

~ The Familiar ~

by Rhuarc Black

rh.black@hotmail.co.uk

April 2009

Description: In the dark alleys of the city, a war rages between rival clans, a war born of betrayal. For Kalia, the journey to the city is a duty to her tribe and her clan but as she is attacked quickly after arrival, the war comes to touch her in more ways than one. From the enigmatic human that saves her from her attackers to the raven-haired beauty that is the Ottewalds' heir to the sinister revelation of the Zindramas' plan, Kalia's journey is something she never expected.

Warnings: There are graphic depictions of violence in this story. There is a description of rape in this story but it is not graphic. This story includes loving relationships between all sorts of people, including moments of intimacy but nothing remotely graphic. If you have a problem with that, then it's your problem. There is swearing and bad language in this story.

Disclaimer: None needed. The characters and story are mine.

My sincerest thanks to Pam and Chris for their comments, questions and suggestions.

Chapter 1: Glint in the Dark

Kalia could hear the running feet behind her but did not turn to look. She knew they were after her. The bleeding injury on her shoulder was testimony to their intentions. She ran as fast as she could, but the footsteps were getting closer and closer. She never saw the drain hole that tripped her, sending her flying against a dumpster. Her eyes rose to the waxing moon on the black sky and then darkness descended.

The next thing she knew was the smell of urine mixed with blood. Her own blood but somebody else's urine. She opened her eyes slowly determined to go down fighting. She could not win, but she would fight anyway. The man pissing on her was smiling beatifically, his long canines flashing in the moonlight.

She was on him before he even registered her awakening. She had to grit her teeth against the pain emanating from her injured shoulder at the sudden movement. She pummelled him about the face, feeling bones break under her fist. She felt like crowing but screamed instead as she felt hands grab her. Someone dug at her shoulder. Her scream of pain echoed in the alleys. She fought and thrashed vainly trying to hit and bite her attackers. There were more than one. Strange hands gripped her body.

Someone bit her shoulder just above where the round had gone through her, tearing a chunk of flesh, and making her grunt. Blood flowed freely down her arm to mingle with the sluggish flow of the bullet wound. Her hands were wrenched behind her back in a vice-like grip and a painful blow to her head sent her to her knees.

The one who had been pissing on her came to stand in front of her. His snigger made her anger rise. "See how you like it now, bitch."

Kalia looked up at his smashed face and his brutish features trying to ignore the waves of dizziness that assaulted her at every minute movement of her head. *What sort of idiot turned someone as ugly as that*, a small voice in her head wondered inanely. The sword in his hand flashed in the moonlight and she knew that was the end. She closed her eyes and imagined the moon over the rugged mountains of Transylvania.

The whine of the gunshot sounded obscenely loud in the small alley and Kalia felt blood spray all over her. Her eyes opened just in time to see the man fall at her feet, his face blown away. The body was still falling when the second shot echoed and she felt herself falling backwards dragged down by the grip on her hands. A hoarse scream left her throat as her injured shoulder was dragged backwards.

The grip loosened convulsively and she crawled away swallowing down the nausea that rose in her throat. She was losing too much blood and it was weakening her. Her head swam at every movement but Kalia gritted her teeth in defiance. She got to her knees as quickly as possible. Her eyes scanned the alley desperately for whoever had shot the men. She saw the third man drawing out his sword.

A voice startled her, deep challenging. "Where is she, bloodsucker?"

Kalia looked quickly at the mouth of the alley where the voice was coming from. It was shrouded in shadows. Only the glint of a gun's silvery barrel revealed the presence of her saviour.

The man with the sword spoke in a mocking tone, his eyes searching the shadows at the mouth of the alley. "I enjoyed fucking your woman, trash. She liked it too."

Kalia wondered at the stupidity of the man. *Two of his own are dead and he stands there playing games with their killer. In his place, I would be running away as fast as possible.*

The round's shrill whine reverberated in the closed confines of the alley but the man moved quick as the wind. It was a blink of an eye. One moment he was standing there, the next he was at the mouth of the alley, sword raised high.

A part of her admired the move. *The man is a good soldier, not like the other two idiots.* His gurgled cry echoed underneath the sounds of the city and his sword fell clattering on the cold concrete.

Kalia saw the glint of a blade sticking out of his back and then disappear as it was pulled back out. He fell to his knees as blood gushed out of his mouth. Kalia gasped as the glittering arc of the sword lopped off his head in one smooth stroke.

A patch of shadow was moving towards her, bloody sword in hand. Kalia struggled to her feet and tried to identify the shape coming towards her. She gritted her teeth hard trying to keep the scream of pain from leaving her lips. Her shoulder hurt as if there was a fire on her flesh and her head swam from shock and loss of blood.

Relief battled fear. The simple design on the blade, bathed crimson in the moonlight, identified her saviour as an Ottewald. Still Kalia's heart raced in fear spurred on by the waves of red-hot rage that radiated from the soldier.

Just a few feet away from her, the shadow stopped and carefully sheathed the sword. The voice that addressed her was deep but polite. "There may be more. We'd better get out of here."

Kalia could only nod. The shadow, to her it looked like a short man or a muscular woman of average height, turned abruptly and started walking back to the mouth of the alley. Kalia followed, carefully cradling her arm against her body, every step an agony. "What about the bodies?," she asked breathlessly.

The soldier neither answered nor stopped and Kalia shrugged bringing a sting of pain from her shoulder. Outside the mouth of the alley, she looked dazed at the huge sleek motorcycle. The shadowy soldier turned to her. "There is a safe house nearby. Hold tight and don't bite."

Before Kalia could respond, the shadow climbed on the motorcycle and started the engine. Kalia slowly climbed behind her saviour and put her good arm around the stranger's waist. Her body screamed at the abuse it had suffered even as she swallowed the vomit that tickled at the back of her throat. Kalia bit the inside of her lips tasting blood. *I won't faint. Not now*, she vowed silently.

The engine revved and they were off. As they sped from one alley to the other, her heart thudded as the walls flew past. With every bump on the uneven concrete of the alleys, jolts of pain assaulted her brain.

In the back of Kalia's mind a small voice, the one that always stayed detached, gathered facts for analysis. One was that her saviour was certainly a woman. The smooth curve of breasts swelled under Kalia's hand as she held on for dear life.

The other was what Kalia's nose had been trying to tell her for the last few minutes. The woman was human, not one of the tribe. The spicy smell of vampire imbued her but without the sharper tinge of the bloodied.

The small voice was a beacon of calmness in the churning waters of her mind. The dizziness that assaulted her told her that she was losing the battle with unconsciousness. The steady flow of blood from her shoulder and the insanely fast ride in the narrow alleys were not helping. With

determination born of desperation and pride instilled in her from birth, Kalia tightened her arm around the human's waist even as she kept her eyes stubbornly open.

Time swirled without meaning or measurement as barely lit roads were traversed and sharp turns into more dark alleys were taken. A garage door opened silently as the motorcycle slowed abruptly throwing her into the woman in front of her. The garage was dark as they entered and Kalia barely managed to stop the gasp at the loss of support as the woman killed the engine and dismounted in one smooth motion.

The blinding pain from her shoulder brought a small cry to Kalia's lips as she tried to stay upright on the saddle. Without a word of warning, Kalia felt hands grip her. Something inside her, one of the old voices, protested at the touch.

Kalia had no time or breath to complain as she was lifted from the motorcycle and carried through a wide door at the end of the garage.

The couple of small lights that had turned on just as the motorcycle parked made her eyes water. Kalia did not have the strength to resist and wondered with some alarm how much blood she had lost to feel so detached.

The room she was being carried into was large but almost bare. A table and a narrow bed were small islands of steel in the sea of bare concrete.

The small cataloguing voice in her mind set out the facts but Kalia could only sigh as she was gently placed on the bed. Mutely, unthinkingly, Kalia watched as the woman took off her cape, no longer blending with the shadows. The human was average in height but Kalia still could not see her face.

Broad shoulders and well-muscled arms were clear under her black shirt and black leather vest. Kalia's eyes unthinkingly observed the twin scabbards on the human's back and the twin heavy LAC-shooters on her hips. The woman did not speak as she went to a small cabinet over the sink and opened it.

Kalia watched, her head swimming from pain and loss of blood, as the woman washed her hands quickly but thoroughly. The smell of antiseptic turned Kalia's stomach. She blinked and suddenly blackness washed over her dragging her into oblivion.

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The smell of fresh blood brought Kalia back to her senses and she opened her eyes slowly. Two pills were pressed into her good hand. "Take them. They're for the pain," a deep voice sounded in her ears. The pounding in her temples and the fire in her shoulder made Kalia swallow the two pills dry without protest.

A glass was pressed into her hand. "Drink. It's fresh," the deep voice said. Kalia caught a glimpse of blue eyes as the woman turned away from her.

Without thinking, Kalia brought the glass to her lips savouring the smell of fresh blood and its coppery taste on her tongue. A slight twinge in her shoulder made her look at the neatly sealed wound visible through the old but clean t-shirt. Her arm was strapped to her body with a wide bandage.

A quick appraisal revealed a pair of long trunks too big for her covering her legs. Her nose quickly detected the clean sharp smell of antiseptic and soap wafting from her body, overcome only by the scent of fresh blood in the glass in her hand. *For how long have I been out of it?*

Slowly Kalia tried to move her head but a wave of dizziness stopped her movement. *Probably a concussion*, Kalia thought silently as the dizziness subsided.

She savoured the blood with a small sip hoping to settle her stomach. Drinking slowly, Kalia matched the intricate smell of the blood with the smell of the human woman who was busy with a small electronic handheld on the other side of the room.

Her nose was not deceiving her. The blood was the woman's. Kalia's quick eyes spied the tiny flash of sealant on the woman's wrist.

The woman's voice startled her. It was deep but respectful. "Jo? I think I have your guest. Blond, violet eyes, high cheekbones?"

A slight pause. "Sounds like her. Looks like a scholar to me.." Another pause. "The old garage. Where Thin Stan goes on vacation. He knows where it is... Ok... Yes, I'm coming back too... We got to talk... It's nothing, just a scratch... Ok..."

A longer pause ensued. "Thought better to keep this off the wave... I don't know... I don't know, Jo!" Another pause. "Yeah... I know... No. No. Just keep this on the ground. Just in case... Alright. See you in a bit. You know the codes? No! Don't say them over the line!... Ok... Alright... Ok..."

As the woman put the device back in a pocket of her vest, Kalia spoke carefully. "You are hurt? I can help." *Even with only one hand, I can still press a bandage to a wound*, Kalia said inwardly. The woman turned slowly to face her and Kalia looked her over carefully, blessing the painkiller for the slowly ebbing pain in her head.

The face was drawn, lips pressed together, Kalia guessed in pain, and small beads of sweat dotted the woman's forehead. There was a harsh beauty there and Kalia could see that the harshness was a product of pain and sorrow. Kalia could easily imagine the drawn features softening.

The woman was looking at her with lidded eyes. Her reply was polite but cold. "Thank you. I am fine. You better rest. They will be here soon."

Kalia nodded slowly. She was not one to press humans. The woman had described her correctly.

She was a scholar not a soldier.

She had sharp eyes though and had seen the small tattoos on the woman's hands. The human was somebody's familiar and Kalia would be damned before she touched what belonged to another. Her own familiar, Henry, had been a fine man and a good friend over the years. His loss, two years past, had been devastating.

Since then Kalia had been even more careful with other familiars and this one had an aura of danger around her. Judging from the telephone conversation, Kalia suspected that the woman belonged to this Jo. Kalia had an inkling who Jo might be. *Josephine von Ottewald, Count Hugo's younger daughter*. The familiar's use of the diminutive warned Kalia to keep her distance.

Kalia was not in habit of sleeping with her familiars, though it had happened a few times, but others were and Kalia would certainly not dare intrude in that case. Drinking the familiar's blood uninvited was intrusion enough.

The woman half bowed to her and Kalia felt warmth at the respect accorded her. Past experience told her that things were different in this part of the world, but this one had been polite, if cold, throughout their encounter.

The woman sat carefully on the table and, taking a small leather-bound book and pen from a pocket, quickly started writing. Kalia guessed it to be a journal. She did not know many familiars that kept journals. The old custom had fallen into disuse during her lifetime.

In this day and age, who wrote in the old way, with pen and paper? Kalia wondered silently. The tired vampire sat back against the hard pillow as she thought. *In the old days, such journals were kept when the Master, or Mistress, of the familiar was away.* Kalia shook her head. *Maybe the human liked to keep a journal anyway. Humans were like that at times.*

Time passed slowly, Kalia slowly finishing her glass and the human writing in her journal. Kalia stirred when she heard the garage door open. The woman was already on her feet, the journal disappearing in her vest, and with quick movements put on her cape.

Footsteps sounded and Kalia tensed as she saw the woman's hands disappearing inside her cape and heard the familiar sound of a gun being primed. A female voice sounded from the garage. "Romi?"

The human clearly relaxed unpriming the LAC before answering. "Here. All clear."

Three men entered the room carefully, their eyes trained on the woman, ignoring Kalia on the bed. Kalia watched with interest as the woman slowly raised her hands, empty, in front of her and spoke in a deep voice. "I said all clear, Solei."

One of the men chuckled quietly and said in a humourless voice, "Better safe than sorry. You've been busy tonight, Roms. Seven of the bastards, I hear."

A female voice sounded from the doorway making Kalia turn. "That's enough, Solei."

The woman on the doorway took Kalia's breath away. Her long jet-black hair framed a face like a Michelangelo angel. As the woman turned, Kalia felt drawn into the most luminous green eyes she had ever seen.

The woman's bearing was proud, almost regal and the small voice in Kalia's mind whispered, *Josephine von Ottewald, Hugo von Ottewald's daughter.*

Kalia took a moment to realise she was being spoken to. "Welcome to our fair city, Lady Kalia. I would like to apologise for the ordeal you've been through these past few hours. Let me assure you, nothing like this will be allowed to happen again," Josephine was saying in her regal tones.

Kalia tried to keep her face impassive. "It is of no matter, Lady Josephine. I was timely rescued. Your familiar has been very considerate of my comfort," Kalia said gesturing at the now empty glass on the small bed table.

Josephine glanced first at the glass and then at the familiar, Romi, and Kalia caught the sadness that flashed across her perfect features. Romi was not looking at them, her eyes on the doorway, her face expressionless.

Kalia tried to keep her eyes from widening. *What familiar would not at least glance at her Mistress when paid a compliment?* Yet the woman seemed lost in a world of her own, paying no attention to them. *And why would Josephine be sad that her familiar had saved her?*

Josephine turned quickly to Kalia, her face holding a welcoming smile. "That is very kind of you. Again let me express the clan's apologies. If you would, we can retire to the estate now. It is a lot more comfortable than this small safe house."

Kalia got up fighting the nausea that roiled in her stomach. She felt the strength of new blood in her veins but it took all her long years of training to stop her stomach from rebelling. Josephine gestured politely for her to move and Kalia walked slowly to the door, preceded by one of the men and hearing footsteps behind her.

Her sensitive ears picked up a whisper from the room. "Are you alright, Romi? Do not be upset. She is a guest."

The whispered answer barely reached Kalia's ears. "It's ok, Jo. She was very polite. And don't fuss. It's just a scratch, nothing serious."

Kalia's curiosity pricked immediately. Her ears were extremely sensitive and she was certain that neither Josephine nor the familiar thought they could be overheard.

She could not help but wonder what their relationship was. *The exchange was curious at best. Josephine was the heir designate of the Ottewald clan with both her sister and her brother*

missing. Yet it was the familiar that had clearly taken the lead in their short conversation.

Kalia knew that some familiars dominated their masters but her instincts were pretty certain that Josephine was not someone who liked to be dominated, and Kalia always trusted her instincts.

There were two huge SUVs in the garage now on either side of the motorcycle and a number of men and women waiting. All of them immediately stood at attention and Kalia knew that Josephine had entered the garage.

Josephine's regal tones brought shivers to Kalia. "Lady Kalia, if you would ride with me."

Kalia's answer was even. "You do me honour, Lady Josephine."

Something inside Kalia felt stifled at the title. It all seemed so archaic. She had not been called a Lady for more than a hundred years, and truth to tell she had not liked it then and she did not like it now. Yet the heir to Ottewald seemed to be determined to be as formal as possible.

A woman with short bleached hair opened the door of one of the SUVs bowing politely to her and Kalia gracefully entered followed by Josephine. Before the door closed, Josephine spoke quietly but commandingly. "Cloe, ride the motorcycle. Romi is injured."

The blonde nodded quietly and closed the door carefully. Kalia watched with interest as she quickly appeared on the other side of the car and stopped the familiar from mounting the motorcycle. She could not hear the words exchanged but she saw the stony expression of the familiar as she nodded curtly and walked to the other car.

Kalia was surprised to see the blonde vampire's expression. Her sense was never mistaken in such matters. She looked hard at the back of the familiar and the look of sadness that marred the vampire's face. Something was going on here and Kalia's curiosity almost made her itch.

The SUVs were quickly out of the garage and Kalia saw a large number of other vehicles, SUVs and motorcycles, surrounding them. Josephine's voice was very polite. "Lady Kalia, if I may offer you a drink. Unfortunately nothing as fresh as you had at the safe house but today's harvest nonetheless."

Kalia spoke quickly. "Thank you. I am fine. Please...do call me Kalia."

Josephine smiled at her and Kalia felt her heartbeat quicken. The woman was beautiful. Her voice was warm. "In that case, please call me Josephine...Kalia."

Kalia's next words were very careful. "I am very sorry if I encroached on your territory. I did not know the human was engaged when I accepted the offering."

Josephine glanced away quickly but not before Kalia saw a flash of sorrow in her eyes. Josephine's voice was expressionless. "You are our guest. Any of our familiars would have done the same. Please again accept my apologies for your travail."

Kalia felt her heart clench at the sorrow in those magnificent eyes. It must have been the painkiller that made the words tumbling out of her mouth. "Josephine...I've had my share of familiars over the years. Sometimes they can be difficult. In most cases all they need is a bit of time."

The beautiful woman next to her might be the heir to one of the most powerful clans in the New World, even if that clan was engaged in a bloody war at the moment. Kalia knew that she was young, born just after the beginning of the century.

Romi was probably Josephine's first familiar. A memory of Petra, her own first familiar, rose unbidden in Kalia's mind. *Her father's words had come true in more ways than one. "Prepare for the fight of your life, Princess."*

Josephine turned to look at her and her eyes drilled holes in Kalia. She met Josephine's eyes squarely, letting her face show her sincerity. *The words had been said, nothing to do about it now.*

Josephine took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. Her words were slow. "You are very perceptive. Romi is being difficult but with good reason."

Before Kalia could speak, Josephine continued. "Romi does not belong to me. She belongs to Zoe, my sister."

Realisation dawned on Kalia and her mind immediately made the connections, the vampire's snigger in the alley, the care of the men when they entered the safe house, Josephine's sadness and concern, the pity of the blonde vampire and most of all the harshness and pain in the familiar's face.

"I am very sorry. I should have realised. One of the attackers hinted at that..." Kalia said quickly, the tone of her voice odd, it took a moment for her to recognise it, sadness.

Most familiars disliked being away from their vampires for any length of time. *To know that your vampire was in the hands of a rival clan in the middle of a war...* Kalia could not even imagine what the poor woman must be going through.

Josephine's question was immediate, concern colouring her voice. "What did he say?"

Kalia looked at her and saw the sincerity of her worry. *Often siblings in powerful clans hated each other but Josephine looked genuinely concerned for her sister.* Kalia frowned. *What could she say? What the man had said was not something she cared to repeat.*

Josephine's voice was low and pained. "Please...Kalia. Whatever it is, it is better if we know."

Kalia's answer was slow as she desperately tried to find the words. "It was invective mostly. An insult nothing more, I am sure." The words sounded weak in her own ears and they certainly did

not satisfy Josephine.

A glimmer of power illumined green eyes as the Ottewald heir commanded. "His exact words, please, Kalia."

Kalia breathed to buy herself time and her voice was barely audible. "He said...he said he enjoyed fucking her... and that she liked it." She did not dare look at Josephine after her words and looked instead outside the window at the city lights rushing by.

Josephine's voice was cold and menacing. "A truth and a lie, as usual. Nothing useful though. Romi killed him?"

Kalia nodded. "She cut his head off."

"Good enough." Josephine growled.

The rest of the ride to the huge Ottewald estate was silent. Kalia was deep in thought and feeling the seething rage enveloping the woman next to her. *The news had rocked the world, at least the underground world of vampires.*

An ordinary meeting between clans to discuss issues of territory under a peace agreement verified by the Council had gone terribly wrong. The Ottewalds had been hit hard, their clan leader wounded, two of his children kidnapped. Kalia knew that Josephine's sister, Zoe, had been the heir designate until that moment.

It was an ingenious strike. By law and custom such meetings were inviolate and under the protection of the Council. The rival clan had hoped to eliminate the leader of the Ottewald clan and his heirs in one stroke. Their plan had not succeeded as they had hoped. Hugo, the patriarch, had survived and so had Josephine. Kalia could still not contain the shock she had felt two months ago when the news had reached her lair, deep in the Transylvanian mountains.

Clan wars were common, although less so this past half-century than earlier, but an ambush of that sort under a peace flag was a crime under every law. Not to mention the ignominy of abducting the heirs of a clan. Anger had swept through the clans and offers of support to the Ottewalds had come from all over the world. It was a strong clan and had politely but firmly refused all help. Kalia knew that the ensuing war was going in the Ottewalds' favour. They had already killed two of the heirs designate of the Zindramas.

Yet the kidnapped children of the patriarch were still missing. Kalia had heard rumours of torture but had not believed them. No clan, even one as treacherous as the Zindramas, would dare. That belief was shaken now. It was clear that torture and worse had been part of the agenda.

Her thoughts moved between the beautiful woman beside her and the blue-eyed familiar that had saved her life. Josephine's rage was clear in her controlled but rapid breathing and Kalia's heart clenched. Kalia clenched her hands to stop her instinctive reaction to lean over and hug the

younger woman.

Bloody drugs always made her lose her focus. Kalia was a stranger here and the woman next to her was the heir to a clan. She wrenched her thoughts from Josephine to the familiar. Now Kalia could understand the challenging tone of Romi's question to the Zindramas soldier. Whatever he said, it would not be good. Still Kalia could understand the need to know.

The journal also made sense now. With her Mistress away and in danger, the journal was a small and fragile connection, but a connection nonetheless.

The SUV stopped abruptly startling Kalia out of her thoughts. She looked outside the window at the huge house. The Ottewald mansion was incredibly large and Kalia could see only part of it, the grounds surrounding it stretching as far as the eye could see under the moonlight.

A young red haired human opened the door for Kalia and she quickly got out. Josephine got out of the other side of the black SUV and came round to Kalia. "Let us go inside, Kalia. We have a fully qualified hospital and excellent doctors."

Kalia started to demure. She felt tired. All she wanted was to sleep, not to have a load of doctors poke at her like a specimen.

But Josephine's strong tones stopped her. "Cloe, would you escort her to Sergei, please?"

Kalia looked at the young vampire in surprise only to realise that Josephine was looking beyond her. Kalia turned, her curiosity piqued despite her slowly returning headache to see the small blonde guiding a tired looking familiar towards the door.

Kalia could not help but notice the careful distance Cloe was keeping from the familiar, her hand hovering an inch or two away from Romi's elbow as blue eyes looked at her. Kalia could see clearly the drawn features and the dark circles under the woman's eyes. Without a word she passed next to Kalia and entered the house.

The small sigh next to her made Kalia turn but only a welcoming smile met her eyes. The beautiful Josephine was waiting for her answer. It must have been the drugs, for Kalia could not explain it otherwise, that made the words come out of her mouth. "What is going to happen to her?"

The flash of surprise in Josephine's eyes was clear to Kalia and for a moment it seemed like the Ottewald heir would not answer. Josephine's voice was low and tired. "Cloe will make certain that Romi goes to Sergei, our head doctor. Hopefully it won't be anything too serious."

Kalia nodded slowly. "She seemed ok before."

Josephine's welcome mask had been put on once again and her words were carefully cheerful. "Of course. Romi is very strong. If you would follow me, Kalia?"

Kalia could do no more than follow. Even as the headache pounded her brain like a hammer, whatever analgesic the the familiar had given her seemed to have dissipated during the ride.

She barely registered the carpeted corridors and the paintings on the walls. She did not even realise when the scenery changed from the carpeted corridors of the mansion to the tiled corridors of the hospital wing. All her concentration was devoted to her footing, making certain that she did not stumble or sway. Kalia after all had an image to maintain, not an easy thing as herds of elephants stampeded behind her eyes.

"What have we here?" The loud voice made Kalia look at the source to see a woman in a white overcoat stand in front of her. Kalia's eyes moved around the room. It seemed like any clinic room she had seen.

Before Kalia could open her mouth, Josephine spoke. "Catherine, this is Lady Kalia Dracula. She has been hurt."

Kalia immediately saw the vampire's eyes widen at the mention of her name, a reaction she had come to expect. "My apologies, Lady," the doctor stammered out.

Kalia wanted to smile, make the woman feel comfortable, but the best she could manage was a twitch of her lips.

Sure hands took Kalia's wrist, checking her pulse in moments before moving to the cooling strip still around her temples. "Who did this?" Catherine asked quietly even as she unwound the loose material.

"Romi," Josephine answered quickly and Kalia was relieved to see the approving nod of the doctor.

The woman was not young. The subtle signs were there for all to see, a bit of grey in her hair, a few lines around her eyes, and she seemed experienced. Gentle hands moved about Kalia's head finding the lump near her forehead. At the sudden poke Kalia almost yelped.

The hands retreated immediately and a sudden light shone in Kalia's eyes making her blink. "Please look at the light, Lady Kalia," the doctor's velvety voice instructed.

Kalia squinted a bit but followed the light as best as she could. "Are you injured anywhere else, Lady?" the doctor asked as soon as she finished.

"My shoulder," Kalia answered, trying to keep her voice steady, even as she tried to tug the t-shirt down. Warm hands deftly tugged down the garment and Kalia could see the doctor's eyes narrow at the neatly sealed wounds. Again relief washed through her at the approving nod.

The doctor must have noticed because her voice was soothing. "Romi is good with wounds. She did a good job on you, Lady. There will barely be a scar."

Kalia wanted to laugh but settled for smiling. *Scarring was the least of her worries. She walked out of that alley alive and scars were a small price to pay for that*

A loud commotion made all three women turn to the door. Kalia did not need the extra sensitivity of her hearing to catch the growled words. "Let me be, Cloe. The night is not over yet." Josephine was already opening the door and Kalia could see the stiffness of her shoulders.

Josephine's clear regal tones spoke in low volume. "Romi, you need to rest."

As the door was closing, Kalia heard the reply. "A major breach and you want me to rest?" The anger in the deep voice was clear and a part of her rebelled at the lack of respect from human to vampire.

Yet another part of her, the part that remained detached and calm always, was nodding in support of one blue-eyed familiar. *The security detail that was waiting for her at the airport to escort her to the Ottewald mansion had been greater than Kalia expected. Yet the attack as they reached the city had been brutal and well-executed.*

It had been only the self-sacrifice of the two brown-haired vampires, the twins, that had saved her life as they stayed behind to give her time to escape. A twinge of grief reminded Kalia to ask for their names. Their faces would live in her memory but she wanted to know their names so that they would not be forgotten.

The doctor's velvet voice made her turn back to the present. "Lady." Kalia turned violet eyes to the doctor. "You have a concussion and you have lost a lot of blood. The arm will take a few nights to heal but it will be fully functional."

Kalia nodded to the doctor carefully. The headache was beginning to take its toll and she could feel her eyelids closing. The tiny sting on her arm barely registered but the doctor's voice did. "Sleep, Lady. You will be better in the night."

Somehow it seemed like it was Henry that was speaking. *"Sleep, Kali. All will be better in the night."* Part of her wanted to fight, to keep the last vestiges of wakefulness but neither her mind nor her body obeyed as the blanketing darkness descended.

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First came sound, muffled sobbing valiantly kept almost inaudible. Feeling came after, wetness falling, a drop of liquid on her forehead slowly descending to her temple. Then a touch, hand trembling, a feather caress on her cheek. *Baby?* Muddled thought but no voice.

Every muscle felt tight and her throat was the worst of it all. Something clamoured in the distance...pain. *Pain? An accident? Where am I? Baby!* Crusted eyelids opened, ripping pain that brought a sound between a sob and a growl. Nothing in focus but a pair of green eyes, tear-filled, young eyes.

Slowly the rest of the world became more than shadow. Cold grey concrete, dangling chains, a flurry of dark stains. The tear-streaked face above her slowly took shape. The chiselled features, the slight darkening at the chin, the patrician nose.

Zeno... Memory cleared, pain rippled in waves in its wake. Tortured breath rasped, voice cracked. "No worries, boy." Pain rose seeking to drag her back down into the merciful darkness.

Teeth clenched together forcing it all away. No time for indulgence now. Voice harsh. "No tears, Zee. They must not see."

A slight nod, grimy hands dashing the tears away, full mouth becoming a thin line.

Sensitive ears caught the harsh sound of booted feet stopping outside the door. Sharp teeth clamped down on bleeding lips. Strong hands flexed, scarred back arched, knees struggled to move.

A hushed grunt escaped parched lips as she climbed to her feet. Pain rippled through a tortured body. Dark blood fell to the concrete. Teeth clenched harder, shoulders were thrown back, head rose.

The grating sound as the door opened, the black-haired man smiled as he saw her. Grey flashed in a lone eye, bloodshot. Fists clenched, muscles bunched. Another day had started.

Chapter 2: Donuts on the Ceiling

The silence grated, Josephine almost wished for someone to shout, to rage, to say something, anything. Looking at the others she took her impulsive wish back. *Any words now would probably lead to bloodshed.*

Ari was sitting with his large hands on his lap, waiting patiently for whatever orders would be given. Josephine almost sighed. *The huge bear of a man could outwait the mountains, but just once she wished he would take some initiative.*

Ari was not at fault, not truly. Certainly he had not asked for the responsibility. It had been merely luck that everyone else had been killed leaving him senior.

This time the sigh did escape Josephine's lips, not that they noticed. Once more, her eyes surveyed the silent tableau around her, this time slipping over Ari to look at the two other people in the room.

Her father, regal as always, sitting on his tall chair, the flash of ice in his grey eyes the only sign of his anger.

Across from him, Romi stood, shoulders thrown back, her blue eyes shining with rage. Josephine's eyes tracked to the small tattoos on the familiar's hands. Zoe's double barbed circles stood out. Next to them, the Ottewald's ornate shield proclaimed the human whose skin it tinted a member of the clan, a Gyn.

Josephine sighed again and then slowly took a deep breath before speaking. "Romi, please sit down," she said quietly trying to make her voice as deep as possible. Blue eyes turned a fraction towards her and Josephine barely suppressed a smile at the immediate reaction.

The light tenor that answered her made her stomach clench. The familiar sounded so tired. "Time for me to be gone, Jo. The kids'll be out by now." Josephine dared not think it. *Was it tiredness or despair that coloured Romi's voice?*

The deep voice almost made her jump. "No outings this day, Gyn."

