

Strengths

“Well, I am so very glad that’s over,” I declared, gratefully sitting down behind one of my many desks. A desk located back in one of any number of my offices. It was good to finally be back.

“It’s good to be home,” Miranda agreed, mirroring my thoughts as she closed the door behind her before walking to the chair across from me and sitting down. “It’s even better to be home again after such a complete victory.”

“Indeed, the whole Houston campaign went very well. Part of the cost was very high though. Painfully high. I’m going to miss Graham and Kristoff. Already do in fact.”

“They died for a good cause, though. Kristoff died as we would have wished... serving you.”

“True. Poor Graham though. Torn to pieces by werewolves. Not one of the ways I’d choose to go if I had my druthers.”

“Quite,” my friend and assistant of so many years agreed. “On a brighter topic, I was rather impressed by how well the telum worked. I believe yours was the only one to make it through the battle. And he almost killed Bertrand Gallet. Missed his heart by less than an inch. Telum typically do not fair so well against vampire lords and ladies. Witness the quick demise of the one who ran into your brother.”

“True,” I agreed, smiling despite myself. “Granted, Gallet promptly broke his neck and nearly killed him, but that doesn’t diminish the fact it was a most impressive strike.” My smile turned to a frown. “And now he’d hied off to Atlanta. He’ll probably be dead inside a week. Such a waste. Quite a shame really.”

“Do you have another use for him during his remaining lifespan, Selina?” Miranda asked with an artfully raised eyebrow. “I was rather under the impression that we were going to do some rebuilding before we turned an eye towards new acquisitions or settling outstanding debts.”

“Not a use for him now,” I replied thoughtfully. “However, you never know when you might need a good weapon. A weapon you can depend on.”

“Do you believe that’s what Wallace McAlister is?” she asked with a frown. “A good weapon?”

“He has that potential. The telum ritual left us with a strong psychic connection. If I concentrate, I can very faintly feel him even from here. And there’s a lot of distance between Dallas and Atlanta.”

“Indeed there is,” Miranda replied. “You’re growing stronger if you can feel him from so far away.”

“Maybe,” I frowned again. “However, I don’t feel as though I’m keeping pace.”

“How do you mean?”

“Alex,” I replied quietly, trying not to feel jealous of my brother’s strength.

Miranda nodded. “He’s grown a great deal in a short span of time. Or perhaps he’s finally using the strengths that he’s had for years.”

“Tell me what you’re thinking,” I asked curiously as I sensed something more behind her supposition.

“Back in the day when the two of you served Vanessa, Alex and you were of roughly equal strength. Vampirically speaking.” I nodded my agreement hoping her explanation wouldn’t dwell on that most unpleasant time period. “He fled with the stated purpose of becoming strong enough to

free you both from Vanessa's dominance." Once more I nodded.

"After we were freed from Vanessa and Arkusinski, Jack Cosgrove and I had a talk," she continued. "He said that the two of them had gone to Ireland to train. Evidently, despite your brother's numerous personality flaws, he was most serious about his training as well he should have been." I nodded, wondering just what that meant. Miranda felt my question. "It would seem that your brother sought out every supernatural he could find who was acting out of turn. Word of a werewolf rampaging through the countryside, they tracked the beast down and killed it. Rumor about children disappearing, they went to the area and hunted trolls. Vampires killing humans by the wagon load? They showed up. Jack told me about a fight Alex had with a vampire lord in the lord's great hall. Alex and the lord broke both their swords in the first clash of blades. They then proceeded to use and eventually break every weapon within the hall before your brother ended up drinking his blood."

"Your point being that Alex trained quite rigorously in order to increase the strength of his powers?" I asked.

"Exactly," she agreed. "As a curiosity, I later sent a couple of agents to Ireland. They found that during the period Alex and Jack were there, they killed over two hundred supernaturals." I felt my eyebrows raise in surprise.

"So many? And they were all... shall we say... of the darker character aspects?" I asked, because I'd never heard of Alex killing anyone who didn't truly deserve to die. Not since I'd met him, anyway. Still, for them to have ended so many lives, it was hard to believe so many were bad enough to deserve death for punishment. Then again, thinking over the vampires and humans I'd met through the years, maybe it wasn't so hard to imagine after all.

"That's what my agents reported to me. A small pack of werewolves who were slaughtering their way across the land they killed in a single great melee. A den of three trolls. The entire court of a lesser vampire lord. His... actually, I believe it would be more accurate to say 'their' training was most... aggressive."

"Why didn't you tell me about this before?" I asked.

"I rather assumed that your brother would have mentioned it," she replied. "As I say, it was more a curiosity to me than anything else."

"So, if I want my powers to grow, I should go out and slaughter a couple of hundred supernaturals," I mused aloud to see if I could get a rise out of her.

"That would be one way to hone certain powers," she agreed. Miranda had a warrior's sensibility and never had been very good with the whole humor thing. "However, you have been exercising powers of your own for quite some time now. Powers that are more conducive to running an empire than to gaining one through melee."

