easy. With a curse I put my hand over my eyes.

Yes. It could be that easy.

“What?” Selina asked sounding concerned.

“Selina,” I told her, shaking my head, “I swear, you made the dumbest telum ever.”

“What are you talking about Wallace?” she half asked, half demanded.

“Do you have pictures of your vampire lords and ladies?” I asked.

“Yes. And I can’t help but notice that you didn’t answer the question,” she said, eyes beginning to narrow dangerously.

Turning to Miranda, I said, “Get those pictures. Doesn’t matter what format.” Miranda gave Selina a quick glance for permission before standing up and walking out of the room. Returning my attention to Selina, I said, “I’ll explain in just a moment. You know, you really are cute when you’re angry.” This did not go over too well with her. Not a big surprise there. Fortunately, Miranda chose that moment to come walking back into the room carrying a laptop computer.

“Okay,” I told them, “Let’s go.”

“And just where are we going Mister McAlister?” Selina grated.

“The morgue of course,” I replied easily.

“The morgue?”

“Yes,” I answered with a small, tight grin, “It’s a place where they keep dead people.” One way or another she was going to pay for those steaks.

“I know what a morgue is!” she snapped.

“Oh? Then why’d you ask?”

“I wanted to know our purpose in going to the morgue,” she growled, all but grinding her teeth.

“Well now, that’s simple. We’re going to talk to dead people.”

“Oh,” she replied.

A departing employee from the hospital morgue handed Miranda the keys to the offices as we stepped inside. It had taken almost five hours before Eileen’s body arrived here. This meant we didn’t have nearly as much time as I’d have liked for this. Daylight was less than three hours away. Miranda locked the door behind us as Selina and I walked on to the storage room.

“Have you ever tried anything like this before,” Selina asked quietly.

“Sorta,” I replied distractedly. “During the war, I asked one of the enemy’s vampires what I could expect in the territory ahead. He was kind enough to tell me.”

“Are you sure he was really dead and not just answering subconsciously?”

“Pretty sure,” I answered quietly. There was a lot of necromantic energy around this place and it seemed to be tugging at the edges of my senses. “I was holding onto his hair at the time he answered.”

“I’m sorry,” she told me looking perplexed. “I do not understand the significance of you holding his hair.” I felt Miranda rejoin us but didn’t turn to look.

“His body was still in the house,” I muttered. “I was carrying his head by the hair. Eileen’s over here.” I walked over to a body bag on a gurney. And she was indeed inside this bag. I knew it as surely as if I was looking through the bag. Perhaps in some strange way I was.

“You could have said that in the first place,” Selina stated with large traces of aggravation in

her tone.

“Yes,” I agreed, less distracted now that I had found Eileen. “But that wouldn’t have annoyed you. I have about six more steaks to pay you back for. That’s a lot of aggravation and I’ve yet to get started good.” Reaching up, I slowly unzipped the bag that held Eileen.

“Steaks which you were not supposed to have in the first place!” she declared hotly. “It is for your own good that I had that meat removed from your house. You should have done as I told you.”

“Take off your clothes,” I told her as I gazed down at Eileen. Death had left her unnaturally pale and bluish. For the moment her eyes were closed. I unbuttoned her shirt just enough to be sure that there was no ‘Y’ incision. No autopsy had been performed yet. I hadn’t thought so but it was probably best to be sure. The fact that the autopsy had yet to be performed was good. Probably.

“Take off my clothes? Are you crazy?” Selina asked, working herself up to becoming really angry.

“You seem to be so incredibly concerned for my welfare,” I replied, turning to look her in the eyes. “Well, let me assure you. You stripping down will make me feel a lot better. I promise.”

“How dare you?!” Oh yes, anger had definitely arrived.

“So,” I said with a nod, “You’re only concerned about my welfare when it suits you to be. When you can further your own agenda. Now we see that when it comes to something *I* feel is important, like my morale for instance, you couldn’t care less.” She stood there and sputtered for a moment. I could feel her annoyance and confusion through the link we shared.

Just before I turned back to Eileen, Selina walked over to me. Reaching up, she grabbed the sides of my head, pulled me down and kissed me thoroughly. Wow. Releasing me, she took a step

back so she wouldn't have to look straight up at me.

"I do care about your morale," she said quietly and sincerely with just a hint of her accent in attendance. "But I am not going to strip for you and I am not going to stop doing everything I can to end your self-destructive eating of flesh. Now, let's get on with what we came here to do." I stood there looking down into her beautiful blue eyes for a moment.

"I suppose," I began thoughtfully, "That we could do some tests later to determine if eating meat is actually a self-destructive endeavor," I sorta agreed with a hint of a sigh. Smiling brightly, I continued, "In the meantime, I'll be happy to argue about it with you. And I think you *will* strip for me. Maybe not here and now, but sooner or later I think you will."

"Get to work," she responded, shaking her head and throwing an exasperated look Miranda's way.

"I guarantee you'll enjoy it at least as much as I do," I promised, grinning my brightest. She just pointed at the gurney while her eyes frowned.

My grin faded quickly as I returned my attention to Eileen. To be perfectly honest, I didn't remember exactly how I'd talked to that dead vampire head those six months ago. I had evidently pulled on my necromantic talents... I just didn't know how I'd done it.

Concentrating on the necromantic energy around us, I found I suddenly knew which freezers held corpses and which ones didn't. To my necromantically enhanced perceptions, Selina and Miranda stood out like flares in a night sky. Slowly, carefully, I began pulling the ambient energy into myself. It felt peculiar. My body began tingling most strangely and I felt a deeper connection to my body than I normally did. As though I was suddenly more aware of just how my body was functioning. More conscious of every muscle moving, every surge of my undead heart, every blink

of my eyes. Still, I gathered more of the energy, being especially careful not to draw any from Selina or Miranda. The tingling slowly intensified.

“I can feel you gathering power,” Selina whispered. “If you gather much more, you will run the risk of other supernaturals in the area sensing the buildup as well.” I nodded but didn’t reply. Something told me that I was almost ready. I continued drawing necromantic energy into myself. When the tingle in my fingertips began changing into a burning, I stopped.

Oddly enough, I knew what to do. Problem was, it didn’t happen to be what I’d done with the vampire head down in Houston. Why this should be different, I didn’t know. Maybe it had something to do with the fact that Eileen Connor had never been a supernatural. Hadn’t been undead to start with. I just didn’t know. Taking a deep breath, I leaned over and kissed her corpse on the mouth breathing the power gathered within me into her. Both my breath and the magic escaped me in a rush. Dizzy, I stepped back and Selina put a hand to my arm to help steady me.

“Is this what you did in...” Selina began asking when Eileen sat up.

Eileen’s mouth opened in a silent scream. Her dead eyes opened and looked around blindly in a rather disturbing manner. And I suddenly felt her pain. It was a sensation quite similar to how I seemed to keep knowing Selina’s moods and even her occasional thought. Except this was all pain. Agony in fact. Instinctively, I knew of two solutions and I acted on both at once. For the first I bit my wrist and stuck it into her mouth. The instant the blood hit her tongue, she clamped down on me and began sucking blood. My second thought had been to gather more necromantic energy. Pulling hard on the surrounding energy, I felt my body begin that peculiar tingling again. This time I somehow channeled the energy through my wrist and into her mouth via the blood she was taking.

Drawing back suddenly, she took a large breath as she thankfully stopped chewing on my

wrist. Absently, I healed the painful wound there while at the same time closely watching Eileen. And I realized something. Her eyes weren't dead any more.

This was definitely not how it had worked down in Houston.

"Eileen?" I asked tentatively. Her attention focused on me slowly.

"Yes," she whispered hoarsely. "I am Eileen. Where am I?"

"Do you remember me?" I asked, sensing her confusion. I knew with one hundred percent certainty that she was not ready for the answer to where she was. She'd likely figure it out soon enough on her own. Hopefully, that would work out better than me telling her.

"No," she answered a little more clearly. She didn't seem to be looking around anywhere except at me.

"Tell me the last thing you remember," I commanded gently. I felt her confusion grow as she tried to sift through her memories. At last she came up with a clear recollection and calmed down immediately.

"I was on my morning commute, driving in to work. I had a nine o'clock appointment..." her voice trailed off. "... I made the appointment. Worked through the day. That evening I got take out from Carraba's." She was silent a long moment. "I do remember you now. You came by the house the other night. Told me I was in danger. There was someone out attacking women. Perle came by. After you left, she told me about her trip to Europe. The next evening..." she trailed off again and began shaking all over. "No. No. Something bad happened. Something very bad. I don't want to remember." I gently placed a hand on either side of her face.

"Don't worry Eileen," I told her, looking directly into her eyes. "Nothing can hurt you now. You're safe. Be calm. I won't let anything happen to you. Be calm. I know this is difficult for you.

Tell me what happened and remember, you're safe here with me." I was trying something similar to what I'd seen hypnotist do. And to some extent it seemed to be working. At least she calmed down anyway.

"After getting home, I ate dinner while watching the liberal drivel that passes for national news." That sounded a lot like my Uncle David. "Before I had a chance to get comfortable, a client called and wanted a quick meeting. It was late but this was one of my important clients. I was just about to get my purse when the doorbell rang." Her narrative came to a stop and her breathing quickened as her eyes got considerably rounder.

"Remember Eileen," I told her in a quiet yet firm voice, "You're *safe* here with me. Nothing and no one can harm you here. It's alright. You can tell us what happened and you'll feel better for it." While it didn't seem to work as well as it had earlier, it worked well enough. "What happened next?"

"I answered the door," she told us as a tear slid down her cheek.

Several minutes of teary explanation later, Eileen asked, "So, I'm dead?"

"Yes dear," Selina told her gently. "You died. Wallace had to bring you back so that you could answer our questions. Rest easy knowing those answers will prevent other women from suffering the same fate that claimed your life."

"I answered all your questions," she said, "Now what?"

"Now it's time for you to go back," the vampire woman explained quietly, "You don't belong

here anymore. You belong in the next world.”

“But I don’t want to go back,” Eileen declared beginning to sound panicked, getting herself out of the body bag and off the gurney. “I don’t remember walking into any light. I don’t remember any angels. I don’t remember anything after I died. Nothing at all.”

“I’m sorry,” Selina told her. Turning to me, she said, “It’s time to dismiss her.”

“Umm,” I muttered, looking over at Eileen.

“Umm?” Selina stated with raised eyebrows.

“Well... this is a bit different from Houston,” I murmured.

“Really? How so? Didn’t you do the same tonight as you did then?” Looking over my shoulder, she muttered a curse in French, “The wound on her neck has healed.” Wiping away the dried blood from Eileen’s neck, I found that Selina was right.

“That’s not going to work,” she stated. “The corpse has to have a matching set of wounds. I suppose we’ll have to clean up a bit.” And with that she moved forward almost too fast to see and a splash of blood from Eileen’s neck sprayed across the floor. In an instant Selina had grown out her fingernails into claws and had then slashed them across the side of the dead woman’s neck. Just as the killer had done.

Eileen freaked.

Screaming bloody murder, Eileen snatched up the gurney she’d just been on and swung it like a club. The blow slammed Selina across the room where her body’s impact dented one of the freezer

doors. Without hesitating she whipped the stainless steel gurney around at me. Leaping up, I barely avoided being hit. Continuing my upward momentum, I landed on the ceiling and stuck there.

Off to the side Selina's assistant drew her sword. "No Miranda," I called. "You see to Selina. I'll deal with Eileen." Face hard, she looked like she wanted to argue. Instead, she walked across the room to where her mistress was just now sitting up. Eileen meanwhile, took an overhand swing at me which missed thanks only to my last second dodge to the right and instead took out a chunk of the cement ceiling. The gurney was getting bent up pretty bad. Rather impressive.

Strength of the dead I supposed.

By this time Eileen had quit screaming and the blood flow from her neck wound had stopped. Despite this, she showed no signs of winding down. "Eileen, please stop trying to swat me with the big metal thing," I called. Her silent response required another quick evasion to the side.

"You promised to protect me," she hissed. "You said I'd be safe. You lied!" She punctuated this statement by taking out an overhead light that I'd been standing near as well as another small bit of ceiling. I flew around to the other side of the room as the lights around the room flickered. Once more I landed on the ceiling. In the flickering lights she'd lost where I'd gone. A nice side-effect of wearing black in an area that now had poor lighting.

"You're right, Eileen," I called. Eileen spun around and then around again trying to locate where I was speaking from. "I did promise that you were safe with me. Please understand, I had no idea Selina was going to attack you. She did it because she doesn't understand." I finished this statement standing on the floor looking down at Selina who sat just a couple of feet away. The same Selina who now glared up at me with angry, pain-filled eyes. "Heck, Eileen. I didn't even understand until you swung that gurney." Selina's angry gaze took on a slightly curious, slightly calculating look.

Miranda only glanced at me before getting back to setting the bones in her mistress' arm back into line. I knew her arm hurt but I also knew we'd both suffered much worse and recovered. Miranda's helping her would save her the use of some blood and reduce the complexity of the healing. Had she wanted, Selina could have healed the breaks in a matter of seconds. But it would have used up a good deal of her internal blood reserve doing it that way.

"What didn't you understand?" Eileen snarled. "And why should I care?!" These were the same questions that lurked behind Selina's blue eyes. With a sigh I turned away from those eyes and returned my attention to Eileen. As I walked cross the floor, she saw me and threw the gurney at me.

Jumping, I kicked the stainless steel gurney remains out of the air and off to the side. "You have two options Eileen," I informed her as I resumed walking towards her. She pushed a corpse off a nearby gurney and picked it up as well. "Option one, you can listen to me and we can all walk out of here. You've caused too much of a mess and this is going to take some serious cleanup."

"I don't believe you!" she shrieked, running at me with the gurney. Dropping down low under her gurney, I kicked her in the chest. She flew across the room and crashed into another corpse-laden gurney which toppled over with her. Her new gurney dropped harmlessly to the floor next to me. I sprang up and continued walking towards her.

"Option two," I called. "You can continue fighting me. As a zombie, you are now very hard to kill for most folks. However, being both a necromancer and an accomplished swordsman, this doesn't pose much of a problem for me. So to sum up, you can either stop fighting me or I can destroy you. It's just that simple and it's entirely up to you."

"I didn't ask for any of this," she cried as anger, fear, distrust, and confusion fought a silent battle inside her and across her face as she slowly stood back up.

“I know,” I answered quietly. “Neither did I. But this is what we’ve got.”

“I don’t want to die. But I don’t trust you and I don’t want to be a zombie,” she said in a near whisper. While she was outwardly composed now, I could feel a maelstrom of seething emotions just beneath the surface of her thoughts.