Blue eyes flashed fire once more and Josephine for a moment had to wonder whether her father was angering the familiar on purpose this night.

"Sire." The word was almost a challenge from the familiar's lips as she saluted and turned to leave, boots thudding even on the soft carpet.

Josephine waited a few moments until the heavy doors were closed before speaking. "Father..."

The words died in her mouth as grey eyes turned to her, the pain in them naked for the world to see. Count Hugo's words were grave. "Sergei was rather pointed earlier."

Even Ari reacted at the statement, sitting forward, his mouth working. Josephine could not stop the words from leaving her mouth. "What? What is wrong, Papa?"

The Count looked at his younger daughter thoughtfully and Josephine feared he would not answer. *No matter, Sergei should still be in the infirmary.* Her feet were propelling her upwards without any conscious thought.

"The sealant is crumbling, Jo. The human needs to rest," the Count said even as Josephine was stepping toward the door. Josephine looked at her father without speaking. *What was there to say?*

The words that should be spoken would never be. *The human... even the sound of those words made the blood rise to her face.* Josephine turned to leave. *There was nothing she could say that would not lead to a fight.*

The Count's next words were barely audible. "She is human, my daughter. It is so easy to forget it..."

The depth in her father's voice rocked her and she turned to look at the whipcord thin man. The

lines on his face looked deeper than ever and the soft light from the lamps made his skin seem ashen. But it was the pain in his grey eyes that arrested her gaze. Josephine wanted to look away, not to see the pain in her father's eyes.

"Ah...Josephine. It is not easy to face your sins, little princess," he said his voice low, resonating with feeling. Josephine could only look at him, her mind numb.

"Go to the Gyn, Jo. Make sure she rests," Count Hugo said quietly, turning his face away from his daughter, his eyes coming to rest on the row of small frames sitting on the mantelpiece.

Josephine blinked rapidly to keep the tears from falling as she walked to the door. As soon as the heavy wood had closed behind her, she closed her eyes trying to will the tears down. *Now is not the time, woman, not with the guards looking on, not with work still to be done this day.*

With a deep breath, the raven-haired vampire opened her eyes and walked down the corridor, nodding at the guards with a small smile. They nodded back as she passed. Josephine never saw the looks they exchanged or Redoe's sad smile. Her thoughts, as always these days, went back to Zoe.

If only she had not insisted that night. Her mind's eye conjured the images once again. They stayed with her all night. Not even the days were free of them. They haunted her dreams.

Grey eyes darkening with anger and suspicion. "For fuck's sake, Jo! You've known for months. Why tonight? Of all nights, tonight!"

The rehearsed speech, the rehearsed reasons, the rehearsed arguments, they all chased each other in the corridors of her mind. The pain welled anew in her heart, her lungs burned cutting her breath short.

The soft steps, the slight creak of the door, the light tenor with the hint of a smile. "Easy, Falcon. I can hear you from outside. Hey, Jo."

The light touch, blue eyes smiling as they look up. Grey steel softening, hands that can crush stone tousling sweat-slicked hair. "Go shower, you clown."

The low laugh. "Be nice, oh harsh taskmaster."

Bile rose and Josephine swallowed convulsively, as she nodded mechanically to those she walked past.

Grey eyes watch as the door closes, the slightest hint of a smile arching full lips. A hint that disappears as Zoe turns. "As you wish, little sister. I'll tell father. But, Jo...don't do this again...ever."

Josephine's steps were muffled on the thick carpet as she nodded to Alden, standing guard on the landing. He nodded back. His face was shadowed with worry even as his eyes glanced once at the double doors at the end of the corridor.

There was movement in the shadowy alcove by the doors. Josephine could make out Tsan sitting on the floor, the hushed scratching of his whetstone echoing slightly. She stood just before the doors, only for a second. *Try to get a grip, woman.*

A deep voice echoed in her memory.

The door is closing behind her. Josephine can feel the smile on her face. Her smile deepens at the overheard words just before the door clicks shut. "Katrina, I wish to cancel tomorrow. Something came up. Save the cake though, if you can for when we come back."

Josephine opened the door, as always these days left unlocked, the soft music could be heard clearly. She looked around at the simple anteroom, three doors, two closed, one left slightly open. For more than two months, Josephine has not seen any of the two doors open. Sometimes she wondered. *Did Romi even step into those rooms any more?*

The slightly open door on the right caught her attention. The soft notes came from inside and she could hear a slight scratch-like sound. Josephine hesitated for a second before knocking. The scratching stopped, followed by the rustling of cloth and then soft steps on the carpet.

The door opened abruptly and Romi stood there, cloaked, her eyes lidded. "What is wrong, Jo?" Romi asked quickly.

Josephine shook her head. "Can I come in, Romi?"

The familiar's nod was curt as she backed away from the door. Josephine slowly stepped inside the room. It looked no different than it did yesterday.

Books lined the walls. Maps were on the large table in the corner, and a single blanket was on the couch. Romi walked to the sunken den before turning to look at her. "Would you like something to drink, Jo?"

Josephine shook her head. Sometimes she wanted to scream. Every day the words were the same. She wondered what would happen if she answered yes once. "Take it off, Romi," she said quietly.

Blue eyes met hers, impassive, shadowed from within. "Let it be, Jo."

Josephine could feel the burning anger building in her gut. She had to grind her teeth together to keep the words from escaping. Finally Josephine breathed out and her voice was quiet once again. "The sealant is crumbling. You need to rest, Romi. You are not invincible." *Please, just speak to me. For once just speak to me.*

But again tonight the blue eyes blinked slowly and Romi turned without a word. Josephine could only watch as the familiar walked to the desk and sat down heavily, her hands picking up a map of the city. There were marks all over the map, dots and squares. Josephine did not know what they meant, but they had something to do with the search.

"Romi, you must sleep," Josephine said trying to make her voice strong commanding. She could manage it with everyone else but with Romi it never seemed to work. Then again, the familiar had been ignoring all orders. Only Count Hugo had any hope of being obeyed. She could only wonder how many more days would pass before Romi started ignoring him as well. *There would be no answer, as there had been no answer every time.*

Shoulders slumped she turned to leave. Just as she reached the door the whisper reached her. "Do you think she sleeps now?"

Josephine could not answer. There was no answer she could give. If there were weakness in the tenor, a tremor, even an honest question, she would have found something to say. But Romi's voice was cold, a question expecting no answer, merely a reminder.

Josephine could hear the rustling of paper as she closed the door softly. Her eyes avoided Alden's she passed next to him but she could not help but hear his soft sigh. They were always there when Romi was in the house, Alden and Tsan, Cloe and Matias, Kelso and Shie, or some of the other scouts.

They never passed the double doors. They let a bare handful of people reach them. Josephine had asked Shie once about providing extras from the units, if nothing else so that they could get a good day's sleep. Shie, polite as always, had refused point-blank. Josephine could understand. They could not trust anyone else with this duty.

She wanted to laugh at the irony of it all. Two months ago, anyone would have laughed in scorn. *A human leading the Ottewald in battle...* Josephine shook her head in wonder. Vampires who never had a good word for the familiar now followed her short terse orders over the wave without a word in protest and those who had accepted her implicitly as one of them from the beginning stood guard outside her door.

And the greatest irony of all, if anyone, anyone at all, had the guts to take up the responsibility, they would be certain to have the immediate support of the blue-eyed familiar.

The harsh light snapped Josephine out of her thoughts. Her steps unknowingly had carried her to the deep wings, to the infirmary. Josephine looked around, immediately recognising the door her feet have brought her to. Without thinking, her hand opened the door and she stepped inside the small suite.

Green eyes looked at the sleeping form on the bed, blonde hair framing a strong beautiful face. Josephine shook her head angrily. *What am I doing here? That's right, Jo. It isn't enough the poor woman was attacked under our protection. Now you have to come and wake her up in the middle of the fucking day.*

With another shake of her head, Josephine stepped back, her hand finding the door handle instinctively. Without looking up, Josephine turned and walked out closing the door quietly. She never saw the violet eyes that watched her silent exit.

Josephine looked down the white-tiled corridor, at this time of day it was deserted. She could see shadows playing at the nurses' station further along and knew someone was there. The dull thudding on the back of her head revealed her body's insistent message. *Time to go to sleep, the night was long, too long.*

Josephine exhaled quickly, the breath almost a sigh, as she started moving down the corridor to the steps that would bring her to the upper levels and her rooms. Her nod to the nurses was delivered with exact precision, but even a blind man could see that her mind was far away. Josephine hated these corridors, this part of the residence, the white tiles, the smell of disinfectant, the echoes of her steps on the bare floor.

In her mind's eye she was always expecting to see the gurney carrying her father's bloody form turn the corner, Sergei running at its side, giving orders to the nurses. It had been chaos.

The doors of the surgery close with a resounding bang. Josephine's breathing is laboured and the bloodstains on the white-tiled floor make her stomach roil. *What had happened? How could this happen?*

Josephine can feel the coldness of the wall on her back as she stands against it. Her eyes look unseeing at the double doors. She can hear the people around her, the soldiers grunting in pain as nurses and orderlies wheel them down the corridor. Nothing registers through the shock.

It looks like a vid, not real life. The blood is too red, the tiles too white, the light too bright.

The loud angry voice snaps Josephine out of the mire of her mind. "Damn you, Ari. Let me go! She is still back there."

Josephine turns quickly, her eyes zeroing on the large bear of a man struggling to hold what looks like an apparition or some child's monster nightmare. She forces her legs to move. They are heavy as if someone had put lead weights on them, or a ball and chain.

As Josephine moves, she can hear the deep tenor, low and rumbling over the sounds of struggle. "You are hurt, you bloody idiot. You can't go anywhere now. Fuck!"

The images seem disconnected. Josephine watches almost in slow motion the thunderous blow that connects with Ari's jaw sending him backwards against the wall. The form stumbling towards her resembles nothing human, blood completely covering it, dripping on the floor.

Clothes shredded, gaping wounds, dark red flesh a lighter shade against the black garment. It never sees the blow that fells it as Ari's fist connects with the back of its head. As it falls to the floor, Josephine can see the lightning movement as the large vampire breaks its fall, scooping it up on trunk-like arms.

Josephine can only watch, as to a theatre production, Ari walking past her, only then recognising the bloodied form in his arms. The pain makes her hand flail out to hold on the wall. *What had happened? Where was Zoe? Oh, Selene, do not let her die...*

Josephine's steps had taken her with an unflinching precision, like an internal map, to her destination. Not the one in her mind, certainly not the one in her heart, merely the one to which they always bring her to.

Josephine nodded at the guards as her hand found the handle. After the guards' answering nods, she stepped inside. The office they call it. The office she calls it as well. No one had yet dared to call it her office. Most did it in fear of her father, loath to show that in their innermost minds they had already given them up for dead.

But some, those who have been inside the room, did it because they had seen it. It was not her office and Josephine had claimed it in no way. There were no personal touches to betray her occupancy. No folder placed differently, no pens that could be recognised as hers on the large mahogany desk, even the d-stills had not been touched in any way.

Josephine sat on the welcoming leather chair behind the desk. Her eyes roamed the surface only to still upon the open folder in front of her.

Ah... who would have thought how much food two thousand people need? Certainly not as much as this? We are vampires for fuck's sake! Why do we need one hundred and twenty-three pounds of donuts?

The deep tenor that her memory never failed to conjure, the same that ripped her heart out, sounded as if Zoe were there by her side. "Check something different every day. Keep them on their toes. You cannot do everything but they must never know... or suspect."

With a sigh, Josephine scanned down the lines. *Twenty-six pounds of peanut-butter donuts?* Without taking her eyes off the list of foodstuffs, she wrote down on her notebook. "*Check kitchen garbage. Donuts?*" Josephine absently registered the tiny beep that showed that the entry had been recorded, even as her eyes moved further down the document.

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Bumps on the ceiling. Heavy grunts echoing. Harsh movement inside. Zeno's chattering teeth. Pain, oh so much pain. Back on fire, ribs sending rippling waves through her with every thrust, the slowly cooling blood pooling. Senses that cannot be shut down.

Eyes on the ceiling, stubbornly open. *Never close them. That is a victory they will not have.*

The soft almost inaudible voice of confession, only in her mind she knows. *No. It's ok. I don't mind. It was a long time ago. I don't know how the others did it. I just thought of other things. Things that don't matter. Donuts mainly. Now I can't even look at the little fuckers but what the hell... you gotta survive...*

Like before, like yesterday and the day before that and the day before that and the day before and... she conjured the image of a donut among the bumps on the ceiling, delicately deliberately adding to it texture, smell, taste...

^^

The double doors opened, the tiny sound drew his eyes. Alden stood tall as the familiar form passed the doorstep. He did not move, his mouth set in a thin line. The careful strides on the carpeted corridor, the black cloak swirling darkness, the blue impassive eyes.

Alden knew them so well. He had been seeing them for so long, that he could barely remember the times when it was not so. *How can days seem like years, even as they pass quicker than a sword's arc in the moonlight?* Alden stepped away from the wall as she neared. *Stay here today. Just for today, please, stay here. What if they find you as you roam in the daylight? What will I tell her then?*

Alden's thoughts churned in the familiar litany, the one that has failed to work so completely. Yet his face retained its stoic mask. He fell in step with her without a word as she passed by him. *What can I tell you? What words will make you stop this insanity? Cloe, Love, where are you, Baby? To you she listens...sometimes.*

Alden cleared his throat carefully. "Save it, Alden. I ain't going out today." The light tenor sounded loud in his ears. It was the acoustics of the corridor, as he well knew. The voice was barely audible. *Thank the gods!* He nodded without speaking.

Alden followed carefully, merely a step to the side. His covert glances made his lips thin further. Her stride was heavy, an arm held carefully by her side. Alden could see the edges of the freshly sealed wound near her temple.

Why did you have to go out alone? Why not come back and get us? Seven? Why...why even try against such odds? Why do you use the light to escape? The questions remained in his mind. I cannot ask you, can I, Roms? You would not answer even if I did. I bet you would not even look my way.

His lover's words a week past flitted in his mind.

"I don't know, Baby. I cannot understand her. It is not the killing. Or the chances she takes. Sometimes it feels like...fuck! I...she is looking for a trail, like something draws her. I just don't know, Al."

I cannot understand either, Babe. What drives you, human? What is this shadow you trail? Alden snuck a glance studying the hewn profile. He could see the new lines that had appeared seemingly overnight. *You still look young though, Roms. As young as the first night you walked these corridors. Do you remember? I was the first one to greet you, the first person she introduced you to.*

Alden was sitting just outside the front doors of the mansion with the others. Zoe had called. They would be there within the hour. It was no big deal, not really, but he wanted to see how Jo was. First times on the hunt were never easy. Not that Jo would have to do it again. It was just a thing to be done. Just another test to be passed.

For them all, the soldiers of the same generation as her, Josephine was precious and Alden, as many others, was waiting outside tonight. Not that he worried, with Zoe at her side nothing bad would befall Jo. As the large SUV came into view, Alden got up hearing the rustling of cloth and leather as the others stirred.

Stopping just in front of the entrance, he could just make out Zoe at the driver's seat through the stained windows. Alden smiled when the door opened and Jo came out. She was beautiful as always. Even the slight circles under her eyes could not detract from her beauty. He hung back as the others surged forward.

There would be time to talk later. His shoulders itched at the thought of being in the press of so many people, as Jo was quickly ushered inside by the throng. Instead he stepped towards the front of the car, where Zoe was climbing out. Alden watched with a small smile as the six-foot-seven frame slowly got out of the car, stretching quietly.

It had been a long ride. The rogue had led them on a merry chase for the better part of a month. Alden looked at the chiselled features of the woman he called both leader and friend and had to smile. He had missed her. They all had.

Just then, he saw the shadow of movement from inside the car but before he could see who else was there, Zoe closed the door. Alden tried to keep his face expressionless. It was not easy. He had never been good at keeping his emotions hidden.

Yet something told him that he had to try, and it was not merely the jibes of his fellows. Alden watched unmoving as Zoe moved with easy steps to the other side of the car and opened the door with care. As she extended her hand towards the person inside, he let a small smile grace his lips.

Alden had watched her play this dance so many times over the years. Hell, he was not ashamed to admit, that he had copied quite a few of the moves himself. All he could wonder was how beautiful the woman would be. After all, they all were, the butterflies that flitted around the Ottewald heir.

Flitted but never alighted, a small voice whispered in his mind. Alden almost shrugged, stilling the movement at the last moment. *That's the way of the world, innit?*

His jaw fell when Zoe closed the door and Alden could see the smaller figure beside her. *A man? Zoe with a man? And a boy at that!* Alden's mind reeled and once again all control over his expression failed.

He was still staring slack-jawed as Zoe came to stand in front of him. "You're gonna catch flies, Alden." Her deep voice made him flinch.

As he clamped his mouth shut and tried, unsuccessfully, to smooth his features, she was speaking again. "Get over it, Al. There is someone I want you to meet."

Alden could only watch as she turned slightly, her hand opening in invitation. Without warning, Alden found himself pinned by a pair of impassive electric blue eyes. He shivered at the cold challenge in them.

Alden always wondered how he managed to get his hand to move, to extend in greeting, how his mouth worked to form words. "Nice to meet you. I'm Alden Mateus."

The soft tenor that answered him was no more surprising than the strength of the hand that clasped his. "Honour, Alden Mateus. People called me Booker." The greeting set off the alarms in Alden's head. *Where had he heard the peculiar phrasing before?*

Alden took a step back and looked at the person in front of him up and down, his eyes coming to rest in the hand that still held his. Strong tan hand, if small, but it was the tattoo on the back that made his eyes widen, the black long sword nestled in a drop of blood.

Zoe's voice sounded amused. "B is a Slayer. And a damn good one. She was the one to nail that asshole."

The words brought a wave of relief over him. *A woman! Thank the moon. And the Slayer that*

killed that idiot. That's why she is here, for the reward.

Zoe's next words made him flush in embarrassment. "He thought you were a man, B."

Feeling the flames on his cheeks, Alden raised his eyes to apologise, only to find two blue eyes under raised eyebrows looking at him.

The soft tenor was even. "It's fine. It happens," the woman said as she gently but firmly disengaged her hand from his.

Alden could see the signs now, the smooth jaw, the slight slant to the features. Still he was certain that it happened more than often. Then again, he could understand. *Slaying was a hard job.*

Alden opened his mouth to speak but the words died before sound emerged as Zoe put an arm around the human's shoulders and her grey eyes took on a look he had never thought to see in them.

Alden forced a smile to his face and nodded, trying not to show his shock this time, before turning towards the wide doors. *Fuck, fuck and thrice fuck! Oh, Zoe, what have you done?*

The echoing sound of his own steps on concrete pulled Alden out of the reverie. He knew where they were headed now. *I should have known. Where else would you be going?* Their steps were loud in the corridor. There was no one around, not now in the middle of the day.

Alden opened the door and watched her enter. She did not look at him, her movements like those of an automaton as she went to the room reserved for the scouts. He followed silently entering the familiar space. Blue eyes looked at him in question. He nodded in acquiescence. *You should not be doing this. You can barely take that infernal cloak off. How will you fight?*

Alden removed his own shirt mechanically as his eyes took in the form before him. Without the cloak, the damage was obvious to the eye, the off-white colour of the sealant, the still pink scars, the corded muscles, the ribcage showing. *You should eat more. What will she say when she sees you?*

Alden cleared his throat but no words came out. His grey b-jack was buttoned up quickly and his hands found instinctively the practice guns.

Alden followed the similarly clad woman quickly into the exercise room. As soon as he was in, he saw her punching in the opening sequence. As the lights dimmed and the warming-up started, Alden's mind blanked as his body found the familiar rhythm, his eyes following the movements of his practice-partner.

A last thought flitted quickly through his consciousness just as the first shot sounded. *She would*

The soft whisper barely reached her ears. "They'll never get her."

She must smile, re-assure the boy. As her lips curved and she looked at the huddled form opposite her, she could only feel disgust at her lie.

The answering twitch of his lips told her he still remained strong. She could not help the pride that welled in her chest. Her little boy of a brother had become a man. Unbloodied still but a man nonetheless.

She blinked once to keep the moisture from escaping her eyes. It was her fault he was here. *No matter what the old man said, I should have said no. Head of clan or no, I was in charge of security. Zeno had no place in negotiations. Not just to stoke the old man's pride.*

She bit her lip to stop the groan from escaping. Regret had no place here. Neither did tears.

She let her eyelids close. The harsh light hurt. She knew one of her eyes was already lost. The other still functioned. *Cannot ask more than that.*

The memory of a light tenor in happier times echoed in her mind. *"Do not let fear of loss defeat you. Everything they take from you, the doc can give back. To remain alive is your goal. You will be rescued."*

She tried to keep the thought from forming. She did not want it to form. Yet it escaped her control. *Can the doc bring you back, Baby? Stay safe, oh stars, just stay safe.*

^^

Shie stood at the landing, her eyes scanning the corridor, listening to Cloe's even breathing at her side. Her eyes caught the movement of shadows in the alcove by the double doors at the end of the corridor and she waited until they coalesced into Tsan's slight figure.

She did not move as the lithe figure moved quickly towards her, a slight smile illuminating his face. The words tumbled from his mouth as soon as he neared. "They left a couple of hours ago. But they have not exited. I'd say the gym is the best bet."

Tsan took a hurried breath as he stood in front of her before continuing even faster. "How are you, Shie? Cloe? Sorry, you know she prefers Alden. Oh, and Jo came by earlier. Ah, you know already. Alden called it in, didn't he? It's been quiet since then. So, what happened?"

Shie could not help but smile at the onslaught from the small man in front of her. Even after the better part of the century, she still smiled at the rate the words left his mouth. Like the old machine guns, she remembered from her youth, not that Tsan was alive then but even so.

Shie's smile widened when Tsan finally stopped, breathless. He knew she found it amusing and as always he smiled back, head cocked to one side.

Cloe's voice was serious as usual and Shie barely stopped herself from counting the short answers. "I am well, Tsan. No worries. Yes, he did. The sealant is crumbling."

Shie watched, barely suppressing her amused grin, as the small man looked with narrowed eyes at the blonde at her side trying to remember the order of his fast speech, connecting questions and answers.

They could not be more different. Cloe soft-spoken and habitually serious, Tsan gregarious, bubbly, always with a smile on his lips. Yet they were the best in unarmed combat, an almost invincible duo in practice and battle both.

Shie's gut twitched as Tsan's smile slipped from his face when Cloe's words registered. "Crumbling? That's impossible! Sealant...fuck...sealant does not crumble."

It was her turn to speak, she knew that. But after having spent the better part of an hour trying to explain to Cloe and the others, Shie was just too tired to go through it again. Her tone became cold, hoping that Tsan would recognise that she did not want to elaborate. "It does, Tsan. It is a human thing. A bit of rest will fix it."

Jet black eyes rose to her, searching her face. With his ready smile and constant jokes, it was easy to forget that Tsan's smiling face hid a quick mind and an amazing memory. Totally out of character, the small man nodded without a word. Shie barely contained her sigh of relief. *She could not truly understand it herself. She was no doctor, just an old soldier that had seen too many battlefields.*

But Sergei was dead serious when he called and his words so eloquent in his native Russian have not left her mind for a second.

"Humans are not as resilient as we are, Shie. If the Gyn does not rest, give the seals time to heal, they will break apart. And at this point, there are too many seals on her. She will bleed to death. Am I clear?"

Clear as a cloudless night, my friend. As if there is something we can do, as if she will listen to any of us, as if she does not know... Without remorse or hesitation, Shie clamped down on that train of thought.

She could understand. She might not approve but she could understand. The worry and the helplessness in Sergei's voice were almost too much to bear. He too knew there was nothing he could do, not truly. He could not order and expect to be obeyed, his pleas left unanswered and then summarily ignored.

A tiny regret surfaced only to be squashed down immediately. *If he knew, he wouldn't worry so. No!* There are confidences she could not break. In her mind's eye, Shie could still see the steel in grey eyes, feel the warning in the ice-cold words.

"My father must not know. Or anyone else..."

The footsteps made her turn. Shie watched, eyes lidded, as they came down the corridor. Her heart warmed as Cloe put an arm around Alden. He still could not fully hide the blush that tinted his cheeks at the intimacy.

Shie's face hardened as she met blue eyes, the shadow in them making her want to take a step back, to whip her sword out and defend against the promise of death. The same shadow as in the d-stills. *No! Don't even go there!*

Romi's voice was even, impassive. "All is well? The others?"

Shie's shoulders stiffened involuntarily at the command barely hidden under the even tone. Her own voice was strong. "No news. They are sleeping."

The answering nod was miniscule. "Good. Stand down until sundown. Get some sleep."

At the order four sets of shoulders stiffened. Tsan opened his mouth, Alden not far behind.

Before their words were formed, the soft tenor sounded again. "I will be inside. Get some rest. You'll need it."

Shie could hear the care under the ice, barely discernible unless you were listening for it. She knew the others could hear it too. They nodded mutely and slowly turned to go, even as Romi started walking towards the doors at the end of the corridor.

For a moment, Shie watched the others leave before she turned to follow at the footsteps of the cloaked figure. The strong steps, the wide stride, the cloak swirling at every step, the squared shoulders, everything about the figure in front of her conveyed strength, strength and danger.

But Shie knew the familiar too well. She could see the slightest hitch to her step, the arm held protectively close to her body. The memory swirled in her mind.

The man, absently massaging his bio-arm, reeking of whisky and sniff. "Booker was ice. Real cold-hearted motherfucker. But hell, girl, in the heat you prayed she was your point. She had your back; you came back alive. B never left anyone out there."

Shie reached the door as it closed and entered without a sound. She was only half inside when the light tenor sounded loud in the close confines of the anteroom. "You too, Shie."

Shie moved inside without answering, closing the door carefully behind her. Only then did she raise her eyes to look at the hard eyes that watched her.

Shie would not leave. She would not lose this battle. Long moments passed, eyes locked, before the familiar turned and entered the library. Shie followed trying to be as quiet as possible. Shie hated this intrusion. She hated knowing that she was trespassing. She hated it even more that Romi did not resent her for it. The familiar won that battle weeks ago.

Shie had tried then to stay outside in the corridor but that plan had backfired quickly when Romi had simply left the door open, the sounds from inside telling her that the familiar was awake. Finally, Shie had come inside only to be met with the unwavering command to sleep.

Shie stepped down to the den softly averting her eyes from the familiar figure as the cloak was taken off and the ravaged body was revealed. This was their deal, their unvoiced compromise. Shie would not give voice to her concerns or stay awake and the familiar would sleep too.

Shie took off her jacket and lay on the couch, carefully arranging the blanket over her body. Shie did not look at Romi as the familiar bared her right arm with studied movements. Her expression did not change even as her heart bled when Romi pressed the button that shot the blue liquid into her vein.

Shie did not follow Romi's movements as she lay on the couch opposite drawing the cloak over her body. Shie stared off into space as she listened for Romi's breathing to even out into sleep.

Only then did she turn to look at the figure huddled under the cloak. Shie's heart clenched as she realised that the lines of worry had not eased, not even a little. The familiar thought invaded the foreground of her mind again. *If you were a man, I'd fight Zoe for you.* And the small voice that always answered was there as well. *As if that'd make a difference.*

Shie sighed as quietly as possible. The slight sound would not wake the familiar but better be safe than sorry. Even if she doubted it before, Shie could not doubt it now. *You are dying before our very eyes, aren't you Romi? You are fading away and there is nothing we can do to stop it. It kills you a moment at a time this poison for every breath of strength it gives you.*

What if we find no more than a body or a heap of ashes? What then, human? Will you stay? Will you even try for a life? Or will you turn your back on us all and find someone strong enough to kill you? Shie blinked to keep the tears from falling.

The light tenor made her flinch. "Sleep, Shie. Tonight won't be easy."

The small half-illegal dumps where losers, smokers, addicts and runaways live their lives. Where the trade in everything illegal and shadowy thrives. Where they're often used but always mistrusted allies congregate. Slayers are necessary but how to trust humans whose job is to kill vampires? There have been too many instances when Slayers have killed members of the tribe rather than rogues.

Zoe wants to laugh. Here Zoe is at home in all the ways that she will never be in the place that the world thinks her home. Zoe's hand takes Jo's elbow, a touch, nothing more, but one that she knows will still the trembling that is starting in her sister's limbs.

Zoe's eyes scan the room once more. She meets the glances of the others sitting and standing around. Her shoulders square and a feral smile paints her lips for a second. Here she can be true, the predator that stalks the night. Some will know just from looking who she is, what she is. Others will not but will recognise the power in her eyes and that will have to be enough.

Zoe sees the movement of the large human as he steps towards her, towards them. Her muscles bunch in readiness as his arm extends, only for the red and black tattoo to show on the back of his hand. Zoe does not relax. *A tattoo is little more than ink.* Still she is certain this is the man, the description fits him like a glove.

His voice is low, barely heard over the hubbub. "The sword of darkness sheathes tonight."

Her own voice is as low. "The blood enfolds the blade, the blood that is mine."

His toothy smile is too bright for Zoe's liking but she has been warned.

"And what should I call you and the beautiful lady?"

Her answer is delivered coldly, a hint of canines allowed to show. "You may call me Falcon. This is Mary. I assume you are Bear?"

"That I am. Come on over and meet the others," he answers. The jovial tone sounding so false.

Zoe wants to grit her teeth. Yet this man has a reputation and despite her misgivings, Zoe has agreed to work with him. *Not much else out here this season.* An outbreak of rogues up north meant that the teams Zoe is accustomed to working with are busy.

She follows his bulk as he moves into the shadows at the back of the dingy room, her arm securely guiding Jo, who is still looking around with eyes wide.

The team takes up two tables in a shadowy corner. They look up as Zoe nears. She has known some of them from the past. Snake stands immediately. *He would. He is that kind of man. A real gentleman, just don't let him near a child.*

Zoe nods at him coldly, the bright fury dancing in her eyes. He does not know why but then

again that spark is her reputation. Zoe listens as Bear introduces the men one by one. She connects the names to faces. Thankfully Jo remains silent. Zoe was worried her little sister would have forgotten her careful instructions on the trip here.

Her voice is cold, impassive. "You seem to be missing someone, Bear." Zoe lets the words hang in the air, watching the man squirm in his seat. They have not offered her one, nor to Josephine. She had not expected them to but she still resents the cocky arrogance, the implied insult.

The man's words are slow in coming and when they do, they come out oily. "Ah...well, Worm is out the back. Freaky little dy..." He stops as soon as he remembers who it is he is speaking to. Zoe can see his mouth working, trying to find the words to cover up his mistake.

Zoe is known, more than known, and her opinions on some matters are also known, better than merely known. She has written them in blood on the bodies of those who have dared to offend her. Zoe's smile is more of a grin, her upper lip curving, the twin points flashing for a second in the light of the lamps. She almost growls in delight at the sweat popping on the man's brow but she cannot indulge. *Not now. Maybe after the job is finished.*

Zoe turns towards the clearly marked exit door at the back, her hand on Josephine's elbow guiding gently the young woman towards the door. A few steps, a gentle push and they are outside.

