

Selina's Telum

“So the telum is still in town and appears to be here to stay,” Walter stated with a thoughtful frown.

“Yes,” Randy agreed, a similar frown pursing his lips. “I saw him at NightWings the other night talking with Blanche Locke. Certainly didn't look like he was going to keel over dead or anything.”

“From the way they were sitting, would you say the two of them were acquaintances, friends, or lovers?” Walter asked curiously.

“Friends is the impression I got. I could be wrong but I don't think so. They were casually comfortable together but didn't do much, if any, touching. Didn't share a drink or anything like that but there were awkward silences either. Blanche was telling him one of her stories from the war.

“I did notice something interesting though,” Randy added.

“What's that?” Virge asked quietly.

“You all know how Ronaldo and Rourke glare at anyone who comes into 'Wings with conspicuous weapons and stuff? Well, this Wallace guy....”

“The telum?” Virge interrupted quickly. “His name is Wallace?”

“Yeah, I mentioned that already.”

“No you didn't.”

“Oh? Well, I meant to. Anyway, when he first got there, he pulled a scabbarded sword off his belt and leaned the thing against the seat next to him. Ronaldo and Roarke both came by to greet him personally and neither said a word about the sword. Acted like they were lucky to have him there. Like he was a big time celebrity or visiting royalty.

“And that's what I found out about the telum,” Randy finished with a smile. “How about you guys?”

“He's well liked within Selina's household,” Armando told the small group. “You know, they wouldn't talk much about him but you could see in their faces and eyes that most of them liked him. As you may or may not have heard, he's been titled lord. No retinue, though that's not really unusual. However, evidently not from lack of trying. Heard he created and then lost a soulless woman about a month ago.”

“How 'about a month ago'?” Walter pressed. “Thirty days ago? Thirty five? How long ago?”

“I was told the woman was buried Tuesday a month ago,” 'Mando replied, taking a good look at Walter to see what expression showed on the older vampire's face. At the moment it showed interest with just a hint of intensity.

“We can surmise that she wasn't long dead,” Walter muttered, looking over at his empty fireplace. “Do you know how she died? Was it a failed transformation?”

“I don't think so,” 'Mando replied quietly. “I got curious. Checked out the funeral home records. They were sparse as you'd expect with a death from within the grand illusion. Still, it was a closed casket affair. In my experience that usually means died by violence.”

“I suspect you're right,” Walter agreed with a thoughtful nod.

“You want me to find out more about her? Her name was Eileen Connors, if you're interested.”

“No. Not without better reason. Soulless die the second death every day. New soulless are created. For many it is not a great concern. Fools, if you ask me. Yet the fact remains. Best not to give the impression that we’re snooping. If he’s already a lord, chances are he’s become one of the Lady Selina’s favorites. Tempting fate has not gotten us good results in the past.”

“Ain’t that the truth?” Randy asked, absently rubbing a hand over his belly.

“Well,” Carla began, “It looks like I got more information than you lot for once.”

“What’d you find?” Virge asked.

“I found out at least to some extent why he’s so well liked and why he’s one of her favorites.”

“Yes? Come on, spill girl,” Mando demanded with a smile.

“This Wallace McAlister and the Lady Selina are lovers,” she replied seriously.

“No!” Randy blurted out. “Really?”

“Yes,” the soulless woman stated. “He’s evidently one of the reasons she’s mellowed recently. According to at least one member of the staff who didn’t realize she was within range of my hearing, Selina’s been needing a good shagging for quite some time. Apparently she’s gotten just that.”

Randy frowned, “I always thought she was something of a... well, you know those rumors about her and her bodyguard, Miranda. Never thought she was particularly interested in menfolk, you know.”

“Apparently she is in this one,” Carla replied with a quick quirk of her lips. Not quite a smile but perhaps within sight of one.

“This is an unexpected development,” Walter mused aloud. “Does this work in our favor or against it?”

“Her moodiness *has* decreased substantially over the last few weeks,” Mando noted. “And from everything I heard and saw, she was one moody bitch while that Petrokovitch woman was in town. The more stable our environment, the better our opportunities are and the more options we have. I think it’s working for us at the moment.”

“Yes. I had surmised that the unexpected death of Perle Medea had been the source of her sudden improvement in temperament. Perhaps it was actually this Wallace fellow’s attentions instead.”

“Or a combination of the two circumstances,” Carla suggested.

“What do we tell the younger members of our group?” Virge asked.

“To stay the hell away from him!” Randy stated emphatically.

“Hear, hear!” Mando seconded.

“Come on guys,” Virge said with a puzzled frown. “He can’t be that bad.”

“You didn’t have to step over the piles of bodies he left down in Houston,” Randy countered seriously. “They were two days pulling the corpses of the people he killed out of *Nachtmusik*. That’s working continuously with carts. I literally did not see a living enemy soldier until we breached the inner sanctum. The main attack was coming in from the other side of the complex. We were the first allied units to hit our section. Other than the telum. All we found were corpses. Thousands of them. All due to him.”

“I did hear that there was a doppelganger with him,” Mando said with a frown. “Just a quick blurb I overheard when I was walking past a couple of members of the elite guard talking. Something about a fellow who’d gone with this Wallace character to turn the doppelganger’s the Seven Masters were using.”

“So he had a flexface with him. All they’re good for is copying humans.”

“I don’t think so bro. They said he was covered in blood,” ‘Mando said quietly.