“It’s not fair but here are the basic facts. Before we leave this room you are either going to have to come to grips with them or you will not be leaving this room. You have already died. You are now undead. The evidence is all around you and you remember being killed. Face it. Accept it. You don’t have to understand it and you damn sure don’t have to like it.”

“Oh, for pity’s sake,” Selina declared, striding across the floor, “If you don’t have it in you to take care of this...” Which is as far as she got before finding her path blocked by the flat of my sword. Both she and Miranda blinked in surprise.

“Wallace,” she began, which is as far as she got.

“Go... sit... down!” I commanded with a fierceness that surprised me with its intensity. “You caused me to break my *word* tonight woman! Now sit. I will handle this... and I’ll do it my way.” I could feel Eileen’s gaze on my back as I watched the surprised Selina back away. Miranda’s steady eyes followed me as she slowly retreated with the woman she’d chosen to serve. When the raven-haired vampire hopped up onto a table and sat, I turned back to the zombie I’d accidentally created. No wonder it had felt different from Houston. I’d gone from communicating with the dead to animating them. Damn.

“What’s it going to be?” I asked the undead creature I’d created. “Do I destroy you, sending you on to the next life. Or, do you check out what life as a zombie entails before meeting whatever end eventually awaits you?”

“I...I don’t know,” she muttered, obviously shocked.

I began striding once more towards her. “Decide... now. A continued existence here or do you go off exploring the next life?” As I closed on her, I began drawing the sword back for a decapitating strike.

“Life!” she screamed, causing me to halt my blade only inches from her neck.

“Wallace!” Selina barked. “You cannot allow this thing to live. It is a zombie. They eat flesh and their bodies rot. She doesn’t want to be trapped inside a shell of rotting meat. Free her. It’s the only truly compassionate thing to do. She must move on to the other side!”

“No,” I replied, eyeing the vampire woman cautiously. “She’s made her decision and I’ll stand by it. Miranda,” I snapped sharply, “You’ve served your mistress for a long time and have done an excellent job of it. However, if you draw that weapon, I’ll kill you where you stand and Selina will be without your expert service, council, and succor for the rest of eternity. No, I need Eileen to live,” I announced, returning the majority of my attention to Selina. “I need to find out about my powers. And my powers will tell me about myself. If I can create something like Eileen, then I am likely not too far away from what I’ve created. I also need to find out how durable Eileen is. Most *telum* do not survive as long as I have. A fact you rather conspicuously failed to mention. Should Eileen prove to be sturdy, then it might offer hope that I too can continue to live a longer than expected lifespan.” Silence settled down over the morgue.

“If you... no, if *we* let her live,” Selina told me quietly, “It will be violating many of our laws. And I wrote some of those laws.”

“And within your cities, you make the rules,” I responded equally quietly. “You rule these lands. Your word is law. If you say there will be an exception, there will be an exception.”

“I will not say any such thing,” she stated firmly. “If this is to happen, it must remain secret.”

I nodded. “Very well. We are agreed then. It won’t be our first secret and I’m sure it won’t be our last.”

Gesturing Eileen over, we began walking towards the door. “How’s your arm doing?” I asked the blue-eyed vampire as my zombie reluctantly followed us.

“It’s fine,” Selina replied, obviously in poor humor.

“Good,” I muttered, looking the place over. “It looks like a bunch of drunken frat boys broke in here,” I commented.

“Not a bad idea,” Selina said, giving Miranda a look. Miranda pulled out a cell phone and began dialing. “Tell her to use her discretion. Just make sure none of us is mentioned in connection to this.”

“What about the corpse?” Miranda asked with a jerk of her chin at Eileen.

Sighing, she said, “Leave that up to Claudia. Either missing or destroyed by one means or another should be fine.”

“But you said....” Eileen began when I held a finger up to simultaneously stop her and get her attention.

“They’re not talking about you Eileen,” I explained. “Well, they are but they aren’t. They’re talking about the coverup story for the mess we created. Part of that is going to be coming up with a viable reason for why you aren’t going to be found in there with the rest of the dead. That’s what they’re talking about.”

“Oh,” she muttered, looking embarrassed. “Umm. I have a question,” she asked as we walked out of the building and headed towards the waiting limo.

“Go ahead and ask,” I replied.

“I’m not going to start craving brains or anything gross am I?”

“You play a dangerous game Wallace McAlister,” Selina told me as she and Miranda dropped Eileen and myself off at my house. We hadn’t been able to pick up my car. It was simply too close to daybreak. Selina would be fine in the limo until they made it to whichever house they were staying in for the day. “Make sure you’re playing it for the right reasons.”

Walking around the car to her door, I opened it and knelt down in front of her. For a long moment I just looked at her. “My old life is gone. I miss it but life is all about change. Right now, I am learning about who and what I’ve become. My methods are a bit unorthodox but they’ve always been that way. This new life is certainly interesting and I’m working on embracing it.

“Now, I can promise you several things,” I continued quietly. “Perhaps you will find reassurance in them... and perhaps you will not.” Taking her silence as encouragement, I continued.

“I will always to my utmost to keep my word. I will never betray you. Whenever possible, I will not allow you to take a wrong turn without first giving you warning. And I will argue with you ‘til the cows come home about what constitutes a wrong turn. For myself, I will walk the path I see as the best. You are free to argue with me about which path is the best one... but in the end, I will walk the path I choose as we must all must walk our own paths.” Taking her hand, I kissed her knuckles. “These things I swear.”

“I am underwhelmed,” she said drolly, pulling her hand away. “Men have sworn their hearts,

their kingdoms, their very souls to me. Why should I be impressed with your oath?”

Standing up, I walked a few steps away before turning to half face her, “Why should you be impressed? Maybe you shouldn’t. But those were lesser men. They were not your equal, they were underlings, toys, pawns, and lackeys. Unlike them, I *am* your equal. That’s part of the reason why I made those promises to you. So you wouldn’t fear me.”

“Fear you?” she declared incredulously. “Why should I fear *you*?”

“You shouldn’t,” I replied quietly, “But you do nevertheless. I frighten you on a number of levels. Perhaps a part of you senses that it’s time for you to finally grow up and the prospect frightens you. One thing’s for sure though. Your life will never be boring again. I’ll see to it personally. Good evening.” And with that I turned on my heel and walked into my house while she sputtered in a vain attempt to find something to say.

A moment later the limo drove away.

“Is it true?” Eileen asked as we walked into my kitchen. “What she said. Is it true?”

“Which part of what she said?” I asked, coming slowly out of deep thought.

“About me being trapped in dead and rotting flesh. Will I become a monster?” she asked in a near whisper.

“Grab the refrigerator and be ready to bring it with you,” I replied, dodging her question for the moment. “I’ll be right back.”

“What?!” she asked my back as I stepped out in the garage. I was only there long enough to

pick up what I needed before returning to the kitchen.

“Okay,” I began, “Bring the fridge and I’ll try my best to answer your question. Hurry up, we don’t have much time.”

“What do you mean bring the fridge?!” she demanded almost angrily.

“I mean, pull it away from the wall a bit, unplug it, and carry it with you,” I replied. “And try not to spill the contents while you’re at it. Get a move on. It’s getting close to sunrise and I doubt you’ll fare much better than a vampire in sunlight.”

Putting her hands on her hips, she just stood there staring at me.

“Look,” I told her as patiently as I could manage, “You have the strength of the dead now. While the refrigerator is bulky, you’ll find it’s not particularly heavy any more. Oh, and be careful maneuvering it through the doorways. Try not to damage the walls.” I continued on through the house with the bulky rig I’d picked up in the garage and took it into my bedroom. There, I opened the secret door in the wall leading down into the vault where I slept during the day. And it truly was a vault. Metal-lined walls and all. While those walls had been plastered over and covered in rich wood paneling here and there, it was still just a glorified bank vault.

Both at the top of the stairs and at the bottom were heavy, bank-vault quality doors. So far as I knew, these were the only access points into my room other than whatever conduits the electricity and water had been run through. There was no ventilation shaft. Vampires didn’t need to breath unless they wanted to talk or to literally get a breath of fresh air.

“Eileen!” I yelled, “Hurry your ass up!” When I heard no reply, I went to see what the holdup was. I found her standing right where I’d left her. The only difference was the tears that were now streaming down her face. Muttering a string of curses, I walked past her, grabbed the fridge, and

carried it leaning on my back through the house and down into the vault. Placing it in a corner, I plugged it in before going back up to retrieve my zombie.

Along with Eileen's waterworks, there was also water all over the kitchen floor. She couldn't have cried that much. Crap. Checking it out, I discovered that the icemaker had evidently been plugged into a water line. Go figure. Fortunately, there was a cutoff valve right there at floor level and it still worked. Splashing back through the water, I gently took her elbow and began leading her through the house and down into the vault. I didn't bother cleaning up the water. It would dry eventually. With her, the fridge, and my equipment inside, I went back up the stairs and closed the secret door located there.

"Why did you bring a refrigerator and a welding rig down here?" she asked, not really sounding interested in the answer. "That is what you brought isn't it?"

"Yes," I called down the stairs, "You are correct." After pulling on my welding goggles and lighting the torch, I adjusted the flame and set to welding the door closed from the inside. "I brought the fridge because I'm tired of having my steaks stolen. I brought the welder because I'm becoming paranoid in my old age." Welding this was going to take longer than I had until sunrise.

"What's that supposed to mean?" she asked dully.

"Just that," I called over the noise from my welding. "Nothing more, nothing less. If you're thirsty, there's some blood in the fridge. I personally don't particularly care for it cold but you might. Who knows?"

"Drink blood?" she asked, sounding a bit more animated. "That's disgusting!"

"Tear open a corner on one of the blood packets. Smell the contents. See if you still feel the same." Over the sounds of the welder, I heard her open the fridge. A moment later I could smell

fresh blood. “Well?” I called.

“It... it... it, smells... different,” she muttered. Despite the sound generated by the relatively noisy welder, I had no trouble hearing her and hearing her clearly.

“I know it smells different,” I called, continuing the welding. “Dying seems to bring a number of changes to the table. They’ll take some getting used to. Tomorrow, we’ll explore just what changes you’ve undergone. In the meantime, find a comfortable place to lay down. Daytime’s only a few minutes away. If you *are* like me, you’ll probably keel right over as soon as the sun comes up.”

“Hey,” she called, sounding perturbed. “If you’re welding the door shut, how are we going to get out?”

“I’ll show you tomorrow night,” I replied, cutting off the torch and dragging the welding rig back down the stairs. Moving that off to the side, I closed the bottom door. I didn’t usually do that but tonight, it seemed like a good idea.

“You know,” she mused as I staggered for the bed. Daylight was only seconds away and I could feel the strength bleeding out of my limbs. Me making it to the bed was going to be close. “For an underground bunker, this place isn’t half bad. It’s got most of the comforts of home and....”

The sun rose above the horizon and I went away.

After sleeping a while, I gained enough consciousness to try sending myself into the spirit realm. On my second try I succeeded. Once there, with only a little effort I found Jack.

“Ah,” he said, apparently pleased, “I see you’re back. So tell me, how are things in the land

of the living?”

“Confused,” I sighed.

“Perhaps you might care to talk about it?” he suggested, “Two heads being better than one and all that.”

“Well,” I began slowly, “I think Selina and I are either on the path to becoming lovers or she’s going to kill me. I’m not sure which.”

“Really! Now that *is* interesting.” He seemed to think about something for a long moment before asking, “Do you know what Selina’s favorite hobby is?”

“Playing busybody to the world and trying to run everyone else’s life for them?” I ventured.

Jack laughed aloud. “That’s not quite the answer I was looking for. Actually, her favorite hobby is matchmaking.”

“Okay,” I replied after he failed to continue. “You mentioned that as though it were significant for some reason. I’m guessing that you didn’t bring it up simply because matchmaking seems like a natural next step from minding other people’s business for them?”

“Quite,” he agreed drolly. “Selina has been playing matchmaker for a long time. A very long time. She’s actually quite good at. Many happy marriages have resulted from her efforts.”

“And?” I prompted.

“However, she has not had much luck finding someone for herself. Her vampiric gifts make it all but impossible for her to know if she’s actually attractive to someone for who she is rather than the powers she both consciously and unconsciously wields. She has the power of High Command and a most powerful aura. Between the two, mortals trip over themselves in their efforts to please her as do most immortals. One of the reasons she loves her brother so dearly is that she cannot

influence him in the least via her powers. Therefore, she knows he loves her for who she really is.”

“Oh. Well, that is an interesting angle, I suppose,” I mused aloud before trailing off into silence. She’d used quite the contrary tactic with me earlier this evening. And perhaps that was all it had been: a tactic.

“I sense a shadow of understanding in you,” Jack said, “Understanding based on prior knowledge. Perhaps you could enlighten me?”

“Right,” I agreed absently, still mulling matters over, “She can no longer influence me either. Earlier this evening, I made her several promises. They weren’t exactly meant to reassure her... more to help her get a little better understanding of who I am. Her response was to tell me that she’d been promised much more by kings and the like.”

“Is that right?” he asked, apparently intrigued. “And how did you reply?”

“I told her they had been lesser men and walked off.” Jack smiled broadly but didn’t otherwise respond.

After a few minutes had passed, he asked, “So, what other news from the living world?”

“Well... I, umm... I accidentally made a zombie,” I muttered.

“Oh, my.”

“Yeah.”

“And?”

“And now I guess she’s sleeping in my vault. Selina wanted to kill her. I wanted to learn from her. I’m hoping that by... ‘studying’ seems too clinical a word but I suppose it will do. It’s my hope that by studying her, I can come to gain a deeper understanding of my own powers.”

“Selina wanted to kill her? Hmm. As I recall, she did have a standing law within her area of

control that all zombies and ghouls were to be killed on sight. And she didn't actually re-kill your zombie?" Jack asked cautiously.

"No. She damaged Eileen. In exactly the same way Eileen had just been killed. Have you ever seen a freaked out zombie before?"

"I saw a great many things during my long life on earth. In fact, I did see a number of zombies, but never one I would describe as 'freaked out'. Please, go on."

"There's really not that much to tell," I explained. "I stopped Eileen from knocking around Selina like a baseball and then stopped Selina from killing my zombie. After explaining why I wasn't destroying Eileen, Selina dropped us both off at my house."

"How did you stop her," Jack asked, closing his eyes.

"I blocked her path with my bared blade," I replied a bit absently.

"Oh, dear," he muttered, re-opening his eyes.

"Oh dear, my ass!" I declared a little on the hot side as my attention refocused on the discussion. "She made me break my word. I'd promised the zombie during questioning that I'd protect her. And then Selina turned around and attacked her."

"Oh. Your word. Well, I *do* understand that. You must understand that Selina can be impetuous in the best of... wait. Did you say during questioning? You spoke to the zombie you created?"