In the fresh crisp air of the desert, the moon shining over the flats bathing them in her unholy light. Zoe's lungs fill with the sweet smell. She can feel the hurried breaths Jo is taking. Josephine opens her mouth to speak but she is immediately silenced by the sound of a gun being primed.

She can see Jo looking around instantly alert. But her own eyes have already found the deeper shadow just a few steps away from them. Zoe tenses, her hand already on the hilt of her sword under her long leather coat.

The light tenor voice Zoe doesn't recognise sounds loud in the silence. "The sword of darkness sheathes tonight."

Zoe's deeper tenor is soft, blending with the night. "The blood enfolds the blade, the blood that is mine."

Zoe hears the tell-tale sound of a gun unprimed but her hand does not leave her sword hilt, not quite yet.

The same tenor, this time lower, a hint of danger in it. "That ain't very trusting..."

Zoe answers in the same tone, letting the power illumine her eyes. "I ain't a very trusting person."

Zoe does not betray her surprise at the prick of the blade at her lower back nor at the low voice that breathes to her. "Funny. Neither am I."

Zoe grins in the moonlight, her teeth white against the night. Her move is smoother than silk, faster than lightning as she pushes Jo away and turns, her hand instinctively finding the exposed throat. She squeezes without delay, her smile still wide, her canines reflecting the moonlight.

Zoe can feel the neck muscles contracting in her hand even as her body registers the hard cylinder against her breast, the angle just right for the round to shatter through her lungs and into her heart.

Check and checkmate. Zoe knows she has to retreat. She can kill the human but both a bite and squeezing the breath out of her will have the same effect, the instinctive primal jerk that will pull the trigger. So she lets the pressure ease slowly before carefully taking her hand away. As her hand moves Zoe can feel the muzzle also retreat until it touches her no longer.

The soft tenor is light, almost amused. "Start again?"

Zoe steps back taking in the figure in front of her. The old biker's boots, shined until they reflect the moonlight, the black leather trousers with the twin holsters on the hips, the gloved hands holding a thin blade and a LAC, the thick leather armless vest, the dark hair closely cropped, the slightly bowed head.

The words escape Zoe, she wants to take them back but they have left her lips. "Look at me." She tenses waiting for the attack that is sure to come. Zoe can barely contain her surprise as the bowed head rises and two blue pools of darkness look at her, their challenge a hunter's call at midnight.

Time seems to stop. Zoe's breath refuses to leave the sanctuary of her lungs. Her body seems to have a mind of its own. Zoe watches, powerless observer, as a hand, her hand, rises to find, gently oh so gently, the square jaw slightly tipping it upwards. Somewhere in her mind Zoe registers the harsh gasp that her touch brings. She can see blue eyes slowly blink. Her hand feels the slight movement, almost a caress.

The slight sound is almost ignored before well-honed instinct takes over. The sound of a gun primed is unique. Zoe is already moving, turning as her blade clears the scabbard, her body somehow moving into space shielding the smaller body behind her.

Zoe's voice is low, little more than a growl. "Drop or die."

Zoe can hear her command blend with the low voice somewhere on her left and down. "Drop it."

Josephine's wide green eyes meet hers even as Zoe registers the trembling muzzle of the small shooter.

"Unprime it, Jo. What are you doing?" Zoe's voice, almost a cry, echoes in the desert.

Josephine's answer betrays her fear. "I thought...I..."

Without a thought Zoe is moving, her hand instinctively sheathing her sword, her arms coming to pull her sister in a close embrace.

"Easy, Jo. Easy, Sis. It's ok. It's alright," Zoe whispers, holding Josephine close, pressing her hip against the shooter. Slowly, carefully Zoe takes the gun from Josephine's still trembling hand, quickly securing it at her waist. Long moments pass before Josephine stops trembling. Her tears have soaked through Zoe's shirt.

Zoe can feel the tears stop. The tiny sobs cannot be heard anymore. The trembling has ceased. Gently she lets her arms fall and steps back.

Josephine looks at Zoe and her lips twitch almost into a smile. "Sorry," she whispers.

"It's alright," Zoe answers, her voice even deeper than usual.

Slowly Zoe turns, her eyes searching until they find the glint of the LAC-shooter, following the shadows until she can see the form resting against the wall.

Zoe can only look. The few paces of moonlight on the dirty yard seem a distance greater than the Atlantic. Her feet tremble to move. Her heart holds her still as a statue.

The voice is deep almost as deep as her own. "Dream crimson, moonguide."

Zoe's eyes move as the shadows deepen and every second thuds in her heart as the glint of the gun disappears. She does not recognise her own voice. "Come to me...." Zoe flinches at the sound. *Whose voice is that, command and entreaty entwined?*

The shadows stop their retreat. Long moments pass in a limbo of stillness, stale breath burns in Zoe's lungs.

The first step releases the locked muscles in Zoe's throat and her breath leaves, fire and relief. Her eyes follow the small movements until the half-formed darkness stands at the edge of the shadow. The slight hesitation, the sound of the breath filling starved lungs at the first step into the light.

Zoe's fingers find the same spot, gently she raises the bowed head once more. "Open them."

The slow movement as lids open to reveal an ocean of darkness underneath. Once more thought ceases, except for words that cannot be said. *Not here, not now, not in this lifetime.*

In the denial of Zoe's mind, her body moves tasting soft lips and the saltiness of tears. Her whisper so low that human ears cannot hear. "Who are you, warrior?"

Slow movement, without words, answer to question unheard, soft kiss on her fingertips.

The feathery touch on her brow made her open her eyes, unseeing still in the darkness. Her voice was rough, her words barely formed from muscles grit tight. "Baby? Where are you, my warrior?"

The voice that answered her was an instant deluge of ice in her muddled mind. "They'll come for us, Sis. You'll see; they'll come for us."

Zoe's eyes focused slowly at the face over her, the green eyes old before their time, the unruly black hair.

The part of her that thought of clan and honour woke twitching her lips into a smile. "Of course they will, Zee. No worries, boy. Just a dream. Sleep now, you need your strength."

Zoe felt the movement against her, the head that came to rest on the crook of her arm. She gritted her teeth, locking her jaw tight, no sound must escape as her hand moved, muscle and bone screaming in pain inside her mind. The pain was worth it as she heard her brother's smothered sigh of relief when she pressed him close.

Zoe's eyes closed of their own accord, her body living in the memory of another pressed against her, listing the differences. *Shoulders not wide enough. Hair too long. No hand resting on her chest*

Her eye opened searching the half-darkness. His even breathing told her the boy was asleep.

Zoe stilled her mind, starting the familiar exercise without conscious thought. As the first image formed, the simple black triangle on the white background, she could not help but send the thought, maybe somebody was out there to listen. *Keep her safe.*

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Chapter 3: A Park in the Slums

The little alleys on the other side of the Barrels were empty, yet Cloe still kept her eyes on the road. *There was nothing to see. It seems like everyone had gone to ground tonight.*

She almost glanced at the mirror but she stopped at the last moment, she could feel the heat of Romi's fury coming from the back seat.

Cloe glanced at the man sitting beside her instead and she almost smiled when she caught his eyes on her. The tell-tale blush that heated Alden's cheeks told her exactly what he was thinking, nothing to do with the road or the lack of people. She did not open her mouth to tease him. They were not alone.

Hell, she loved making him blush but not tonight. Not that the woman at the back seat would

mind. She never had before. Yet something stopped Cloe. She was not certain whether it was some latent sense of decorum or the knowledge that the slight banter would only highlight the lack. Cloe's mind shied away from giving voice, even in her own thoughts, to the lack, the gaping wound, the presence that should be there and was not. *The silence is heavy without you, Falcon*, the thought sounded mournful in the corridors of her mind. .

Cloe barely caught the movement in the shadows but as her foot hit the brake, she could hear the door opening. Looking at the side mirror, her eyes followed the shadow that had erupted from the car and bounded towards the tiny alleyway. As soon as the car screeched to a stop, Alden was opening the door, leaping out in pursuit.

Calmly Cloe reversed and parked, her hand immediately going to the spot behind her left ear that would release the wave. The initial wave assaulted her senses. She had never been able to get used to the blast of the initial connection of the wireless network that was the core of their communications system. Her ears boomed with the harsh sound of breathing on the other side of the wave. She cursed inwardly. Only one person was on.

As usual, the familiar had conveniently forgotten to switch her transmitter on. Cloe was certain the receiver was, as always, on.

Alden's whispered words sounded loud in her ear. "Got the package. Stay out."

Cloe nodded and whispered back. "Roger." She could not hear what was going on but there were faint voices coming through Alden's transmitter. The light tenor was clearly recognisable, the other voice sounded gruff, a man then.

Cloe waited patiently though internally she fidgeted. It was so unusual to have others in patrol with them. By rights she should be out there, backing Alden up. Romi had made her wishes clear, however, from the moment she stepped inside the armoured vehicle. Unless the genal sounded, she was point in this little expedition. *Yet it is a good thing, ain't it?* Cloe thought with a sigh. *At least she came with us, not left alone on that infernal beast she calls a motorcycle.* Cloe thought they would have had to fight to make her get into the car but Romi had surprised them all by getting into the car without a single word of protest.

Cloe's heart clenched. *How much pain must she be in to give up her mobility?* The blond vampire sighed inaudibly. With the wave any sound she made would be instantly transmitted to the other two. Her eyes glanced at the rear-view mirror, part of her expecting to see cold grey eyes looking at her.

But there was no one there. She was alone. Alone and waiting, like everyone else is waiting, for that small slip, that scrap of information. This time the sigh almost escaped her tight lips. *Will they never get a break?* Two months of nothing more than cold leads, empty basements, random fighting in the streets... two months of waiting.

Alden's voice in her ear made her look at the mouth of the alleyway. "Coming."

Even before Cloe could see them coming, the light tenor boomed over the wave. "Eagle One calling. Genal. Genal. South Slums west. ETA Eagle One 15. ETA 15."

Cloe revved the gas unthinkingly as Romi's voice repeated the instruction for the benefit of the other teams over the city. Even before the two had closed the doors of the SUV, the car was moving, speed increasing towards the west and the Slums. Cloe's ears were tuned for the light tenor and the instructions that would come.

Cloe blinked in surprise when Alden's voice provided the details. "Eagle One calling. Genal. Genal. South Slums west. South Slums West. Possible Code Six. Repeat, possible Code Six. Expect heavy fire. Expect heavy fire. ETA Eagle One 14. ETA Eagle One 14."

Cloe could not help but glance at the mirror even as her foot pressed harder on the gas. Blue eyes were not looking at her, their attention riveted on the I-Mac, but Cloe could see the steel in them. As the teams started answering with ETAs of their own, she could hear the sound of guns being primed from the back seat.

An errant thought passed through Cloe's mind even as the lightly armoured vehicle speeded through the dark roads. *It's going to be carnage...if it is a six...*

There was no sound but Alden's breathing next to her and the engine underneath her. Romi at the back was even quieter than usual. Cloe's eyes found the mirror and the blue eyes that looked at her.

Cloe shivered at the darkness reflected within them, the death that they promised. Minutes passed quickly as she weaved around the abandoned buildings of the Slums. Everything seemed deserted. Her heartbeat increased as another intersection passed, deserted. *Such quiet could only mean a six.*

There were no lights but the moon, yet it seemed like there was a glow in the distance. Not too far away, somewhere in the western Slums, and coming closer every second.

The light tenor over the wave almost made Cloe jump. "Eagle One calling. Eagle One calling. We have visual of a large gathering. South Slums west. Between Corringer and Large. Repeat, intersection Corringer and Large. ETA 2. Repeat, ETA 2."

"Stop here, Blondie." The command was low, only for Cloe's ears and she stopped the car quickly. Cloe could hear the responses from the other teams over the wave. The nearest was still a few minutes away.

As Cloe moved to get out of the car, a hand on her shoulder stopped her. "Wait for the others. When they come, you know what to do."

Alden's mouth was already opening to refuse but before a sound emerged, the light tenor became ice. "I said wait. Keep the wave on."

Without a further word, the familiar was out of the car and into the shadows of the alleys. "Fuck! What the fuck?" Alden's anger made Cloe flinch.

"Easy, Baby," Cloe said quickly. "She knows these parts well, remember?"

Cloe knew her quick response would not quieten Alden for long and it sounded hollow in her ears.

The voice over the wave made her jump. "Quit it! It's a six. I spot two of the bastards. Large crowd, lot of power. No sign of our jewels."

Cloe looked at Alden, her hand finding his flushed cheeks. They had both forgotten the transmitters in their throats.

The next words over the wave made Cloe bowl out of the car, her short legs hitting the ground running. She could hear Alden's footfalls behind her. The words played in her mind. "It's Kirby. Genal. Genal. Code red. Code red."

People, dirty children, glassy eyed humans, were running the other way and Cloe could hear the high pitched whines of guns fired. She hit into the crowd, desperately pushing people out of her way, hearing Alden's loud curses next to her. Bodies fell in front of Cloe, some from her own strength, others from Alden's.

It was not until Cloe smelt the fresh blood that she realised that some of the falling bodies around had nothing to do with either her or Alden. Without thought her hands found the twin long knives at her waist, bringing them out to shine in the moonlight. The sound of Alden's guns priming made a smile appear on her lips.

"Roms, we are coming through the crowd to your left." Alden's voice on the wave made Cloe look around for the swirling darkness that she knew would be there. Yet she could see nothing but bodies running in all directions and she inwardly cursed her small stature.

Following the tall figure of the man she called lover, Cloe finally saw the familiar through a break in the milling crowd. For a split second, Cloe froze at the sight of Kirby lying on the ground in a pool of blood and over him Romi's swirling darkness dancing in the moonlight, guns extended in her hands, shooting with abandon.

The cowl had fallen back to reveal Romi's face, mouth open in a wild laugh. Then Cloe's training kicked in and her eyes focused on the men around her belatedly recognising their glowing eyes and the long canines revealed by their feral smiles.

The nearest was already turning to meet them and her cry echoed in the night as Cloe literally flew at him, knives flashing in her hands. She could feel Alden a step behind, the shrill whines of his guns melding with the sounds of the fight. Cloe's body moved of its own accord as she weaved around her attacker avoiding his flashing sword, her feet sure on the hard packed dirt.

Cloe could not stop the laugh escaping her throat as he overextended in his attack and she stepped lightly inside his defences, her knives slicing him open from neck to navel. And then she was away, stepping over his falling body, her eyes zeroing onto another of the men. In her peripheral vision Cloe saw the darkness she would recognise anywhere stand feet held widely apart over Kirby's fallen form, death spouting from the muzzles of the guns in her hands.

Cloe's ears finally registered the voices over the wave, the others already there, all around her as the Ottewald scouts joined the fight.

Her knives flashed no more, the dark blood stealing their shine. Cloe could feel the salty taste of blood from her victims on her lips and she unconsciously licked them as her knives sliced once more through flesh and soft veins.

"Cloe, behind you!" Alden's scream on the wave made her turn on her heel, almost a pirouette, her knives at the ready. Cloe had barely turned before her eyes caught the flashing arc of a sword coming down on her unprotected neck. Her arms tried to move, to ward off the shining blade, even as she fell backwards desperately trying to avoid the lethal arc.

Cloe felt the blood and brains spraying all over her as the arc of the sword faltered a mere moment before she hit the ground hard. Training took over her shocked body and she rolled away immediately, coming to her knees a few feet away. Strong hands gripped her and without thought Cloe struggled to bring her knives to bear on her attacker before the loving smell of his aftershave told her who held her.

Her eyes sought his face and Cloe smiled at the sound of his soft voice. "I am here, Babes." She allowed herself a moment in his arms before she stepped away, her eyes scanning the scene around her. All Cloe could see standing were wearing the blue and gold insignia of the Ottewalds, carefully walking through the bodies strewn on the ground finishing them off.

Cloe's eyes stopped at the three men hunched around a figure on the ground and at the swirling darkness a few feet away from them. She could not stop the gasp escaping her lips as she saw the blood painting Romi's face crimson in the moonlight.

Before Cloe could move a step towards the familiar, the soft tenor on the wave stopped her in her tracks. "Let's get out of here, people. You know the drill."

The command in the soft voice was unmistakable and Cloe could not help but obey. Alden's steady presence next to her, she turned to the bodies strewn around what was once a park. Others were already helping wounded men and women on their feet and away.

The drill was ingrained into her body. Since no team has asked for outside help and there were no loners tonight, Cloe's attention focused solely on the bloodied figure slowly walking toward them.

As the familiar neared, Cloe said in the lowest voice possible. "You are hurt."

The answer was soft. "It's nothing, Blondie. Let's get outta here."

Cloe could smell the blood and she knew the cut was deep but past experience had taught her that the soft voice held steel in it. She followed the direction of Romi's eyes as all three started walking away from the carnage around them. The familiar was tracking the progress of the three men carrying an unconscious and bleeding Kirby away.

Cloe could only follow behind Romi as she shadowed their progress out of what once had been the gate of a municipal park and now was no more than a wasteland among the abandoned concrete shells of the Slums.

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The shouts from the corridor propelled Kalia out of the bed and towards the door before thought intruded. The door opened to reveal chaos in the corridor as soldiers brought in wounded, nurses running to their aid.

A man's voice boomed over the maelstrom. "Blood, O negative, Surgery one."

Kalia's eyes could not take in the details of the scene in front of her. Part of her was transported decades back to another hospital teaming with the wounded and dying. She blinked slowly to clear the memory from her mind. Still the reality of clan war assaulted her nostrils as the blood started pooling in the corridor.

The feeling of being watched made Kalia turn to the right, where a small group of soldiers stood against the wall. The darkness in their midst told her whose eyes were stalking her. A tiny movement from a leather-gloved hand sent the blond vampire from last night hurrying in her direction.

"Most honoured Lady, forgive the intrusion to your rest. Everything is fine. You need not be concerned. You shall not be disturbed further," the woman told her with a small bow.

Kalia turned violet eyes to the blonde, part of her wanting to laugh at the stilted language. She glanced at the small figure at the other side of the corridor, more than twenty feet away.

Kalia could see hands gesturing calmly and soldiers leaving singly or in twos, obviously sent on errands or to rest. For a second, she wondered what to do. *Turn back into her room or...*

With a small grunt, Kalia moved outside into the corridor, the hospital scrubs scratching the inside of her thighs with every step. Soldiers smelling of blood and death moved around her, some away, some towards the small group at the corner.

When she reached the outskirts of the small group, Kalia stood listening to the soft conversation.

A balding soldier was speaking in a low voice. "Shuteye is down and out, Roms. The bastards got 'im."

The response in the low tenor was immediate. "I'm sorry, Niko. Tell Ari and get someone to stay with Anne tonight."

The balding man grunted in answer and turned to leave. Kalia could see the pain in his brown eyes.

Another soldier, a tall willowy woman took his place. "No one got any bloody idea how many are out. Fuck it all, Roms, what are we to do now?"

Kalia shivered at the ice in Romi's voice. "Take Alden and Cloe...and Tibet, too. Check the rooms and the library. Get me a fucking Count, Shie!"

The tall woman turned and ran, three others at her heels. Yet another soldier approached. "Roms..."

When the black cowl turned to him, he stammered out. "Fourteen hit. Three in the surgeries."

Kalia took a step back as the darkness turned, a fist thudding against the wall. She could see the impression left on the plaster.

A growl made Kalia's hands clench. "Kirby?"

The soldier shook his head and Kalia could feel the fury hidden under the cloak's deep cowl.

The sound of a regal voice behind her made Kalia turn. The green eyes that met her own made her breath catch. *Goddess, such beauty should be illegal*

With a frown Kalia chased the errant thought from her mind, even as Josephine spoke. "Kalia, forgive the interruption to your rest. Please, there is no need to worry or stand out here. Everything is under control. This should have never disturbed you."

Before Kalia could respond, the raven-haired beauty was speaking again. "Mike, please escort Lady Kalia to her room. She is not to be disturbed further."

Kalia could feel the presence of the soldier next to her. His fingers that didn't quite touch her elbow. *At least some of them are well-trained*, she thought in disgust. *What is the girl thinking, ordering me around?*

Kalia closed her eyes, trying to keep down the temper that threatened to engulf her.

The soft tenor next to her made Kalia snap her eyes open. "Lady, would you mind terribly if I used your bathroom for a few moments? I seem to be bleeding all over the place."

Kalia could not stop surprise from showing in her face. The voice sounded cultured, a slight self-deprecating amusement in its tone. She looked down at the cloaked figure that faced her and her

eyes narrowed. *Who are you, Gyn? And what do you want of me?*

Kalia did not voice her angry thought. Instead she schooled her voice into a tone of light banter. "But of course, my dear. No need to ask. Come, let's get you cleaned up."

Kalia felt the feather touch on her elbow and she started moving. She had to smile when the familiar guided her to the door of her room and with a slight flourish opened the door for her.

Kalia glided in hearing the familiar following and softly closing the door. Only when the click signified the door completely closed, did she turn to face the woman standing a few paces behind her.

"Are you hurt, Gyn, or was it merely an excuse?" Kalia could hear her earlier anger making her voice harsh.

The cloak swirled as the human stepped towards her and with an abrupt movement let the cowl fall back from her face, her voice little more than a growl. "Both, Lady."

Only the anger still burning in her gut stopped Kalia from stepping back, away from the bloody mask that surrounded flashing sea-blue eyes.

The blood dripping down the familiar's chin chilled Kalia's insides and her anger dissipated in moments. The human was clearly hurt, not that she showed any sign of pain. Kalia started to speak but words abandoned her. With a shake of her head, she placed a gentle hand on the woman's shoulder firmly guiding her towards the small bathing suite.

"Wash up, Gyn, while I call the doctor," Kalia said as soon as Romi entered the bathroom.

The harsh words stopped her. "No doctor. I'll fix this myself."

The familiar's whole body was tense, her hands clenched into fists. Kalia took in the gloved hands, the muscled shoulders clear even under the cloak, the stubborn cast to her face and nodded silently.

The familiar's answering nod was curt before she turned to the sink. Kalia watched the cloak carefully taken off the small body and left to fall on the floor.

Romi did not waste time before splashing her face with water. The white porcelain turned crimson with blood within seconds. Kalia could hear the soft click of the door opening and the footfalls that brought Josephine into the room. She knew the sound of the water made them inaudible to the familiar in the bathroom.

Kalia stepped back and turned to face the heir to the Ottewald Clan. Green eyes failed to meet her own as Josephine looked towards the far wall. Neither woman spoke. Kalia taking in the beautiful woman in front of her. Josephine lost in some middle distance that only her eyes saw.

The sound of splashing water from the bathroom continued and the smell of disinfectant wafted into the room. The small grunt of pain made both women turn, their eyes meeting fleetingly. To Kalia even the split second of contact was enough to reveal the alarm and worry in the younger vampire.

A part of her wanted to remain cold, punish Josephine for her insult. Yet Kalia stepped back, with a sigh gesturing at Josephine to go to the bathroom.

As the young vampire passed next to her, Kalia half-smiled at Josephine's whisper. "Thank you."

Josephine's gasp when she entered the bathroom was clearly audible. Kalia tensed, when the light tenor boomed in the room. "Jo, get the fuck outta here!"

Kalia's mind struggled to reconcile the images. The cold but polite soldier that saved her yesterday. The almost flirting captain in the corridor moments earlier. The harsh rude words of just now. She was even more surprised at the sight of Josephine getting out of the bathroom, her face pasty white as she closed the door.

The sight of Josephine's pale face and the sound of her rapid panicky breathing spurred Kalia into action. Without a word, or a moment's thought, her hand was at Josephine's elbow, firmly guiding her toward the bed.

The young woman tried to resist but Kalia's harsh growl in her ear disabused her of any such notions. "Move, woman!"

As soon as Josephine was in the bed, Kalia was pouring water into a glass from the nightstand. Gently she held it for the young vampire to drink slowly.

Josephine sipped the cold water, colour coming to her cheeks slowly. "Thank you," she whispered.

Kalia glanced back towards the closed door of the bathroom, her ears straining to catch any sounds beyond the water running.

Josephine's voice was low. "She is fine. It was my fault."

Kalia looked at the pale woman and carefully sat on the edge of the bed. "You were concerned. That's nothing to be ashamed of."

Josephine turned away but not before Kalia caught the pained look in her eyes. Kalia blinked trying to keep her face impassive. *What's going on in your head, Beauty? What are you hiding?* The sound of the bathroom door opening made her turn.

Romi had put on the enfolding cloak once again, only this time her head was bare. Sealant sparkled on the long cut on her cheek and among her short-cropped hair. The light tenor was soft as she approached the bed slowly. "You ok, Jo?"

Kalia could hear the care in the familiar's low voice. Josephine's answer was quick, her voice trembling. "I am fine, Roms. You need to rest! Sergei said..."

A black-gloved hand gently touched Josephine's shoulder stopping her from speaking further. "Don't panic, Jo. Sergei frets too much. It's a new seal. "

Kalia looked at the familiar with suspicion. *What did it matter whether it was a new seal or not?* Before Kalia had a moment to think about it, Josephine was already shaking her head, her mouth opening to speak.

Romi's words held the sharpness of command. "Stop it, Jo! It's happened before. I know what I am doing." Romi gestured with disdain at the wound on her head. "This? This is nothing! You understand me? Nothing!"

Kalia watched, her eyes narrowing in the first seeds of anger, as Josephine seemed to deflate. Before she could give voice to her concern, turned to her and Kalia saw the warning in them. She nodded slowly in acquiescence and the familiar half-bowed in response before turning on her heel and quickly marching out of the room. Kalia's eyes narrowed. *Who are you, Gyn? What are all these masks you wear?*

Her thoughts must have shown in her eyes for Josephine's voice was little more than a whisper. "Don't think less of her, Kalia."

Violet eyes turned to study green and Josephine swallowed before continuing. "Romi dislikes anyone seeing her weak. I was not thinking when I went in."

Kalia could not stop the arch of her eyebrow even as her thoughts turned mellow. *You are a soldier to the bone, aren't you,, Gyn? All that human weakness you strive to disguise.* Kalia shook her head sadly. *So much like Jackson. Poor dear Jackson.*

Josephine's voice became stronger, verging on demand. "Forgive Romi, daughter of Dracula. She is under a lot of pressure. She certainly would not want to offend you in any way."

Kalia had to clench her cheeks to keep from smiling. "There is nothing to forgive, Josephine. I was merely surprised."

It was clear that Josephine believed her, and Kalia had to smile. No point in making the young woman even more anxious than she already was. Kalia could understand. It was not every day that one had a member of the First Clan as their guest, much less the First Reader.

Yet Kalia had to shake her head in wonder. *By every star did every member of this household have so many faces?*

Her eyes are trained on the scene below as she stands ramrod straight on the balcony. Shie can hear Alden's breathing on her side mingling with the cries and chanting from below. *Guard duty is fucking irritating! It is our turn this time, but hell! Down there is where the fun is.*

The gyrating dancers hold Shie's attention for a moment before her eyes move on to the figure behind the altar. The chanting rises and falls but the deep voice can be heard clearly on the balcony. The rapture is evident in the features she knows so well as the words of appeasement boom in the Sacred Hall.

Her eyes once more take in the white cowled figures at the front of the assembly. A soft smile escapes Shie's sober visage. It is always a fine feeling to see the initiation. Those young and unbloodied as they reach for their future. For the seven cowled figures standing before the altar this night would change their lives forever.

Shie could easily remember her initiation almost a century before. Her cheeks turned a slight shade of pink at the memory. *Well, at least I managed it alright even with tripping down the steps.*

"Oh fuck me...." Alden's whisper catches Shie's attention immediately and she looks at the man.

Alden is looking behind her toward the centre of the balcony, his face a mask of disbelief. Curious Shie turns wondering what could possibly happen. *Certainly not an emergency.*

Her face falls at the sight that greets her eyes, her breath catching in her throat. Without thought Shie turns to the Hall once again. *Has she seen? Oh goddess, let her not have seen.* Shie can only gasp in relief when she realises that Zoe's attention is fully on the ritual, her grey eyes never coming up to gaze on the balcony.

As Shie slowly turns, it is clear that everyone's attention has focused on the new addition to the party at the centre of the balcony. Her eyes take in the scene and she cannot help the premonition of disaster that rings in her mind.

Josephine's face tells the story better than anything. Her wide eyes and her mouth working to find words. Little Zeno standing at her side has his eyes closed, his head shaking from side to side. He is young but not too young to understand the break with tradition. The handful of guards stand impassive. Their faces are blank. Their eyes trained to some middle distance only they can see.

But Shie can see their disquiet in the fists they hold at their sides, at the shuffling of their feet. It is the Count that holds her attention, his small smile and the glint in his eyes as he looks upon the person his guards have brought before his high-backed chair. The two guards standing at attention flanking the small human between them.

Shie cannot help the gasp that escapes her lips when she spies their hands holding the human.

The human in her black leathers with the white band on her arm. Shie wants to shout, to wail. *This is more than a break with tradition. Or at least it will be as soon as Zoe realises what is going on.*

The white band seems almost fluorescent against the black leather and Shie has to wrench her gaze away from it. That simple white band that puts the human out of bounds for any vampire, even Zoe herself. A part of Shie still cannot believe that Zoe would do such a thing. The white band puts the human beyond clan law. More importantly, the human's blood innocence is protected from all, especially from ceremonies such as this, where the shedding of blood is the core of the ritual.

Not that a Slayer would blanch at the sight of a little blood. It's not like the old times or anything. Aldus has been doing this for years the little idiot. It's his big moment. And Zoe is always careful that the new ones do not take too much out of him.

Shie's eyes widen in apprehension as the count gestures his smile widening. The two guards turn the human around roughly and march her to the edge of the balcony, their hands on her shoulders. Every pair of eyes on the balcony is trained on the human in their midst and Shie is no exception.

Shie's thoughts churn as her eyes flick to the scene below. *At least Zoe is not looking up. Yet. Stars know why Zoe is being so stubborn about all of it. A white band! I haven't seen that used since the German war. Maybe in the old country but not this side of the ocean. It's not as if the human is a child. Hell, she could easily kill anyone who accosted her with those blasted LACs of hers.*

The thought brings a shiver down her spine and the unthought of before suspicion blooms in her mind. As Shie stretches to look at the human, her stomach roils. There is no expression in the profile she can see, feet are planted wide, shoulders held back. But Shie can see the tiny movement of a hand held against a leather-clad leg, the tiny beat of a finger on leather. After the better part of a year, she can recognise the signs.

The façade that doesn't break. The face that betrays little emotion. The eyes that don't smile. The steady beat of a forefinger against the nearest available surface. Shie knows most others will not understand but she can recognise the promise of death when she sees it.

Oh stars! She's doing it for us as much as for the human. A trained Slayer can cause havoc in the estate what with scholars and pups around. And there are too many idiots who don't take no for an answer.

The human that stands on the edge of the balcony, a half-step from the bronze balustrade, eyes trained on the ritual below is the one the scouts have learnt to fear. Not the human that shares their drills. The human that will shyly at times give advice on some movement or strategy in a low voice. The same one that will smile and chuckle at the jokes around the bunker.