"True," I agreed, speaking slowly. "I can exert quite an influence on most. There are few who's will I cannot bend or twist. And I can speak across my bloodline over quite some distance. Witness my ability to sense my telum even from here." Miranda nodded.

"That's precisely my point," she declared. "You each have your own strengths. Your brother's are not necessarily stronger... just different. And that doesn't even bring your hemomantic talents into the picture." True. I had spent a lot of time learning about blood magic. And longer mastering it. Centuries in fact. But it had been worth the time and effort. Witness my success with the telum for instance.

We sat in silence for a while. I casually let my thoughts drift to those of my people. Many of the vampires I'd created over the years lived within my domain. My blood flowed through their

veins. And as my focus sharpened, my concentration followed my blood through their surface thoughts and then on to the thoughts of the vampires they had in turn created. Right now there seemed to be no emergencies, so I allowed my attention to drift back to my conversation with my oldest friend.

“Do you remember meeting Alex in that beach house?” I asked quietly. “Sometime back during the 1950's? I believe it was in Venezuela?”

“Yes,” Miranda replied. “I remember.”

“Alex seemed so... weak. I was surprised, no, I was shocked to see him so weakened.”

“Jack was rather upset as well that he'd fallen into such a... I suppose 'depression' would be the most appropriate word.”

“Yes,” I agreed. “Human depression seemed to cover it pretty well. The horrors perpetrated by the Nazis scarred him badly. My poor brother wasn't ready to see that level of horror. Not again.”

“Again?” Miranda asked. Alex didn't care much for Miranda so he wouldn't have talked about his past much with her. Not that he talked about it much with anyone. And that was such a sticking point with him that Jack wouldn't have spoken about it with my longtime companion either, despite the fact that the two of them had gotten along so well.

“Alex grew up as a warrior,” I told her slowly. Perhaps, if I didn't give too many details, Alex wouldn't be too upset with me later should he find out. Miranda would never speak about it but Alex had a most uncanny way of knowing things he shouldn't. “His uncle was a noble in a small eastern European country. When Alex was only in his teens, his country... country is too strong a word but I suppose it's close enough... his country went to war with their nearest neighbor. It was a long and bloody war. Then, as their war was winding down, a third party invaded hoping to conquer both weakened countries. Alex fought in dozens of battles and hundreds of skirmishes. That's how he caught Vanessa's eye.”

“Yes, I recall hearing her talk about the it,” Miranda nodded. “‘Blood beading and streaming down shining armor in delicious rivulets. Tall, strikingly handsome... a dangerous man with a wild glint in his eyes.’ I believe that was what she told Mary.”

“That sounds right,” I agreed with a sigh. “I don't think Vanessa ever understood that Alex would just as soon have forgotten the part of his past that most excited her.”

“Vanessa has not been the only vampire to feel that way. Many of the older vampires... and no few of the new ones... have the same problem. Her control of her powers was badly skewed,” Miranda stated. “She kept her control too tight and never allowed any feedback. Empathy was a rather foreign concept to her. I doubt that it ever occurred to her to ask what anyone else wanted. Too many vampires have similar problems.”

“Yes,” I breathed, eyes unfocused on memories of a woman who'd long been only dust. A woman I'd once loved like a mother and had hated more than virtually anyone else in existence.

Miranda eventually broke the silence, “Mister Wilde was only a little stronger when I picked him up after Jack's death in Cactus Ridge than he had been in Venezuela. Do you think he'd lost his faith in the god he worships at that time?”

“Alex? Lose faith in God? Never. However, I think he might have lost his faith in man. As I said, the horrors committed by the Nazis upset him badly. What bothered him even more was the fact that the world immediately turned around and began making the same mistakes they had with the Nazis. Mass murdering despots were not only allowed to rise to power, in some cases they were encouraged. Witness Stalin for instance. And the world media services led the people in a call for

peaceful solutions to these ‘problems’. What do mass murderers care for peaceful solutions? The longer they remain in power the more people they send to the ‘peace’ of the grave. That’s the only peace they care for. All these butchers have to do is delay and make false inquiries into their own crimes and that’s enough to pacify the press. For some reason they have come to feel that mass murder and wholesale slaughter is better than war. I accept it for the way humans are now. Alex does not and thus he is hurt by their lack of understanding of the realities of life.

“Or,” I mused aloud, “Perhaps it’s Alex who does not truly understand the reality we live in. I suppose the argument could go either way. Regardless, I think that was at the root of his depression.”

“Yet from his time in Cactus Ridge to Houston,” Miranda began, looking almost thoughtful. “That represented a tremendous change in ability. In Houston, he almost literally hummed with physical power. I have never seen anyone that strong. Powerful enough to cut through stone as though it were paper. I’ve never even heard of trolls doing that.”

“That’s partly because you’ve never heard of trolls using swords,” I told her with a wry smile. “However, your point is quite correct. I suppose married life has suited him.” I guess there was something in my voice or perhaps some emotion bled across the psychic link we shared because she frowned in concern.