"Yeah," I confirmed with a sigh. "That was why she got animated in the first place. I was trying to ask her a few questions like I'd done once before in the past. Instead, I turned her into a zombie."

"Speaking with the dead is one thing. Creating a zombie that has enough intelligence to speak

is quite another. In fact, I've never heard of it being done."

"Never?" I asked with a frown.

"Never," he verified. "I've seen a number of animated zombies. Even a few animated skeletons. Lesser necromancers used to make them fairly frequently. Sometimes, we'd even find some that had been left over from the days when more powerful necromancers walked the earth. All those creatures could do is follow simple orders. They could not speak. They walked at a shamble. Well... mostly anyway."

"So," I began before trailing off into thought. A while later I started again, "So, maybe... she's not actually a zombie at all?"

"I don't know," Jack said slowly. "There hasn't been a really powerful necromancer for possibly thousands of years. It could be that your zombie is what zombies are supposed to be like. Of course, it certainly could also be that you've created some new form of undead."

I muttered something extremely rude.

"Quite," he agreed.

"Wait a minute!" said with a relieved smile, "This is the spirit world. We should be able to find one of those ancient necromancers and ask them!"

Jack turned very pale and immediately began shaking his head. "No. No, no, no. That would be a most terrible idea." When I started to object, he explained, "I am dead. My only links to the world of the living are my friends. You, however, are undead. Within you exists a magical link to the world of the living. A magical link formed by necromantic energy. And what do necromancers utilize? That very same necromantic energy. While I am content to wait here in the spirit world, not everyone is. Some would like to go back to the world of the living. Would love to go back in fact.

And for a powerful, skilled necromancer, you would provide an ideal conduit for doing just that.”

“Oh,” I muttered.

“Indeed,” he agreed again.

Upon waking the next evening, I found myself tucked into bed. Interesting that. Sitting up, I noticed that my boots sat under the table across the room and my weapons on top of it. Perched on the edge of the chair across the room, Eileen watched me intently.

“Morning,” I muttered, slowly waking up.

“No,” she contradicted me. “It’s evening. How are you planning on getting us out of here?”

“Right. Evening. You’d think I’d remember the proper greeting by now,” I told her around a large yawn. Hopping out of bed, I walked over and pulled on my boots before going into the bathroom to wash my face and brush my teeth.

“You didn’t answer my question,” she informed me upon my return to the room.

“Quite right. I’ll demonstrate for you in a bit,” I responded as I put on my various weapons.

“Right now, I’m going to finish welding the first door shut.”

“What?!” she demanded.

“Look,” I began before being interrupted.

“That’s the only door out of here!” she declared in a near screech. “You can’t lock us in down here. Even if we didn’t starve to death, we’d go insane. Assuming I’m not already.”

“You are not insane. Granted you’re in a bit of a crazy situation, but strangely enough, you’ll

come to redefine normal soon. Just give it a little time. And I *can* get us out of here. Don't worry."

"How?!" she demanded. It seemed that if I was going to get any welding done, I'd need to go ahead and demonstrate. Instead of immediately answering her, I walked over to the fridge and drank one of the blood packets. Cold. With a shudder I finished it off. And noticed that I now only had two left. It appeared she'd gotten thirsty.

"Alright," I told her. "Come here." A bit cautiously at first she walked over to me.

"Now this is going to seem a little strange," I warned her with a frown. "Even compared to how weird your world has become. However, don't worry. It only lasts a moment and then it's over. Ready?"

"Ready for what?" she asked sharply, a bit round about the eyes.

"Showing is much easier than explaining," I told her, grabbing her upper arm. "So let me show you." And with that I walked us across the room and into a suitable shadow. An instant later we stepped out into my living room. Me with sweat instantly beading on my forehead and the beginnings of a headache. Transporting two without being able to see where I was going was quite a lot harder than just moving myself.

"Did...." She began and stopped. A moment later, after looking around and pulling her hand free, she started again, "Did I black out or something? How did we get here?"

"No, you didn't black out," I replied wiping the sweat off my brow. "I have the ability to instantaneously travel through shadows. At first I was limited to line of sight. Basically, if I could see a shadow, I could step into another shadow and out that one. In the last couple of months I've learned to travel in between shadows that I can't see. It's quite a bit more difficult."

"Oh," she replied, blinking owlishly. I noticed again that her clothes were the same

bloodstained outfit she'd been wearing when she'd died.

“Like I said, it takes some getting used to. For the moment why don't you go through my clothes in the show bedroom and see if you can't find something that'll fit. We'll get you some real clothing later.”

“Clothes. Sure,” she answered, apparently a bit shocked.

“Yes,” I agreed. “You do that and I'll finish with the first door. I'll be back in a jiffy.” And with that I walked into a nearby shadow and returned to my real bedroom. Thirty minutes later I had the top door welded shut. Hmm. After a bit of thought, I went ahead and welded the corners of the downstairs door closed as well. Just in case. Done for the moment, I took a quick shower and shadowported up into the upstairs living room. From there I walked around looking for Eileen. I found her still in the bedroom standing in front of a mirror. She only wore my blue boxers and a bra.

“All I have is a scar to show that I died,” she said quietly. “Just a scar. It's almost as though I never died at all. Everything after my attack was just a dream and I've since healed.”

“I wish that was the case,” I told her quietly. “I really do. But it isn't. You did die. And I brought you back. But not into the normal world. I brought you back into the hidden world. The world normal folks never see. A world filled with wonders. And terrors, as well. While it may not be the world you wanted, at least it has the virtue of being an interesting place filled with interesting people.”

She nodded and stood there a moment longer. With a quick turn of her head to look at me, followed immediately by a gasp, she leapt forward into the closet. “Get out! Can't you see I'm almost naked?”

“Well, not any more,” I replied, failing to keep the amusement out of my voice. “I'll just wait

in the other room.” As I walked back into the living room, something occurred to me. She’d been able to see herself in the mirror. That was another difference between us. When I looked in the mirror, I saw everything but myself and what I carried. Mentally cataloging this for later study, I called a taxi and waited for Eileen to get dressed.

When she hadn’t reappeared five minutes later, I yelled, “The taxi’s on it’s way. The sooner you get out here, the sooner we can get to my car and then find something to eat.” And those were apparently the magic words. Less than a minute later she came out wearing a pair of jeans that looked much better on her than they ever had on me and a turquoise-colored shirt that I’d never particularly liked. It too looked better on her.

“Okay,” she said as I paid the taxi driver. “Now what?”

“Now,” I began as the taxi drove away and I remote started my car, “We go get something to eat. Later, we’ll need to go see your favorite person and biggest fan.”

“That bitch who laid open my neck?” she demanded angrily.

“The very same bitch,” I confirmed, sliding into the driver’s seat. “Hop in.”

“I don’t want to see her again,” Eileen informed me decisively, gingerly settling into the other seat. “She only wants to destroy me.”

“That was true last night,” I told her, driving towards the freeway at what I called a sedate pace and the police would probably call reckless endangerment. “However, after hearing my reasons for wanting you... intact... she may have come to see reason. Maybe.” It was possible. Barely but

still technically possible.

“I suppose we’ll see,” she said doubtfully. Selina did seem to give everyone a certain impression of hardheadedness. “Now, I’ve had most of the day to think about the way you avoided answering the question of whether or not I’m going to decompose while I’m still aware of my surroundings. Now I want an answer. Am I going to be trapped inside a body that’s rotting around me?”

“I’ve been thinking about that, too,” I replied thoughtfully. “I don’t really think so. Of course, I could be wrong but I don’t believe I am. I may be new to being a necromancer, but I’m fairly sure that you’re going to stay in pretty much the same shape you’re in now.”

“Necromancer,” she mused for a moment. “Isn’t that some sort of evil wizard or something?”

“Umm, no actually. It’s someone who works with the magic of the dead. Dead most certainly does not equate to evil. Rest assured, I am not evil. While it is entirely possible that my sense of humor could be called ‘wicked’, I am most definitely not evil.”

“But you’re a vampire. Aren’t you?”

“Yes, actually I am. How did you figure that out?” I asked curiously as I turned us off the interstate and headed towards a nice steak place.

“You move faster than anyone I’ve ever seen before,” she began quietly, “You have blood in your refrigerator, you keel over as soon as the sun rises, and your room is down in an armored vault. I figure if I could be a zombie, then you could be a vampire.”

“That’s exceptional thinking. And so soon after turning. Amazing,” I muttered, pulling into the restaurant parking lot.

“You are of course quite right. Let’s not talk about it inside, though. What happens behind

the deception remains behind the deception.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” she asked with a frown as we walked inside the steakhouse.

“It means,” I whispered, “That normal people are not supposed to know about our existence. Ever. Under any circumstances.” Well, actually there were certain circumstances, but I wasn’t ready to get into that yet. Nor was she ready to hear it. She still had far too many basic facts to hear and absorb before she’d be ready to hear about exceptions to the rules.

As we were finishing eating a while later, she suddenly stopped and looked at me. “You’re eating food,” she observed. “Aren’t you... supposed to be on a liquid diet?”

I smiled. She was smart. “Yes I am. And the Lady Selina will be aggravated at me for getting off that diet. However, I am a special case. Much like yourself in a way. I’ll tell you all about it later. By the way, would you like another steak?” Neither of us had so much as touched our side dishes.

“No,” she replied, “I’m trying to watch my figure.” And upon uttering those words, she blinked twice and broke down sobbing. I’d been afraid things had been progressing a little too well. Leaving a very large tip for the waitress, I led the sobbing Eileen out to the car as she clung to me and cried on my shoulder. After a moment, she calmed down somewhat and I was able to get her into the car. I hurriedly went around and slid into the driver’s seat.

“You okay?” I asked gently, starting the car.

“No,” she replied, wiping her eyes.

“Maybe not,” I told her, earnestly. “But you will be. Just give it some time.”

“I don’t want to be dead!” she screamed as I raced the Viper out of the parking lot.

“I didn’t want to be either,” I replied in a normal, conversational tone. “But we are. You’ll

find being undead is terrible. You'll have to eat steaks every night. You'll live in a big house and drive nice cars. You'll be forced to meet interesting people and discover that there's much more to the world than you ever would have guessed. A most dreadful life."

"That's not funny," she muttered, wiping away a stray tear.

"No, it's not. But it's basically true. Like I said, give it a chance. I still miss my old life, too. However, I've discovered that this life has a pretty strong appeal going for it as well." Focusing on her, I could tell that inside she was still a walking ball of emotional turmoil. But there was also a thoughtful feel to the mix, and the roil of emotions was much lessened from last night.

After twenty minutes of silence, she finally asked, "So, we're on our way to visit the vampire bitch?"

"Yes, we are," I replied. "However, you'd probably better begin thinking of her more respectfully. Or at least talking about her respectfully. She's in charge of the shadow world within the whole and entire Dallas/Fort Worth metroplex area. She is a powerful vampire and she cannot allow herself to be seen as weak by any of her people."

"You're saying that if I call her a 'bitch' then someone might think she's weak and challenge her right to rule or something?"

"If she doesn't respond appropriately," I agreed. "And I don't think you'd like what she would most likely consider an appropriate response." She didn't reply to that but she did seem to be considering my words.

As we were pulling up to the gates of yet another of Selina's estates, Eileen asked, "So why are your eyes black? Selina's eyes aren't black, nor were that other woman's. Is it because you're a necromancer?"

“Actually, it’s because I’m what the supernatural world calls a telum. Except I don’t think there are even too many within that world who know what a telum is. Basically, I’m a weaponized form of vampire. And please, don’t mention to anyone that I’m a...” I paused a moment to lift up my sunglasses for the gate guard. He immediately motioned for the other guard to open the gate. “Don’t tell anyone I’m a necromancer. Or that you’re a zombie either. Evidently, we’re both forbidden under the laws of the supernatural world.”

“Then what in the world am I supposed to say I am?” she asked, angry and a little alarmed. This led to a quick discussion about the soulless.

“So why is it okay to be a soulless and not a zombie?” she demanded, evidently offended for her species.

“I don’t know,” I replied a bit defensively. “That’s just the way it is.” She sniffed her annoyance which for some reason amused me greatly.

Inside, we found Selina and Miranda in a large, extravagant living room. A familiar looking woman in a grey, pinstriped business suit seemed to be going over the contents of a folder with Selina while Miranda spoke quietly with a group of five varied people. If I remembered correctly, this was the woman who’d met Selina and myself in the parking garage with the picnic basket.

“There’s something... odd, about the man in the white polo shirt and the woman in the yellow dress,” Eileen whispered to me as she studied those around Selina’s secretary.

“They’re both soulless,” I whispered back. “The other three speaking to Miranda are human so be sure not to say anything related to the deception.”

“What deception?” she murmured so softly I had to strain to hear her. “Who is being deceived? And about what?”

“Yeah,” I replied, equally quietly, “It’s the secret of the hidden world. And anything directly related to the hidden world. Like you. Or me. Like I mentioned, no human can be allowed to find out about. They’re the ones being deceived.”

“Okay, so what do we tell them if they ask why we’re here?”

“That we’re here to see Selina. But Selina already knows that. If she doesn’t simply dismiss them out of hand, she’ll come up with any excuses that might be needed. It’s part of the hidden world etiquette. If there is someone outside the deception with you, then it is your responsibility to come up with a suitable excuse.”

“Well, I suppose that makes sense.”

A couple of minutes later, Selina told the woman in the grey suit, “Thank you, Claudia. You’ve done a wonderful job. As always. I’ll see you again soon.” Claudia smiled at Selina and then frowned at Eileen and myself as she walked by us on the way out. Before we could step into the room though, Selina came stalking out. With a curt gesture of her hand she indicated we should follow her. After leading us through several twists and turns, she eventually took us into the sitting room of a good sized bedroom and closed the doors behind us.

“Whatever in the world possessed you to bring this creature into my house?” Selina demanded angrily. Eileen’s eyes hardened and her mouth tightened but I held up a hand to delay any reaction she might have.

“I take it that by ‘creature’ you mean my soulless companion?” I replied blandly.

“She is not a.... Hmm, that just might work,” she mused. “Her aura is similar enough to that of a soulless that someone would have to be looking very closely to sense the difference. And that difference might be explained away by you being a telum. There are certain behaviors that would

have to be learned... but there's time for that. It usually takes a new soulless quite some time to earn the adjective. Very well, you may continue bringing your soulless companion around."

"Most generous," I told her, concealing my mirth with some effort.

"So," she began as her eyes narrowed dangerously. Evidently she felt my amusement, even if it hadn't shown on my face. "Why are you here?"

"We need to do some planning," I told her.

"What did you have in mind?" she asked more neutrally.