No, this human is the one they rarely see in their drills, in the gym, in the grounds around the

estate. This human Shie has seen in the dark alleys of the city, in the moonlit desert on the hunt, among the ruined houses and littered streets of the Slums and the Barrels. This is the human she has learned to fear. To fear the death in her eyes, the small smile that appears as she deals death and destruction.

Shie's heartbeat speeds up, her eyes widen in sudden recognition. The high-topped boots, the black leather trousers, the jacket and from within a glimpse of the vest. She is certain her disbelief must show on her face. *How can they be such idiots? Such blind stupid idiots?*

They have taken Booker's weapons away. There is no belt slung low, no holsters holding thick-barrelled LACs at her hips. Certainly the sword Booker is slowly learning to use is not on her back. *How can they not see that the human is in battle gear? How could they not realise?*

The list that goes through Shie's mind makes beads of sweat appear on her forehead. *The throwing knives, the thin grenades, the death stars, the strips of explosive and, oh stars, the blast shooters.*

The loud cry from below makes Shie turn to the Hall and the ritual that is about to finish. She sighs in immediate relief. It is merely the ritual cry of the sacrifice. Her eyes follow the heir to the Ottewald in her crimson ceremonial robes as she approaches the sacrifice in the rhythm of the drum.

Her eyes widen and Shie has to grasp the balustrade in front of her to stop from crying out. *The ritual cannot be stopped, not now so close to completion.* She turns slightly to find the impassive figure amongst them. *How will the human react? When she sees... Blood is not an issue. Booker is no sheltered maiden. But still to see your lover leading a sacrifice. There are too many old fears still lurking in human minds. And if all you've known are rogues... Oh stars.*

Booker's eyes seem glued to the scene below but nothing shows on her face. Even her fingers have stilled their tapping on a leather-clad leg. The drumbeat reaches its crescendo and the ululating cry of the revellers echoes in the hall.

Shie turns to see the blood painting the walls. The crimson drops falling off Zoe's fangs as she opens her mouth in the cry of the celebrant. The sacrifice lying limp on the altar.

The cry still reverberates among the arches when the heir to the Ottewald licks her lips and with a smile raises her head to look at the balcony. Shie's heart misses a beat to see the face of the woman she calls leader crumble from ecstasy to unimaginable pain.

Shie does not have to turn to know that the grey-eyed vampire has seen the black-clad figure in front of the balustrade on the balcony. It is the naked fury transforming Zoe's features that makes Shie take a step back in fear. The next few seconds will stay in her memory forever as Zoe lunges from the raised altar and flies to the balcony.

So very few vampires ever manage to defy gravity. Shie had never thought Zoe would manage the feat. The hours of training, of trying and failing had convinced her that Zoe would never

achieve the strength to fly. Yet at this moment gravity seems to have no hold on Zoe as she sails through the air far above the hall to land in a crouch on the balustrade.

Silence has filled hall and balcony both as everyone tenses for the confrontation that is sure to come. Zoe's growled words can be heard clearly throughout the huge circular hall echoing in the shadows of the alcoves. "Get your hands off her."

Shie can only watch as the two guards flanking the human step back, their hands leaving the woman's shoulders as if burnt. The silence is broken as those around the guards shuffle backwards, away from the burning anger in Zoe's face. The whisper carries, the naked pain in it audible to all. "Booker?"

There is no time for an answer as the count's mocking words boom in the hall. "Watch your pet run, daughter. See the disgust in her face. See the fear. What did you think? You are who you are."

Shie cringes at the words but the scream that erupts from Zoe reduces her spine to jelly. "You bastard!"

Shie's eyes cannot follow the lightning fast movement. One moment Zoe is on the balustrade, the next she is crouching in front of the count ready to attack. Swords are being drawn all around the balcony, scouts and guards both. Only the glint of her own blade tells Shie that she too has drawn.

A breathless second and the moment is upon them as Zoe starts her lunge. The twin shots arrest all movement making heads turn, swords raised to slay stop in mid-swing, Zoe turning in mid-air back toward the balustrade. Every eye is on the black-clad figure shooters in her hands pointing at the ceiling.

Every eye watches, every breath is held as the raised arms slowly come down to point at the floor. The voice is loud echoing. "You folk are excitable. Let's keep the toothpicks away, shall we?"

Shie can only look, her mouth hanging open, at the human as she steps towards the centre of the balcony. *Are you so cold then, human? Newly-turned vampires are known to blanch at the initiation and you don't even bat an eyelid?*

By the time the last word leaves her mouth, Booker is standing next to Zoe but her eyes are glued on the tall thin man still sitting in his high-backed chair a few steps away.

Shie shakes her head in denial as the human speaks again. "My humble thanks for the...ah... invitation, Sire. Very interesting. Very...ah...illuminating."

The count's laughter makes Shie flinch and his words chill her through to the bone. "Merely a reality check, human. Fangs have a purpose no matter how much my daughter wants to hide it.... Ah...I assume you will be leaving us shortly..."

The growl from Zoe makes Shie tense, her hand clenching on the swordhilt.

Zoe's words are full of venom. "You will regret this...father." Her muscles bunch as Zoe crouches to attack once more. Like everyone else in the balcony, Shie gasps as the human steps between Zoe and the count without hesitation.

Booker's words are low but the acoustics of the hall bring them clearly to Shie's ears. "Enough! What are you gonna do, Falcon? Fight your father? Huh? For what? For me? For this fiasco?"

The silence is deafening as everyone holds their breath at the human's effrontery. The answer from the crimson-clad vampire is low but can be heard. "Get out of the way, Baby. No one hurts you and lives to tell the tale, not if I can help it."

The whisper is barely audible and Shie tenses to catch the words. "I am fine. I am not hurt. Don't do this, Falcon. You love the man for fuck's sake."

The whispered words, full of feeling, must have had an effect for Zoe stood up tall slowly. Shie could read the anger in her bunched shoulders but the madness of fury had left the blood-spattered face of the vampire.

Zoe's voice is loud and clear, making certain that everyone can hear. "Father, my apologies. Residues from the ritual, I expect. Thank you for keeping Booker company and...hmm...allowing her to witness the ritual. It is a great...ah...honour you have done me."

The words have no inflection whatsoever but Shie can hear the anger that the lack of tone disguises.

Shie is already moving, Alden a step behind her, as Zoe stands before the count her hand raised in a crisp salute. Shie can see the shadow in the count's eyes and the irritation that flashes on his face.

His eyes are not on his daughter but on the human that stands next to her. The silence stretches before the count speaks. "Of course, my daughter. The ritual can be...huh...taxing. It was my...pleasure to...ah...entertain your guest."

Shie is at Zoe's side as she turns crisply as if on parade. It is only proximity that makes Shie catch the almost inaudible whisper. "Seven years hunting rogues. Think again, Sire."

Shie misses a step at the overheard words making her almost collide with the human moving away from the count.

The guard stepping in front of her surprised Shie out of her reverie. She was already at the count's antechamber, her feet following the path without any direction from her mind. Shie shook her head to clear it from the memory. The almost five years had not managed to blur the scene in her mind. *We all found out that night, didn't we, Falcon? Your choice was right, odd as it was.*

"Can I help, Shie?" the guard said quietly.

Shie's answer was quick. "I'm looking for Nigel, Gaby. It's urgent."

The man nodded quickly as he ushered her inside. Nigel, his grey hair thinning at the top, raised his head from the stacks of paper in front of him as she neared.

"Shie, my dear, what brings you to our parts?" His kindly voice and warm smile made Shie immediately felt welcome.

What she had to say to him would bring no smile to his face. "Nothing good, Nigel. Romi wants a minute with the count. In private..."

The smile left the man's face immediately replaced by a frown. "Why, Shie? Is there need for another bloody shouting match?"

The surprise must have shown on her face for the man reddened at his inadvertent revelation. Shie pushed the information to the back of her mind, now was not the time to ponder, as she answered him. "I don't know why, Nigel. But we have one dead, three that will probably not make the night and eleven others injured. She is not happy."

At her words, the blood left Nigel's face. "Who?" he asked, his voice cracking.

"Shuteye. He never even made it back to the estate."

At the name, Nigel shook his head in denial. "Oh stars..."

Before Shie could find the words to console him, Nigel spoke, his voice business-like. "I'll clear his schedule. As soon as she is done at the ward, just come up."

Shie nodded at a loss for words and turned quietly to leave. As she passed through the door, she heard the almost inaudible sob that escaped the man's lips.

^^

The tear that splashed on her cheek made a lone seeing eye open. *He is crying again. So sensitive, like his mother. He will learn. He has to.*

"Don't cry, boy," she tried to say but only a croak came out of her parched lips. A filthy bottle touched her lips and she tried to swallow the liquid. It was a line of fire down her throat, the

Oh stars, Lorna would have been so angry if she were here. The pang of sadness that always accompanied thoughts of her made his lips twitch.

The low words turned his attention back to the present. "It is a senseless loss. The man should be out there talking with Anne right now and all because those spineless idiots think that they can play games in the dark." The last words were delivered in an icy growl.

He nodded once more. She was right and they both knew it. *Here it comes. Now is your time, Gyn. But how will you say it?*

"You should talk to them. An order from you will stop this foolishness once and for all. They fear you too much to disobey," Romi continued in a slightly calmer tone.

He could feel his eyes widen in surprise at her words. He could not stop the words that left his mouth. "Is that all you are here to say?"

Romi's eyes found his own and held them. There was anger in them and fury that made his heart beat faster. "Don't insult me, Count," Romi spit out through clenched teeth.

He took a breath to speak but he had no time as Romi spoke on. "Are you all idiots? Is there nothing you can think beyond your bloody honour and those fucking rankings?"

There was true venom in her low voice and he narrowed his eyes at the threat he felt emanating from the woman in front of him.

His words were low conciliatory. "You are already doing the job, Gyn. You should have the rank, too. It is a matter of honour."

His eyes widened at the sudden movement that brought flashing eyes mere inches from his face. "Fuck your ranks. And fuck your honour, too. What I want, you cannot give me. Got it, bloodsucker?" The hissing words made his hackles rise.

"We'll get them back, Romi."

The soft words escaped his lips and he closed his eyes at his loss of control. He felt the sudden retreat as the familiar stepped away. He opened his eyes slowly cursing himself for his thoughtless words.

She hated him with a passion. That he knew fully well. And in his heart of hearts he could not fault her. The last thing the human wanted was his sympathy. She had turned her back to him but he could see the slight trembling in her shoulders as she stood in front of the fireplace.

Long moments passed in silence before a cold light tenor sounded in the room. "Will you speak to them?"

He schooled his own voice, removing all inflection from it. "I will. This will not happen again,

Gyn."

The face that turned to him held no feeling, no expression. Her salute was simple but crisp before she moved with careful strides to the door.

He watched silently as she opened the door and left closing it softly behind her. His eyes roamed back to the mantelpiece above the fireplace and the row of pictures on it. His whisper was barely audible. "Hold on, child. Oh stars, let her be still alive."

^^

Kalia turned on the screen absently, mindlessly flicking through the channels. Part of her wanted to simply lose herself into the infinite variety and boredom of the screen. Too much to think about, too many impressions, too many feelings.

She sighed silently. People thought it was all instinctive, that everything happened in a moment, a great flash and you knew everything there was to know like in the vids. *Who would believe that there was no great flash, no easy few moments of connections, no constant stream of images and thoughts?*

Kalia sighed again. Sometimes she hated this gift of hers. Her eyes absently looked at the images playing on the screen, some sort of animal documentary.

And in the back of her mind images turned themselves over in her thoughts. Emotions caught in the net of her psyche were plucked out and quickly analysed. Kalia could not help it, she certainly could not stop it. She had tried once and it had almost cost her sanity.

Kalia let the images and emotions replay in the recesses of her mind trying to dislodge the recurring image of two bottomless green eyes. For a moment she wondered whether Zoe von Ottewald was anything like her sister.

Does she have those same green eyes, full of expression and sadness? One thing is certain, if she is one tenth of her sister, she is a real beauty. Whoa, Kali, don't even go there. With a shake of her head, Kalia stood up from the bed. Looking around, she knew she could not stay in the hospital room for a moment longer.

It was past dawn and Kalia knew she should sleep. The dull ache behind her eyes and stabbing needles at her shoulder told her that she had not yet healed from the previous night's attack. Yet her mind was restless, she was restless. Quickly Kalia stepped to the door and opened it wide. The corridor was not empty but that was a lucky stroke.

Without hesitation Kalia moved to one of the men standing along the wall. He was tall, over six feet, and heavily muscled. His ebony skin reflected dully in the sanitised lights of the hospital corridor. As Kalia neared him, intelligent blue-green eyes turned to her and the man bowed from the waist in a short half-bow.

"How may I help you, Lady?" he asked respectfully.

Kalia felt strange. It seemed like all the Ottewalds were simply too hung up on ceremony and antiquated ideas. She tried to keep her voice even. "Would you know where I can find Josephine?"

The man answered immediately. "I would assume at the office, Lady. Please come, I can take you there."

Kalia shook her head to refuse. After all there must have been a reason for him to be here and certainly she had no need for a chaperone.

His next words forestalled any of the arguments. "We are your escort, Lady," he said gesturing to the three other vampires standing in the corridor. Kalia turned to look at the three who immediately bowed low to her.

Kalia reined in her immediate reaction, which was to shake her head. Instead she nodded to the tall man and followed him as he started down the corridor. She could hear the footsteps of the other three as they fell in behind her.

Kalia could not help but wonder who had given the order for her to be escorted. Her first suspicion was Josephine herself. After all the girl had been upset to see her on the corridor alone among the soldiers earlier. She could ask her escort but it could create problems and problems were the last thing that Kalia wanted.

Being a stranger in the middle of an armed camp was bad enough, especially when she had brought none of her own people. It had been by choice that she had travelled alone. After Henry's death, Kalia had been lax in arranging for a new head of security and most of her people were scholars not soldiers.

Surely Kalia could have asked for an escort from the clan but her father had agreed with her that any outstanding Dracula presence could have adverse consequences. The Ottewalds seemed to be winning this war but in war one never knew how the end came and the first clan had always to be careful not to alienate the others.

The man led Kalia through a maze of corridors to an elevator. Without looking at the woman behind him, he quickly pressed the large blue button on the board. After a few seconds a voice could be heard through the intercom. "What is it, Taxy?"

The man answered quickly. "The Lady Kalia wants Jo, Lowell. Send the box down."

"Coming," was the immediate answer from the intercom.

Another few seconds passed before the doors to the large elevator opened and Kalia stepped inside followed by her escort. She waited patiently, keeping her eyes on the mark display, until the elevator reached its destination.

As soon as the doors opened, Kalia stepped out into a large carpeted room. A small wiry man stepped up to her and bowed quickly. "Lady, if you would follow me. Jo will be here in a few minutes."

With a small nod Kalia motioned him to lead the way. The man led her to a large set of double doors that he quietly opened and held for her to pass through. As soon as Kalia stepped inside the room, he closed the doors behind her. She was surprised that the man would leave her in the room alone.

It was obviously the office her escort had referred to earlier but there was no sign of Josephine. Kalia stood by the door wondering what was best to do. Scanning the large room, her eyes felt drawn to the huge antique desk at one side. Kalia knew she should stay by the door or at best go to sit at one of the chairs in front of the desk.

Those would be the right things to do. After all she was in another's space and snooping would not be taken well. But something drew her to the large desk and as always Kalia followed her instincts, quickly walking to the desk. She looked closely at the precisely placed items on the desk, a folder, some d-pens, a simple comp board.

Finally her thoughtful gaze came to rest upon the four d-stills on the edge of the desk. The first she recognised immediately. A younger Josephine looked at the lens with a large smile, part of her face obscured by a baby's flailing hands. Kalia could not help but smile at the beautiful young woman looking at her with laughing eyes from the still.

The next d-still was of a woman and a man. The man she recognised immediately, Hugo von Ottewald. Kalia could only assume that the woman at his side was Josephine's mother. At that thought, alarm bells started ringing in her mind. The d-still was clearly a mating picture but the house on the background looked modern. Kalia's thoughts raced in suspicion. *Wasn't Hugo's last mate a MacArden? One or another of Fiona's sisters?* The MacArden Clan were still based in an old castle, wet and dreary if Kalia remembered correctly.

Once more Kalia looked at the desk and then around the room. The large space had a definite character. Its furniture was placed exactly. The small display case on one wall held a number of swords from different eras and parts of the world. Kalia shook her head in confusion. The room emitted an essence but nothing she could connect with Josephine.

Kalia's eyes returned to the d-stills and immediately widened as she took in the last two. The figure on the one on the left, she immediately recognised and her heart thudded. It was the same figure that had rescued her last night. The same darkness swirling in a moon-lit alley, a LAC glinting in the moonlight. The face was hidden in a dark cowl but Kalia was certain the person was Romi.

The person on the other d-still, took Kalia a moment to recognise. When she did, she could not contain her gasp of surprise. The smiling face with the laughing eyes in a pair of light-blue trousers and a white cut-off shirt sitting in an overstuffed armchair hands thrown up in surprise

was nothing like Kalia would ever have imagined. Her eyes moved between the stills, her mind trying to reconcile the images.

The darkness Kalia had seen, the danger, death walking among the shadows. But the smiling woman in the other still looked so much younger, almost carefree. A cute human that looked ready to laugh forever.

Kalia shook her head, suddenly sad. She had not even recognised the familiar at first. Taking her eyes from the stills, Kalia looked around the room once again and she felt certain she knew its owner.

Just then the smaller door on the side of the room opened and Josephine walked in. "I am sorry you had to wait, Kalia. I was at the Center."

Kalia smiled at the young vampire. "I am the one who has to apologize, my dear, for interrupting you."

Josephine's reaction was immediate. "No!..ah...I mean no, there is no need to apologise."

Kalia's eyes narrowed at Josephine's reaction. It seemed like she was truly upset before she had quietened her features. *What is going on, Beauty?*, Kalia thought silently. Josephine was not looking at her, her eyes looking at some middle distance again.

Kalia waited patiently. After a few moments Josephine looked back at her, her face composed.

"How can I help you?" Josephine asked seriously.

Kalia took a deep breath before answering. This would not be easy. It never was, but then again that was why she had come.

"I want...I need some information about the missing," Kalia said quietly.

Josephine paled at her words but nodded quickly. "Of course. Anything you need."

Kalia felt the slight twinge in her breast at Josephine's sudden pallor. *What has you so frightened, Beauty?*

Keeping her voice even, Kalia spoke carefully. "This is your sister's office."

Josephine's answer was slow. "Yes. I...Everything is as she left it."

Kalia let her eyes roam around the room, finally coming back to the d-stills on the desk. "Your parents?" she asked gesturing at the still.

Josephine did not have to look but answered quickly. "Our father with Zoe's mother. They were mated for only a little while."

Kalia nodded filing the information for later use. "And Romi?"

Josephine was quiet for a few seconds before answering in a strained voice. "Yes."

Kalia's eyes narrowed at the strain in Josephine's voice. "What is it, Josephine?"

"Nothing! Nothing at all". The younger vampire sounded too quick and too breathless for truth to Kalia.

Without taking her eyes from the d-stills, Kalia let power colour her words. "What is it, Josephine?"

Moments passed in silence before Kalia heard the slight sigh from the woman near her. "Yes, that's Romi. I...I don't understand. What does it have to do with anything?" Josephine said with a strange undertone in her voice.

Kalia cleared her throat before speaking quietly. "I cannot perform miracles, my dear. I have to know them before I can find them. Who they are? What they like? What are their ties with this life?"

Kalia could hear the effect her quiet words had on Josephine from the strangled breath the brunette took. Kalia remained quiet waiting for an answer to her unspoken question.

Finally Josephine spoke in a strong even tone. "Then you are in the wrong place. If you would come with me?"

Kalia turned to the woman looking at her through lidded eyes before nodding in acquiescence.

Without a word, Josephine turned and started walking out of the room, leaving Kalia to follow. Kalia looked at the woman's back before following. Her mind flashed with images and emotions. There was nothing she could fully understand or place but there were waves of emotions coming from Josephine.

Kalia did not try to analyse or recognise. She merely let her mind absorb the flashes and emotions. There would be time later for sorting them out. As soon as they were out of the door, the four men of the escort fell in behind Kalia. Josephine turned to look at Taxy and her eyes took on a steely feel before she gestured at him to come nearer.

He almost ran to Josephine's side. Kalia could listen perfectly well at their conversation but the hushed tones made it obvious that Josephine did not want her to hear.

"What are you doing here, Tax?" Josephine whispered coldly.

The large man walking at her side glanced at her quickly before answering in a low voice. "Escorting the Lady, Jo."

"Romi?" Josephine asked quickly and received an answering grunt from the large man immediately. With a sigh Josephine turned, her eyes in front of her and gestured absently dismissing him.

Kalia watched the action avidly as she walked a few paces behind Josephine. *So it was Romi not you*, Kalia thought reflectively. Kalia wondered at Josephine's reaction. A moment before she looked angry at the escort but now she merely strode ahead without even a look or a word at them. Her thoughts immediately turned to the small familiar and her curiosity piqued. *Why an escort, Pietren? What are you expecting within these grounds?*

Kalia had no enemies that she knew in this part of the world but then again her name alone was enough to make her a target.

As Tax slowed down allowing himself to fall back from Josephine's side, Kalia caught his eyes and nodded. She saw his eyes widen at the gesture and was instantly surprised to see his answering half-bow as he fell in beside her.

He did not speak and neither did she. They merely walked side by side following Josephine.

Kalia tried to follow the twists and turns of the corridors but quickly she felt lost. Finally Josephine led them to a large staircase and started climbing quickly. At the next landing, Josephine turned into a corridor.

Kalia was surprised to see a number of men and women standing in the corridor. A few were even sitting in the alcoves or on the floor. Kalia was not alone in her surprise as Josephine stopped abruptly, her head moving from side to side taking in the sight.

For their part the soldiers in the corridor turned quickly to look at the new arrivals. None of them spoke and Kalia could see that there was little warmth in the glances directed their way.

After a few seconds, the stocky blonde vampire that had talked to her earlier in the hospital came to stand in front of Josephine.

Josephine's voice was low but cold. "Having a meeting, Cloe?"

Kalia barely heard the answer of the blond woman. "Can I help you, Josephine?"

Kalia saw the immediate tension in Josephine's shoulder and could guess at the anger smouldering in her eyes. Before Josephine could utter a word, another of the vampires that Kalia had seen around the familiar in the hospital came to stand in front of them.

His voice was even but there was no warmth in it. "This is not a good time, Jo."

Josephine's answer was quick, her anger obvious. "And why is that, Alden?"

The man's reply was low, for Josephine's ears only. "Thin Stan didn't make it, Jo."

Kalia saw Josephine step back as if from a blow and she immediately stepped forward, her heart thudding in sudden fear. The man, Alden, was already there, his arm grasping Josephine's elbow to steady her.

"Why was I not informed?" Josephine asked, her voice climbing.

"We were just told," Alden's answer was a faint whisper.

Josephine shook her head and sighed before speaking. "I am sorry, Al."

The man did not speak but Kalia could see the moisture in his eyes. Josephine's next words were calm but Kalia could hear the sadness in her voice. "We have to see Romi, Al. It's important."

Kalia watched with interest as the man looked at Cloe in question. He did not answer. He merely turned to look at Josephine as the blonde left quickly walking to the double doors at the end of the corridor.

Josephine's voice held an edge. "What is this, Al?"

His voice was low, almost too low for Kalia to hear. "Don't get all worked up, Jo. Nat is in there."

"How is he?" Josephine whispered. Alden shook his head in silent answer.

Kalia's eyes turned to the double doors at the end of the corridor from where Cloe was exiting behind a thin man who walked out the door tears falling down his cheeks. Quickly a group of vampires went around the man, hiding him from Kalia's gaze.

Kalia watched the group as they came down the corridor and quickly passed next to them. As they walked past, she caught a glimpse of the thin man in their midst. He was walking unseeing as two others held him between them.

The grave voice of the blonde made her turn. "Come on in, Jo."

Josephine glanced once more to the group now descending the stairs before turning and walking quickly down the corridor. Kalia followed, her heart heavy as she walked among the vampires lining the corridor. She could feel their gazes on her.

As soon as they reached the double-doors, Cloe went in first, holding the door for Josephine and Kalia to pass. Kalia spared a glance behind her to see the four men of her escort standing along the wall with the other scouts.

Kalia could hear the angry voice coming from behind a half-open door. "Damn it, Roms! It's like they've fucking disappeared!"

The answering light tenor was low but Kalia shivered at its coldness. "They are out there, Shie."

The answer was equally low. "You ain't going out there alone, Romi. For fuck's sakes you can barely stand...."

A loud clearing of the throat from Cloe immediately stopped the owner of the voice from saying another word. Kalia watched as Josephine opened the door wide and stepped inside. Kalia hesitated for a moment before following.

As soon as she was inside, Kalia heard the soft click of the door closing behind her. Kalia had no time to observe the room as Romi spoke. "Jo? What's wrong?"

Kalia's eyes immediately went to the small familiar dressed entirely in black and fully armed albeit without the cloak that she had seen her in before.

Josephine's answer was quick. "I am sorry for Stan. It's a great loss."

Kalia watched as blue eyes darkened but Romi did not answer. She heard Josephine's sigh before the vampire continued. "We need to talk...privately."

Kalia felt Romi's eyes moving from Josephine to her. She turned to meet those blue eyes and saw the question in them. Without thought she nodded, immediately cursing herself for her reaction. *Fuck! How do you know what I am doing here, Gyn? How much do you know?*

But it seemed like no one noticed as Romi moved purposefully towards them, grabbing the cloak draped over the couch with one hand. The light tenor sounded strained to her ears. "Do what you need to do, Jo. I am outta here."

Before Josephine could answer, Kalia surprised herself by stepping into the familiar's path, the words coming out of her mouth without thought. "Gyn, you should be here."

Romi did not stop walking until she was standing in front of Kalia. "You don't need me, Lady, for what you got to do. And I got work to do."

Even before Romi had finished speaking, Josephine was talking, her tones regal and commanding. "You will stay, Romi. This is important."

Romi did not even turn to look at Josephine, her eyes focused squarely on Kalia, as she answered. "You got two of your idiot layabouts missing, Jo. Want them found or not?"

Kalia from the corner of her eyes could see the immediate concern in Josephine's face but before she could utter a word, Romi was speaking again. "Shie will give you the details."

Josephine was still standing with her mouth open as Romi quickly stepped around Kalia and left the room hurriedly.

Kalia almost smiled as anger replaced surprise in green eyes as Josephine turned to the other vampire, Shie.

Josephine's voice was high enough to be heard outside. "What the hell, Shie?"

The vampire did not answer immediately drawing Kalia's attention. The woman was tall, almost as tall as herself, and carried herself like the soldier she was. Kalia could not help but admire the feminine form accentuated from skin-tight black clothes. The woman was obviously angry. It showed in her abrupt turn as she went to sit on the large desk in the corner immediately bringing on a comp board.

Josephine's eyes flashed as she took a step toward the desk. Just then Shie spoke. "Claudia Yong and Henry Sheridan left sometime last night. We have not been able to find them."

Kalia could see the pictures of two young people, one male one female, appear on the comp-screen as Shie tapped the shadow keys.

Josephine's voice was tight, Kalia could hear the anger in it. "What do you mean cannot find them? These are my students!"

With a last tap on the keys, Shie turned her eyes flashing. "Cannot find them, Jo. It's plain fucking English! Your little idiots have been breaking curfew left and right and we can't bloody find them."

"They will be back by tonight for star's sake! There is no need to get all hot and bothered by it. They are just kids!" Josephine spat.

Shie's eyes flashed red. "Like Kirby came back?" she shouted.

"Don't talk to me about Kirby! You did not have to tell his parents! I had to!" Josephine shouted angrily.

Kalia watched wide-eyed as the tall vampire stood up and started walking menacingly toward Josephine. Shie's voice was a growl full of threat. "You told them what, Jo? That their little piece of shit killed two of our men tonight? That we got a dozen injured?"

Shie was standing in front of Josephine her eyes flashing murder. "That the one person in this whole fucking estate we cannot spare is going out there to flash out two of your fuck-ups? Did you tell them I can spare no one to go with her? That all of our day-shift is out there right now bringing in the other seventeen that broke curfew tonight?"

At the last Shie's hands had grabbed Josephine by the front of her blouse bringing them fang to fang.

No one was more surprised than Kalia to see her own hand around the vampire's throat, to hear

her voice full of power. "Unhand her! Now!"

Shie immediately let her hands fall to her sides, her mouth opening trying to draw breath through the hand constricting her throat.

Kalia shook her head. *Where did that anger come from? Why am I acting like that? So unlike me?* As soon as Shie had stopped grabbing Josephine, Kalia let the vampire go stepping back, still shaking her head. Josephine was clearly shaken by Shie's anger and manhandling. She stood stock-still, her mouth open, a faint tremble in her limbs.

Kalia without thought put an arm around the younger woman's shoulders drawing her in. Josephine's body seemed to mould with her own. Kalia stayed there for long moments, valiantly keeping any rational thought from intruding, merely being there, feeling.

It was Josephine that stepped away first and Kalia's heart seemed to stop to see the sadness in her eyes. *There was something there... regret?* Josephine's eyes met her own, a message in them, a message Kalia could not read.

A vortex of emotions assaulted Kalia at the eye contact and she blinked to hold them at bay. A part of her screamed to get away. Another cringed in sudden fear. *No! Not now, not again, never again.* Kalia stepped back unthinkingly, tearing her eyes away from soulful green.

Josephine's voice sounded strange in her ears. "Shie, you need to rest. This is not like you."

Kalia turned to look at the soldier that had retreated back to the desk and was sitting looking at Josephine. She could see the dark circles under the woman's eyes, the drawn face. Josephine looked tired, dejected and Kalia could detect a hint of fear in Shie's face.

Shie sighed loudly before speaking in a low voice. "I am sorry, Jo. We are strung out now."

"It's ok. I was not thinking clearly either. Stars! What a mess... What were those idiots thinking?" Josephine answered slowly.

Shie nodded, her eyes sad, before turning back to the comp-screen.

Josephine's voice was strong. "You need to rest, Shie. Please."

The answer from the vampire was quick, it's tone final. "Can't, Jo. We may have to run back-up."

Kalia saw the steel entering Josephine's eyes as she shook her head in irritation.

"No wonder you idiots get killed..." Josephine whispered.

Kalia immediately alarmed looked at Shie but the vampire seemed to have heard nothing. Josephine turned to her. "Kalia, I am sorry for this. If you would come with me."

Kalia nodded immediately wondering what Josephine wanted her to see. This room seemed to be the centre of the apartment. Here was where she could find out about the missing Zoe von Ottewald. Yet Josephine apparently did not think so. Kalia shrugged as she turned to follow the younger vampire. She could always return here.

She followed Josephine out of the room into the small anteroom, where Josephine immediately turned to another of the three doors. Kalia waited as Josephine opened the door wide and stepped in before following.