“There’s more to doppelgangers than just facial flexibility,” Walter said, frowning hard at Randy. “Don’t underestimate any of the other species that live within the illusion. It’s a very good, very fast way to end up dead. Or worse. And I definitely don’t want you passing that silly crap down to the others. I’ve met a couple of doppelgangers in my travels that would make you soil yourself... if you still could. And changing their faces is only the tip of what they can do. Hell, even the lesser ones can do that.”

“Where did you meet a powerful doppelganger?” Carla asked.

“Atlanta,” Walter replied. “I met Randalf Mitgaur. One of the original members of the Atlanta ruling council. It was fifty years ago. I had gone into town doing some freelance work and heard that there was to be an open council meeting. I actually went there because I’d never seen a troll and wanted to change that. Only saw the troll at a distance.” Walter laughed before adding, “And that was plenty close enough.

“Still, it was meeting the doppelganger that stuck with me. I didn’t even realize who he was at first. He was just the guy standing next to me when I walked up and we struck up a conversation while waiting for the show to start. And that was his turn of phrase rather than mine. It was only later, when he walked over and took his seat, that I realized who he was. The meeting was a contentious one. A lot of shouting and a few times they actually got into each other’s faces. That night the council was hashing out who was going to control some of the outlying suburbs.

“You’ve all met elder vampires. You know just what it would take to get into their faces. Carla’s met an elder werewolf. From the looks on your faces, I gather that Randy and ‘Mando have as well. Houston? Yes, I suspected as much. Trust me Virge when I tell you they are intimidating.”

“Man, that’s an understatement,” ‘Mando said, shaking his head. “They’re freakin’ scary is what they are. Dangerous as all hell.” Randy nodded his agreement of the other man’s assessment.

“That they are,” Walter also agreed. “And Randy Mitgaur got into the faces of an elder vampire and an elder werewolf and argued with them. He wasn’t particularly aggressive, but he didn’t back down an inch. And it may have just been my imagination, but I had the feeling that the other two were quite happy with their argument remaining only verbal. I’m not saying that they were afraid to fight him. Only that they seemed to look upon him as an equal. And if an elder vampire and an elder werewolf consider someone an equal, you’d be a fool to underestimate them.”

“I think the other races should be the topic of your next down home meeting,” Randy suggested. “I hadn’t heard that story before. What were you doing in Atlanta?”

“Learning what not to do,” Walter replied.

“Care to elaborate chief?” ‘Mando asked with a grin.

“No.”

After the silence stretched out a bit, Virge asked, “Okay, getting back on the actual subject, what are we gonna tell the younger crowd about the telum? The whole story? We know a bit more than word on the street. If they repeat something to just the wrong people, someone might become curious about how they know. Might start backtracking. Very short trip from them to us.”

“We edit the story,” Carla stated. “Instead of saying he’s popular with the Lady Selina’s staff, we tell them he’s popular. Instead of saying that they’re lovers, we say that they’re close. Word that they’re lovers is bound to continue leaking out. I suspect the word will be on the street sooner rather than later. People have already noticed her behavioral changes. She’d be a fool to think she can keep that secret and whatever else she may be, she is not a fool. Basically, give them the same information each of you brought, just minus the specifics that they don’t need anyway.”

“An excellent suggestion, my love,” Walter agreed with a smile.

“When are they due in?” Randy asked.

“They should start arriving in half an hour,” the older vampire replied after a glance at his watch.

“Good, then that gives me time to raid your refrigerator,” Randy said, standing up with a grin.

“I’ll be out sitting on the back porch pretending to be surprised,” Walter replied with a wry smile.

“I’d better help him,” Mando said, following after Randy. “Without me there, he’d just screw something up.”

“Don’t let him flip you off like that Mando,” Virge called after them. However, instead of following them into the kitchen, he followed Walter outside.

“There’s a lot more to our lives than just aligning ourselves with a vampire lord who shares similar goals and similar principles, isn’t there?” he asked the older man, sitting down in the lawn chair next to him.

“Yes there is, young Virgil. You are just beginning to understand what’s out there. Someday you’ll see it with your own eyes. And when you do, I want you to see it and fully understand just what it is you’re seeing. I think elder vampires are so strong because after all that time, they’re finally beginning to see what the big picture truly is.”

After a moment of silence, Walter asked, “Have I told you my onion theory?”

“No sir.”

“It’s simple. Each and every world is like an onion. You start at the center and each time you move out to the layers beyond the center, the bigger the onion gets. As a baby, your world consisted of your mother’s tit, where you slept, and probably the sound of her voice. As you grew, language and your home were added. Other people. The sun, the sky, and the wind. With each additional peel of the onion, the world grows much larger. You and every other new vampire who awakens within the grand illusion thinks they know the entirety of the truth now. Trust me, you don’t. You don’t even know the boundaries of this layer of the onion yet. But you will. And eventually, you’ll work your way out to the next peel and find a greater and more profound understanding of why and how our world works.

“And that is my onion theory.”

“You’re saying there’s a lot more for us to learn,” Virge said with a thoughtful frown.

“I’m saying there’s a lot more for *all* of us to learn. Myself included.”

“And tonight we fill the others in on the Lady Selina’s telum.”

“Yes, we don’t want to jump too far ahead of what they can comfortably absorb. People move through the onion in layers because skipping them tends to bring on madness and insanity. We’ve got enough problems without throwing that into the mix.”

“Ain’t that the damn truth. Sounds like the others are starting to arrive. I’d recognize the sound of Misty’s hotrod anywhere.”

“It is rather distinctive, isn’t it?” Walter asked, following the younger man back into the house.

“Maybe you should tell them about your onion theory?” Virge suggested.

“Perhaps another night. Tonight, we’ll just stick to Selina’s Telum.”