"We need to go hunting. Eileen's killer is the same individual who murdered nine other women. Those murders require justice. And on top of that, I believe the killer has been leading up to something. Something to do with you and the visiting Telena Petrokovitch if my guess is correct. We need to act before the killer does." Eileen was suddenly paying very close attention.

"Yes," Selina murmured softly. "We need to act. And we will. We'll made sure the killer understands what it is to be hunted."

Driving back to the house, I brought Eileen up to date on the murders. When I'd finished, she said quietly, "So I was just the last in a long line of murders?"

"Fraid so. Now, there are some additional things you need to know." This statement was followed by a long explanation about the strained relationship between Selina and Telena Petrokovitch and why matters stood as they did. When I'd finished, Eileen shook her head.

"It's surprising to think that the cold-hearted bitch is actually afraid of something," she said.

“Or, then again, maybe it’s not so surprising.” I didn’t want to get into that so I chose not to respond. This earned me an appraising look which I similarly ignored. I didn’t want to get into that either.

A little while later she asked, “So, why don’t we just walk up and shoot the killer? Or cut her up? Do her in the same way she killed me?”

“You were there. You heard her reasons the same as I did,” I replied with a small sigh.

“Yes, I did,” she said defiantly. “And it’s still dumb. Even for a frightened, vampire bitch. If this goes wrong, not only could we get killed again but this Petrovitch woman could, too. According to you, that would be a huge disaster.”

“Petrokovitch,” I automatically corrected. “And I know. I thought you weren’t too keen on living this new life?”

“I’m still deciding,” she replied a bit petulantly. “And I’m not too thrilled about the prospect of this dumb plan making the decision for me.”

“Alright,” I sighed. “We’ll make a little side trip before resting for the day.”

“What? What side trip? And how is that going to help anything?”

“You’ll see,” I replied mysteriously as I warmed to my own idea. She proceeded to pester me for the next fifteen minutes while I drove across town to an old, industrial building.

“What’s this?” she asked. “I don’t think we’re in real need of repackaging supplies. Not that it looks like this place has been used in ages.”

“Not for packaging supplies,” I agreed. “However, looks can be deceiving. Come, young soulless companion. Follow me and learn.” She sniffed loudly and frowned, but she did nevertheless follow me up the steps and into the abandoned looking building. We walked through various empty

hallways and through offices empty of all save the occasional broken chair or desk. “Can I help you?” a large black man, who was suddenly blocking our path, asked. He was definitely a soulless and was heavily armed and armored.

“Yes, you can,” I replied easily. “I need arms and armor for my soulless companion.”

“Name?”

“Wallace McAlister,” I told him. He nodded.

“Step this way,” he stated. We proceeded to follow him into a small room that looked like a small photography studio. “Step over there for picture ID confirmation.” Hmm. Would I even show up in a photograph? I wasn’t sure. I didn’t show up in mirrors but I’d never checked to see if I might show up in a photo. With a shrug I walked over to the big ‘X’ marked out on the floor with masking tape. Eight or ten feet from me stood a camera on a tripod.

Another fellow walked in through a door on the far side of the room. This time a much smaller, white guy who wore a uniform but no armor. He walked to the camera, took a quick picture, removed the memory from the camera, and exited the room the same way he’d come in. Done in twenty seconds.

Very faintly, I could hear someone speaking into the guard’s earpiece. I couldn’t quite make out what was being said but his stance relaxed a bit. He turned to the woman next to me, “Name?”

“Eileen Connors,” she replied, throwing a quick, confused look my way.

“Please step to the mark, ma’am,” he instructed. She did so and the smaller man returned. He put in another memory chip just long enough to take her picture before removing it and once again departing. This took no longer than my picture taking had.

“Why did they need to take your picture if you’ve been here before?” Eileen asked.

“Oh, I haven’t been here before,” I replied quietly.

“Then how did you know the path to get back here to these rooms?” I blinked a couple of times. That was a good question.

“I supposed I knew because Selina knows,” I mused aloud.

“That’s freaky,” she replied.

“Isn’t it just?” I agreed.

“Now what?” she asked with a thoughtful frown. The guard gestured us toward a door. I motioned for him to go first. He stood there a moment frowning before finally leading the way out of the room through yet another door. This led us to a hall which eventually led us to a large room filled with shelves and crates.

“You mentioned armor, sir,” the big fellow said, gesturing around the room where all those shelves were covered in various types of armor. “What size, weight, and configuration?” I turned a speculative eye on Eileen before turning back to the guard.

“Two sets,” I replied. “One light, concealed with side panels. The other heavy, full package. Size we’ll have to determine by fitting.”

“You get that Earl?” our guard called to a man who was just stepping around one of the back shelf units.

“Got it,” the grizzled, old man replied as he eyed Eileen a moment and began walking amongst the shelves. He looked to be in his seventies and made of boot leather. He was probably Hispanic with a lot of Indian blood. He wore the same uniform the camera guy had worn. “Come here, you two,” he called after a quick search. When we got there, he held up an undercover vest and eyed Eileen again. “Take your shirt off,” he told her.

“Excuse me?” she asked a bit incredulously.

“Take your shirt off. You’re wearing a bra aren’t you? Well then, take your shirt off. Girl, I’m not a pervert so don’t look at me like I am. I have great grandchildren who are older than you. But if you want to know how this is going to fit, you need to take your shirt off.” She threw me a dark look and began unbuttoning her shirt, thus revealing that she still wore the same bra from earlier. No surprise there but I supposed I had really better take her clothes shopping soon.

“Where’s your armor, sir?” he asked me as Eileen put the vest on.

“It’s more comfortable than I thought it would be,” she informed the room in general.

“Newer, better materials,” Earl replied. “Better fit, better performance. Your armor, sir?” he asked me again.

“I don’t have a set. I suppose I always figured it would slow me down,” I replied.

“Slow you down?” Eileen demanded. “Then why am I getting armor?”

“Because you’re new to the game,” I replied easily. “You don’t know when to duck yet and I don’t want you getting yourself killed again.”

“That’s cute,” she replied darkly. “Sure. Make fun of the dead girl.”

“You look better dead than most people living do,” Earl told her. “And are probably living more than them as well. One of the great ironies of our corner of the night world.” Eileen didn’t reply but did look a bit more thoughtful than petulant. Not that I thought it would last. “Sir,” he said, returning his attention to me. “I think I have something that will fit your needs while not inhibiting your movement.” Turning back to Eileen, he tightened a couple of straps slightly. “Still feel alright?” he asked.

“Yes. It does,” she answered, still sounding a bit surprised.

“Good,” he replied a bit distractedly as he began looking in a box on a nearby shelf. “Sir, try this on.” He threw me a similar vest but the side panels were smaller and all the armor was situated higher. “This is one of our vampire specials. The armor plating is situated to prevent penetration of the heart. Double plated but still a bit flexible.” With a shrug I accepted the armor and began unbuttoning my shirt.

“Nice shoulder holster,” he commented as he grabbed Eileen’s arm and began leading her off to another section of the room. I followed along after them removing my shirt as we walked.

“Thanks,” I replied, pulling the vest on. “It’s a custom job. Got it made in Atlanta a while back.”

Earl pulled a top section of heavy, rigid armor out of a crate and held it up a minute. Shaking his head, he dropped it back into the box and continued on to another box. Most of the armor in this section looked like the armor that Selina’s soldiers wore. He then pulled out another piece of armor and eyed her again.

“Go ahead and take the vest back off,” he told her. Sighing, she did so as I pulled my shirt back on over my own vest. The shirt fit a little too snugly over the chest now. I supposed I’d have to do some clothes shopping for myself as well. The old fellow helped Eileen pull the armor over her head and get it situated.

“This one’s not nearly as comfortable as the other,” she informed us with a small frown.

“No, it’s not,” he agreed. “Not much with this model we can do about it. Does it feel heavy to you?”

“No. It’s just not very comfortable. And it’s bulky.”

“Yes it is,” he nodded. “It will take some getting used to. Most of our heavy infantry go

through considerable training to get used to it. They basically wear the entire armor suit twenty four/seven for three months. They sleep in it. They shoot in it. They go on hikes in it. You name it, they do it while wearing the armor.”

“I think I’ll pass on that,” she replied, making a little moue as she pulled the top armor back off.

“It will help you serve and protect your master better,” he replied as he began looking over the shelves again. Thus, he failed to see the furious look she threw at me. I made placating hand gestures and signaled for her to keep quiet. Her look downgraded to a scowl. Earl continued, “The next training class starts in about three weeks. If you change your mind, just contact me. I live here in the facility. I’ll be here for the next couple of months and then I’m going on vacation.” I could see Eileen’s mouth form the word ‘vacation’ thoughtfully. I supposed it seemed odd that people behind the deception had vacations as well.

“Here,” Earl said, handing a pair of armored pants to Eileen. “What size shoes do you wear?”

“I wear a size eight,” she replied automatically as her attention focused on the bulky, heavy looking pants.

“Good,” he muttered. “Got a good supply of those. Be right back.” He then walked out of our row and down a few where he began looking in various boxes located there.

“Is all this really necessary?” she asked.

“I hope not,” I told her seriously. “But I don’t live my life on hope. I’m going to do what I can to make sure you get a chance to check out this life fully. That means preparing for the worst while hoping for the best.”

“Good rule to continue living by,” Earl stated, returning to our row. “Girl, you need to try

those pants on. And here's your boots and equipment belt." Frowning again, Eileen knelt down and began untying her shoe.

"Do I get armored socks as well?" she asked sarcastically.

"Sorry, ma'am. We're out of stock on armored socks at the moment," Earl replied with a little smile. He then pulled out a crate from the rack behind us. "Here, have a seat."

"Thanks," she muttered. Shoes now off, she began to step into the armored pants.

"Ahem," Earl coughed while looking at the ceiling.

"Now what?" Eileen asked. He gave a quick but significant glance at her jeans. "Oh, you've got to be kidding."

"Won't fit right otherwise," he informed her. "Not only that but you'd also find that wearing both inhibits your movement more than it will already be inhibited. At least it would until you really began moving. And then you'd tear those jeans all to pieces." Scowling at me, she dropped the armored pants and pulled the blue jeans off. Evidently she'd changed out of my boxers at some point. Her panties, which I hadn't seen earlier, rode low on her hips and had little pictures of big-eyed puppies all over them. I wondered if Earl had to work as hard as I did to keep from grinning. Frowning and blushing furiously, Eileen pulled on the armored pants.

"There's little catches here and here," Earl said, demonstrating on his own pants. "Use those to adjust the fit." She fiddled with it a moment.

"The fit's not so good," she informed us after a moment. "Feels like if I walk around at all they'll fall off."

"They're meant to be worn with the equipment belt. The shoulder straps not only hold equipment but they help support the pants. However, it looks like we need another size smaller.

Take those off and I'll get what should be the right pair."

"You're enjoying this," she hissed at me after handing over the pants to the older man.

"Now why in the world would I enjoy watching a pretty woman walk around in her underwear?" I asked.

"Sometimes you vampires ask the dumbest questions," Earl declared, handing another pair of armored pants to Eileen.

We spent the rest of the morning clothes shopping in an upscale, twenty four hour store that catered primarily to vampires but to other hidden species as well. Eileen ended up with a lot of new clothes and a nice suitcase to carry them around in. I picked up several dark colored shirts to wear over my new body armor.

On the way home I picked us up two dozen steaks at an all night supercenter. Due to the time Eileen spent shopping, I didn't have much time to continue welding on the second door before sunrise.

"I want a bed," Eileen informed me shortly before the sun breached the horizon. "It would be more comfortable than the chair. Of course, a better chair might be nice as well."

"Yeah, we'll have to work on that tomorrow. Will you sleep alright today without it? If not, you can sleep on the other side of my bed. Lord knows that during the day I couldn't care less."

"I don't sleep. At least I haven't so far," she replied.

“What? You don’t sleep at all?”

“Not a wink. At least not so far.”

“Damn. I’m sorry, I didn’t realize that. You must be bored to tears down here. No tv and no books or magazines.”

“Oh, that’s not a problem. I’ve had a great deal to think about here lately. A great deal.”

“Still, we’ll see about... oh, the sun’s coming up. Have a good....”

Sleep washed over me in a dark, soothing wave.

My following night got off to a bumpy start.

“I want to see my boyfriend,” Eileen informed me. Son of a bitch.

With a sigh I told her, “No. You can never see him again. Nor any family you might have. To the world at large you’re dead. And if you want to keep living, it has to stay that way.”

“But Keith wouldn’t say anything. Keith’s very cool. You’ll like him and he’ll keep our secret,” she said, trying to persuade me.

“No Eileen. If Keith finds out about us, they’re either going to kill him or convert him. And a lot of the would-be converts don’t make it and die anyway. Same goes for your parents, siblings, and even any children you might have. All ties severed cleanly.”

“That’s not fair,” she whispered.

“I know. It’s not fair at all. But our secrets must be kept. From everybody. At any cost.

That's rule one of living behind the deception. You don't have to like it, but we all have to obey it."

"What if you bit him?" she asked. "Then he'd be a vampire and we could be together."

"Are you willing to make that decision for him?" I asked very quietly.

She was silent a long moment before whispering, "No."

"I'm not either. We'd be taking his life against his will and that would make us murderers.

That's a line I'm not willing to cross. And as I said, not all converts make it. Quite a few simply die." She sniffed as a tear slid down her cheek and the conversation ended there.

After eating and getting myself cleaned up, we drove over to Selina's mansion de jour. We were both wearing our undercover armor and it was becoming obvious it would take a little getting used to. While Eileen was taken around to meet various members of the security staff, I asked Miranda for a copy of my soulless companion's file.

"Also," I asked Selina's blonde companion, "If you have the people available, I'd like 24/7 surveillance on her boyfriend for a while. I'm concerned she might try to go see him."

"Is this of vital importance?" she asked.

"To be honest, no," I replied.

"Very well. I'll make it a training exercise."

"Thank you, Miranda. I appreciate it."

"You've been eating meat again," Selina accused as she entered her own study for the first time since I'd been there tonight.

"Really? What makes you think so?" I asked.

"Do not play games with me," she growled.

"What makes you think I've been eating meat?" I repeated.

“I heard your thoughts earlier,” she stated coldly.

“Did you feel how good the steak tasted as well?” I asked. “Don’t worry. I’m still planning to work with you on studying whether eating meat really is bad for me. But later. If I happen to grow a prehensile third eye in the meantime, I will consider it entirely my own fault.”

“You are a stubborn, aggravating man,” she informed me in a near growl, sitting down at her desk.

“That makes two of us. Except, of course, the man part.”

“Why are you here?” she asked in an almost resigned tone.