Stepping inside Kalia looked around the room. Her gasp was clearly audible.

"You wanted to know her. This is her," Josephine said quietly.

Kalia could fully understand what the younger woman meant. Her eyes surveyed the room once again from the glass case full of cameras to the small half-open door of what could only be a darkroom. Kalia could recognise the true antiques but many of the designs were unknown to her.

But it was the pictures and the stills hanging on the walls and perching on every available surface that held her attention. Kalia had seen enough art in her life to recognise it when it was in front of her.

Kalia felt as if she were bombarded by emotions, from the blank-eyed children huddling under a makeshift shelter, to the doctor wearily leaning against a wall still in his surgical scrubs, through mothers and soldiers, workers and whores, people walking on crowded sidewalks, children sleeping peacefully. It seemed as if the artist had tried to capture every aspect of every life on film and still.

Kalia felt the hand on her shoulder gently turning her toward the small desk in the corner and her eyes went to the stills surrounding the small workspace. These were people she had seen in her stay under the roof of the Ottewalds, Josephine, Count Hugo, a young boy, a handful of soldiers and, of course, one blue-eyed familiar. Kalia did not have to count to know that stills of Romi outnumbered the others.

It certainly seemed like Zoe had a unique eye. Her shots were candid, revealing, loving, expressive through the impersonal lens. Kalia's mind cast back to the stark mahogany desk in the office with its precisely placed writing material. She could not help noticing the contrast with the desk in front of her. The desk was not messy but it looked like someone actually worked there.

Kalia tried to make the words soft. "Your sister has an amazing eye."

Josephine's laugh held a bitter edge. "She does. Pity you are one of a handful to know."

Kalia turned to her surprise evident in her face. "She does not exhibit?"

Josephine shook her head. "Never has. Don't think she ever will."

Kalia could not believe it. *Certainly no one expected the heir to the Ottewalds to exhibit outside but not even within the tribe? How could the woman hide such talent?*

The unvoiced question must have shown in her eyes for Josephine answered it. "There are two parts to Zoe. The heir, the leader, the soldier... call it whatever you will And...this. She keeps them separate and expects everyone else to do so as well."

There was sadness in Josephine's voice and Kalia could understand. *How could anyone not be saddened to see such pictures as these ones hidden?*

Kalia thought of her next question carefully but she had to ask it. "Does Romi know?"

Josephine looked at her quizzically before answering slowly. "Of course, she does. Romi was the one to convince her to show some of these."

Josephine gestured at the pictures around the walls before continuing. "There are a few in the library as well."

Kalia nodded thoughtfully as she cast her eyes around the room once again. "Is there a picture of your sister?" she asked quietly.

Josephine nodded before moving to one of the large cabinets and opening a drawer with an ornate R on the outside.

Taking out a still folder she brought it to Kalia without a word. Kalia sat on the desk and opened it carefully. The first few stills were of the estate but something felt wrong.

"These are not your sister's," Kalia observed slowly.

Josephine shook her head. "Romi's. Zoe was trying to teach her."

Kalia could not help the small smile that appeared on her face. It was obvious to her that the familiar did not have much of an eye judging from the stills. Turning the pages, there were mainly stills of the estate but empty of people. They were clearly the efforts of a casual photographer, not those of someone who could see the beauty beyond the lens.

Turning another page, Kalia barely contained her gasp. The page held a single still only and a small handwritten note underneath it. Her eyes travelled all over the still, taking in the moment and the emotion it reflected. Zoe von Ottewald was nothing like she expected, certainly nothing like she would have imagined her to be.

Kalia's eyes were drawn to the note and she smiled at the few words.

"Green is nice...Gray much nicer...No more trees, ok?"

Kalia raised her eyes looking around the room once again. *A soldier, so much a soldier, the son*

Josephine's voice was up an octave. "What? What do you mean no transmission?"

Before Shie could answer, a clearly irritated light tenor sounded over the wave. "Would you shut the fuck up?"

Shie heard the breath Josephine took to go on and turned immediately shaking her head in mute appeal. Putting a hand over the mike on the device, Shie whispered as low as she could. "She is alone, Jo. The wave is distracting."

Shie could see comprehension dawning in green eyes and the immediate guilt that accompanied it. Josephine's voice was barely a whisper. "Sorry."

With a hand still on the mike, Shie instructed quickly. "Watch the blip. She's got a sensor. Green is ok. Red something is going on." Seeing the quick nod from Josephine, Shie turned her own eyes to the screen.

The light tenor sounded hushed over the wave. "They were in Blade last night. Left together. Blue Beast, silver lining."

Shie started tapping the information in the comp-board, the sound of her fingertips on the shadow-keys loud in the silent room. "Done, Roms," Shie said clearly. There was no answer merely the blip speeding across the screen in the direction of Blade.

The club was deep in the Barrels. Shie could not help but wonder what the hell Claudia Yong and Henry Sheridan were doing in a place like Blade. She sat back on the chair. Her eyes never leaving the screen. Her ears attuned to the slightest sound over the wave.

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"I'm half-asleep, man".

The whining voice was getting on his nerves but the idiot would simply not shut up. He sipped his coffee trying to tune out the whining idiot. His eyes went to the far corner of the tiny basement apartment, where the girl huddled. Her sobs were clearly audible and he had to clench his teeth to stop the sigh from escaping.

Why the hell is the little slut crying? Damned if I know. It wasn't like we hurt her or anything. We would not have hurt the boy either but he tried to be a hero. Yet the bitch does not stop crying. Like the idiot they have saddled me with will not stop his incessant whining!

It isn't like I am not tired, too. But we don't dare sleep. Sure the sun is up and every fibre of my body seems to know that the fucking gas-ball is shining.

"Come on, Chico, we can take turns. You take first. Come on, man."

Hearing the man's high-pitched voice he felt his head constricting. He ignored him for the hundredth time.

If only I knew that there was back-up above, I could just blast the idiot's brains out and get some peace. But with what had gone down in the Slums earlier, I very much doubt it. Stars if I know what happened! But I know enough to doubt that there is anyone keeping watch above. Sure, there is no one manning the com-centre. At least not anyone that we have been able to raise for hours.

And here I am with a girl that will not stop fucking crying and that idiot. And it is still early. How many more hours until sundown and the possibility of some back-up worth the name? He couldn't stop the snarl from leaving his mouth. We are so fucking thin on the ground! Us thin on the ground. Who bloody would have thought that the Zindramas would be thin on the ground?

It had all started so well. He could remember those nights so clearly, those ten beautiful nights. Ten nights of not getting blasted out of the streets. Back then when there were people you were certain would have your back when the shit hit the fan.

Ten nights. Ten fucking nights! Ah, man... the Ottewalds were running. They sure were. He could remember the certainty that it would be over in less than a moon. We were strong. The streets were ours. Ours! Another snarl escaped his clenched lips. He had been there that night. That night when the tide turned. Not that he knew it then but he could see it clearly now. If I, a lowly soldier, could see it, why, fuck why, didn't anyone else see it?

He could remember the screams over the wave. He could remember their frantic dash to the low Slums. Bile rose in his throat just by the memory. He swallowed to keep his stomach from emptying. That night he had spewed all over the place the moment he saw the bodies. *In the space of a block, six patrols down. Six! Not one still breathing.*

Everyone had been upset but they thought it a fluke. *Hell, I thought it a fluke, too. They had been lucky, or the patrols had been lax, or something. Surely there was an explanation. An explanation. Ha!*

And everything was quiet for the next two nights. He could remember the laughter in the barracks. Koreis slapping him on the back, his deep voice full of laughter.

Oh, how certain we had been. Just a little setback. A fluke. Certainly nothing to worry about. But that night there were screams again on the wave. And more bodies on the streets. And the next night and the night after that and every night.

He had not paid attention, not really. It was not until Koreis' bunk had a new occupant that he looked around the barracks and did not see any that he knew. *New faces, new blood. It wasn't a bad thing. New blood is good, I am new blood in a way as well.*

He could see the new faces in his mind but so few he could put a name to. They were never there long enough to get names. To know more about them than that they existed.

Every night more bodies found. Every night new faces. But every barrel has a bottom. And judging from the idiot I have been partnered tonight, the recruiters are down to the bottom.

They were down to the bottom, and so am I. And it is a cold and lonely bottom. Here I am. With a girl that can't stop crying and an idiot that wants to sleep. Sleep! The idiot wants to sleep. Are they all so stupid? All he could do was wait. His sword in his hand, the long gun at his side.

He could wish for a long wait but every minute that passed meant only more weariness. And it doesn't do to be tired. No sir... When the door opened, I want a chance. The others laughed, cocky little idiots.

They don't see the nose in front of their faces. We have them, the Ottewald kid and the heir. But none of the soldiers, none of the street-walkers are ever told where. In the beginning he had thought nothing of it. But he had heard enough over the wave to know better now.

The question was always the same. Always... He heard the answers only of course but the question was obvious. Cocky answers, good answers, flippant answers, stupid answers. You name it, some idiot has said it already. And all of them futile, all of them ending in the same gurgling sound or the booming sound of a shot.

He watched the door. Fuck me! If there is a sound to hear how the fuck will I hear? Not with the sobbing from the girl and the idiot's unstoppable nattering.

The bang from behind had him out of the chair and turning in the air, his sword extended, the coffee flying from his hand as he desperately tried to bring his gun to bear.

The next blast reached his ears even as he felt the twin impacts stopping his turn, sending him backward, slamming him against the wall. He tried to lift his gun but his hand was empty. He tried to look around for it but his head refused to move. He felt hands on him, turning his head. There was no pain but his hands would not move.

Everything seemed darker somehow. Who's turned off the lights? Well, lights off is a good thing. I must have closed my eyes. There was no light any more. Time to sleep.

He would have been surprised at the gloved hand that closed his sightless eyes.

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"Hey, wake up...Come on, wake up."

Tiny movements in waking. The soft sound of short hair scratching against her collarbone.

"Come on, little one. It's almost six. Time to get up."

The sleepy voice makes her smile. "Mmm...Oh...It's you."

She swallows to stop from laughing. "Why? Whom were you expecting?"

Eyes still closed but a voice almost awake. "Clara Voyager?"

"Clara Voyager? What have you been dreaming, you clown?"

The muzzling on the side of her chest warms her heart. Voice muffled against her skin. "Who? Me? Nothing...."

She cannot contain the laughter this time and it echoes in the room.

Blue eyes, sparkly with mischief, find hers and she can only laugh harder. She feels the movement more than she sees it. Soft lips cover her mouth. A kiss she returns. Only the lack of oxygen forces her to break the kiss.

She is out of breath, the blood thudding in her ears. The smile her eyes see no one ever witnesses. The voice she hears is the one only she ever hears. "I like it when you laugh."

What she sees in the blue eyes above her makes her shiver. The endearment comes tumbling out without censor from her mind. "Ah...Love."

The head that lowers to lie on her shoulder feels like it's been there forever. The soft whisper barely reaches her ears. "You smell nice, too."

Her arm tightens around the strong body that moulds with her own. Pain shoots up her arm making her gnash her teeth together.

"Easy... easy. Don't move. Please...". The soft voice in her ear sounded strange.

Her eyes opened of their own accord. Darkness blanketed everything. "Baby?" Her voice was no more than a croak.

"It's me, Sis. Zeno...your brother". The boy's voice cracked in the middle of the sentence.

She did not know which pain was greater: the flashing jolts of agony in her arm and shoulders or the sudden emptiness inside her. She blinked slowly trying vainly to clear clouded vision.

"Stay still, big sis. You gotta give time for the slash to heal. Please, Zoe. Please..." He was pleading now. She could hear the despair in his voice.

Her thoughts felt sluggish. She tried to take stock. Pain, pain all over. There was no part of her

body that was not sending desperate signals. But it was the heat she felt and the coldness that accompanied it that told her most. Her throat was tight but she had to force the words out. *The boy is young, too young. I cannot leave him alone.*

"No worries, boy...Fever...will pass...stay...calm," she finally managed to croak out.

The effort was too much. She could hear the bubbling in her lungs. Breathing hurt and scorched. The quiet sob cut through the fog in her mind. *The boy is crying again.* With a grunt she turned her head to look at him, reassure him. The blinding pain shot behind her eyes. The darkness came over her.

Gentle hands, trembling, slowly turned her head. They gently wiped the sweat from her brow, leaving a faint smudge of dirt. Hesitantly they touched her broken skin. A sigh echoed in the small dark room as trembling hands wiped tears away from green eyes.

The whisper was almost inaudible in the stillness of the dark. "Hold on. Please... just hold on. They'll come. You'll see they'll come."

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Chapter 5: Shadows in the Cemetery

Cloe stood in the corner, her eyes trained on the stairs. The landing and corridor were almost deserted. Only she and Alden remained. She passed a hand through her short spiky hair, a barely audible sigh escaping her lips. He heard and turned from his post at the landing.

Worried eyes looked at her and Cloe gestured impassively. Alden shook his head but dutifully turned away, back to his survey of the stairs. *We could have gone off to sleep.* With the day teams back in the estate all the scouts had been stood down.

But Cloe could not leave her post. *Shie is inside, and Josephine too, along with the guest. Yet it feels wrong to leave the corridor deserted. To let Romi come back to silence and emptiness.*

The broken whisper a few nights back haunted her thoughts. *"There is no colour these days, Blondie. Everything is flat."* Cloe had not dared to answer. *What answer was there to give?*

It frightened her so much. So much that she could not even voice it. Giving it voice would make it real, more real than it already was in her thoughts. Cloe had seen it tonight once again, that emptiness of the eyes, that lack of anything resembling sanity.

Nathaniel had been sedated and put to sleep with his team taking turns watching over him. But there was nothing they could do. Nothing anyone of them could do.

Nat's eyes had emptied of everything when Shie gave him the news. *Who would have thought it? It was not like it had been the love story of the century or something. Hell, the two of them spent half their time fighting and the other half bitching about each other.* But Nat's eyes bore the truth

that she had failed to see.

Shie had said to keep him away from the streets as much as possible but it was Romi's toneless voice that brought shivers to her even in memory. *"Keep him sedated. Maybe he'll get over it in a while."*

Cloe had looked at Romi then, at the blue eyes that seemed to hold no expression, at the face that had stayed impassive throughout. And fear had hit her heart like a blast round in the gut. *Like to like. It took one to know one.* All the old sayings chased each other in her head.

The toneless words had held no hope. Nat should not go out on the streets. That was what Romi was telling them. For if he did, he would not come back. Her eyes looked to the figure standing, feet planted wide, on the landing.

Cloe did not even want to wonder. She did not dare think. *It took me so long to find you, boy, so long to see you.* The thought wailed like a mourner at a funeral in her mind.

Alden's abrupt move toward the stairs made Cloe's heart thud even as her feet instinctively moved.

The cold voice made Cloe stop in her tracks. "Leave me be, Alden. I'm fine."

Cloe took a step back as the darkness-clad figure reached the landing, Alden hovering at her side, shadowing every step.

A blind man could see that something was wrong. Romi's steps were laboured and slow, an arm held close to her body. Cloe did not hesitate as she took a step towards the woman passing in front of her. She was careful as she put an arm around Romi's waist, just above the weapons' belt.

The words that echoed in the corridor do not faze her. "Fuck, Cloe. Get away from me!"

Cloe did not step back. Merely she tightened her hold further trying to support as much of the familiar's weight as possible. "Shut up, Roms. You are hurt," Cloe's voice sounded strong in her ears and she wondered how her voice could be strong when she was quaking like a leaf inside.

"It's nothing. Just need to sit," the light tenor was strained and Cloe could feel the lie in the sticky wetness that coated her fingers.

Shie's words the night before sounded in the corridors of her mind. *"The sealant is crumbling. It's a human thing."*

If it were anyone else Cloe knew exactly what to do. Her arms would have already moved. She would already be cradling the tired body. Yet she could not. Not from some obscure sense of propriety but from a very real fear. For Romi to have allowed even this much help, she must have really been hurt.

But the familiar would never allow anything more than that, Cloe was certain. And with Romi fully armed that was a chance she was not willing to take. Their progress down the corridor is slow and strained. Alden has moved on ahead, opening the double doors, his eyes so worried that they were almost crimson.

Cloe did not really look ahead. All her attention centred on supporting while exerting the least amount of pressure possible. She could feel the fresh stickiness that dripped over her fingers. She could see the involuntary twitch of Romi's lips at every step.

The hands that covered hers made Cloe look up. Shie's worried frown met her alarmed gaze

"Sergei?" Shie's voice was low, the question evident.

The familiar's answer was no more than a grunt but clear enough for both of them to hear. "No!"

Slow step after slow step, Cloe barely registered Josephine's hushed gasp as they entered the central room and moved to the bathroom door.

As soon as they were inside the tiled confines of the bathroom suite, Romi's voice sounded so loud in her ears. "Enough. I'll take it from here."

Cloe did not want to go but she could find no words. Desperately she looked at Shie but the taller woman was already turning to leave.

Romi's eyes caught her gaze. The voice held little warmth. "No worries, Blondie. I'll see ya in a bit."

Cloe lowered her eyes to the blue and white tiles of the floor. There was no sound from behind her as she left closing the door softly behind her.

Cloe stood just there. Just there, outside the door. She tried to listen but the door was thick, too thick for any small sounds to reach her ears. Yet she did not walk further. All eyes in the room were upon her but she had no way of answering the questions in them.

Cloe planted her feet wide apart. Her hands found each other behind her back. Her eyes found some spot on the opposite wall to rest her gaze.

She might be able to do nothing. She might have no words to speak. She had nothing to give but this. Her body to become guard. No one would pass no matter what. This at least she would preserve. These moments, this privacy. Cloe could feel the emotions swirling in the close confines of the room. Yet silence reigned.

What little talent Cloe had, made her head ache. Too much pain, too much rage, too much guilt in one room unuttered, unexpressed. It was moments like this that she wished Zephyr had not taken all the talent leaving her with no more than scraps.

Cloe could not hear their thoughts. She could not even tell one emotion from the other, or where they originated from. Yet it still affected her. In waves they came clamouring for her attention.

She swallowed. Her mouth was dry. Her eyes never moving from that bare undistinguished spot on the wall. Brick by brick Cloe built the wall to keep the others away. Split second by split second the barrage receded, until she felt alone in her own head. Even so she did not turn her gaze away from the wall.

All Cloe wanted was to open the door at her back and go inside. See what was there to see. See the blood and the open flesh and the pain. Be there, do something, anything. But there was nothing. Nothing she could do. Nothing anyone could do.

Cloe did not understand but she knew. The others still believed that there was something to be done. She could see it in their eyes. In their hushed words. In their hastily hidden anger.

Cloe could turn, open the door, walk inside. She was strong, far stronger than the human. She was quick, far quicker than any human. But she could not.

Others wondered why. They had even dared to ask her. It was known after all that Romi would never hurt her.

"Romi may attack anyone else, but not you, not you, Cloe". Their voices always seemed to say, even when their words were different.

It was true after all. In her heart of hearts Cloe knew it. Romi would never hurt her. Yet they were all blind. Romi would not hurt her. Why did they think she would do anything to hurt the human? Even if, as they all thought, it was for her own good.

She wanted to turn, open the door, help in whatever way she could. But she could not. She knew there was only one person under the stars that had the right to open that door. Only one person that Romi had given that right.

Her eyes closed to keep the tears from falling. These days it seemed she could not stop them from flooding her eyes. In the silence between the beats of her heart, Cloe could only pray. *Stars, let her be alive. Let her still be alive*

The touch on her shoulder was light and Cloe turned, her eyes snapping open. Romi's eyes met her as she turned, the ice in them a thin film over the raging pain underneath. A tiny pat on her shoulder just before the touch receded. Cloe stepped to the side, letting Romi pass. She hoped no one had noticed the moisture in her eyes.

Josephine was the first to speak. "What happened, Roms?"

The voice that answered her was toneless. "The girl is with Sergei. She is alright. The boy...the boy's dead."

"What? When? How?" Josephine said quickly.

Romi moved slowly to the couch and sat. The black cloak shimmered as Romi carefully put it next to her before answering. "I don't know, Jo. The girl is in shock. She didn't say much else."

Josephine stood. She was already moving toward the door before she spoke. "I have to go. Stars! What a mess." No one spoke to stop her even as they watched her leave.

As the outer door clicked shut, Romi looked at Alden. "Time to sleep, big man. It's been a long night."

The tall vampire turned looking at Cloe, still standing next to the half-open bathroom door.

"You sure?" Cloe asked carefully.

The nod that answered her was slow. "We all need rest, Blondie. Go...."

Cloe nodded quickly in acquiescence before moving to take Alden's hand in hers and led him out.

The click of the closing door sounded loud in the silent room. The sigh that followed it was slight but still it ravaged Shie's heart to hear it. Shie did not need to see to know. She could smell blood and death even over the soap and the disinfectant.

Shie's eyes were drawn to the hunched body on the couch. Head held in her hands, Romi sat drawing long even breaths. Shie could recognise the signs, the signs of waiting for the drugs in the sealant to take effect, to numb the pain. A part of her wanted to ask, to voice all the questions that passed through her mind. *How badly are you hurt? What happened? How did you find the children? How many of the bastards were there?*

But these two months had taught Shie well. Pointless questions, questions that will receive no answers. Romi never answered, not questions such as these. Shie could only watch as the human raised her head and with a small grunt stood up. Heavy steps thudded on the lush carpet as Romi moved to the desk in the corner and innocuous cabinet above it.

Shie averted her eyes as Romi took one of the automatic injectors and quickly shot another dose into herself. Still the tremor that passed over Romi's wasted frame was not lost on Shie. Her voice was careful. "Romi..."

A glare from shadowed eyes was the only answer to her unvoiced objection before Romi turned back to the desk.

As Romi sat, her hands finding the map without apparent thought, her low voice echoed in the room. "Get some rest, Shie."

Shie could only shake her head in silent denial and Romi did not even turn to look at her, nor did

she speak again, her attention devoted to the map in front of her. "You need to rest. The sealant..."

Her words made Romi turn from her study of the map on the desk. Romi's answer was clearly irritated. "Enough! I am not a child. Nor will I listen to Sergei's foolishness! I know what I'm doing, Shie."

Shie took a deep breath trying to force her own irritation down. Still a smidgen of it showed in her tone. "Of course you are not a child. But you are bleeding. Again. You can't go on like this. Not matter how much of that infernal drug you take, you are human, not vampire. You cannot just ignore this!"

The answer was an angry hiss. "You think I don't know? You and Sergei and the Count and fucking everybody! The sealant this and the sealant that. The sealant is nothing! It's the Tokan!"

Shie's eyes closed of their own accord at the revelation. *Oh, stars.* The odd cocktails of drugs that Romi was taking to keep her strength up and increase her reaction times were not something Shie wanted to think about. *As if the aggressiveness, the black-outs and the pain were not enough. The infernal drugs affect the sealant too! Stars, will this never end?*

Shie closed her eyes trying to find words, any words to express her disquiet. "Can't you stop? Just for a few days? You can do the patrols in the day. I'll do the night ones." *Anything to keep you away from the damn drugs. Please, Romi, just for once do the wise thing.*

The anger flashing in the eyes that turned to her brought the lead weight of fear to settle in her belly. Romi's words were ice. "And while I happily get the blasted things out of my system and the sealant heals, where will Falcon be, Shie?"

There was no answer that Shie dared to give to that question.

The silence stretched uncomfortably long. Finally a small sigh escaped Romi's lips. Her voice was low. "This does not leave this room. Am I clear...Captain?"

Shie's eyes narrowed in alarm at the use of her title. Romi never used it unless it was something important. Something really important. Her nod was quick, even as her breath caught in anticipation.

Romi sighed once more before speaking slowly. "The sun hurts me..."

It took a moment before Shie registered the import of the words. "What? How?" she stammered.

Romi shrugged and shook her head. "I don't know. We must have been careless, I guess."

"How long? Did you tell Zoe?"

Romi closed her eyes for a second before answering. "About a year. Falcon realised it first."

Shie had to bite her lips to stop the words from escaping. Still she could not contain the anger of her thoughts. *A year? A fucking year? What were you thinking, Zoe? Stars!*

A full minute passed before Shie could contain her anger enough to speak. "Alright. What's done is done. I'll speak to the Count. The convocation is in a few nights' time."

The words had barely left her mouth, when Romi's reaction rang out in the room. "No!"

Shie opened her mouth to speak but Romi cut in immediately. "This is not up for discussion, Shie. I am not turning. Not like this."

Shie's mind could barely understand the words. Their meaning eluded her for long moments. *Not like this? The drugs can be flushed out of the system quickly, potent as they are.*

She tried to speak but Romi stopped her once more. "I told you because I'm sick of people trying to tell me what to do. This is over. I know what I'm doing and that's all there is. With the drugs and Zoe's blood in me, I can take the bastards. The sealant is nothing. It keeps well enough still."

Shie opened her mouth to voice her objection though she knew it would be brushed aside. Still she had to try. Romi's words stopped her. "Don't be a fool, Shie. I've had sealant crumble before on me. Don't be as stupid as the others. You know better."

Shie could only look at Romi with wide eyes as the familiar turned back to her quiet study of the map on the desk. *You are right, damn you. I do know better.* Yet Shie still felt uneasy with anything that reminded her of Romi's past as a mercenary. Even so the suspicion remained. *Are you telling me the truth, Gyn? Or merely playing at it? Do you care enough to live to tell me when it will become too much? When you won't be able to take anymore drugs, to fight in the night toe to toe with one of us?*

Her eyes misted over and Shie blinked quickly to dispel the sudden tears. She was not one of those who found tears easy but it seemed like fate conspired to rend her heart apart. It seemed like she was always being pummelled in this room. The same room, the same desk, the same forsaken hour of the morning as when she had come to give her report all those years ago.

But the back turned to her was different. The hands that rifled through the papers with slow motions were different. Shie knew the eyes trained with such concentration on the documents were different. Where blue eyes now roamed the map desperately trying to find the spot that they had not yet searched, the spot that held their hope, once they were grey. Back then it was Zoe's tense back and insane stubbornness that held Shie's attention.

Shie cannot stop her hands from fidgeting at each rustle of pages turning. No word had been

uttered between them for hours, hours that pages turned and papers rustled. Part of her wants to shout. Somehow give vent to nerves and boredom. *For fuck's sake, you've read the bloody thing twice already.*

But Shie does not shout. All she can do is fidget with her hands, even as her foot taps a steady tattoo onto the carpet. She has read the same papers herself enough times. *Hell, I wrote most of those reports.* As for the others, she was the one to find them, to bribe for them and steal them.

Part of her wonders. *What is it that she sees that I missed?* But mostly Shie feared...feared the moment Zoe's steely grey eyes would turn to her.

Three months of searching, three long months with no more than a blurred d-still and a name to help her. The name had been no help. Then again she had not expected it to be real or even the only one the human used. Slayers often changed their names and Booker had the look of a woman with a past to run from. Even the still was no real help, too blurred. Shie had complained about that in the beginning but as the months passed and more information came in she stopped complaining.

The reason had become obvious eventually, though Shie still resented not being told from the beginning. *The Cantos are not known for letting deserters live.* The famed band of mercenaries that could be found in every battlefield since the last great war was a harsh taskmaster.

Humans aged quickly. Thankfully the still was too blurred to show the human's age accurately. It could have been taken six months ago or ten years ago. It was the little things, the details that had helped Shie find the right track.

The LACs, the low voice that always felt unused, the book always in some pocket, and most of all the shadows, the shadows in deep blue eyes that meant death. It was the little things that people remembered. The little things that had guided her through three months of searching.

And now all of her findings were there on the desk, carefully being read line by line, carefully observed and catalogued d-still by d-still. The little information she had managed to collect in slum towns and run-down orphanages. The official-looking documents from the Cantos that had taken too many bribes and hair-raising meetings with men, and women, that seemed too enmeshed in darkness even for the hardened soldiers they were.

A part of her resented that it had taken so long. With the resources of the clan at her disposal, Shie would have been able to crack this little mystery in weeks, if not days. But her orders had been crystal clear.

Shie could still vividly remember the cold words. *"You will use nothing that can be traced back to us. Nothing at all, Shie. Am I clear?"*

"Crystal," she had answered then. She had been angry and frustrated. She had even wondered whether this was some obscure type of punishment.

But as the months passed, Shie had seen the wisdom of her instructions. Now if anyone wanted to search, all they would find was the trail of a tall blonde with green eyes that disappeared abruptly at the other end of the continent. She almost laughed. The disguise had worked to perfection and there was nothing to connect the blonged green-eyed investigator with the dark-haired brown-eyed captain of the Ottewald.

One young mercenary missing in action would remain presumed dead and anyone interested in them nothing more than a shadow figure in frail human memories. Not that Shie feared the Cantos. The tribe was stronger even than the infamous mercenaries. *Still better to leave no trace. Or chance another round of rumours and odd articles in the press.*

The deep voice took her by surprise. Shie had been expecting it for so long that when it came she almost did not believe it.

"What do you think?" The words are clear, enunciated to perfection but Shie can detect no inflection in them.

Shie looks up at Zoe who is patiently waiting for her answer. *What can I say? What the fuck can you say about this mess?*

Shie can not help the sigh that escapes her lips. This was not easy. Her words were slow, hesitant. "I'm not certain. Your human has certainly led an interesting life. Hell... more than just interesting....eh... There are too many questions, Zoe. I...I don't know...."

"Questions?" Zoe's answer is immediate, yet her voice still holds no feeling.

Shie sighs again. *Fuck, what can I say?* "Questions. Gaps. Whatever you wanna call them," she says finally.

Zoe's eyes impale her with their intensity but she lets the silence stretch. Shie cannot take the silence, not for long, and Zoe knows it. *Fuck it! Fuck it all to hell...*

Shie speaks. She knows there is no choice. "Birth, parents, age... I could find nothing. She grew up in the Slums but... There is always something. People remember others, but never...they don't remember her, Zoe. She just...ah...appears out of the blue. Some petty thievery, the usual. And then it's the Squads.

"And there... fuck...there it's a shambles. Sure...she climbs the ranks quickly but why? Why? No one seems to know. She doesn't even have a unit. People remember her here and there, but no one for long. And then...then she just disappears. Off into thin air! Like she never existed.

"And suddenly she's a slayer. Even then...it's more like a ghost. Not one team, not one place. It's just blips. There is no line. I...I just don't know." Silence greets Shie's words, silence that stretches into long minutes.

Zoe's voice is low, almost too low to hear. "No theories, Shie? That's not like you."

Shie can't bear to look into those grey raptor eyes any longer and she turns away. She has to.

But Zoe will not let it rest. Her rebuke is almost immediate. "Speak to me, damnit!"

What can I say? What, oh stars, what? There was only one explanation Shie has been able to think of and it seems more like vid story than a life.

She takes a deep breath before answering desperately trying to find the words. "I think...I think she was a black ops, Zoe. I'm...ah fuck...I'm sorry...."

The silence stretches and finally she turns to look at Zoe looking thoughtfully at her. "That would make sense." The gravely voice that answers surprises Shie more than any rebuke or denial.