“Selina,” she began slowly as I was already regretting the lapse. “Do you truly feel that you need a man... any man... to make you complete?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” I sighed. “Not really... and yet seeing how happy so many married couples are.... I suppose part of it is conditioning. My mother always told me that I’d meet a handsome prince who’d sweep me off my feet. She had no idea what bastards most princes really are,” I said with a fond smile. “She never met anyone of higher station than the mayor of our small town. She’d be amazed at the people I’ve met and the places I’ve been. And despite all of that, she’d still want me to be married. She and Papa were very happy during their time together.

“I suppose in some way I feel like I’ve disappointed her by not marrying,” I explained to my best friend quietly, looking at the bookshelf across the room without really seeing it.

“You’ve met quite a number of men over the years who would have married you in a heartbeat,” she pointed out. Perhaps she had a reason for rehashing all of this, I thought as I fought off a frown and blocked my thoughts from her. If so, she’d better get to her point quickly.

“I’ve met many good men over the years,” I agreed without letting any of my inner annoyance bleed through to the surface. “I’ve loved some of them and some of them have loved me. However, as you well know, I cannot bear to face the eventual erosion of their willpower that inevitably seems to take place. Their eyes turned empty of everything but an unholy desire to please me. I suppose some people would love to have this problem but I do not. I find it abhorrent. And every species, supernatural or otherwise, seems to have the same problem around me. A rather nasty side effect to one of my key strengths. Even most other vampires lose their self determination under a constant bombardment of my power. And it is not a power that I can turn off and on with a flick of a switch. At least not the deeper portion of the talent.”

“Yet there are a few vampires out there who might be strong enough,” she stated quietly. “Your brother’s immunity to that aspect of your power is a rarity... but it is hardly unique.”

“Are you suggesting that if I truly wanted to find someone I could?”

“I think that’s a question best answered by you,” she replied softly. This particular point drew blood. And she was right. As often as I’d played matchmaker, I knew that if you looked long and hard enough, you could find the perfect match for someone. Perhaps even myself. However, few

men matched up very well to a woman as powerful as myself. Especially when you added in the need for a will of iron.

And the failures were so disappointing... the hurt ran so deep....

I sighed and shook my head. "I'm not sure my life can stand another complication at this point. Successful as it was, cleanup after Houston it going to take a while."

"Quite true," Miranda agreed, knowing I was making an excuse and not calling me on it. She'd drawn her blood with her point. That was enough for her and she began listing off some of the myriad things we needed to attend to in the coming months. I gave an internal sigh. Being honest with myself, I knew that Miranda had never intended to hurt me. Some of my feelings I didn't deal with very well. Likely never would.

Miranda had stopped when she realized I was no longer listening. However, rather than chastise me, upon seeing my returned attention, she instead asked, "What were you thinking about doing with the telum? Had he not run off to Atlanta?" The change of topic surprised me a bit.

"I was considering freezing him until I next needed him," I replied.

"Well," she began with a raised eyebrow, "That's an interesting idea. Shall I dispatch a messenger to bring him in?"

"No," I smiled wanly. "He served me well. There's no telling how many of the enemy he killed. Both directly and with his whole werewolf revolution." My smile brightened briefly at the memory of how clever my telum had been. It faded just as quickly as it had arrived. "Perhaps Alex was right about me interfering with people's free will. Here I am hoping to find a prince who'll be immune to my powers of persuasion while at the same time I order people about my business without concern for their wishes or desires." I gave my head a little shake. "However, these things must be done. So, I'll continue seeing that what needs doing gets done. But Wallace, my telum, has earned his peaceful death."

"Did you tell him he has only a few days to live?" Miranda asked.

"No. I didn't want to ruin his last days with worrying over the looming specter of death."

"That's good of you," she said, "But don't ever do the same for me. If I'm going to die, I want to know it."

"You, my friend, are strong enough to handle the foreknowledge of death," I told her quietly. "I don't know about Wallace and I'm not willing to take the chance with him."

Miranda cocked her head to the side a moment before she stood and walked around the desk next to my chair. She gently lifted my chin to look down into my eyes. "Do you worry that I'm going to follow Jack Cosgrove into the grave?" No one else had the uncanny ability to trace down my fears the way she could.

"Yes," I barely managed to whisper.

"I suspected as much," she replied, sitting down on the corner of my desk. "Know this my friend. I feel no need to follow in Jack's footsteps. Perhaps it is because I'm more powerful than Jack or perhaps because I'm weaker. Regardless, I have no desire to end my life. I left my emotions behind a long time ago and I am stronger for it. Jack did not feel the same. However, should such a time come when it become necessary for me to die again, I will tell you. Because you're strong enough to hear it."

"I'm not sure I'll ever be strong enough to hear that," I whispered.

"Do not doubt the depths of your strength for a moment my friend," she told me in her serious, emotionless voice that had become such a fixture in my life it was hard to even imagine it not being there. "Not any of your many strengths." She walked back around the desk and picked back

up with her litany of tasks that needed doing and the degrees of urgency that accompanied each endeavor. One of our first tasks would be to give Wallace a good deal of money and a nice house. Let him concentrate on living his last few days with money to burn and no financial worries. After that, we made a note to arrange for the burial of my soon to be dead telum before beginning detailed discussions about some of the possible ramifications of the upcoming after action tasks.