“I just had to start the night off by seeing your smiling face,” I told her. Her moue indicated she might not be convinced. “And I wanted to talk to you about how we’re going to approach Petrokovitch. Without her willing cooperation, this isn’t going to work. Her moue turned into a full-blown frown of distaste.

“Why don’t you....” she began nastily, when Miranda entered without knocking.

“We have a problem,” the soulless woman declared without preamble. “I’ve been double checking records. There is no possible way Medea could have committed three of the murders. She had to have an accomplice.” The interruption caught us off guard for a moment. An accomplice. That wasn’t truly surprising but it certainly complicated matters.

“Hugh Hausse and Gladys Wright,” Selina stated coldly.

“Let’s not jump to conclusions,” I cautioned, earning myself a venomous look. “Sure, they invited Petrokovitch into town against your express wishes. However, it’s a big jump from inviting someone into town with the stated goal of establishing a dialog between parties all the way to becoming a serial killer. Particularly when these killings will be upsetting your friends and neighbors.”

“You may have a point there,” Miranda said, surprising me and Selina both. “While the two lords benefitted greatly from the Houston campaign, neither are prepared for the type of reprisals they could expect if word got out they had anything to do with the murders. Also, while Gladys *might* be capable of cold blooded murder, I do not believe Hugh has it in him to do so. Naturally, I could be wrong in this assessment. Understanding people’s character is not one of my strong points.”

“Could a powerful vampire turn them completely counter to what I’ve read in their files?” I asked.

Selina looked thoughtful a moment before replying, “I do not believe so. You saw firsthand how I took control of one of the enemy’s lords down in Houston.” I nodded. “The vampire he reported to did not have nearly my level of talent with High Control. Truth be told, few if any do. My point is that while I may be deluding myself, I do not believe someone could do that to one of my people without me knowing about it.” Miranda immediately agreed.

“So,” I mused aloud. “Unless she hired a shapeshifter to duplicate her or knows someone who’s really skilled with makeup, that would rather strongly suggest that we have another active player.”

“I have an agent fairly close to Perle. This agent reported from Greece several times recently. I believe my agent would have seen through any such ruse,” Selina stated.

“Good information to have,” I acknowledged. “So there’s another player. Someone who’s willing to murder for their interests. Now we just need to find what those interests are. And who our second killer is.”

“Now where are we going?” Eileen asked with a mix of curiosity and aggravation.

“We’re going to a private gun range. You’re going to meet several new friends. There will be lots of playing with very fun toys and I’m going to teach you how to share. Bullets that is. You’ll learn to share freely and with a smile on your face.

She frowned. “I don’t really like guns.”

“Why ever not?”

“Guns kill people,” she replied.

“Very seldom,” I corrected. “As a rule, bullets kill people but on a few occasions, guns have indeed been used to kill.”

“You know what I meant,” she stated as the aggravation began edging out her curiosity.

“Of course I know what you meant,” I replied. “However, that doesn’t make your statement any more relevant or correct. Since I’m in an argumentative mood, I’m going to ask you some questions. Okay?”

“Yeah, I suppose,” she muttered, sounding much less sure.

“Okay, here’s the first question: Have you ever heard of a weapon on a shelf killing someone?”

“No, of course not.”

“Alright, here’s the next question: If all the firearms in the world suddenly disappeared, would peace, love, and harmony suddenly break out or would the bad people who are out there simply find another weapon?”

She was quiet a moment before answering with a sigh, “They’d find another weapon.”

“Sadly that is quite correct. Third question: If we make owning firearms illegal, are the gangs

and other criminals going to turn their guns in?”

“No,” she sighed tiredly.

“Of course not,” I agreed again. “Last question: If someone has an automatic weapon and is actively trying to kill you, what do you want?”

“The police,” she declared stubbornly.

“That’s a wonderful thought, but the police can’t be everywhere at once. And considering some of the peoples you’re likely to meet, even if they managed to save you, there’s always the chance that their reward for rescuing you would be an early grave. You and I will meet other vampires. We’ll meet werewolves and doppelgangers and other species of the hidden world. When there’s a half-form werewolf coming after you, the police are simply not an option available to you. No, when it comes right down to it, you are your own first line of defense. Truth be told, that’s as true outside the deception as it is within.” She muttered something rude as I pulled up to another apparently abandoned warehouse.

“I’m guessing we’re going to need the case you got when we picked up our armor,” she more stated than asked.

“Yes, please,” I replied, popping the trunk for her.

“I’m your soulless companion,” she growled. “Not your damned porter.”

“Everything in the case is for you,” I replied with a sardonic grin. “I already have my weapons.” With a muttered curse, she retrieved the case and slammed the trunk closed.

Inside the building a crippled soulless man escorted us around to the firing range. At the moment we were the only ones here. At my gesture, she sat the case down on an empty bench.

“This,” I told her, opening her case, “Is your very own high quality, submachine gun. It is

manufactured by Heckler and Koch, one of the finest makers of automatic weaponry in the world.” And I proceeded to show her everything from how to safely carry it to loading, reloading, and shooting. After an hour, she seemed to be getting the idea. She emptied several mags and did a respectable job of perforating targets. I then had the soulless fellow bring me a variety of other firearms. Shotguns, pistols, machine pistols, rifles, automatic rifles and quite a few in between. She loaded and fired them all.

From a second section of the case, I removed her pistol. She walked over and took it from me. She looked it over for a moment, loaded it, and fired at the last of the intact targets downrange. I was pleased to note that the target ceased being intact.

“You’re learning fast,” I told her with a smile.

“For some reason this is coming to me really easily,” she said with a shrug.

“It certainly seems that way,” I nodded. “Now, let’s get your holster set as well as a sling for the H&K.” At her nod, we followed the wheelchair-bound soulless fellow into an office and talked with him about Eileen’s weapon requirements.

While he was fitting her shoulder holster, he seemed to be doing a bit more brushing against her breast than I thought was absolutely necessary. When Eileen picked him up by the neck, I became suspicious that she might be feeling the same way. However, she didn’t actually say anything. She just held him up in the air while he turned blue and made a number of peculiar and interesting noises. Before he actually passed out, she set him back in his chair.

“Do you know why I did that?” she asked grimly. Reluctantly, the fellow nodded and winced. His neck was already bruising. “If I were you, I wouldn’t give me any further incentive to do it again.” Still gasping, he motioned for her to return to her seat. Five minutes later, she was all set.

Before leaving, we stocked up on ammo and reloaded everything. On the way out to the car, I told her, "I was rather impressed by the way you stood up for yourself. I'll admit it, you surprised me. I think you're going to make a very good soulless companion." She smiled, then almost immediately looked a bit confused, as though she wasn't sure she should have smiled.

I drove us again to the clothing store we'd only visited last night. There we found a nice, brown leather longcoat that would conceal all her weaponry while ever so conveniently allowing easy access to said firearms. Eileen was very pleased. Considering it cost over a thousand dollars, she bloody well should have.

With a roar of the Viper's engine, I turned us towards the interstate. We were going across town so that I could switch cars to one of Selina's armored Mercedes sedans. After that, we'd drive back across town so that I could complicate our lives to the point of ridiculousness.

"Good evening," I said with a small smile, "We're here to visit Telena. I believe she's expecting us." The man to whom I spoke was a large, soulless fellow who currently blocked the door into the house where the Lady Petrokovitch and her entourage were staying. Despite being an older soulless, he didn't seem to like finding myself and Eileen at his doorstep.

"You may wait in the parlor," he declared after looking us over a moment. He then opened the door wide and ushered us through the entryway and across a hall, into a small, yet elegant parlor. No matter how much she hated Petrokovitch, Selina had put her up in a nice place. Eileen and I remained standing as the fellow departed, presumably to confer with his mistress. I rather suspected

she knew exactly who was here already. It's *why* we were here she didn't know.

That, I'd fill her in on shortly. Hopefully, with just the proper spin, she'd love our plan.

After a fifteen minute wait, the good-looking vampire woman breezed into the room with a couple of associate vampires. She introduced them and I in turn introduced Eileen.

"With your permission, I'll get down to business," I said after we'd all taken a seat. "I have a proposal. A couple of them in point of fact."

"Proposals? From yourself or the one you serve?" she asked.

"One of each," I replied with a little smile.

"Well, I am certainly willing to listen."

"Thank you. Now, as I'm sure you know, there have been a number of murders within the Lady Selina's territory over the last couple of months." The man seated to her right sniggered at this causing me to stop. I did not consider a number of murdered women to be funny in the least. Removing my sunglasses, I simply stared at him for a very long moment. After a bit of this, he began fidgeting and started looking rather uncomfortable.

Telena seemed amused a moment before glancing at him and saying, "Charles, why don't you go someplace where you can work on your self-control?" Obviously embarrassed, he stood up and left, quietly closing the door behind him. "My apologies," she murmured. "Diplomacy is not yet one of his virtues."

"It's quite alright," I replied, putting my sunglasses back on. "If we were all the same, the world would be a very boring place."

"That is so very true," she agreed. "I believe you had just mentioned some murders before you were interrupted?"

“Indeed, however, I think it would be a good idea if we continued this discussion in private.”

“I’m not sure I’d trust myself with you alone,” she replied in a quiet, serious voice.

“And why is that?” I asked curiously

“You’re a telum. I’ve never heard of a telum living as long as you have. Newborn telum are dangerous. One who’s six months old.... Well, one has to assume that your powers and abilities have grown. And that now you are more dangerous than ever.”

“That’s certainly true,” I replied, which earned me a raised eyebrow.

“Did you think I’d lie to you?” I asked. “It’s obvious that I am what I am. Lying about it would only insult your intelligence. And that would be foolish, even for a six month old telum.”

“You are bold and have a sense of humor,” she replied with a small smile of her own. “I like that. However, I still see no real reason why I should grant you a private audience.”

“Are you worried that I might kill you? In truth, one of my proposals will involve you coming with Eileen and myself. Just the three of us. Details and reasons will have to wait for a more private conversation.” I informed her, searching for any signs of fear in her eyes. There were none. Her look became more serious as she in return studied me.

“No,” she replied after a moment. “I sensed your intent to kill me at the gathering. Saw you preparing to fly at me. Now, I sense nothing of that intent remaining in you. Still, that does not mean that I am necessarily willing to grant you a private meeting, much less allow you to lead me away from my people.” She thought I’d meant to fly at her. Which suggested strongly that she truly did not know about my shadow traveling ability. Unless she was saying that just to deceive me. Possible but unlikely, I decided.

“This woman is one of your guards?” I asked, with a nod to the woman who’s name I’d

already forgotten.

“Yes,” Telena agreed.

“If I wanted to kill you, do you think she’d be able to stop me?” Once more I was more curious than anything. Eileen looked scandalized. Seeing her reaction, Telena laughed.

“Very well, Wallace McAlister, I’ll grant you some private discussion time. Just the two of us. Conni, please show Eileen around.” Oh yeah. Conni. That was the other vampire’s name. With a scowl at me, that worthy got up and led Eileen out of the room.

“Thank you,” I told her as the door to the room closed again. “I appreciate your trust and promise you I will not abuse it. Getting back to the topic of the evening, you know about the murders, yes?”

“The local drinks? Yes, I’ve heard about them.”

“Good. Then you know the background. Now, let me tell you a story....”

A good while later, I concluded my sordid little tale.

“That was quite interesting,” she muttered. Looking up at me, she asked, “How much of this is conjecture and how much is confirmed fact?”

“The murders are all facts. I also have absolute knowledge that Perle Medea murdered her own donor in the same manner the others were killed. However, Perle couldn’t have killed them all. She was witnessed by reliable peoples outside the country when three of the murders occurred.”

“And as a result of her machinizations, she got the lords Hausse and Wright to invite me here. Thus landing me squarely in the middle of this mess.”

“That’s how I see it,”

“And your plan is to turn this around on her?” she asked doubtfully.

“Yes, that’s exactly what we intend to do. I plan to hunt the hunters. As I’ve said before, I won’t lie to you. There is a certain element of danger. Eileen and I will do our best to see that you come to no harm, however, as with all plans, the unknown is always a factor.”

“I am not some babe in need of swaddling,” she replied a bit sharply. I didn’t reply and the room became quiet. A while later she said, “Very well. A lasting peace is worth this inconvenience.”

Five minutes later the three of us were on the road.

“What kind of music do you like?” I asked Telena when I’d finished fiddling with my phone. At the moment I was driving us towards downtown Dallas.

“What relevance could that possibly have?” she asked.

With a smile I replied, “It will determine which of the clubs we enter the Coliseum through.”

“Ah, I see. I suppose that classical is out of the question,” she more stated than asked.

“Sadly, that is indeed the case.”

“In that case let’s try good old fashioned rock and roll. Preferably none of the industrialized, form-fitting twaddle that the studios are putting out now.”

“Ah, I see you’re a lady of discriminating tastes. I believe the Tornado Shelter will be our best bet for a little rock.” Ten minutes later I parked right in front of the club. As the three of us stepped inside, I tossed the car keys to the soulless bouncer. He accepted them with a nod and headed towards the car as we entered the noisy club.

“I always wanted to come here but I was afraid to,” Eileen told us, looking around as she

followed me towards the back of the place.

“Why ever were you afraid?” Telena asked in a tone that sounded only mildly curious.

“This district isn’t the best in the city,” she replied.

“Too many damn vampires,” I declared with a grin, surprising a laugh from both women.

As I held open the door leading into back room, my eyes found Marvin, the Lassie wannabe. Both my companions crossed into the back room. Marvin nodded gravely in response to my gaze... perhaps a bit fearfully at that. Smiling pleasantly in return, I followed the ladies.

Marvin was part of the plan. The ‘favor’ I’d asked of him was his chance for redemption and he knew it. He’d been listening through my cell phone when I’d asked Telena about her musical tastes. He’d then driven here quickly so that he witnessed our arrival. And soon he would be spreading word of it throughout the vampire information network. And that word would reach the murders. Theoretically anyway.

Once we passed the two guards watching the tunnel entrance into the Coliseum, we encountered no one else. Even the security checkpoint stood empty. “Is this normal?” Telena asked with a small frown. “This is an important facility. I would expect it to be guarded at all times.”

“I believe it is being guarded,” I responded. “I just don’t think that the security is making itself seen the way they do when the place is being used for large gatherings.” Whether this was true or not, I couldn’t have said. It sounded good though.

“Well,” Eileen said a bit nervously, “I suppose I need to go find Miranda.”

“You’ll do just fine,” I told her reassuringly with a kiss to her forehead. “I’ll see you soon.”

“I certainly hope so,” she muttered with a rather wan smile as she walked off towards one of the tunnels. We were in the coliseum’s main complex now.

“She’s very new, isn’t she?” Telena asked a moment later as the two of us walked through the access tunnels heading towards Selina’s box.