The question that immediately springs to Shie's mind must have shown on her face for Zoe answers quietly. "She knows too much about such things not to have personal experience. It's alright, Shie. This is good news. No lies. No lies."

Shie can only nod. She does not know the human well. After all, Booker had appeared only a month before Shie was sent on her errand. Still, Shie suspects no one does, not even Zoe. But Shie has observed this Booker closely and there is a shadow in the mirror of her eyes.

Pain, death and a knowledge. Shie has seen it in others, too. In older vampires, those who lived through the old days, when there were still mobs with pitchforks and torches coming to kill and loot. The knowledge of death, how to deliver it...how to accept it.

The thought springs unbidden in her mind as she observes Zoe's features calming and a small smile appear on her lips. *Stars damn you, Falcon. It would be like you to find someone with the blood of a killer. Fuck me! Good news, she says. Good bloody news...*

The low voice startled her out of her reverie. "It's late, Shie. You must rest."

Shie looked at the cold eyes that looked at her under hooded lids and she nodded. "You too, Roms."

The slow nod that answered her was a blade in her heart. Romi looked old right now, tired, despairing.

Shie tried to keep the despair away from her eyes even as it wailed in her thoughts. *No matter what you do, it's not enough, is it, Roms? With the drugs and what you know and even Zoe's blood in you, it's still not enough. How long before one of them gets you? How long before I*

have to bring back your lifeless body to the estate?

Shie watched without speaking as Romi stood slowly and walked to the couch. She did not even take her cloak or shoes off before laying on the couch. Her eyes closed even before her head hit the small pillow.

Shie dashed the tears that had appeared suddenly in her eyes angrily. Crying would not help anyone now. With a sigh, she bent to remove her heavy boots before lying down on the couch herself. Shie closed her eyes but sleep was long in coming.

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The door was closed. Even Kalia's sensitive hearing could hear no sound from within. Her hand was raised to knock but she did not move. She blinked tired eyes. Wearily she stepped away from the door, her hand falling to her side.

Has the human come back yet? But if Romi had yet to return there would certainly be someone around. The vampire, Shie, had looked determined to stay and wait for as long as necessary.

With a sigh Kalia walked up to the large double doors, opening them silently. Slowly she stepped outside, closing the door securely behind her. A shadow as she turned made her stiffen in alarm.

But the small man that stepped up to her had his hands held out. "Lady, how may we help you?"

Kalia looked around then as a tall thin man stepped out of an alcove and bowed deeply. Her eyes roamed over the pair as they both waited respectfully for her answer. Part of her wondered. *What is wrong with this house that guards are needed inside its sanctum?*

Kalia's shrug was too small to be noticed by the two scouts as she dismissed the matter from her mind. This was a clan at war after all and in war all oddities were normal.

Her voice was calm and commanding. Kalia tried to suppress any vestige of her tiredness from showing. "If you could direct me to a guest room, soldier, I would be grateful."

The man stepped back gesturing lightly for his colleague to step forward. The thin man's voice was deep, respectful. "Please, Lady, if you would come with me?"

Kalia nodded in acquiescence and he walked away. With a glance at the smaller man who bowed to her once more, she turned to follow the guard. Their steps echoed slightly in the almost empty corridors as the man led her downwards. The man was extremely courteous opening doors for her with small bows even if he declined to speak.

Kalia had no problem with that. She had no wish to speak. Her mind was awash with images as her memory replayed constantly a stream of Zoe von Ottewald's d-stills.

The heir of this house certainly had talent. Kalia spent hours going through file after file and

album after album. Not only d-stills but also old-style film photos and even digies.

And all of them exhibiting the same amazing eye. Like the most talented of photographers, Zoe's eye was haunting, filling the mind with images that seemed ineligible in memory.

The bright lights of the hospital corridor seemed oddly welcoming and when the man opened the door to her hospital room she smiled at him. He returned Kalia's smile with a deep bow before closing the door behind her.

The bed looked inviting, her body felt tired. *Oh so tired.* But Kalia's mind whirled with images and thoughts. With slow movements she removed her clothes before laying inside the covers.

Sleep would come quickly she knew but the images would continue in her dreams. Once Kalia had hated the talent that never let her rest, not even in sleep. Kalia sighed at the remembrance. That girl was long dead. The woman that settled the soft blanket over tired limbs had long ago resigned herself to the vagaries of her talent.

Kalia closed her eyes waiting for sleep to come. It was funny how the mind worked. Her last waking thought was of a pair of soulful green eyes and a smile that could take your breath away.

^^

"You must not move from this spot, Jo. No matter what. It's not our job to get involved. Hear me, little sis?"

Zoe's words are swift. She must have repeated them ten times already. She cannot help but smile at Josephine's exasperated sigh. Zoe can see clearly that Jo shares none of her suspicions. *Then again I had not expected her to. Josephine's instincts are not yet developed.*

For the hundredth time these last few days, Zoe curses her weakness that has let Josephine live such a sheltered life. *So stupid. I should have made her take the training and the studies be damned. Stars!*

Yet she cannot help the spark of pride that the determined look in her little sister's face brings to her eyes. The low clearing of a throat makes Zoe turn, her right hand instinctively finding the hilt of the sword at her waist.

The blue eyes that meet hers for no more than a moment hold more amusement than fear. The glint of black muzzle pointing towards the ground almost makes her laugh. *Whatever faults the human has, excessive trust is not one of them.*

The voice is no more than a whisper for a human but Zoe can hear it clearly. "Falcon...Mary..." The respectful nod that accompanies the words is something Zoe has come to expect this last moon. It serves to do no more than heighten her suspicions even as her heart warms at the sight.

The other Slayers can barely be called civil but this one, this Worm as they call her, is always

respectful. Not in a fawning way to be sure, more like one equal to another. So different from the others.

Josephine has not taken a liking to this human but again she cannot yet recognise the difference between respect and fearful ass-kissing. Even worse she cannot fully see the many intentional insults and slights. Too sheltered by half. Damn me.

The difference between this Worm human and the other Slayers is almost too good to be true. And Zoe knows very well that when something looks too good to be true, rarely is it true. *The shoe will drop, little human, and I'll be there when it does.*

Yet she still nods back in acknowledgement. Whatever her suspicions are, Zoe cannot make herself treat this human with the cold indifference and barely veiled threat she treats the others. Her mind shies away from that line of thought. This is neither the time nor the place. *It's nothing. She is just...likeable. Ok, she is likeable.*

The human is speaking again Zoe realises belatedly with shock. *What the fuck is wrong with me? Concentrate, you idiot!* Such lapses in concentration can prove deadly here in the wilds.

"...if possible, Miss Mary, please do stay here. With all due respect, ma'am, this business had better be left to professionals."

What? You insolent little pup! A part of her growls at the insult. *Jo may not be a fighter but hell's bells no human has the right to voice such insult.*

Yet the warrior in her cannot help but agree. After all this is no more than she had been telling Josephine herself but a moment earlier. Zoe's eyes narrow as the human turns to her. *Truly, the woman has not yet uttered an insulting word in my hearing. Still after this afternoon... Let's see what game you play, human.*

Yet the human's voice holds no insinuating undertone. "Falcon...ah...with all respect, Sir, I...I would truly appreciate it if you stayed outside the red zone with the others. No offence, Sir, but I work better alone."

Zoe looks at the human expressionless, her mind whirling. *Is this a trap of some sort?*

The Slayers had designated two zones of attack, red and blue. Yet none of the others had said anything about avoiding the red zone. *And why the fuck would the human be working alone? The plan is crystal clear. Two zones of attack and two teams of attack.*

Zoe watches the human's face closely otherwise she would never have caught the flash of anger in shadowed blue eyes. The light buzz from the human's shoulder pocket is almost too loud in the silence.

"What is it?" the human says in the harsh whisper that she always uses when talking to any of the Slayers.

"What? Why?" the human spits out and Zoe can see anger flooding the shadows in blue eyes that seem made of steel. Zoe can hear Bear still speaking as the human turns the device off.

The mumbled curse is almost inaudible. "Fuck, fuck and thrice fuck."

The human turns to her and Zoe has to steel herself from stepping back from the rage reflected in the depths of her eyes.

The voice is a low growl full of threat. "Stay out of the red, blood-sucker. That's my bit of the woods. Got it?"

Zoe has no chance to answer the insult as the human strides away quickly, blending with the surrounding shadows.

For a moment Zoe can only stare in consternation. *What was this about?* The human looked angry but there was something else in the harsh lines of her face as well.

"Blood-sucker? I cannot believe this!"

Josephine's whisper makes Zoe turn. Her little sister is clearly angry. Her eyes flashing in the faint moonlight. Zoe barely stops the shake of her head.

Can't blame Jo. Not really... She's lived a sheltered life and no one to blame but me. If only I had pushed her to complete her training. At least give soldiering a try. Well... No use worrying about it now. Maybe it's not too late. She just hangs on the words. She needs to look further.

"Let it be, Sis. It's nothing," Zoe says quietly. "Stay here. Don't move, Jo. No matter what, you hear me?"

Josephine's nod is slow and Zoe can see the spark of wilful rebellion in her sister's eyes. She pins Josephine down with a stare. She tries to make her eyes cold like she would to a soldier that dared to question her orders. Zoe is not certain whether she has succeeded until Josephine nods again, with a resigned sigh this time.

Zoe nods back and starts to climb down the gentle slope towards the abandoned cemetery. She has no intention of entering either zone of combat. *At least not where anyone can see me.* But Zoe has things to observe and reports to make when she goes back to the estate. *Can't do that from afar now, can I?*

Her steps are light on the ground. Her body instantly adapting to the changes in terrain. Zoe does not think about it. Her mind is concentrating on the task ahead. She traverses the slope moving steadily downwards but at an angle. She has memorised the positions of the Slayers, as well as where the rogue vampire is supposed to be.

Finally Zoe can see the boulder the human had described last night after scouting the area.

Silently she steps into its shadow blending with the darkness. Her movements are quick and sure as she takes the glasses out of her jacket pocket.

Zoe scans the area quickly registering the heat signatures. The three bodies in the cemetery are easy to find, together in one of the crypts. *That rogue has tried to be smart but I bet that he is not expecting to be found so soon. Turning just two others in a moon. Well, maybe we deserve to be lucky for once.* She turns to observe the slopes around her.

One by one, Zoe finds the signatures of the Slayers and her eyes narrow. Four humans are scattered around the slopes and she can see another one stealthily entering the cemetery. Zoe can recognise the Worm as the one entering the cemetery and Snake's slight figure on the slope at her left but she cannot find the large silhouette of Bear.

Still searching, Zoe's hand drops down to the long-shooter at her hip. She unholsters the gun slowly, but she does not dare prime it yet. The sound is too distinctive and the night is too silent.

The heavy sound of a blast echoes in the cemetery and Zoe searches for movement. One of the three heat signatures in the crypt is down but the other two are moving, fleeing. *Stars! I wish these Slayers had a wave like the tribe. That's an empty bloody hope. Very few teams can afford such equipment and this lot are not a team, not really, at least not enough to give any of their pay for fancy equipment like the wave.*

With a click Zoe turns the gun on. The priming sounds loud in her ears. No more blasts are coming from the cemetery but that is not what makes her heart race. None of the Slayers on the slopes are moving downward. None of them are shooting. *What the fuck? They have heat-seeking glasses. They should be able to see the rogues as well as I. What the hell is going on?*

A sudden flash makes Zoe's heart skip a bit as another blast sounds. She can see the figure running stealthily towards one of the targets. *This makes no sense. No sense at all. This is not a Slayer tactic. At least not one I've ever seen or heard of. Even if the human is running point, the rest of the team should be moving in now.*

Zoe's feet move involuntarily as shots flash in the cemetery. This time no blasts echo merely the high whines of small shooters. With a wrench of will she stops her instinctive reaction to step forward, to run into the fight. None of the four figures on the slopes has moved in yet.

A trap? Zoe wonders. Or merely a double-cross among Slayers? If only Jo was not here...

Zoe cannot get involved, not with her sister here. *If this is a trap...* She starts to turn to look for the telltale signature on the slope behind her and on the right, where she had left Jo at the vantage point but another blast keeps Zoe's attention on the battle below.

Zoe can feel her lips curving in a grim smile as she finds another of the rogue vampires down. *Whatever the human packs in those blasters, sure is effective. A single shot and the rogue is down.*

Zoe is still smiling as she turns her back to the cemetery. Her attention is now all on the slope above her. Zoe scans once and then again. Her heart starts hammering in her chest. *Where is she? Zoe bites her lip as she turns scanning the slopes all around her. I told her to stay put, where is she? Where the fuck is she?*

The sight of a figure stumbling into the cemetery from the west makes a deep growl escape Zoe's chest. The figure looks female but there is no definition. A heartbeat and then another and it seems like her heart will push its way out of her chest. The woman, Zoe is certain it is a woman, is no soldier. Her steps are uncertain. She is taking little cover as she walks.

"Fuck!" With a curse, Zoe unsheathes the sword from her hip and starts running down the slope. *It is a trap and, hells, someone will pay for this.* But not now, now she must get to Jo.

The words flash through Zoe's mind even as her legs pump down the slope. *"Stay out of the red, blood-sucker. That's my bit of the woods."*

The red zone is the cemetery. Worm's warning chills Zoe's blood. *If the human is shooting at heat signatures...*

"Cease fire. Booker, cease fire!" Zoe's shout echoes as she spies the movement behind Jo.

"Jo, down! Down!" Zoe shouts even as she vaults the low wall of the cemetery.

The movement is too fast to be human as the rogue pounces on his unsuspecting victim. Zoe shoots almost blind. The sword is her weapon not the pistol but maybe, just maybe she can attract his attention.

A blast sounds close by and then Zoe lunges through the air, her sword extended. She can feel it slicing through flesh even as she collides with the rogue's body. Somewhere on the right Zoe catches a glimpse of someone running towards her and then she is tumbling on the ground, the rogue's body over her. The man is strong. Zoe can feel his strength in the grip that finds her throat and starts choking her.

But her sword is still in his guts and Zoe jerks it sideways feeling it slice through his belly. A warm gush of blood on her hands tells her the wound is deep and probably fatal. Time seems to stand still as the edges of her vision darken from lack of oxygen. It is only stubbornness that makes Zoe hold on to consciousness as she tries to bring the shooter in position. The blackness is closing in and Zoe squeezes the trigger in desperation.

The thud of the round on flesh echoes in Zoe's ears a moment before a sodden crack and the abrupt lack of pressure on her throat. The gasping breath she recognises as her own and slowly the darkness recedes.

With a jerk Zoe pushes away the heavy body crushing her onto the ground. Slowly she climbs to her knees. The glasses are long gone in the struggle and Zoe's eyes search the shadows around her frantically. The body huddling against one of the tombstones wears her sister's clothes and

she lunges towards it.

Zoe's arms encircle trembling shoulders feeling the telltale signs of life. Jo is crying and clearly in shock but alive. *Jo is alive. That's all that matters.*

The sound of the thick voice a few steps away brings the knife in her hand in one lightning movement. Zoe almost attacks before the words register in her mind. "Stay still. Where are the others?"

Zoe's eyes find the crouching figure, LACs in her hands, head swivelling from side to side scanning the slopes above them. The words are out of her mouth instinctively. "You move, you die, human."

The reply is cold and angry. "Blood-sucker, if I wanted you dead, you'd be dead. Now stay still for fuck's sake."

Zoe is still drawing breath to answer when the human stands up suddenly her voice booming in the night. "Come down you bastards!"

A slight sound makes Zoe turn to the left and the large silhouette in the shadows.

The voice Zoe recognises immediately. Her hand is poised to let the knife fly. "Stay out of this, Worm. This has nothing to do with you."

Zoe does not need more proof. The trap was enough but the man's words confirm her worst suspicions.

Zoe swallows making her voice cold, colder than ice. "What do you want, Bear?"

The man's ugly chuckle echoes in the darkness and she steels herself. There isn't much Zoe can do with only a knife against the man's guns without taking unnecessary risks. *I can give Josephine time to escape.*

The knife streaks through the darkness to embed itself in the man's throat when the blast booms in Zoe's ears and his head disappears in a shower of blood.

The sounds of guns being primed nearby makes Zoe turn to watch four patches of darkness as they walk carefully towards her.

No one is more surprised than Zoe at the feeling of a sword hilt pressed against her empty palm or at the strained whisper. "You'd better start flashing those credits now."

Zoe has no time to react beyond clutching the hilt of her sword. Its welcome weight is a balm on her speeding heart.

"Stay where you are boys. I ain't feeling too friendly tonight" The light tenor sounds bored in the

darkness.

The men stop their advance. Snake's voice is placating. "Hey, Worm, don't go off half-cocked now. We're just here to help."

Zoe almost laughs as a wide patch of darkness steps between her and the men. *The human is shielding us! Bloody hell! She is masking our movements. This is just too much. Smart human. Very smart.* The irony is almost too much to bear.

The voice that answers Snake's honeyed lies has no discernible expression. "A bit late for that now, Snake. ...Ahahh...don't move, chico. I got four notches in ma belt tonight, I ain't minding a fifth."

The men stand still as Zoe moves to stand next to the human. Zoe schools her voice to the tone of command. "Stand down, Slayers. Stand down and get paid or...." Zoe can feel the retort from the stocky man at the right even before he opens his mouth.

"Or what?" his words echo in the darkness.

They have barely left his mouth before the blast sounds and he seems to be flying through the air. The thud of his body against a tombstone is loud in the silence. A silence broken by the voice of death. "Five can be six, boys. Me, all I want is me credits. Stand the fuck down."

Snake is the first to take a step back letting his rifle fall until it points to the ground. "Easy, Worm. Credits is what we're all here for, eh?" The other two men step back quickly after that, letting the muzzles of their rifles fall downwards.

Zoe's free hand falls to the waistpocket on her belt quickly feeling credit markers. Mere moments pass but they feel like hours before she finds the thousand stack. Slowly Zoe takes three out of the pocket. With practiced movements she throws them to the men.

As they grab them out of the air and turn them to look at the value, Zoe's hand is already finding the five hundred markers fishing three out. Her voice is clear without even a shadow of fear.

"One green each, the agreed. Plus a red since you are fewer now," Zoe says even as she throws the second triad at the men. She can see the white of their smiles as they grab the second set of markers before they fall to the ground.

Booker's words are quiet but they bring a chill to the still air. "Time to go now, boys. Ten minutes. Any hotties in the zones are fair game."

Snake's answer is mocking but he is backing away his rifle still pointed to the ground. "What 'bout you, Worm? Staying with the suckers?"

The answer is given in a laughing tone. "I'll take my chances. Ten minutes, mate."

Zoe can see Snake's slight figure shrugging in the darkness as he turns and strides away. The other two Slayers are only a moment behind him. Zoe stays there still and silent as they climb over the cemetery's wall. Her eyes straining to see the moving shadows in the darkness as they leave.

Long minutes pass before the light tenor whispers slowly. "They're over the ridge."

Zoe turns to look at the human standing next to her but the human does not turn to her. Only then does the smell register. *Blood! Fresh blood flowing near.* Zoe licks her lips instinctively, a hunger pang liquid fire in her belly.

"Don't even think about it, blood-sucker. I ain't that gone yet" The light tenor warns immediately.

The import of the words hits Zoe like an iron fist, the words are out of her mouth before she even thinks them. "You're hurt."

The low laugh makes Zoe's eyes flash in sudden anger as the human turns to look at her. "Well...you did shoot me."

The memory of the round's thud in flesh flashes in Zoe's mind. She blesses the darkness that hides the heat on her cheeks. *Stars, I haven't blushed in more years than I can remember.* The words of apology that surface in her thoughts choke in her throat.

The low laugh echoes in the silence of the cemetery. "Sorry'd be mighty nice right now but you lot never apologise, do you?"

Zoe can feel the heat intensifying in her cheeks, half-embarrassment half-anger. The low chuckle from behind makes her turn, her sword rising without thought.

Zoe almost laughs herself as she finds her blade mere inches from Josephine's throat and spies the silver muzzle of the LAC hovering between her sister's eyes.

The human's exasperation is clearly audible. "Woman for fu...ahh... Miss Mary, sneaking up on armed folks ain't a good idea, specially on a night like this."

Zoe can see that Jo is immediately contrite and she slowly sheathes her sword. The human has already holstered her blaster. Zoe cannot help the smile on her lips at the human's effort not to swear and the lilting brogue that seems to have taken over her usually bland pronunciation.

Zoe's hand finds Josephine's cheek, caressing it slightly and bringing a small smile on her sister's lips. "We'll talk later," Zoe whispers. She is still too high on adrenaline and danger to talk to Jo without shouting at her. Looking into her sister's eyes, Zoe can see clearly that Josephine regrets fully what happened.

The time for questions and some very honest answers will come later. For now everything is alright. Jo is alive and the human too. Zoe could ask for no more this night. A tiny wince from

the side makes her turn in sudden alarm, only for the sight to bring a rueful smile to her lips. The human has turned her back to them and is trying to put sealant on her wound but the wound is not easy to reach.

Without thought Zoe steps up to the human, her hands finding the small tube of sealant and taking it away. She can hear the breath the human draws to protest and the immediate tension that grips her body.

Zoe tries to school her voice to coldness but she knows she has failed even before the first word leaves her lips. "Shut up and stand down, Gyn. I'll do that."

Hands hold her own, Zoe can feel the strength in them and she smiles in the darkness. The human is strong but not strong enough to hold her. Zoe does not move, merely flexes her arms.

The breath is uneven. The voice holds a strange shadow in its depths. "Let me be...Falcon."

With a jerk Zoe frees her hands bringing them up to cup the strong chin, the square jaw. Slowly Zoe raises her hands until deep azure eyes look into her own.

Zoe tries to discipline her wayward body but she cannot stop the words. "My name is Zoe, Gyn."

Shadows dance in blue eyes too deep to comprehend. "I know," the whisper is almost too low to hear.

"You and I need to talk" Zoe whispers back.

The human's nod is resigned and she looks so young just then. Zoe's hand tousles the short black hair that seems to have never known the attention of a comb even as she gently guides the human towards a fallen tombstone. Zoe presses down in silence until the human sits.

Slowly Zoe opens the heavy leather jerkin, carefully leaving it aside and then opens the lower buttons of the black shirt. The shirt is matted with blood and Zoe frowns as she checks the long graze of the bullet. Zoe can hear Jo's indrawn breath as the wound is traced and she barely stops from shaking her head. *You're a lucky one, human. Thank the stars, I can't hit an elephant at ten paces with a shooter.*

With deft movements Zoe seals the surface wound. She is using more sealant than absolutely necessary but she wants to make certain that the wound closes quickly and with little scarring. Gently Zoe lowers the shirt back and buttons it up. "You're all good to go," Zoe says in a voice even deeper than usual.

"Thank you." The answer is a whisper and Zoe shakes her head to see that the human is looking somewhere beyond her in the darkness.

"Dawn is coming..." Zoe's words are left to hang in the silence.

The breath the human draws is strained as is her voice. "I would appreciate my credits now, Falcon, if possible."

Zoe cannot contain the growl that starts deep in her chest. Booker's eyes turn to look at her. The shadows in them hold her captive for long moments. Her decision is taken in a split second. She almost laughs at the thought. *A moon in indecision, doubts and logic, a split second for impulse to take over. Stars!*

"You are coming with us, Gyn," Zoe's voice is that of command. Soldiers jump when she uses that tone.

But the human merely looks at her. Her eyes search her face in the darkness. The whisper is barely audible. "I am no such thing! That's not a good idea, sir."

Booker's eyes fall to look at the ground but Zoe encounters little resistance as she raises the human's chin until she can look into them. "Am I reading your eyes wrong, Gyn?" Zoe's voice sounds choked and she realises that there is a knot at her throat and her heart is thudding in her chest. Still she won't take the appellation back. The human is a friend to the clan whether she accepts it or not.

The human blinks slowly and her eyes are resigned. "No. No, you are not reading them wrong."

"You are coming with us," Zoe says again only this time there is no command in her voice, only invitation.

The human nods slowly and even though the shadows have made her eyes unreadable pools of darkness, Zoe cannot keep the smile from her lips.

The slight shake made Zoe open her eyes in alarm and pain descended like a blanket over her body.

Zeno's voice was faint with fear. "I think they're coming."

Zoe studied his face. The youth of his features contrasted so heavily with the tiredness of his eyes.

Zoe nodded slowly to tell him she understood only a moment before she heard the bolts on the door sliding back. She turned her attention to the opening door, stilling her mind for the pain she knew was coming. Waves of almost unbearable pain assaulted her from all sides already. Zoe could not but wonder whether she would survive this visit of their captors.

Zoe breathed as deeply as she could. For a split second the smell of the desert wafted in her

nostrils. Her smile was crooked and painful but she kept it in place as the man stepped into the room. Somewhere deep in Zoe's mind blue eyes flashed in an abandoned moonlit cemetery.

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The girl was sleeping peacefully. Sergei must have filled her with drugs for her to sleep so soundly after everything that has happened. *Telling her parents had not been easy. Her mother will be arriving sometime soon. Stars! Yet another worry. Another detail to arrange.*

The nurse at the station was looking at her and Josephine struggled to keep her face impassive. The anger she felt was too great to express. The despair almost drowned her. The recrimination echoed in Josephine's mind. *If only Zoe was here none of this would have happened. They wouldn't dare disobey her order. Stars! What a mess...*

With a shake of her head, Josephine turned. Her heart seemed to bleed in her chest. *If only Zoe was here. If only I had not been such a fool.* Josephine's steps shuffled in the empty corridor, her eyes forward unseeing. *How could this be happening? How? Oh by the stars themselves how? Why did none of us see?*

Josephine had always prided in her nature, in her knowledge, her analytical ability, her studies. *How could I have been so wrong? So blind?* Josephine clenched her teeth to keep from screaming. Her own words haunted her more than anything.

Her memory, her extraordinary memory, the one Josephine always took such pride in, tormented her. Words spoken not so long ago. Words spit out in anger dredged up from the depths of her mind to stab at her soul. *"How can you do this to us? To father? How can you be so selfish? It's been years. People are talking! They say you're mated now. With a human!"*

Josephine shook her head in desperation to dispel the memory. But it was no use. *Grey eyes look at her, shadows dancing in them. No words answer her accusation. Zoe merely turns on her heel, leaving without a word or glance.*

Remembered coldness made her shiver. Remembered disgust in the voice Josephine barely recognised as her own made bile rise in her throat. *"You idiot! How do you dare open these halls to a...a nothing? She is no more than a bum on the street! The world is laughing at you. At us! You could have had anyone you wanted. And you choose that?"*

Josephine flinched at remembered anger. *The low growl sounds wild in the room. Grey eyes full of anger come but an inch from her face. "Is that all you care about...sister?"*

Josephine blinked to keep the tears from falling. *Two months...two long unbearable months. Why did it have to be this way? Oh stars, let her be alive and I swear, I swear I will do everything right this time. If there are gods in this world they must be laughing like mad.*

Josephine had always been so proud of her analytical skills. In finding all the disparate bits and pieces and piecing them together in a neat picture. *A true picture. How could I have been so*

blind? Zoe must have known. She had known from the beginning. The very beginning. The very first night. She must have. Why did I not see? A blind rat could see the potential. Booker was so good, so composed.

Romi's human name as always sounded odd in her thoughts. *Eromene is so much more beautiful.* Yet still, even after all these years, the name that her sister had bestowed upon her familiar still amused her. *What possessed Zoe to called a warrior like Romi 'Lover' only the stars know.*

Sentiment aside, Zoe had seen. She must have seen. The power, the knowledge, the potential. How could I have been so blind? How could I have misread every sign? They had been there all along. How could I not have seen them? Sure, Booker didn't string two words together. But you could see it. In her eyes, you could just see it.

Josephine's slow steps had led her astray once again. Her hand opened the door without thought. It was not until she stood next to the narrow hospital bed that Josephine realised where she was. In the dark room she knew she must turn away, leave, let the guest rest. But Josephine could not. Her legs would not move. She stood rooted on the spot.

Josephine could only look at the long blond hair framing the regal face. Irrationally she wished Kalia's eyes would open so she could look upon them. Josephine clenched her hands into fists to keep them from moving. To keep them from smoothing the long lock that had rested upon a marble-white cheek.

She had to go. She could not be found here. *What would the lady think to find her here looking upon her in the darkness? Someone like Kalia Dracula would never even spare a glance at her. This was not after all some common Dracula. Kalia was the First of the Readers.* Josephine swallowed the lump in her throat. A lone tear traveled down her cheek.

The small voice screamed in her mind. *Is that all you can think about? How do you dare even think of such this day?*

The whisper made Josephine stiffen in sudden anguish. "Josephine?"

Josephine shook her head but the eyes that searched her face were not to be denied. Words escaped her. Her mind seemed blank. She could only look at Kalia. Kalia's fingers were warm where they touched her hand.

"Come here." Kalia's whisper sounded loud, too loud, in the silence.

Josephine could not speak. She could not even shake her head in denial. The tear that escaped left a trail of wetness down her cheek. Warm fingers grasped her hand, gently pulling her near. Her body seemed to obey a voice other than her own. She stepped closer.

Kalia silently shuffled making a space on the bed. The hand that guided Josephine was gentle but insistent. Like a mindless robot Josephine obeyed the implicit command, slowly lying on the bed. Arms gently welcomed her in a loose embrace, her head gently guided down on a soft

shoulder.

The whisper was for her ears only. "Close you eyes, Jo. Sleep now. Sleep, everything will be better in the night."

Josephine's eyes closed seemingly on their accord. The sweet forgetfulness that had been eluding her for so long was like a soft blanket on her shoulders. The last thing Josephine knew was the soft whisper in her ear. "Sleep now. You're safe here."

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Chapter 6: The Golden Cord

The row of silent photos and d-stills screamed accusations at him. How many hours, how many days had he spent here? Just here in his customary chair looking at them? His wishes never mattered. His body disobeyed him at every turn. His eyes always returned to the silent row.

They were all there. His failures. The boy he had loved as a brother. The old sketch faded now almost beyond recognition. *I couldn't save you from their fire, could I, Niko?* Melissa's soft smile was still a balm on his soul. Her body reduced to ashes a century ago. Seirius' smile seemed sad. How much he missed the boy. *I was too far away to help you, my son.*

Lorna's luminous green eyes seemed to search his face for answers. There was none he could give. Her last message, mere days ago, swirled in his mind. *Do you want us to come?*

He had been adamant in his refusal. It was the right thing to do. The children must be kept safe, just in case.

Zeno's baby face was a stabbing wound in his heart. *Where are you now, my boy? Are you still alive? Are you cold and afraid wondering why I have not come for you yet?*

Josephine's arched eyebrow almost brought a smile to his lips. *Have I destroyed you too?* He had tried so hard to keep her out of all of this. Out of the fear and pain, away from the struggle. He had wanted so much for her to have the life she wanted. *But I have brought you in too, have I not, my baby girl? Now you have to face the fear and the responsibility.*

Almost of their own accord his eyes strayed to the d-still at the end of the mantelpiece. Zoe's piercing grey eyes held his, the accusation in them needing no words or gestures. A lone tear fell down his cheek. Again this time the familiar nightmare returned.