“Very. She’s showing a great deal of potential though and she’s made a huge amount of progress lately. All things being equal, I’m extremely pleased with how she’s working out.”

“I am pleased for you,” she told me quietly. “The old saying is true. Good help *is* hard to find.”

“So it would seem,” I agreed as we entered the box from which Selina had addressed the crowd during the big gathering. We found Selina already here. She stood in the back, in the shadows where I’d stood when I’d been watching and learning about the crowd. Back when I’d almost killed the woman standing at my side. Most peculiarly though, I couldn’t sense her psychically at all.

Once they’d spotted the other, the two stared and glared at each other. I thought they’d stop after a minute but they kept right on looking at each other, neither saying a word.

Oh, for pity’s sake.

“You two need to talk,” I stated flatly. This caused both Selina and Telena to throw me dark looks. Their combined ire should have sent me running. Certainly, if looks could kill, I’d probably have been in little pieces. But their foolishness while we were actively trying to lure the enemy here was starting to pique my own ire. “Both of you need to sit down and talk. Like reasonable adults faced with an adult-level crisis. This needs to happen now before someone comes in and tries to kill Selina.” However, as the words left my mouth, I realized something. Both of these women had become involved in this. And both of them were pretty with shoulder length black hair.

Telena saw something on my face and her eyes narrowed calculatingly as she asked, “What is it?”

“I just realized something. You’re *both* potential targets of the killer. All the murder victims have been pretty women with long black hair.” The longer I thought about it, the more I didn’t like the way things were adding up. “In fact, only one of the women has been under five foot five. The rest have all been closer to five foot seven. Your height, Telena.”

“If so, someone has gone to a great deal of trouble to set me up,” she stated, apparently not the least bit worried.

“Yes, so it would seem.” I mused. “However, our own trap’s been set. I think we should proceed as planned. The possibility of either of you being the ultimate target of the killer doesn’t truly change matters that much.”

“I quite agree,” Telena replied, walking into the shadows close to Selina where she sat on one of the rather uncomfortable chairs in front of a sitting table.

“Well I don’t,” Selina declared before walking quickly out of the room.

“Please don’t move,” I told the scowling Telena as I hurried after Selina. “We’ll be right back.”

Out in the corridor, Selina coldly declared, “I’m not going back in there with that creature.”

“Selina, we need her for this to work. And I need the two of you together. I can’t protect you both from different locations.”

“I do not need your protection,” she barked hotly. Whatever she’d been using to mask her presence began sliding away. Not surprisingly, not-so-little wisps of her anger were the first things I felt from her.

“Yes you do and so does she,” I countered.

“Like hell I do,” she snapped as she continued stalking through the corridors.

“Selina, stop,” I asked. “We have a good plan, let’s stick with it and put an end to this. Once it’s over, she’ll leave your city. Let’s go back and it will all be over with that much more quickly.”

“Forget the plan, I’m not going back into the same room as that bitch,” she snarled as she increased her pace. Something inside me snapped and I sudden found myself standing in front of her. She stopped out of surprise.

“You will turn around and you will go talk to her,” I commanded coldly, despite the fact I was in a near rage. “You will speak with her in a civil manner and you will calmly ask her about what happened on the night you and Miranda were tortured by Arkusinski. Further, you will calmly sit and listen to what she has to say. After that, if you’re curious, you can ask her about how she and the vampire who remade you came to be descended from a demon. If she doesn’t want to talk about it, you will use your powers of persuasion but you will not use your powers of command to try to elicit answers from her. You will be civil and polite. The perfect lady. Do you understand?” I demanded as a shred of my own anger finally tinged my voice.

“Yes,” she replied and to my stunned surprise she turned and walked back the way we’d just came. Deeply surprised by her sudden turn around, I absently began wiping my hands on my coat to sooth the tingling feeling in them. Tingling. In my fingers. Oh, dear. I suddenly realized that I’d unknowingly raised my necromantic power. My body still had that peculiar, prickly sensation from holding a little too much power within me.

Oh crap. What had I done?

As I watched the two powerful vampire women talk from the concealment of a deep shadow, I felt someone searching for me. Turning, I found Eileen looking around at nearby shadows.

“I’m here,” I called quietly, still causing her to startle.

“Oh, crap,” she whispered, walking over to me. “So they’re talking?”

“So it would seem. Why are you here?” I asked. “Shouldn’t you be playing diversion up top somewhere?”

“I will be shortly,” she replied. “But Miranda realized she has no means of speaking with you at the moment so she asked me to deliver this,” she explained, handing me a small earpiece radio and microphone. “She didn’t think anyone else would be able to find you.”

“Probably right,” I muttered. “You gonna be okay?”

“I think so,” she replied quietly. “Miranda and I have it worked out. I’m going to be driven around to various vampire lord’s mansions along with a woman wearing a blonde wig cut the way Miranda’s hair is cut. The other woman will pretend to call them on a cell phone and act as though she’s actually the one talking to the vampire lords. In reality, she’ll only be listening in and lip synching as the real Miranda calls and summons them in Selina’s name to a meeting at one of Selina’s Fort Worth estates. The fake Miranda will hang up when Miranda hangs up and then we’ll drive off to the home of the next lord on our list. For my part, I’ll sit in the limo and look bossy while I do my Selina imitation.”

I hadn’t heard this part of the plan before and frowned in puzzlement. “And just what exactly is this supposed to accomplish?”

“Evidently Selina’s done this in the past when she wanted her lords to think she was one place when she was actually somewhere else. Combined with the rumor we’ve got leaking, it should

convince our killer that something's up and it's happening here.”

“And that really works? Sounds strange, but I suppose if it gets the results we're looking for....”

“Keep your fingers crossed and hope that it does,” she said as she turned back towards the corridor she'd stepped out of.

“Good luck,” I quietly called.

“Same,” she replied, disappearing down the corridor.

Refocusing my attention on the two powerful vampire women and the area around them again, I slid from shadow to shadow until I found a new place to watch them. Like my last place, this new hiding spot was very dark. Content with this place and the view of the area it provided, I settled down to wait and watch.

Two hours later, Miranda quietly stated into my earpiece that one of her guard posts had failed to report in. This particular post guarded an entrance into the Coliseum. I acknowledge this and paid even more attention to the area around the two women. The rat or rats were inside the trap now and headed for the cheese.

Thirty minutes later, a strange man landed on the balcony to Selina's box. The ladies' quiet

conversation came to an abrupt halt.

“Who is this?” Selina asked.

With a marked frown, Telena replied, “He’s my second in command, Uwe Muller. And he’s supposed to be back home watching over my interests while I’m away.”

“That’s right,” the fellow replied easily with only a faint hint of a German accent. “However, there are more pressing issues to be resolved here.”

“What are you talking about Uwe?” his mistress asked in a quiet, ominous voice as he strolled towards them.

“Why I’m talking about Selina Dupree’s treachery, of course. You see, she invited you here under a false flag of truce. She then blew up the house she gave you to stay in, killing the entourage filled with those most loyal to you.”

“I’ve done no such thing,” Selina declared angrily.

Uwe pulled out a remote control and flicked a switch. “So far as the rest of the world is concerned, you just did.” He tossed the remote casually across the floor.

“Nooo!” Telena screamed, falling down to her knees.

“Oh, yes my dearest. Don’t worry, I’m not going to kill you quickly. No, you have answers I yet need.”

“You can’t think I’m going to let you get away with this treachery?” Telena sobbed as she completely collapsed onto the floor.

“Oh, I have no doubt that’s what you’re thinking, my dear. However, I’ve grown strong over the years. Strong enough to rule your lands. Strong enough to control your people. And more than strong enough to spend your money. You see, with you so far away from your... *my* people, they’ll

hardly even notice the backlash of your death. And I'll slide in and take over just as smoothly as you could please."

"I suppose you have some brilliant plan for killing me as well?" Selina asked with her French accent once more in evidence.

"Oh, indeed I do. Rumor has it that you're not much of a warrior... but I'm not really willing to take that chance. No, I've been doing my research. Actually, Perle's been doing my research on you. Wonderful woman her. Took me a while to get her to visit me in Greece though. Five years ago that is. Since then, we've been plotting and planning everything. For instance, to get you out of the way, all I have to do is kill someone particularly close to you. The backlash will make you every bit as vulnerable as Telenia is now." He put his hand to his ear and pressed a button, "Dietrich, take the shot."

"Miranda!" Selina gasped, falling over.

"Yes," he stated, sounding quite pleased with himself. "You can armor them up all you like. In the end it doesn't matter. It always has been and always will be easier to destroy than it is to protect something. Especially with these great modern weapons. HEAT baby!" he yelled joyfully. "We're bringing on the HEAT. High Explosive Anti-Tank. Twenty millimeter sniper cannon. Heard your people used a few of them down in Houston. My friend Perle was kind enough to get me one from your armory. Got a whole lot more than that. You see, I brought some other friends along. Just in case this turned messy."

"Oh, I think you can count on that," I told him as I materialized out of the shadows.

Shaking his head, he said, "I'd heard you were still around. Who'd have thought someone as weak as Selina Dupree could have fashioned a telum that would last?"

“Selina weak?” I asked, shaking my own head. “You’ve got the wrong vampire. Selina’s as strong as they come. She’s an oak among weeping willows. And you must be the greatest of fools.”

“I know weakness when I see it!” he declared, drawing a sword as I drew mine. “She refuses to face her past. This fool honestly believes Telena enjoyed watching her torture. Draws much of her strength from an incredibly stupid and willing misconception. And she doesn’t even know how her line got it’s blood! No past, no future!” That certainly sounded familiar.

“You don’t know that either,” Telena announced, standing up and wiping her face with a hanky. “And it’s always bothered you, hasn’t it Uwe? Poor obsessive compulsive Uwe. The things you don’t know gnaw at you, don’t they. They eat away at your sanity until you do something utterly insane. Like trying to take over my territory.”

“Oh, not just that,” the big German snarled. “I’m also going to start a war. Or rather, her murder of your retinue started the war. Houston weakened her forces. Not much, but when you have detailed, inside information, it’s enough to see the job done. Her death,” he declared with a nod to Selina, “Will wipe out half the hierarchy or more. All I have to do is position my troops properly, and it will be over with in a matter of hours.”

“You think you can hold Germany and my metroplex at the same time?” Selina asked tearfully from the floor.

“Hold it? Oh, my goodness no. These cities are very rich, especially after you received your share of the Houston money. No, I’m planning to loot it and leave the remains to Perle. With the cash I can move into Austria, Denmark, and Belgium all at once. My own version of a blitzkrieg if you will.”

“So where’s your little friend?” I asked Muller. “Surely she’s around here somewhere. I

hardly think she'd want to miss out on the biggest event in her entire unlife. Tell us, where's Perle Medea?"

"I believe I can help you with that," another fellow called from the balcony. In his hand he held a good sized paper bag.

"Hugh," Selina called from the midst of her tears, still laid out on the floor. "Hugh Hausse, what are you doing here?"

"This mess is in large part my fault," he called. "I was gullible and allowed Perle to play me. I should have known better. Perhaps this will help me make amends." And with that he threw the bag into the room where it exploded.

For a moment the room went completely dark. A moment later the emergency lighting came on showing the entire chamber filled with a slowly settling dust. Flour dust at that.

"I checked out Perle's place before coming over," Huge explained into the silence. "There I found a circle of rock salt. And on the table next to that sat a book of magic, conveniently turned to the page on how to make oneself invisible to vampires." Well now, wasn't that interesting? I supposed that somewhat explained the rock salt that had been found on one of the murder victim's wounds as well.

With a yell, Uwe Muller launched himself at his mistress. I intercepted him and a ferocious fight ensued as we went after each other with our swords. The staccato clashing of our blades sounded so close together it almost seemed like a single continuing sound. It didn't take me long to decide he was probably physically stronger than me... or that he was less of a swordsman. Working him around to where he had to parry a couple of blows aimed at his head, I took the opportunity presented to kick his right knee backwards.

His pain-filled yelp was most gratifying but he didn't fall. However, as his attention became split between healing his leg and preventing me from decapitating him, I managed to get several nice cuts across his arms and his other leg. At which point several more vampires entered the room apparently on Muller's side. A huge melee ensued.

Uwe and I continued doing our best to kill each other. I worked him around to where I wanted him and nearly severed his left arm off just below the elbow. At approximately the same time, I kicked his knee again. Sideways this time. As he fell, I got a good slash in across his back. Before I could finish him, I was distracted by a vampire suddenly being imbedded in the wall next to me. Muller rolled away and began healing himself as another vampire joined our private little battle, apparently, someone on Uwe's side. This woman was wielding what looked like a cattle prod but with a rather impressive electrical arc at the end.

Unfortunately for her, she was out of her league.

When she came at me, I stepped inside, removing her arm at the elbow. With my off hand, I caught her with an uppercut just under the chin and her head snapped back loosely against her back as her neck broke. Before she could drop to the floor, Muller ran his sword through her back. Regretfully, he ended up running the blade through my guts as well.

They tell me that most of a vampire's innards wither over time as the heart slowly becomes the only truly meaningful organ. Evidently, six months is not long enough for any significant withering to take place.

I screamed in agony.

But even as I screamed, I realized that he'd made a fatal mistake. His sword was now stuck through the woman's corpse and through me. Removing it would take time. Not much but hopefully

long enough. I launched a horizontal strike at his neck. With a sideways jerk of his blade, he ripped his sword out through my left kidney, causing me to scream again. Twisting his body, he was still too slow to intercept my blade with his, however he did succeed in mostly turning his way out of my sword's path. My strike ended up only removing a patch of hair and a thin slice of skull smaller than a playing card. However, my reverse lunge punch to his chest knocked him back hard into the nearby wall. During the brief moment he was staggered by this, I removed his other arm. He looked very surprised right before I took his head.

Across the room, the two vampire ladies, as well as Hugh Hausse, and Gladys Wright were busily killing off the vampires who'd come to Uwe Muller's aid. And do my surprise, so was Miranda. I suppose rumor of her death had been a bit premature.

"Has anyone seen Perle Medea?" I asked, casually healing my wounds and killing vampires as I walked closer to where Selina stood. Her fangs were clamped onto an enemy vampire's neck as she worked on draining him dry. Hugh's idea of using dust to cover her and the floor had been a good one, but since the battle had ensued, the floor now had far too many confused tracks to easily figure out which set might have been Perle's.

"I'm right here!" the invisible Perle screamed as she stabbed Selina in the back with a wicked looking dagger. "Die you weak minded bitch! Die!"

I don't honestly remember crossing the intervening space. I do however, very clearly remember swinging my sword and cutting Perle Medea in half. As her body pieces hit the floor, they became visible. She looked every bit as surprised as Uwe Muller had. I also remember pinning her upper body to the floor via the expedient means of sticking my sword through her heart.