Shots ring all around. The ring of defenders is half-breached already. His hands tremble as he grips his sword waiting for the end. He can feel the blood pooling at his feet. His wounds are

grave but his mind shies away from their meaning.

He steals a glance at the small body huddled next to him. Zeno's fists are clenched and he has to smile as pride wells in his battered body. Unarmed as Zeno is, he still readies to fight.

With a grimace he shoves the pain and the regret that threaten to overwhelm his shaky senses away. His pride has brought his son into danger but regret serves no purpose, not here not now.

Still the thought swirls in his mind. *What business has an unbloodied boy here? Why bring him? Why? Are you such a fool, von Ottewald, to want to show off a fledgling to your enemies?*

He shakes his head. Such thoughts are useless. What was done was done. Nothing to be done about it. All he can do now is stay standing for as long as he can. Maybe if he is lucky, he will manage to take a couple of them with him to the eternal night.

It is funny how the mind works. It is not until the booming blasts stop, leaving only the high whines of the lighter shooters to fill the cavern that he realises their speed, their effectiveness.

In the echoing ringing, he almost does not catch the hurried whisper. "Take him out of here, Love. Take him to Sergei."

He tries to resist as strong arms gently hoist him upon a broad back but his arms are weak. The words slur in his mouth. He looks up at grey eyes. There are tears in them. *Are they for me?*

The deep voice holds the world's sadness. "Don't worry, papa. Romi will get you out of here."

At the first running step pain stabs through him and his eyes water. When they clear, he can see the grey eyes no more, merely enemies all around. With every movement pain makes him moan helplessly. He tries to shout a warning but nothing more than a whimper passes his lips.

He feels the round as it hits soft flesh. He hears the grunt of pain but the forward movement does not stop. He never sees the flash of swordblades in the half-light of the tunnels but he can feel their impact. Blasts boom in his ears. His nose floods with the smell of human blood from wounds he cannot see.

The wind that hits his face is the first he knows of the outside world. Rounds whisper all around him. He feels their impact in the sudden stumbles but the movement never stops. He almost blacks out when he is roughly shoved into the back seat of the Ranger.

The screeching of tyres as the car accelerates sounds faint in his ears. The voice that accompanies them is strained. "Hold on, old man. Hold on."

Time blends into a seamless whole as pain lances through his body. He does not feel the car stop, only the strange hands that take his body. Lights flash in his vision even as the darkness descends.

Just before he is lost in soundless oblivion, the words reach his ears from far away. "Damn you, Ari. Let me go! She is still back there."

Zoe watched him from the depths of the d-still. A half-sob escaped his throat. As every night his heart rang with the words he fears he will never have a chance to tell for real. *I am sorry, little one. I am so so sorry.*

The soft knock at the door made him shake his head to dispel the images that seemed to never stop from invading his thoughts. Carefully he cleared his throat before speaking in the voice of command. "Enter."

Nigel's head peeked in surveying the room quickly in his customary way before stepping in closing the door softly behind him. "My lord, Jo is here with your guest," Nigel said in the formal tones he has never managed to abandoned in his century or more of service.

The Count blinked slowly before standing. With a silent gesture he dismissed his valet. Nigel's bow was quick but deep as he opened the door for the visitors to enter. Nigel waited patiently until both women had entered the room and with a quick glance at his master stepped outside closing the door behind him.

Kalia's eyes surveyed the large room quickly before finding the tall figure in the middle. Grey eyes met her violet and she inclined her head gracefully at the Count. His answering bow was short but correct to the inch.

"Lady Kalia, you honour my house with your presence," the Count intoned in a careful voice.

Kalia's lips formed the customary response without thought. "It is I who am honoured, Count Hugo. Father sends his best wishes to you and your clan."

The Count bowed low at the mention of her father and Kalia smiled. Count Hugo was well-known for his respect to the Draculas.

Her father's words echoed in her memory. *"There are many faults with the Ottewalds, my dearest. But they have always been loyal. Hugo would prefer to cut off his own hand than betray us."*

Kalia's last meeting with the Count was more than a century ago, more like two as she thought about it, when the world had been a different place.

The Count's words made Kalia smile genuinely. "My lady, please sit. There are no words to express my grief for what happened. I beg for your forgiveness."

From other heads of clans, Kalia would take such words for no more than empty flattery but the Count's feelings were clear in his face. He truly regretted the attack on her person.

In truth, no one could ever accuse Hugo von Ottewald of any sort of deception or lie and expect to be believed. He was a canny man. No head of clan could afford not to be. Still it was well known that he preferred direct confrontation to schemes.

Kalia's own words bared her feelings. "No forgiveness is necessary, cousin. It is to others that I lay blame for what happened."

The Count held Kalia's gaze for a moment before nodding slowly. Custom and propriety dictated her response but in this case it was no less than the truth. The attack on her, savage as it was, was a breach of the law. Even so she had known the risks when she had left her home. In war accidents happened. Not that Kalia thought the attack was an accident, but that was what the Zindramas would offer as excuse.

The Count's gesture was immediate and respectful as he showed Kalia to a deep armchair. Kalia sat gracefully, accepting with a radiant smile the glass of deep red wine from Josephine.

Kalia was at home in these circumstances. Her position had always entailed such meetings. But a part of her huffed inside at the stifling formality she had to endure. Yet Kalia waited patiently until both the Count and Josephine were seated, wine-glasses in their hands.

Only then did Kalia clear her throat carefully. "Lord Hugo, I would think the needs of custom and form have been met this night. There are more important matters to discuss."

Colour rose in Josephine's cheeks at the words but the Count inclined his head in acquiescence.

Kalia held his eyes for long moments as she tried to find the words to continue. Her words were careful. This was a delicate matter. "Cousin, your need is great but there are some issues we need to discuss. Some matters cannot be hurried."

Silence reigned for long moments as Kalia waited for the Count to answer her implicit question. When he finally spoke, Kalia's heart clenched to hear the tiredness in his voice.

"My lady, you came. I know these things are...neither easy nor quick. Whatever you can do, we will be grateful."

Kalia looked at the Count before her eyes travelled to Josephine's regal form. The young vampire was looking at her with hope in her eyes. Sadness filled Kalia's head at the sight. The Count understood, he had made that clear, but Josephine had clearly not understood the hidden warning in Kalia's words. For a moment Kalia let the silence reign. Her sigh was loud in the silent room.

How do you explain the ways of the mind to the uninitiated? Kalia's thoughts held the sadness of long years of trying and failing to explain. How do I make you understand, Beauty? No heart is pure. Until the demons are defeated, the golden cord leads to nothing but darkness. What heart

harbours no doubt, no fear?

Part of her whispered invectives in her head yet Kalia opened her mouth to speak. She knew full well that for anyone else, in every other occasion, she had simply stayed silent. As long as the leader understood, she had stopped long ago from trying to entice the understanding of others. But the hope in Josephine's soulful green eyes was too much to bear with a lie. *No matter how white it is.*

Kalia tried to school her voice to the calmness of command but she could hear the undertone of care in it and was certain the Count would hear it as well.

"Josephine...this is not an easy undertaking," Kalia started slowly.

The determined look that transformed Josephine's face made her heart clench in a stab of pain.

With a deep breath Kalia continued. "Reading is not a science. There is no..." Kalia stopped then seeing the question in Josephine's eyes.

With a sigh Kalia abandoned all pretence. "Josephine, it may not work. There is no certainty in Reading. We all fear and doubt."

Surprise came first. Then incomprehension and then the flash of anger Kalia had come to expect every time when others realised that there was no quick and easy magic to get them what they desired. *For your sake, Beauty, I wish there was. The stars have never been that kind.*

Josephine's question was sharp and cold as ice, chilling a part of Kalia's soul. "Why?"

Kalia had to close her eyes for a moment to keep the emotion that surged in her from showing. *How do you explain this? Stars, how? The ropes and chains that bind us to one another. Never pure, never clear. Always twisted with one another, doubts and fears riddling our souls and our connections.*

Too many times Kalia had heard the reassurances of those who asked for her services. Too many times had she been guaranteed that the Reading would not fail, not because of their fears, their weaknesses. And time and time again the Readings had failed, fallen into the dark abyss of the soul where the thousand hurts we inflict upon on another reside.

When she opened her eyes again, Kalia did not look at Josephine, who looked at her with flames in her eyes, nor at the Count who looked on, his eyes lidded with sadness.

Kalia's eyes found the row of photos and stills on the mantelpiece. Unseeingly they stayed there. Her voice was low. "Emotion is never clear, my dear. No one likes to lay their soul bare to the eyes of another. And even when they finally do...even then nothing is certain."

Kalia knew she had Josephine's full attention from the hushed sound of her breath but still she did not turn her eyes to the woman listening to her with every ounce of her being.

Kalia merely continued. Her voice was expressionless as she could make it to mask the pain. "Reading needs strong emotions but...but such powerful feelings are rare. Even worse they are often unclear. To hate to the death is a bond beyond comprehension, a bond akin to love. And love...love is a million facets of the heart. Who never disappoints? Whose love remains untainted by doubt, by jealousy, by fear? And yet even the tiniest seed of doubt can throw the Reading off."

Silence greeted Kalia's words and silence stretched for long minutes. Finally Kalia could bear it no longer and she turned to look at Josephine. There was anguish in the marble-sculpted face of the Count's daughter and a shadow that made her eyes shine with darkness. *Ah, Beauty...now you understand. Do you truly want them back? Or is there a tiny part of your heart that thinks it's better if they just never come back? Welcome to my world, Princess.*

Yet Josephine's nod was assertive, her voice even. "I see... Whatever you can do, Kalia, we will be grateful."

The repetition of her father's words carried the same weight of sadness as the old man's. Yet the despair that had replaced hope in Josephine's eyes made Kalia's heart bleed.

The Count's deep voice sounded too loud in the silence that followed. "What do you need us to do, Lady?"

Kalia's question was careful, but had to be asked. "Have both the missing been bloodied?"

Both the Count and Josephine looked at her in silence. As their faces fell, Kalia knew the answer. *The boy is dormant. The stars are not kind to you, Beauty. He would be easier, so much easier.*

Finally, Josephine answered. "Zeno would be bloodied in Solstice this year. Is that a problem?"

Kalia sighed. This made things difficult. "I assume your sister has been bloodied?"

At Josephine's immediate nod, Kalia continued. "Then I am very sorry but only she can be traced. Since your brother is unbloodied, his bonds are dormant... Reading can be accomplished only with full vampires."

Just try to understand, Beauty. There is no magic at work beyond the magic of our own blood. The thoughts swirled in Kalia's mind even if nothing showed on her composed expression.

Kalia kept her eyes straight ahead, as Josephine looked at her father, her anguish obvious. The Count's voice was calm. "They are probably keeping them together. All the hideouts they've used show signs of two persons being held, not one. Zeno is with Zoe. We find the one, we find the other."

The grey-haired vampire turned to Kalia. "When is the best time, Lady Kalia?"

Kalia looked at him and spoke quickly. "Reading the bond may take some time. It depends how far the subject is. But I can tell you whether it is possible to make an immediate trace with either you or Josephine immediately."

The Count looked at her startled and his voice showed his surprise. "Now? You can do it now?"

Kalia nodded in acquiescence.

Count Hugo jumped to his feet and spoke quickly. "Then it should be done. The sooner the better. If I can help it, none of them will stay another night under the thumb of those bastards."

Kalia felt the anger and the pain that the Count had been trying to contain. She tried to keep her voice soothing. "It would be better if we were private."

The Count nodded but Josephine was shaking her head negatively and her voice was low, pained. "You are trying to shelter us. You don't think it will work with either of us."

Kalia could not find it in her heart to lie. The young heir to the Ottewald clan had seen through her ruse immediately. The Count's voice was harsh. "Both of us here and now, daughter. If we fail, we can carry our guilt together." Kalia was stunned to see Josephine's eyes steeling as she nodded to her father.

Kalia felt tears stinging her eyes and blinked to clear them. There was strength in the Ottewald clan. She could see it clearly now. Kalia's voice was even. "It would be better, if we were seated."

The Count moved like lightning, quickly taking two chairs from the table and setting them opposite each other in front of the fireplace.

Kalia sat slowly and the Count sat at the other. Kalia took his large warm hands into her own. "Think of your daughter, sir. Of happy times."

The Count closed his eyes and Kalia followed suit letting her mind unravel and her heart feel the man opposite her. It was a rare talent that Kalia possessed, a vampire empath of such power.

Immediately Kalia could feel the warmth of the Count's love for his children and his pain and anger for the kidnapping. Short flashes in Kalia's mind showed her a beautiful grey-eyed baby, a toddler looking up with adoration in her eyes, a young girl looking at her father with pride and love, the woman Kalia had seen in the picture sitting at an overflowing desk.

Kalia felt the Count's feelings for his daughter, his deep abiding love, his admiration for her strength and courage, even when she defied him. Kalia caught a glimpse of another face, Romi, and felt the mixed feelings of admiration, fear and anger in the Count.

But it was a tiny moment. The Count's thoughts went back to his daughter and Kalia could feel his love and pride for his child. Still the tiny black spiral underneath those feelings caught Kalia's

mind.

Kallia gasped and opened her eyes letting the Count's hands slide from hers. The grey-haired man opened his eyes at the loss of contact and Kalia could see the hope in his gaze.

Silently Kalia shook her head and saw guilt and pain descend upon his strong face. "Why?" he asked in a broken voice.

Kalia tried to spare the man more grief. "Please, sir, that is not necessary."

But Hugo von Ottewald was no coward and his commanding voice rocked Kalia. "Why?"

Kalia took a deep breath trying to find words that did not hurt as much. "I am very sorry, sir. You do not...ah...fully approve of your daughter. You love her but..."

Kalia's heart clenched at the shadow of hurt that passed over the Count's face. *Nothing to be done about it. This is not Reading at court, nor putting wards on a child. As always when Kalia was faced with the disappointment of those who had depended upon her help, she tried to steel her heart.*

Their disappointment often turned to anger and Kalia had learned to be wary. *It's not like they even understand. For them Reading is Reading. No difference between helping a victim or doing an interrogation and this. And how to explain? How indeed? How to explain that it's their strength not mine that leads this search.*

The Count stood abruptly and turned away. His voice was strained. "Jo?"

Kalia could not help but admire the Count's poise.

Warm hands enveloped hers and Kalia turned to look at Josephine, now seated in the chair her father had left so abruptly. There was pain in Josephine's eyes and determination as well.

Kalia tried to smile but could not. Finally she settled for words. "Think of her, Josephine. Close your eyes and think of your sister."

Once more Kalia let her eyes close and her heart open to the feelings of the beautiful woman who held her hands. Love assaulted her, a little girl's admiration of her big strong sister.

A child's love for the young woman that held her close as she cried herself to sleep. The big sister that was always there, her kind words, a lopsided half-smile. Loyalty for her sister was also deeply rooted in Josephine and Kalia felt her respect for the leader, the soldier, the woman.

A kaleidoscope of images played through Kalia's mind. The woman from the picture hugging her sister after her first date, the confidante that never passed judgement at heartfelt confessions in the black of night. Strong arms enveloping Josephine and a whisper in her ear as the knife descended, "You are beautiful, princess. Be brave."

Kalia felt almost jubilant as she felt the bond strong and pulsing. Lightly she touched it and tried to follow it. Blackness enveloped her and Kalia felt spiralling down to the depths of Tartarus amidst valleys of pain and guilt. With a cry, Kalia opened her eyes and severed the contact.

Josephine opened her eyes and looked at Kalia. The same pain and guilt clouded her beautiful gaze. Kalia took the young woman's hands once more and squeezed them, trying to bring some relief to the tormented woman opposite her.

The Count's voice held tears. "What now, Lady Kalia?"

Kalia looked at the father and her heart clenched at the sight of the tears falling down his cheeks. Kalia heard the sobs that racked through Josephine's body and without thought, she hugged the young woman.

The Count was crying silently his eyes on the row of pictures on the mantelpiece as Kalia held his daughter and felt hot tears on her shoulder.

Kalia's words were slow. "There are ways to repair a bond, Lord Hugo. The process is neither quick nor painless but it can be done."

Kalia could not utter what preyed on her mind. *Is there enough time for such a long and convoluted process? It's already been two months. Are they even alive?* Kalia was certain that neither the Count nor Josephine had any idea of the time something like this could take.

From what Kalia had glimpsed, her own professional opinion would be months if not years. Something in the Count's eyes however told her he understood. The tiny glimmer of hope in his eyes had extinguished.

There is another way, a small voice inside her whispered. Kalia's decision was taken before she allowed herself time to change her mind. "Josephine, what about the familiar?" Kalia asked quietly.

The reaction from both father and daughter was immediate. Josephine looked up at Kalia, even as the Count spoke. "You can use a human?"

Kalia looked at him, her eyes narrowed in disbelief. *Any human? Certainly not. But this one has the markings of a familiar.* Kalia composed her features once more and answered softly. "Lovers' bonds are the most difficult. Too many strong emotions but there is always a chance."

Kalia could see the Count's eyes narrow at her honest assertion of the relationship between his daughter, and heir, and her familiar.

Hugo closed his eyes briefly and when he opened them again Kalia saw the acceptance in them. "Try it, Lady. If there are any gods in this forsaken world of ours, they will love the irony."

as possible but it would not do for others to see him running. His nods were quick and arrogant at the few servants that roamed this part of the complex.

He did not breathe deeply for the whole of the distance until he reached the huge double-doors of enforced steel. It galled him still that the...thing he had just visited had better security than his own father but he would not dare voice such a sentiment. Quickly he turned down a small side-corridor that led to the dungeons.

He stopped slowly in front of the only door that was closed in the long dungeon corridor. He schooled his features to show nothing and with a deep breath opened the door. The room inside was full of guards. They were not his own people and for that he cautiously surveyed the room before entering fully.

The men did not stand at this entrance. Indeed they ignored him after the most cursory of glances. The anger that stirred in his gut did not show on his face. There was nothing he could do about their insult that would not damage him further in his father's eyes.

Without a word he moved to the smaller door at the end of the room. Opening it he entered the short corridor that led to the prisoners' cell. He was still unhappy about having to move them within the complex but none of his arguments had carried any weight with his father or his brother.

In the silence of his mind he cursed once again the human. *How by every star the woman tracked them down I could not even begin to imagine.* It was only luck that they had managed to keep the prisoners. At least the Ottewalds would never think of looking here of all places. Even the estate had been attacked but this complex was unknown to anyone without the markings of the clan.

He stood outside the heavy door. Carefully he took the key from his waistpocket inserting it in the slot. The door opened immediately and he entered the room. Just a few days ago he would not have been confident enough to enter on his own.

Zoe von Ottewald was too strong for him to feel safe even if he knew that she would never be able to pass through the guards at the end of the short corridor. But now with the vampire incapacitated from her injuries and the strong shackles securing her to the wall, he felt better about entering the cell alone.

His eyes surveyed the tiny cell. His nose wrinkling from the stench. The boy was looking at him from his customary place against the back wall of the cell. He did not speak. *What was there to say after all?* All his attention was on the woman laying on the cold wet concrete. He savagely quelled the anger that swirled in his heart at her condition.

He did not look at her face. He was certain she was looking at him with the burning gaze of hate and contempt. Instead he looked at the wound-ravaged body. He almost sighed to see that the doctors had come already. At least all open wounds had been sealed neatly. There was not much else to be done.

What are you so afraid of?" Solei's exasperation was clear in his voice.

Shie turned to look at the ginger-haired vampire. Once more she wondered whether this was wise. Blending scouts and soldiers was not a good idea. She never had liked it.

Yet Romi had insisted from the start. Shie could still hear the soft words two moons ago. "*Cooperation is necessary, Captain. They have been getting you piecemeal. You don't even coordinate your patrols.*" Romi seldom called her by rank but she had that night in the small bunker on the other side of the estate.

Shie's eyes scanned the room. The difference of opinions was palpable. The scouts frowned still at Solei's words and his clear insult. Chloe was still low in rank and most of the lieutenants tended to look down upon her.

Sometimes Shie wondered. *What is wrong with them?* It was common knowledge that scouts achieved rank more slowly than soldiers. *Yet still they persist.* Shie's eyes came to rest upon Ari's bulk as he stood in the corner. His eyes were lidded but their gazes met for a moment. His words were slow as usual. "Roms?"

Shie shivered as Romi's eyes passed over her in their slow scan of the room. Romi cleared her throat before speaking in a thoughtful tone. "Seventy-three days. Four sixes and seventeen fours. Two sixes and twelve fours in the last fifteen alone. They are blinding us."

Shie watched as everyone tried to remember the incidents. She did not have to. She had checked the logs as soon as Romi had come to her earlier. The sixes she could remember without the help of any log. A Zindramas attack was not easy to forget. Fours were not that easy but the logs had helped jolt her memory. Romi was right. Too many incidents of Zindramas trying to infiltrate their territory or attacking their patrols. *At least they haven't tried to attack the estate yet.*

Shie could see Solei drawing breath to speak but Otto was there before him, the old soldier sounded tired. "Why, Gyn? Why? They have no chance of winning and even that old son of a bitch must know it by now. Sol is right. They are panicking. They are attacking blindly. That's what any cornered animal will do."

Shie shivered at the flash of anger in Romi's gaze yet the eruption never came.

Romi closed her eyes, taking a deep even breath before speaking again. "Otto...ah...Otto, you don't make up sixes and you don't attack a Dracula cause you're panicking." Otto looked down thoughtfully and Shie barely hid her smile.

"Human, are you fucking stupid? They saw the chance and they took it. You are flinching at shadows." Solei's tone was mocking and Shie tensed as every scout in the room stood ready to attack.

Romi's voice boomed with command. "Stand down, all of you. Now!" One by one the scouts sat back down with apologetic glances at the familiar's direction.

Josephine's voice was calm and commanding. "Henry, is Romi upstairs?"

The soldier, a solid looking man with short spiked hair, answered quickly. "She went in a while ago, Jo. She wasn't looking good."

Josephine nodded at the soldier and continued up the stairs. Kalia nodded at the two guards on the first landing and followed Josephine as she climbed on.

Everyone looked tense and although the soldiers had bowed politely to her. Kalia could feel their eyes on her back as she climbed. She could sympathize. No member of the Ottewald clan could truly feel comfortable with a stranger in their midst. The pain of betrayal was too recent.

As the night before there were guards in the corridor and Kalia nodded at them silently. Kalia stood a step behind Josephine as she waited for the guard that had disappeared inside the double doors to come out. The guard came out quickly followed by Shie.

"What is the problem, Jo? Is everything alright?" Shie asked quickly.

Josephine's nod was curt, her voice even. "Is Romi inside?"

Shie looked from Josephine to Kalia measuring them both. Romi's voice from inside the room was faint but clearly heard. "Come in, Jo."

As Josephine moved to step inside, Shie's headshake made Kalia hesitate.

Yet Josephine did not pay any mind to Shie, holding the door for Kalia to come inside. In the small anteroom, Kalia could not keep her eyes from the door opposite. The door she knew led to the Zoe von Ottewald's sanctum.

Kalia's sensitive hearing caught the sound of something rustling in the other room and then footsteps before the door opened completely as Romi stepped out into the anteroom. Seeing Kalia, Romi bowed formally, her cape swirling around her.

"What is wrong?" Romi asked as soon as she straightened, looking at Josephine.

Josephine's answer was quick. "There has been no news. We need to talk."

Romi glanced at Kalia before speaking. "Of course. Please, come in. Excuse the mess."

Kalia waited until Josephine had entered behind Romi.

Josephine immediately went to the centre of the room and sat on one of the couches there, gesturing at Kalia to take a seat. Kalia sat next to Josephine carefully. The couches were comfortable and had seen a bit of use.

Romi's voice was polite but cold. "Would you like something to eat? Some wine maybe?"

Josephine looked at Kalia questioningly. "Whatever is available," Kalia said quickly.

Josephine flashed Kalia a smile before turning to the familiar, who was still standing. "Whatever you are having, Romi."

Romi nodded and brought two glasses to the small table that stood in front of Kalia and Josephine. Without speaking, she put ice and whisky in them. Kalia looked at the bottle on the table. *Southern Comfort. At least it is something drinkable.* For a moment, Kalia had been afraid that it would be something totally undrinkable. Humans were humans after all. And Romi did not look like a person that enjoyed the finer things in life.

Josephine spoke as soon as Romi had given her a glass. "Romi, sit, please. And take off that cloak."

The light sound of the door clicking shut heralded Shie's entrance. She silently climbed down into the sunken den sitting opposite Josephine. Romi looked at them all, shadows swirling in her eyes.

Kalia could feel the tension in her, as Romi took off her cloak and set it over an armchair. Underneath she was wearing a pair of black leather trousers and a simple cotton white armless vest. Kalia could see the long seals on her head and arms.

"Are you alright?" Josephine asked, her worry evident.

Romi did not answer merely gestured dismissively.

Kalia heard Josephine sigh quietly and felt sorry for the young woman. The injuries were not serious. That much was obvious, but the white vest was transparent enough to show other similar wounds all over the familiar's chest and belly.

Kalia wondered how the woman managed to fight so well with so many injuries on her body. Kalia had seen Romi kill three vampires a couple of nights before and would never have guessed that she was in anything but perfect health.

"You did not bring the guest here to discuss my scratches, Jo. What is going on?" Romi said without preamble.

Josephine glanced at Kalia and took a deep breath before speaking in even, calming tones. "Lady Kalia has offered to help find Zoe and Zeno. She is particularly accomplished and could possibly find where they are being held."

Kalia tried to keep her composure as Romi's eyes shifted from Josephine to her. "You mean to track them, Lady?"

Kalia nodded and looked at Romi searching her face for any reaction but there was none.

"What sort of thing are you looking for? Weapons? Her favourite shirt? She was not much for things... not really," Romi said quickly and Kalia could hear the slight tightening of her voice.

Kalia decided to stay silent and let Josephine handle this. *Better if it comes from someone the familiar knows.* Josephine cleared her throat making Romi turn to her. "You, Romi."

The familiar was clearly puzzled. "Me? Blood you mean? It has been a long time, since she bit me last."

Josephine shook her head and spoke carefully. The strain was clear in her voice. "You love her, Romi. There is a bond in love, in...lovers."

Kalia saw the slight narrowing of the familiar's eyes. Romi's voice was low and Kalia could hear the emotions in it, love, hope, pain. "What do I need to do? Anything..."

Kalia was moved by the honesty in Romi's words. She would bet her right hand that if she asked for her still beating heart on a plate, Romi would hand her the knife as quick as she could get it out of its sheath at her waist.

"Just think of her," Kalia said to the familiar.

Romi looked at Kalia, blue eyes meeting dark violet, and spoke quietly. "That's not difficult. Anything in particular?"

"Anything you want. The first time you met. Anything..." Kalia said as she moved to the couch next to the familiar.

Kalia's next words were careful. She did not want to make Romi uncomfortable. "We will have to touch hands. It makes contact easier."

Romi nodded and without delay took Kalia's proffered hands in a strong but gentle grip.

"Now just close your eyes and think of her. Try to think happy memories," Kalia said and watched the familiar nod and obediently close her eyes.

Kalia stopped herself from glancing at Josephine. She had work to do and what she would see in Josephine's eyes would not help. With a deep breath, Kalia closed her eyes and stilled her thoughts before plunging into the familiar's mind

Barely a moment had passed before Kalia opened her eyes, surprise and suspicion colouring her face. Her voice was low. "You have barriers in your mind."

Romi's reaction was clearly surprised and her eyes travelled to look at Josephine. "Barriers?" Romi whispered.

Shie's voice held clear warning. "Roms."

Three sets of eyes turned to look at her but Shie was looking only at Romi and the shadows of death in her eyes. "You remember Zephyr?" Shie asked carefully.

Romi's nod was curt but her eyes were narrowing dangerously.

Shie continued in haste. "He put wards on you. Zoe thought it was for the best. This way no-one could pluck information from your mind. If...if anything happened."

Kalia barely contained her surprise as Romi's expression changed instantly from barely contained rage to a small smile. *She put wards without consent? And Zephyr allowed it? And the human does not even understand what that means?* Kalia took a deep breath to force her anger down. Humans were humans but this was a step too far. Still it had been done and nothing could change it now.

The familiar shrugged with a small shake of her head and Kalia heard Shie's relieved sigh.

Josephine's words held little hope. "Kalia, could you remove them?"

Kalia could feel her eyes widening in horror at the suggestion and quickly shook her head to hide her reaction. *The wards were strong. I should have recognised Zephyr's work. Breaking through them...* Kalia did not even want to think of that. But she had not been fast enough.

Romi's words held the finality of bells ringing for death. "You can, Lady. What is the problem?"

Haunted eyes rose to meet impassive blue and Kalia had to swallow to keep the bile from rising in her throat. She did not fault Romi. *The human does not know what she is asking.*

Yet Josephine should know better than even suggest it. Kalia tried to keep her voice steady. "I can't do something like that, Gyn. It is...it's abomination. Even worse than what Zephyr did to you."

Romi's eyes narrowed searching her face. Kalia could only hope that her composure held. Romi's smile was fleeting but Kalia's heart thudded at the grimness in it.

Kalia could only watch as Romi's eyes hardened. The voice that left the familiar's lips was colder than the void. "Leave us. Now."

Josephine opened her mouth to speak but Romi did not let her utter a word. "Jo, out, now."

Kalia could only watch as Josephine's cheeks coloured at the undisguised command. Shie was already walking to the door and Kalia could see her shoulders slump with every step.

Josephine stood up slowly and Kalia could see the words that wanted to pour from her lips. *It's hard, isn't it, Beauty? For a human to order you around.* With a small shake of her head,

Josephine turned away and walked slowly to the door.

Kalia schooled her features to impassivity. The click of the door closing sounded insanely loud in the room. Kalia knew her face revealed nothing yet she trembled inside. The eyes that watched her unblinking seemed empty of all emotion. All Kalia could see in them was the promise of death.

Yet Romi's voice was not aggressive merely cold. "Abomination you said, Lady. But you've done it before."

Kalia could not hold the piercing gaze. *How did the human know?* She did not speak. She knew she could not disguise the tremor in her voice.

Romi's words held no accusation. "I don't care, Lady, about the past."

Kalia shook her head mutely. *The human does not know what she is saying.* The touch on her shoulder was light but strong. She had to turn then. She could not keep silent any longer.

"Gyn... Romi, you don't know what you are asking. Please...just let it be," Kalia said slowly.

Romi blinked and a sad smile appeared on her lips.

The familiar's voice was not cold or impassive. Kalia could hear the despair in it. "Lady, I don't care. I honestly don't care."

Kalia shook her head but Romi continued inexorably. "If there is a chance, even the tiniest hope, then it must be done."

Kalia could not stand the proximity any longer. Waves of pain and unadulterated despair rolled off the familiar. Kalia stood abruptly walking towards the shuttered window.

Kalia tried to find the words. Words simple enough for the human to understand. "I cannot undo Zephyr's work. His method is...ah...it is complicated. The point is simple. The barriers...ah...they are not imposed. They come from within. To break through them...Gyn, it would break your mind."