Turning to Selina, I felt the blood drain from my face. Perle's dagger was sticking out of her

back. Powered by the strength of a vampire lord, the blade had passed right through her body armor. Into her heart. After pulling the dagger out, I found she still clung to life but only barely. For nosferatu, a heart wound was almost always fatal. And I could feel her strength and her essence slipping away as I turned her over and brushed the hair away from her face..

Power. I needed power and I needed it now. And I knew what had to be done to get it.

“Everyone on Selina and Telena’s side, move behind me. Do it now!” I commanded with a roar. I don’t know if they sensed something bad was going to happen or if it was something in my voice, but in the twinkling of an eye, all of the good guys were suddenly behind me. Hugh and Gladys supported Miranda between them but neither of them looked to be in good shape either. As Selina faded, so would they. Miranda would be first and if I didn’t hurry, I would follow right after her. Turning my furious gaze on the rapidly approaching enemy, I began drawing power not only from them but from the entire area they occupied.

The fresh energy from those vampires who’d already been killed, slid into me first. My finger tips began tingling and then burning with the energy I’d received. However, I could feel the power yet in the living vampires and I wanted it. Needed it. Their first clue something was wrong most likely came when their vampiric speed abandoned them. Despite their fading powers as I pulled the death energy right out of their bodies, one of them made it to me. With a touch of my hand I yanked the remaining necromantic power out of his body. Doing so felt so good I could scarcely believe it. My hands burned with power as he dropped, utterly lifeless and without a sound.

Realizing that something was desperately wrong, the others tried to flee. None of them so much as made it out of the room. Running to them, I touched each in turn. As the last eight started to fall, I was once again kneeling next to Selina. My body blazed with the energy I’d taken from the

others and the near rapture from the feeling was tempered only by the knowledge that Selina didn't have much time left. Behind me, Hugh and Gladys were pale and grey looking, both laying on the floor with wide, fearful eyes, Miranda unconscious and forgotten between them.

With a kiss, I blew life and energy back into Selina's body. The guttering flame that was her remaining life force, flared and then roared back to life like a great blast furnace. A moment later, I reached the point where her small body could hold no more of the power I bore. Unfortunately, I was still overly full. My eyes and limbs burned with it. I had to get rid of more. Turning, my eyes locked on Telenia's and she felt my need.

"Yes," she whispered.

The next thing I knew, my lips were locked onto hers and I was breathing power into her as her lips writhed against mine. A moment later I pulled away from her, leaving a rapturous look on her face. If receiving it felt anything near what taking it had, she was going to be very happy indeed for a while.

Gladys Wright was just beginning to stand when I kissed her as well. She was only able to hold a fraction of the power Selina and Telenia had. Considering that the excess was nearly gone, this was not a bad thing. With a shrug, I gave Hugh a power-filled kiss on the forehead and he dropped like I'd brained him. Not quite empty, I picked up Miranda. Grinning into her fluttering eyes a moment, I then dipped her right before kissing her soundly. The last of the excess energy I wanted free of breathed into her. This left me a bit over where I'd started and I continued kissing Selina's oldest friend, but that was fine by me. When I was sure she'd been kissed quite thoroughly, I set her in the nearest chair.

Yes, things were definitely looking up. And speaking of looking up, Selina sat there across

the floor watching me intently.

Sitting down next to her, I slid a hand gently over her cheek. “You okay?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” she replied before closing her eyes and sighing. “It looks like the cat’s out of the bag now.”

I looked over the four people who had just participated in and witnessed what I’d done. “Oh, I’m not so sure about that,” I told her with a quiet smile. “Your oldest friend... I think she might be persuaded to keep another secret. Two of your lords who are desperate to work their way back into your good graces... I think they might be convinced as well. And Telena Petrokovitch,” I continued, looking that woman in the eyes, “I believe she was on our side to start with. All she ever truly wanted from you was peace and a little understanding. While you’ve hated her all these years for witnessing your torture, she’s hated herself all that time for not setting you free.”

“I know,” Selina replied quietly. “We talked.” And in that moment I saw her remember why she’d talked and I watched the anger build behind those lovely blue eyes.

Leaning close, I pulled her to me and breathed into my ear, “Be mad at me later, gorgeous. Right now we have things that need doing.”

Pulling back, I saw her anger turn calculating. That almost certainly wasn’t going to be good.

With a sigh, I turned to Telena. “I’m hoping and guessing that since Miranda’s still with us, your retinue wasn’t blown up?”

“We’re deep underground,” she responded with a smile. “There’s no way the signal from the little transmitter he carried could have penetrated all the earth and concrete above us. Uwe always considered technology to be more magic than anything else. Never learned to understand why things worked. No, my people are just fine. My collapse and the pulse of shock I sent down my line were

all just another part of luring him out. I had to know why he did what he did. Had to be sure that the treason began and ended with him.”

“Well, I’m glad to hear that.”

“Indeed. It would seem that your plan worked. Perhaps not quite as planned, but well enough to be sure,” she said, still smiling. Turning to Selina, she walked over and took the smaller woman’s hands. “We share many secrets now, sister. Let them draw us closer together rather than drive us apart.”

“It’s going to take some getting used to, this idea of yours,” Selina replied quietly as she looked into the other woman’s eyes. “I’ve hated you a long time. And for no good reason. But I am willing to try. And I’ve never yet tried my hand at anything that I have not eventually succeeded at.”

“I am patient as the hills,” Telena replied, kissing Selina’s cheeks.

“And I am persistent as flame,” Selina responded as she in turn kissed Telena.

Telena smiled, “Why don’t we seal our alliance with a drink?”

“A wonderful idea,” she agreed. She then turned to the two lords present. “Gladys, Hugh. Round up all of Perle’s line. I’ll want to speak to them later. Also, clean everything of interest out of her house. Start with the book of spells and work your way around from there. I believe the two of you know to keep quiet about events here?”

“Yes milady,” both said at once.

“Good,” she replied with a little smile. “I was very pleased by your actions tonight. So much so, I believe it has completely canceled out the ire I felt towards you earlier. Now go, both of you. I need time to think of something nice to get you.” The two lords departed quickly.

“Miranda, you’ll see to cleanup?” Selina asked with a gesture around the room.

“Of course. I’ll also see to it that the bomb at the Lady Telena’s estate is found and removed as well.”

“Let’s save the bomb removal for later. Right now let’s relocate the Lady’s people to nicer quarters.”

“It will be done,” Miranda stated before leaving.

“And you Mister McAlister,” she began, turning thoughtfully narrowed eyes to me.

“Why don’t I leave the remainder of the evening to you ladies? If neither of you mind terribly, I think I’ll find my soulless companion and go home for evening?”

She looked surprised a moment before it went away as though it had never been there. With a small nod of her head, she said, “Yes. That just might be the best idea for the moment. You and I will... talk... later.” Her statement didn’t quite have an ominous ring to it, but it wasn’t very far from it. Telena blew me kiss, laughed which made her look much more human, and wished me a good evening.

When I failed to find Eileen, I called Miranda. She promised to find her for me and promised to see to it that she was properly sheltered for the day. Kicked back in my chair, I spent the last couple of hours of the night thinking over what had been said and done. There was a lot to think about. Just before the sun rose, I went to bed and slipped into an easy sleep.

Sometime that day, I dreamed my way into the spirit world. Within moments, I’d found Jack.

He was speaking with a couple of women. Both rather cute. Upon realizing I was there, their conversation cut off and both women faded away.

“Sorry about that,” I said, a bit embarrassed. “I didn’t mean to run off your friends.”

“Not a problem,” Jack informed me with a smile. “Perhaps some day I’ll introduce you to them. Right now, their schedules are so busy they’re acting under some serious time constraints.

“So Wallace,” he said, sitting down in a chair. “How goes things in the land of the living?”

“Better I think,” I replied. I then went on to explain the events of the past evening.

“Believe it or not,” I already knew quite a bit about that,” he replied.

“Oh, how so?”

“Time does not work the same here as it does on earth,” he explained. “I’ve been talking to someone close to your recent events. She told me about quite a bit of it.”

“How is that possible? And how did you get in touch with this person?” I asked.

“I have near constant feelers out for people who can help me. You remain the person most likely to do so. Therefore, my feeler led me to her when she entered this realm.” He stood up and looked around. “Perhaps she can explain matters a bit more clearly than myself?” And with that, he concentrated. From out of the ether stepped Eileen.

My surprise was absolute.

Smiling, she walked over and gave me a hug. Her hug conveyed a peace and serenity I hadn’t felt in a very long time. “Thank you for giving me a little extra time. I’ll never forget that little walk on the wild side.”

“How did you get here?” I asked, totally befuddled.

“Some bastard shot the Miranda decoy. Shot me too when I jumped out of the limo.”

“But Muller’s call to his sniper couldn’t have worked. We were in the Coliseum, deep under ground,” I protested.

“There’s a cell repeater station inside the facility. Phone’s work just fine down there,” she said with a sad smile for me. “You’re about to say something along the line of you can bring me back.” Yes, I had been about to say just that. “No need. I appreciate the extra time I had, but I’ve already moved on. My little brother met me here and my grandparents made the trip back from farther along to greet me. They’ve been explaining how things work here. It’s simply incredible. I’m thinking about joining one of the angelic hosts but I haven’t decided for sure.”

Not knowing what to say, I just stood there. Looking back over her shoulder, she said something to someone I couldn’t see. “Well, I’ve got to go,” she said, with a fond look for me. You take care of yourself. Stay strong and follow your moral compass.” And with that she stepped into the greyness and vanished.

“That’s a lot to take in,” I whispered.

“I know,” Jack replied gently. “Why don’t you sleep on it?”

And that was the last thing I remembered until the sun set.

After a leisurely breakfast, I drove out to Selina’s. Tonight the gate opened as I approached and the guard waved me on through. Interesting.

As I entered the house, Selina psychically called to me, telling me she was in her study. The connection was crisper and cleaner than it had been before.

Entering the room, she motioned me to a seat in front of the desk she occupied. “I’m afraid I have some bad news, Wallace,” she said once I’d sat.

“I know,” I replied softly. “Eileen’s dead again.”

“Yes,” she nodded. “I’d have thought you’d have felt her die. I did. But I suppose I know what it feels like much more than you do. I’ve felt it far too many times.”

“She’s where she belongs now,” I said with a faint, somewhat sad grin. “I think she’ll be happier there.”

“I’m sure she will.” A silence descended upon the room. I was trying to decide if it was a comfortable or an uncomfortable silence when she broke it.

“You and I are going to have a fight,” she declared.

“Oh?”

“Oh, yes,” she said as she began working herself up to being angry. “You used your powers to override my will. You *controlled* me.”

“Yes,” I agreed. “I didn’t do it consciously, but I certainly did do it. And a good thing too. Otherwise things would have turned into a huge disaster.”

“I told you I’d never allow you to control me,” she snarled with blazing blue eyes as she gathered her power.

“Turnabout’s fair play,” I countered calmly. Thankfully, I’d had a while to think about this. “Besides, I’ve been told that in order to become great, boxers need to be knocked out once. In order to see what it’s like to be on the receiving side of what they give. Similarly, I’ve heard that some playground bullies stop being bullies after being punched in *their* noses. Seems that once they understand how much it hurts, they lose the taste for beating the smaller, weaker children. These are

only two possible takes on the situation. I'm wondering which way you'll proceed now that you've been on the receiving side of the power you dish out in such high volume. ”

“I should destroy you for what you've done,” she grated as her anger grew.

“Oh really? Overriding someone else's will is a executable offense?” I turned my head and gave her a sideways look. “Unless it's *you* who's doing the overriding? Because you're so special you're excluded from this rule along with all the others. Right?” Ooh, she was mad. “It's kinda scary having none or only a little control over your actions, isn't it?” I asked seriously. “Some people might revel in the freedom of not having to be responsible for our own actions. Of not having to think about what they're doing. But not to people like you or me. To us, it's an attack on the very fabric of what we are. Oh, don't look so surprised. I remember very well what it's like. It hasn't been that long since you did the same to me. And what I had you do was a damned sight easier than what you put me through since I only made you sit through a conversation. You on the other hand took up my new life and threw it like you would dice.” My eyes narrowed and my voice took on a dark tone as I looked her in the eyes. “Let me assure you, I liked that a great deal less than how much you enjoyed my command for you.”

“I gave you that life!”

“Yes,” I snarled, angry myself now. “You did give it to me. A fact I still appreciate. However, that did not give you the right to gamble with *my* new life like you would quarters in a back-alley dice game.”

We continued arguing in a similar vein for a half hour. When the discussion devolved into name calling and throwing various object off the shelves. I bid her adieu for the evening.

Later that night, an idea came to me. Probably not a good one, but maybe it would help with

bridge building between us.

Early the next evening found me sitting in my den. After ten minutes or so of staring at the phone, I went ahead and dialed. Miranda answered on the second ring.

“I’d like to talk to her, please,” I simply said.

And moment later Selina picked up with a curt, “What is it?”

“Come visit me. Here at my house. Tonight.”

“Sorry,” she stated coldly. “I’m busy.”

“Be here at midnight or I’m leaving town,” I replied. There followed a long silence.

“Maybe that’s for the best,” she finally said.

“Maybe, maybe not. We can either discuss it or you can take the coward’s way out. Twelve o’clock.” And with that I hung up. I felt almost certain she’d be here. Almost.

“Alright, I’m here,” she growled, as I let her in the front door.

“So you are,” I acknowledged. “Can I get you anything?”

“No. Let’s just get this over with. Why am I here?”

“Why don’t we step somewhere a bit more private?” I suggested as I took her hand.

“Let’s not and just....” she managed to get out before I carried us both through shadows into my sealed bedroom. She ended her statement with an expletive.

“Sorry about that, but I think our privacy is worth a little more of your aggravation. What’s another spoonful on a building-sized stack?” I asked with a wry grin.

“What have you done to my room?” she demanded, instead of answering my rather rhetorical question.

“I did a little redecorating. It seemed to me with the refrigerator down here, it would be less likely to be robbed.”

“I was more referring to the smell.”

“Oh? Well, I suppose the odor of burned metal does seem to be lingering a bit. To tell you the truth, when I’m down here I don’t usually bother breathing.”

“Now, why am I here? Aside from having you show me what a lousy job you’ve done of keeping up the place.”

I walked over the center of the room and sat down on the floor. “Join me and I’ll show you.”

She muttered something in French that I didn’t quite catch before walking over to stand before me. There she stood looking down at me. I motioned for her to sit. This time I caught what she said which was rather rude. However, she did indeed start to sit. On her way down, I grabbed her and pulled her into my lap. Physically she froze. Mentally she was on the edge of an explosive rage.

“It’s not what you think,” I told her as I held my wrist up to her mouth. A momentary confusion flashed through her eyes and some small amount of her anger faded. I took her left wrist even as my wrist continued resting against her lips.

“Bite me,” I told her gently. After a momentary hesitation, she did so. As her fangs slid into me, I bit her wrist in return so that we were each slowly drinking the others blood. I allowed myself a moment to appreciate the exquisite taste of her blood as I distantly felt her fangs within my own wrist. Not even bloodwine compared to this. But I had a plan and it was time to get on with it.

Raise your mental shields, I silently told her as I looked into her beautiful blue eyes. Her eyes clearly said ‘what the heck’ and she did so. And was startled to find that I was still communicating with her... from inside her shields.

How... how did you know this would work? she telepathically asked, stunned as her anger continued fading. Our connection was even clearer now than it had been.

The knowledge bled over from you, I explained. *Now let me take you on a trip. A short trip down memory lane.*

Where... when are we going?

Let me take you back to the war in Houston. I want you to see firsthand the effect of your powers.

No. I don't want to go.

I know you don't, I told her softly. *But you need to. You need to know how it affects and potentially effects the lives of those you touch with your power. Only when you truly understand your powers will you be able to truly master them.*

Who are you to tell me about my powers? she demanded with a flare of temper.

Who are you to deny the truth? The knowledge I've gained about how vampire powers work has all come from you. It is your own understanding. You cannot deny it or the truth behind it.

I still don't want to go traipsing through your memories, she insisted stubbornly.

I know. But don't consider it traipsing about, I told her with a burst of humor. *Think of it more as a guided tour.*

Men's minds tend to be cesspools. Thank you, but I think I've seen enough. I could feel the thin tendrils of fear running through her. It wasn't the dirt from my mind she was afraid of. It was knowing without a doubt the consequences of the decisions she'd made that worried her.

If she didn't go willingly, I couldn't force her. Knowing her stubborn streak was quickly becoming engaged, I cheated. She sensed it coming but despite this she remained still totally unprepared for I had in mind.

Gathering my burgeoning love for this incredibly strong, yet fragile woman, I gave it to her all at once accompanied by something of a mental hug. And while her wits were scattered to the wind, I pulled us back in time through my memories to a couple of hours after sundown, when the war for control of Houston had been really beginning to pop. The place was a backyard that Selina's soulless had converted into a staging area for the wounded. Never releasing my mental hug, I gently took her with me as we watched together while I relived that night. She'd ordered a number of people around including myself. However, more importantly, she'd commanded my aunt Lisa and my cousin, Lou.

I showed her not my resentment or anger at having my will overridden. She had been right to a certain extent. I'd been dead and she'd changed that. She had a certain right to ask for a few favors in return I admitted. Her surprise at hearing these thoughts brought a smile to my mind.

Instead, what I showed her was a weakened and wounded woman, my aunt, Lisa. She'd come all the way to Houston with the job of taking my body home and finding out what had happened to Lou, Jenna, and their group. In the memory, I watched Lou walk over to her and reattach her

severed arm. Made it look easy. Like something from the old stories. A bit later, Lisa stood up and smiled, happy that she'd succeeded in at least one of her assignments. And then the memory Selina made her forget she'd found Lou and sent her back, unequipped into the heat of the battle. I'd been fearful for her life then. More so than I had been for my own. As Aunt Lisa jogged out of that backyard, Selina felt the ghost of my remembered thoughts as I wondered if I'd ever see her alive again.

A flare of guilt and a rush of excuses from Selina almost cost me my control of this little stroll through my memory. Mentally hugging her tighter than ever, I gently soothed away her upset, allowing her to feel for herself that I wasn't using this to blame her or to try to shame her for what she'd done. I simply wanted her to see and understand that there were consequences beyond those that were visible at first glance. Something she knew in theory but more as an abstract than something palpable. After a while, she allowed herself to be calmed.

Easing us back into my memories, rather than appearing in the dark tunnels under the vampire compound *Nachtmusik*, I found myself standing with Selina in a memory of my Atlanta apartment. Looked like I needed practice as a tour guide.

Uh, oh. Looks like we ended up in one of those cesspools after all. My thought brought an immediate smile to her mind as her curiosity took over. She converted my mental hug into mental hand holding as she looked over my old living room. Looking around the room myself, I realized that all of this stuff was still in Atlanta. And most of it wasn't worth retrieving. However, one of my other swords was still mounted over the fireplace. That I'd like to get back. It was a custom piece and it was perfectly balanced for me. The scabbard was crap though, which was why the sword remained on the wall. Considering the battle my other blade had been through, it would almost

certainly need replacing. Vampires hitting metal objects together tended to damage said objects.

Oh yeah, and there was the sawed off double barrel loaded with the silver buckshot that was taped under the coffee table. Might be nice to have that back as well.

Who painted this? she asked, gesturing at the painting of a forest scene featuring a pair of wolves over the sofa.

Guilt and a sense of loss pulsed through me before I could stop it. She tightened the mental hand holding back into a mental hug.

Your twin sister painted it, didn't she? she gently asked, mostly knowing the answer already.

Yes, I replied with a small, quiet thought filled with undertones of many emotions.

The wolves were the two of you?

Yes, I again answered as some of the remembered joy of running and hunting through the woods with Sonya came back to me. The happiness faded as I once again faced the fact that I would never run through the woods with the speed and grace of a wolf or any other animal again. Or with my sister either.

Do not be too sure of that, she told me, obviously hearing my thought. *I can transform at will into a wolf. And if I can do it, chances are you can, too.*

I was completely stunned. She held me in a mental hug soothing me with the psychic equivalent to repeatedly running a comforting hand over my hair while my wits slowly returned to me.

You're a more complex man than I gave you credit for, she confided a bit later once I'd finished my emotional rollercoaster over the ramifications of possibly being able to shapeshift again. A staple of my life I'd thought to never partake of again. Even if it was in a limited role.

After a while, I gently asked, *Would you like to see the last of what I was going to show you? Not going to drag me along screaming and kicking this time, she asked a bit archly. Or trick me either?*

No, I replied. *If you don't want to see, we can call it a night.* I sensed a quick impression that she didn't want this encounter to end. Embarrassed by the knowledge that I'd sensed her feeling, she started to pull away. Quickly, I opened up the knowledge to her that I didn't want this to end anytime soon either. She had pulled back to the mental equivalent to a hand hold again and had been pulling further away when how I felt washed over her. With a tentative look at me she slowly began tightening her grip on my hand and I tightened my own hold as she did.

Alright, she said at last. Show me.

This time I skipped the preliminary stuff. She knew what she'd commanded Lou and myself to do. And it was something my cousin had told me about after the battle that had helped me get a better understanding of him.

Before one of the seemingly endless meetings that had followed the battle and presaged the formation of the new, Houston ruling council, Lou and I had found a chance to talk. We commandeered one of the many elegant rooms that were not in use. He'd sat down in the middle of a finely crafted table and I had perched on the mantle over the large fireplace. I was a bit surprised to note he was wearing a ring. Unlike some of my other cousins, Lou had never been much of one for jewelry. Few of us house warriors were.

"You know what my biggest fear was the whole time we were fighting our way across the city?" he asked.

"Death and dismemberment? Again?" I'd asked with a quirky smile.

“Not exactly,” he’d replied more seriously than I’d expected. “I’d made Elaine a promise that I’d get back to her. Had that bitch Selina not ordered me away, I could have fulfilled that promise right after I healed Aunt Lisa. Instead, I had to fight my way through werewolves, and more soulless and human guards than I could throw a stick at. Vampires too I suppose, though I don’t remember actually fighting any that night. Might have though. Still have a lot of memory gaps once we got to the heart of Nachtmusik.”

“She was greatly impressed with how well we worked together. She was worried that you’d run off. She needed every warrior she could find,” I explained.

“I know why she did it,” he replied with a flat, dangerous look in his eyes. Houston had changed him in several ways. Or perhaps I was just now seeing what had always been there. Most likely some combination of both. “I’d have gone with you without her damned commands complicating things and almost screwing up what we were there to do.” He took a deep breath and let it out. Much more calmly, he told me, “My real worry was that I’d never get a chance to say goodbye to Elaine. Never smell her hair again. Touch her, kiss her. Tell her how much I loved her.

“It was only supposed to be a simple scouting mission....” he trailed off.

“Judging by the ring, I guess you’ve since told her how you felt?” I asked half seriously and half jokingly. He ignored the joking portion of my tone.

“Yeah. We’re engaged now. We’ll get married shortly after we graduate high school next year. Probably should have happened before, but sometimes it takes something like this to help you realize what’s truly important in life.”

And with that I froze the memory stream.

Do you see what I’m trying to tell you? I asked softly.

She was silent a long moment though I felt her sadness. At last she said, *One of my hobbies is matchmaking. My brother will tell you it's my favorite pastime. Originally, I started pairing up people because I could. It was just another way to exercise my burgeoning talent of High Control. But as the years passed, I began to look upon it more as a challenge. I began to learn more about the people I was potentially matching up and working harder and harder to find someone who would best compliment them. Eventually, I realized it made me happy to see others happy. Unless someone's crossed me, I do not use my powers to make anyone unhappy. Not on purpose.*

She stood looking at my memory of my cousin sitting on the table and shook her head. *Life is filled with so many 'if onlys'. Turning away from the image, she focused her attention on me. I wish I could have known for sure what would have happened that night had I done things differently. But there are no certainties in battle and I did what I felt I had to do in order to see that as many of my people as possible survived.*

I understand, I told her sincerely. She was surprised and felt a flash of worry so deeply seated and gone so quickly that I didn't have a chance to tell what it was about. He was barely aligned with your forces at the time. Sometimes it's better to use an expendable weapon than a priceless artifact. And for what it's worth, you could have asked. For some reason I felt a tiny lightning bolt of relief run through her which was gone every bit as quickly as the worry had been. Ignoring my own puzzlement, I continued on, *However, I am irrevocably tied to them. From now until the end of my nights. Please try not to step on their destinies.*

That's not why you brought me to this memory. At least not all of it, she responded quietly.

I saw them together later, I replied slowly. *I believe you only got a quick look at them during a couple of the meetings. Lou and Elaine belong together. It would have been a cruelty to prevent*

them from saying goodbye. I'm afraid this is going to sound cruel in its own right. But on that night, fate didn't so much put the two of them back together again, as it prevented you from becoming a monster.

I was worried that she'd take that badly and it certainly stirred a good deal of emotional turmoil within her. At last she told me quietly, *Sometimes I am a monster.*

Me, too, I told her a bit sadly. Comes with the territory.

So why are you telling me this then? To make the decisions I have to make harder than they already are? There was a significant amount of anger preparing to bubble forth from deep within her.

No, I replied gently. I'm telling you so that you might think about using your powers as a last resort instead of a first response. So that when it does come to giving commands, you might stop and ask the person about their own desires in the matter, time permitting. Perhaps ask them how they'd do the task before sending them off to do it your way. And lastly, if you just have to order someone about, I want you to know that you should give them the flexibility to do their job properly. Otherwise, why bother? She calmed down again and gave me a long, thoughtful look.

With a jerk of her head, I found myself suddenly back on the bedroom floor where we'd started. Moving her head had both stopped the two-way flow of blood and had ended our eye contact. I regretfully removed my fangs from her wrist and blinked my dried eyes several times.

"You've given me a lot to think about," she told me quietly.

With a lick, I closed the fang holes in her wrist. A tremble ran through her and she snatched her arm out of my grasp. Looking, I saw no revulsion which was my first thought after she'd jerked away from me. Perhaps it was simply that she didn't trust herself with me yet. I hoped so anyway.

“Don’t leave town,” she said quietly. It wasn’t a command though, it was a request.

I sat there thinking for a while before I said anything. At last I asked, “Will you help me learn about my abilities? Help me learn to control my powers? So far, I’ve been running on instinct and I suppose some small amount of knowledge that was contained within the blood of the potion you gave me.” After a moment I added, “I’m afraid that I’m going to hurt someone you care about. Or worse, you.”

“Yes,” she agreed quietly.

“I’ll stay,” I whispered.

“I won’t make you any promises,” she replied in kind.

“Promises about what?”

“This,” she said just before kissing me. After a moment of surprise, I began returning the favor. Sometime later, I picked her up and threw her across the room into the bed which elicited a delightful shriek from her. Before she’d finished bouncing I had rejoined her. We returned to kissing and that slowly and delightfully escalated into other activities.

Afterwards, we lay there holding each other for a long time.

“How long do you think it will take me to learn to shapeshift again?” I asked quietly.

“I honestly don’t know,” she said into my chest. “For some it comes within a matter of months. For others it takes decades. I don’t know if your former blood will make matters that much easier or that much harder for you.”

“It would be nice to run the woods with my family again,” I told her wishfully as I lightly slid my hand up and down her perfect back.

“What about your new family?” she asked quietly.

After a moment, I lifted her chin so that our eyes met. “My new family is my future. I have plans to do a great many new and exciting things with my new family. In your case,” I said with a very suggest grin, “A great many new things.” This brought a smile to her eyes.

More seriously, I told her, “For the first six months of my second life, to a large extent I had neither family. One mostly cut me off because they were afraid of me. The other I cut off because I was the one who was afraid. Now I have you and I’m slowly beginning to feel like I belong here. But I miss my other family. I’m mildly hopeful that if I can learn to shapeshift again, I can make some small progress towards meeting them in the middle, rather than dragging them all the way into the world of vampires.”

“Ours is a most dangerous world,” she agreed, running a hand over my chest. “I’ll teach you as I am able. I promise.”

“Thank you,” I replied, kissing her forehead. In a much lighter tone, I asked, “Hey, do you have any plans for tomorrow night?”

“I have a number of meetings, if I recall correctly. But, I think they’re early in the evening. Why, what did you have in mind?”

“Well, I heard about this place called NightWings. I was wondering if you might like to join me in checking the place out?”

“It seems like I may have been there once or twice already,” she said playfully. “And that also sounds like a date. As I recall, you said I was a lousy date.”

“Did I say that?” I asked, pretending to be shocked.

“I believe you did,” she replied, smiling brightly.

“Yes, well, since then, I’ve learned what a great kisser you are. I vaguely recall that a lack

of being kissed was one of the reasons I thought that way. Now, I know you're kisses are worth waiting for."

"Flatterer," she grinned.

"Oh, yes," I agreed. "Further...." I stopped and kissed her for a not-so-short moment, "Oh, yes. Further, I'm going to give you a lot of reasons for kissing me. Kinda preventative maintenance on the whole dating thing."

She looked up at me with a seriously seductive grin. "You could be putting your mouth to so many better uses than talking."

Oohlala.