There is the simple truth of the matter. Kalia could only hope that Romi understood.

Romi's voice held a tone Kalia could not recognise. "Will it kill me, Lady?"

Kalia thought of lying. Nothing could be easier. But she could not. Not because she did not want to lie to the human, but because Kalia was certain that death was not something that Romi feared.

Kalia took a deep breath before answering. "Not immediately if that's what you are asking. But..."

Kalia closed her eyes. The words when they left her mouth had the finality of the grave. "Romi, it's rape. That's what you are asking for. Rape, pure and simple. In some ways it is even worse than physical rape. It is not merely your body that is violated. It is your...your thoughts, your feelings. Everything is plundered. Every moment, every memory, every emotion. Everything...."

Kalia could barely choke down the sob that came with her words.

Any reaction she was expecting but the one that came. The low bitter laugh chilled Kalia to the core. Kalia turned slowly. Romi was shaking her head, a bitter half-smile on her face. Kalia knew her face showed her surprise.

Romi's words were gentle. "Lady, rape does violate everything. You body, your mind, your soul."

Kalia blinked to dispel the tears that came to her eyes. Romi did not need her pity. She was not certain whether the familiar even wanted her sympathy. Blue eyes held hers, blue eyes full of shadows.

"Do what you have to do, Lady. All responsibility is mine," Romi said simply and the shadows of her eyes deepened even more.

Kalia could only stare. *The human can not possibly know what she is asking. No one, no man, woman or beast, would ask for such.* But the shadowed eyes that looked at Kalia did not flinch even for a moment. And Kalia could not detect any hint of fear or hesitation.

Kalia walked slowly to sit next to the familiar. Her words came out in a strained whisper. "Do you know what you are asking, human? This may be all for nothing if the bond does not hold."

Romi's answer was quick. "If there is a chance, I'll take it."

The words escaped Kalia before she could stop them. "Do you love her so much?"

Only silence answered the question that should not have been asked. Blue eyes pierced her for a moment before they tore away but Kalia saw the answer in the unshed tears they held.

Kalia sighed then. She knew she should simply refuse. Yet she could not. There had been no pleading, no heartbreaking entreaty from the human. To such she knew how to refuse. Even to threats or violence, she knew how to refuse.

Romi had neither pleaded nor cajoled. Her acceptance was something that Kalia could not refuse. *How can I? This is not love. By the stars, this is despair, pure and simple.* There was dignity in the human's invitation. And knowledge that Kalia could not refute. With a sigh, Kalia nodded slowly. *Stars, help you, Pietren, when the bond breaks.*

Strong hands took hers and held them. Romi closed her eyes and breathed deeply.

"Try not to fight me too much," Kalia whispered.

A single curt nod answered her. Kalia closed her eyes and prepared. In her mind's eye, Kalia traced the wards that barred her entrance in the familiar's mind.

A part of her admired Zephyr's amazing work. *The man certainly knows how to bring out the strongest in a person's mind.* With a deep breath Kalia honed her power to a point. It always helped her to think of it as the point of a sword. *A white shining sword.* With a sigh, Kalia attacked. The wards were powerful. She could see the strength of mind and the strength of heart. But Kalia Dracula was not the First Reader for nothing.

Every barrier shattered before Kalia's assault. The human was strong but no human or vampire yet had managed to defeat Kalia. In the back of her mind, Kalia could feel the convulsions that were ripping through the familiar's body.

Even in the midst of her own battle, Kalia could not help but wonder at whatever strength, whatever stubbornness the woman called upon to let no sound of her pain escape her tightly sealed lips.

As the last barrier fell, she plunged into the human's mind. Kalia was so surprised that she almost broke contact. The few times she had read humans, it had been a struggle, a raging sea of emotions mainly fear, but there was no struggle in Romi. There was no fear, no anxiety. Kalia was welcome.

An image seeped through the contact, a woman seated at a desk intently reading something, her short black hair reflecting the light of the lamp near her elbow, slowly she raised her head and smiled. Kalia recognised Zoe and saw the love in the smile. It seemed like a flood of love and pain washed over her. Kalia could not stop the gasp from escaping her throat.

The images became chaotic. Too quick for Kalia to fully register them. The grey-eyed woman laughing, tossing her head back, running on a starlit night and glancing back, sitting at a throne-like chair with a slight smile on her lips, shouting at someone, anger making her skin flush.

So many images and throughout the barrage, Kalia could feel the torrent of love and the raging fire of despair for a beloved missing, tortured, maybe already dead. And between them all a golden cord that pulsed with every beat of Romi's heart. Kalia could not get her bearings. The emotions were too strong but she knew the golden cord for what it was.

Gingerly Kalia touched the cord with her mind. *Here is the real test.* She held little hope that the cord would remain untarnished for long. Kalia had seen many such descend into an ugly darkness to feel anything but doubt.

Yet as Kalia took hold of the cord and started following it, there was no obstacle as she expected at any moment. With barely any effort, Kalia could feel the direction of the unworldly connection, somewhere to the southwest. *So strong. Ah, Gyn, you've been following it already,*

haven't you? Instinct you'd call it and no need to know better for truth. The Stars are merciful sometimes, human.

Quickly Kalia reined herself in. The connection was there and flowing strong. Trying to follow it now would make no sense. She had to be able to move, give directions. With a slight smile on her lips, Kalia opened her eyes severing the connection with the familiar.

Romi opened her eyes and the pain in them was terrible to behold.

"Lady?" the human panted and Kalia could hear the fear in her. Kalia did not speak for a moment observing the familiar's face, seeing the lines of pain etched deeply in her skin.

Kalia wanted to touch, to reassure but she knew her touch would be unwelcome. *How else could it be?* But there was no rancour in the familiar's eyes, no hostility, only hope mixed in with despair. Kalia chastised herself coldly. How could she ignore the need that pulsed inside the human before her?

Kalia's voice was even. The words held the power of the first clan. "It worked, Gyn." Kalia watched as Romi's eyes widened at the words her mouth silently working.

Romi's words were no more than a choked whisper. "She's alive?"

Kalia could only nod. *Stars, what have you wrought? Poor child.* Kalia almost laughed. *Love and hate they told us. Who'd have thought despair to be even stronger?*

Kalia felt tears sting her eyes as Romi started crying tears flowing down her face, her shoulders trembling. Kalia wanted to put her arms around those strong shoulders and provide what measure of comfort she could but there was something in the familiar that stopped her.

Even Kalia, someone who could not claim to know the human in the least, could tell clearly, there was only one set of arms that Romi would welcome and they weren't hers.

Kalia heard Romi's whisper. "Alive...hold on, love, I'm coming."

The Count's strong voice made Kalia turn to the door and Romi to jump in alarm knife in hand blinking the tears from her eyes.

"Is it done?"

The two guards with the Count immediately drew their guns and trained them on Romi, who crouched knife in hand, her eyes narrowed.

The Count barked his command. "Stand down!"

The guards obeyed reluctantly as Romi stood from her crouch. As soon as their guns were back in their holsters, the knife seemed to disappear from her hand.

Her voice was cold. "Forgive me, sire. I was startled."

The Count looked at the familiar looking at him impassively and sighed before speaking in a low voice. "Lady?"

Kalia's eyes travelled from the Count to Josephine standing at the door. She allowed herself a small smile of triumph as she nodded.

Josephine spoke calmly but her joy could be heard clearly. "It worked, Father. Romi managed...."

Kalia could hear the words that were left unspoken. *Romi's managed what neither father nor daughter did.*

Kalia felt the Count's eyes on her and spoke quickly. "She is to the southwest. I will be able to tell you more tomorrow."

"Thank you, Lady Kalia. You have brought the light of the moon to this house," the Count told her, his voice breaking.

Kalia nodded accepting his thanks as the Count turned to the familiar standing to the side. His words were slow. "Romi... Thank you."

Kalia looked at Romi and held her breath, along with everyone else in the room.

Her face was stone as Romi looked at the head of the clan and bowed stiffly. Her voice was low. "Sire."

Romi was still bowed and never saw the flash of regret that passed through the grey-haired man's eyes but Kalia did and her heart went out to him. Without a word, the Count turned and left with quick steps, his guards following him.

Silence reigned for a few moments as Romi straightened and looked at the door her eyes lidded.

Josephine's voice broke the stillness. "He never meant it, Romi. He did not want to hurt you."

Romi turned like lightning and her eyes flashed in anger making Kalia flinch in fear. Romi's voice was stormy. "Didn't mean it? Oh... your father wanted to hurt *me*, that much was clear. *I* wasn't the one hurt, though."

The stress was bell-like to Kalia as was the menace in Romi's voice.

Josephine took a step towards Romi and tried again. "Can't you find it in you to forgive him? He has regretted it bitterly all these years."

Romi's voice was cold, icier than the Transylvanian winter. "Years? I think not... Forgive him... I ain't the one to forgive him, Jo. *I could not care less what your father thinks of me. I never asked to turn.*"

Again the stress was clear to Kalia. What the familiar was not saying. She suspected that her presence made her hold back. Josephine hung her head and nodded. Kalia could see that the young woman understood perfectly what Romi meant.

Romi's voice was colourless. "You should rest. Dawn is coming. The Lady must be tired as well."

Josephine nodded dumbly and Kalia could see the tears threatening to spill. Without a word she stepped next to the young woman and took her hand. With a glance at Romi, Kalia gently guided Josephine out of the room.

Romi's whisper was barely audible even to Kalia's enhanced hearing. "Southwest... Where is that fucking map?"

Kalia felt a tiny tingle of jealousy. *How lucky you are, daughter of the Ottewald, to have someone like that...*

Kalia had been looking for centuries and yet could not even hope to find someone who would be so loyal to her. So single-mindedly ignore everything for her. Kalia looked at the young woman walking slowly beside her and her heart clenched at the sorrow in her face.

They had reached the landing and Kalia could see the effort Josephine made to school her features. Desperately trying to not let the soldiers see her distress. Kalia walked slowly lightly holding Josephine's hand. Josephine had not let her hand go and Kalia certainly wouldn't.

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Chapter 7: Blood in the Well

The door opening softly made woke Josephine from her slumber. A young human entered hesitantly and sighed in relief when he saw that the vampires were awake. His voice was soft. "Jo, the Count wants you."

Josephine jumped up quickly and answered him. "I am coming."

The human made a quick half-bow and quietly exited the room. Josephine turned to look at Kalia who had sat up on the couch and was looking at her.

The young vampire felt a small tingle inside her at the sight of the slight blonde and almost leaned in to kiss her before she stopped herself with a shake of the head. *What am I thinking?*

What is wrong with me? Now is not the time for this. Josephine tried to keep her inner turmoil from her voice. "Kalia..." she started but any more words escaped her.

Josephine knew her fears reflected in her eyes. *What would Kalia think?* Yet the voice that reached her ears was soft. "I was born the year Napoleon died. I am a patient woman, Josephine von Ottewald. The world's answers are not found in an hour."

Josephine took a surprised step back. Yet she did not shake Kalia's grip. The power in Kalia's eyes was surprising and Josephine was immediately reminded of who the vampire holding her hands was. Kalia Zimmer ni Dracula, a woman respected throughout the tribe for her knowledge and powers and a member of the most powerful clan in the world.

Josephine looked into eyes that held sincerity and, she noted with some trepidation, definite interest. Quickly Josephine bowed her head and flinched when she felt the soft kiss on her head.

Kalia's voice was the whisper of a spring breeze. "Take your time, Josephine. Time we have in excess."

Josephine's heart was racing and her mind was turning somersaults. The words out of her mouth surprised her. "Thank you."

Kalia's voice was calm and even. Her push gentle. "Your father waits."

Josephine looked at Kalia and nodded blushing. Without a word she left. Kalia's sigh reached her ears just as she was closing the door behind her

Josephine walked quickly to the Count's quarters, nodding seriously at the guards at his doors and entered without knocking. "Papa?" she said in a strong confident voice to the grey-haired patriarch, who was standing facing the big fireplace.

Her father did not speak merely gestured to the table. Josephine could see the small cardboard box upon it and her heart seemed to stop. She almost run to the table. Josephine's mind did not immediately recognise the object lying in the small box. Her father hands on her shoulders made her jump.

The message her eyes were sending finally was decoded by her shocked brain and Josephine cried out in anguish. Strong arms wrapped around her shoulders as tears she could not stop coursed down her cheeks. Minutes passed before she took hold of her emotions and slowly deliberately dried her eyes. Josephine's voice was strained but strong. "Does Romi know?"

Count Hugo stepped back from her. His voice was low. "Would that be wise, Jo? She is in a bad state as it is."

Josephine turned to face her father and she knew her anger showed in her face. The words were out of her mouth before Josephine could stop them. "She has the right to know. You know as well as I that if it weren't for Romi we would not be winning this war. You cannot be risked, I

am no soldier and Ari is weak. She has fought more than anyone else has. The soldiers follow Romi into battle, human or not."

Josephine could see her father's grey eyes darkening but finally he nodded. In her heart Josephine knew how much it took for him to listen to such words out loud. *As much as it takes for me to say them...*

The last two months had brought all of them face to face with some hard facts. Josephine watched as he went to the door. Opening it slightly, he ordered one of his guards to go get Romi. Silence reigned in the room as they waited for the her to come.

Josephine's heartbeats beat time in her chest. It seemed like time flew and yet it dragged. Part of her wanted the familiar here. *Romi seems never to despair.* But part of her cringed. *Has the human not suffered enough? Was her father right? Will this be the straw that broke the delicate balance?*

The knock on the door came quickly and Josephine's heart clenched, Romi slept so little these days. Only when exhaustion drove her to it. Josephine opened the door and motioned Romi to enter. As usual she was armed and shrouded in her cape.

Romi's voice was deep and cold. "Jo. Sire. What happened?"

Josephine's eyes roamed Romi's face, noting the deep dark circles under her eyes and the almost pasty look of her skin. Yet the mind behind seemed as sharp as ever cutting to the chase without any delay. Josephine could not find the words to describe it. *What words were there?*

Josephine's gesture was small. She bowed her head abruptly to hide her tears. Romi walked quickly to the table and looked at the small box. Gloved fists clenched once. Her only reaction to the gruesome object.

The light tenor was emotionless. "They are panicking. That's good. They will make mistakes."

Josephine could not help but admire Romi's composure.

"They know about the Reader. They may decide to get rid of them quickly," Count Hugo said slowly, looking at her.

Josephine could only nod. That was her fear as well.

"Sire, with respect, it is day. Vampires are sluggish when the sun is up. Nothing will happen before sundown," Romi said looking at the Count.

Hugo turned his eyes to the familiar and spoke quietly. "So are we, Romi. We cannot move with the sun up."

The laugh that left Romi's lips made Josephine look at her in surprise. She had never heard such

pain in laughter.

Count Hugo's anger was clear in his eyes but all she could feel was worry. *Has Romi quietly but irrevocably snapped under the pressure?* The laughter stopped abruptly.

"I have not lost it yet," Romi said the challenge clear in her voice.

"Vampires are sluggish during the day because they think they belong in the night. Bullshit! Zoe can move the same day or night and so can all the soldiers. She trained them for it." Romi's voice was calm.

"What are you suggesting?" Count Hugo asked slowly.

Romi smiled and her smile was that of a predator. "If your guest is up to it, we track them now. By sundown, we will be in place and hit immediately. They won't be expecting us, not yet. We have surprise on our side and they are bleeding now. They've lost many and they fear."

The Count nodded slowly. The plan was ambitious but it could work. "They still have more bodies than we do." Admitting the weakness hurt him greatly but nothing would come out of burying his head in the sand.

Romi nodded. "True but they are not well trained. They've been turning wannabes and civilians. Most of them are little better than rogues. It won't be easy but it's worth a shot."

Josephine looked at her father who was looking at Romi with lidded eyes. The Count spoke quietly. "She has trained you well, human."

Josephine's breath caught as Romi's eyes flashed. Romi's temper was not something many had faced and Josephine knew that her father was treading on dangerous ground. Romi slowly walked towards the Count her eyes narrowed, hands lost inside the folds of her cape. Josephine saw her father tense battle ready.

Romi stopped two steps away from the Count. Her voice was low, almost a growl. "Yes, she has."

Josephine wanted to run between Romi and her father. They both seemed ready to fight and she could not comprehend how this had come to pass so suddenly, unexpectedly.

"You think you can best me, human?" Count Hugo asked in a deceptively mild voice.

Romi's reply was delivered straight into the clan leader's eyes. "She said take you out, I took you out. She says fight you, I'll fight you."

Josephine watched rooted on the spot. She could not believe her ears. Romi had always been respectful and calm to Count Hugo, even when he had insulted her in front of everyone.

Her father's reaction made Josephine gasp as the patriarch of the Ottewald clan stepped back and inclined his head to the human woman defying him. Hugo's words were slow and measured. "You have done more than that, Romi. A lot more... Zoe was right... I was wrong. I cannot erase the past. But I can tell you this now. When this is over... whatever you ask, you will have."

Josephine felt like cheering. Finally her father had seen what everyone else had known for years. *So have I. Finally. Ah... Zoe you should be seeing this. You wouldn't believe it.*

Romi's words were not warm but they were not cold either. "Right words, wrong person, Count. When this is over... say them where it counts."

Josephine watched her father, fearful that he would be insulted. She felt a spark of anger at Romi. *Can she not see what it takes for him to abandon his pride and admit his mistake?*

But Count Hugo, proud and stubborn as he was, was honourable as well. He could see the sincerity in the eyes that held his own. Josephine's words from the day before flashed through his mind. "Romi does not hate you. She does not know how." *Truly, there is no hate in the human's face and gaze.*

The realisation brought a knife to his heart. He had known for a long time how wrong he had been that fateful night. Right now, he could see the simple truth that had been escaping him all this time. *You deserve it, human. And I was too blind to see it. You deserve it. And her...*

Romi's voice sounded in the corridors of his mind, a painful recollection. "What will you do, Falcon? Leave the clan? For what? For words? Get real. The only words that count are yours." Then he had thought it empty boasting. A clever manipulation and nothing more.

Now and here, with his daughter's ripped out eye in a box on the table and Romi's eyes holding his, he recognised the pain and desolation that the familiar was hiding behind her cold demeanour. His intellect could not fully grasp it but something in his heart saw it clearly. To his daughter's lover the only words that counted were hers.

Count Hugo spoke calmly. "What do you plan?"

Romi looked at him first and then at Josephine before answering slowly. "Three waves. Standard scout with me and the guest. Ari with the guns for the second. Third for cavalry. On the twenty."

Josephine, even after two months of war, needed to translate the jargon in her mind. These were Zoe's codes and Josephine was no soldier, as she admitted freely. Her father was nodding as Josephine tried to picture the attack.

A standard scout, two cars and five bikes. She knew which of the teams Romi would prefer. The ones she had worked with throughout the war. The guns, ten cars and more than fifty bikes, were the main fighting arm of the clan. And the cavalry. Josephine always found the term odd. *So twentieth century.* The fast moving back-up unit.

Josephine spoke hesitantly. War was something she did not feel comfortable about. "Ten would be better, I think. It's better to be near and wait than to be too far."

That Josephine had learnt well. Ari had been commanding the cavalry the night of the ambush and they had been too late. Two sets of eyes turned to her and Josephine felt the blush travel up her face.

"Say fifteen. We don't want to get into each other's way," the Count said nodding at his daughter.

Romi nodded at Josephine and with a half-bow to the Count, she left without a word. Before Josephine could speak, Hugo turned to her. "Jo, you will coordinate tonight."

Josephine looked at her father and bowed her head to hide her shame. She may be heir designate but she knew that she disappointed her father every day. *I am not her, am I, Papa? I'll never be.*

The soldiers liked her but they knew she did not know how to lead in battle. Josephine cursed inwardly. *How I hate this weakness!* Her father's words made her look up. "Don't torture yourself, Jo. You coordinate well and you lead well. You have kept the clan together all these months. Battle is not all that matters."

Josephine looked at her father and ruthlessly suppressed the tears that came to her eyes. She kept her voice even. "I can't wait for Zoe to come back. I am not cut out for this, Papa. If it weren't for Romi..." Josephine left the rest of the sentence unsaid. *What was there to say that they did not know already?*

Ari was a good soldier but in battle he lost himself and was no leader. With the Count forced to stay in the estate, since the clan would not be able to survive his loss, and all the senior captains killed in the ambush, Romi had effectively become the battle leader of the clan during the war. *A human. A human leading the Ottewald. And Romi of all people. The stars are laughing at us...*

Josephine shook her head. Romi neither liked nor wanted that role but the soldiers naturally gravitated to her in battle, obeying her orders and trusting her instincts. *Pure irony, isn't it?* Otto's words from years ago flashed in her mind. *"She's a lone wolf this human your sister's taken in, Princess. Knows her stuff though."*

"I'll get things going. Who is getting the backup?" Josephine asked evenly of her father.

The Count looked at his daughter and spoke slowly. "I am."

Josephine's explosion was immediate. "No! You can't!"

Count Hugo looked at his daughter and let a small smile quip his lips. "This is not a matter open to discussion, Josephine. This idiocy ends tonight."

Josephine looked at her father in consternation but could understand his frustration. Months of having to let others fight for him, to wait for reports, to see his people getting back after

ferocious battles, hurt, bleeding but victorious. *To see a human in his place. Oh, Papa...*

Hugo von Ottewald was a battle leader at heart and having to stay behind as others led the clan to battle had cost him enormously. Josephine inclined her head. She did not approve but there was nothing she could do. The Count was the only one qualified to lead the backup with so many dead or injured.

"I'll talk to Kalia," Josephine said evenly and with a last glance at her father left the room.

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He cannot stop the tears running down his cheeks no matter how hard he tries. The pain is unbearable. His arms feel like they are being stretched to breaking. His shoulders are on fire. *Is this what she has been going through?* He can only wonder.

He cannot stand this pain. This incessant pounding in his limbs. And no one is hitting him. No punches come his way. No heavy boots kick him. The pain seems to melt his brain.

Is this the end then? The little traitor voice sounds in the dark recesses of his mind. Wordlessly he growls. *No...no matter what this cannot end here. Not like this.*

He is certain. In his heart he is certain. *They will come.* His father will come for him. He keeps repeating the litany in his mind. *Father will come for me. Father will come for me.* The cell is damp and empty.

He is alone. The loneliness crushes down on him with every second that passes. He should have fought but it had taken too long for him to realise what was happening. By the time he understood they had him.

The sob racks through him, bringing a flash of blinding pain from his wrists and arms. But deep in his heart, he believes still. *They will come. This will not end here, like this.*

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Josephine's words were faint. "Are you certain? The sun is up and...."

Kalia looked at those luminous eyes and liked the worry that she saw in them. She could not refuse her assistance. The plan made sense to her and she had never had problems with being active during the day.

Kalia's voice was calm, belying the rapid beating of her heart. "It is a good plan. I have no problem with the day."

Barely an hour had passed before the small scout team had been woken up, prepared and assembled in the huge garage ready to leave.

Kalia had been escorted down to the cavernous garage by Josephine, who was silent and serious throughout. As soon as they got to the small group of vampires waiting at a corner, armed and ready, Josephine introduced Kalia. Kalia could not help but notice that most of the team were young. She could recognise two of them at least, the blonde, Cloe, and the tall man that answered to the name Alden.

Josephine talked easily with them. Kalia remained silent, almost aloof. She had little in common with these soldiers and she was a stranger. The slight sound of footsteps alerted Kalia to someone's approach and she turned unobtrusively to see who was coming. The patch of darkness that was moving slowly and confidently toward them made her smile.

Kalia watched with interest as Romi stopped near the circle of vampires but did not enter it. Everyone's eyes were on her but the human did not speak. Instead she bowed to Kalia formally.

Josephine's voice was calm and commanding. "You all know what to do. Romi?"

Romi looked at the vampires, expressionless, and nodded at Josephine before speaking in a deep even tone. "All goes well, we'll know where they are before sundown. It's gonna be an in and out. No fancy, no stuff. We find them, we get them, we get out. Sun starts to get to you, sing out. Ok?"

Kalia marvelled at the immediate response of the vampires at the short speech as the members of the scout team nodded at Romi and without a word put on their helmets and went to cars and motorcycles.

Kalia looked at Romi closely, seeing the dark circles under her eyes and the hard set of her jaw, as the human came to stand in front of her. "Lady, time to get going. If there is anything you need, don't keep it to yerself." Kalia looked at Romi with narrowed eyes and nodded.

Once in the car, Romi said quietly to Cloe, the driver. "Head southwest. The Lady will give you directions but keep your eyes open."

At the small nod of the blonde, Romi turned to Kalia. "Like last night, Lady?" she asked.

Kalia thought about telling the familiar to stop calling her lady. It made her feel a thousand years old, but she did not speak the words. There was a cold formality in Romi that Kalia did not want to come up against. So she merely nodded and waited for the familiar to close her eyes.

As soon as Romi closed her eyes, Kalia took the strong callused hands in her own and closed her eyes calming her mind before letting herself feel Romi's mind. This time she was prepared both for the calm that greeted her and for the cascade of images and emotions that bore down on her like an angry current as soon as Romi started remembering.

Kalia did not try to resist the current, looking instead for the golden cord that pulsed through every image. Her hold this time was stronger, less tentative, and immediately she felt herself being drawn to the southwest. With effort, she made her mouth work, while still holding on to

the cord. "Southwest," Kalia whispered.

Kalia did not feel the car moving and never saw the anxious glances the driver sent back at her. All Kalia could do was give the direction the bond was taking her. Always south and west. A hand at her shoulder made her break the contact with alarm. The young blonde vampire was looking at her.

The car was not moving and the sun was going down over the desert. Before Kalia could speak, Romi's voice sounded deep in the close confines of the SUV. "Are we there?"

Cloe answered quickly. "It's the old quarries, Romi. There is nothing else out here. And there are fresh tracks on the road, lots of them. I don't know how we missed this."

Kalia saw Romi's eyes darken and her voice was icy. "They've been moving a lot, the bloody bastards. Have you reported?"

At Cloe's affirmative nod, Romi immediately touched her ear. "Jo?.. The old quarries. Where is Ari? ... Alright, we'll stay put. I am sending the guest back ...No... Ok...."

Kalia watched, irritation barely hidden. *The human apparently feels that she can decide what a vampire can and cannot do.* "You will be returned to the estate as soon as the rest arrive, Lady. This isn't your fight," Romi said politely but coldly.

Before Kalia could express her displeasure, Romi turned to look at her. "Don't go all bloodsucker on me now, Lady. You ain't no soldier and this not gonna be a stroll in the park," Romi said in a tone that brooked no argument.

Kalia could not keep her irritation hidden. *Yet the blasted human is right, isn't she? I am no soldier. That's all you are, Kali. A hindrance. No more than a hindrance.*

Just after dark fell, a black lorry came to the stand next to the SUV. Kalia watched silently. The past fifteen minutes had been spent listening to Romi give instructions on how to attack the site.

"Time for you to go, Lady." Kalia heard the familiar say politely. She looked at Romi and nodded quickly. Without a word she left the car.

A handsome vampire left the lorry and came to her side. "Lady, at the back if you please," he said bowing respectfully.

Kalia followed him without a word and climbed the steps to the small door at the back of the huge truck. As soon as she stepped inside, she stopped in surprise.

Kalia looked at Josephine stand and smile at her. Quickly the young woman came to her side and spoke in a whisper. "Please don't be angry. I thought you might want to watch from here rather than go back to the estate."

Irritation made Kalia speak without thought. "Are you sure your human won't object?"

The hurt and anger in Josephine's eyes made her regret her words immediately. Josephine's voice was cold. "I will arrange for your transport immediately, Lady Kalia."

Kalia gripped Josephine's shoulder almost painfully. "Josephine... Forgive me. I should not have said that."

Josephine's cold eyes bored into her and Kalia could see the ice in them melt when they saw the frown on her face. "What happened?" Josephine asked quietly.

Kalia shrugged and tried to find words that did not sound totally ridiculous. "I am not a soldier and I was rather forcefully reminded of that..." Kalia said finally.

At the small laugh that escaped Josephine, Kalia tensed. She would not tolerate mockery even by this beautiful woman, but Josephine's words took the sting out of the laugh. "Welcome to the club...."

Kalia looked at Josephine and then at the track. It was quite obviously a mobile command centre and Kalia glanced at Josephine in surprise. "You don't lead?"

Josephine looked at her and Kalia could see the shadow that dulled her eyes. "I am not a soldier either. Neither Romi nor my father will let me forget that."

Kalia took the young woman's hand and squeezed slightly. "Soldiers..." Kalia sighed. It had been her lot in life to always be considered weak. Just because Kalia was not a soldier, her accomplishments, her intelligence, respected as they were, for some reason were always considered less important than the ability to fight.

It was a lot more difficult for Josephine as the heir designate of a clan, since leading into battle should have been one of her main responsibilities.

Josephine's tone was light. "Come. You must meet the others."

Kalia arched an eyebrow at her and turned to face the two young men and the young woman sitting in front of screens in the back of the lorry. Josephine's voice was strong. "Maika, Philo, Tom, this is Lady Kalia. She is our guest for the night."

Kalia nodded politely at the seated bows of the three vampires. Her eyes sought the two screens that literally covered most of the sides of the lorry. They were divided, showing many different images. Kalia recognised the setting immediately. Her own clan had similar mobile headquarters, although they had never been used.

This one looks well used. Kalia suspected mainly in the last few months. Kalia's eyes roamed the screens but something was bothering her. She looked again trying to find what was the detail she was missing. *What are they doing?*

Josephine's hand on her shoulder made Kalia turn. "What are you looking for?" Josephine asked quietly.

Kalia shook her head and whispered. "I am just looking around. It seems like no one is moving."

Josephine smiled. "They are still waiting for Shie and her team to cut the wave. The bastar...the Zindramas have soldiers in the city."

Kalia nodded. *That makes sense.* Yet still something bothered her.

Again, Kalia looked at the screens. There were so many images. Every soldier carried a tiny camera on the side of his or her head. Suddenly Kalia saw what was missing. "Where is Romi?" she asked quietly.

Josephine looked at her in surprise. "Romi does not have one. She has just the earpiece."

At the question in Kalia's eyes at her words, Josephine answered in a whisper. "She said she doesn't want spies in her eyes. Everything is recorded."

Kalia let Josephine guide her to a chair as she considered the information. After a few seconds of thought, she turned to the young vampire next to her. "Isn't that dangerous?"

Josephine nodded, her sadness clear in her face. "It is. But..."

Kalia looked at Josephine and understood. "She thinks she's going to die."

Josephine's nod was abrupt and Kalia saw the unshed tears in her eyes. Kalia tried to swallow the lump in her throat. Small things made more sense now. *That cloak she always wears. Hiding the wounds. And she never speaks of them. All that writing in the journal.*

And most of all what had been buzzing in Kalia's mind since the first moment she had seen the familiar. *How does anyone, much less a human, fight three vampires with no backup?*

Romi's outburst the night before took on new meaning. Her whispered words *"Alive...hold on, love, I'm coming."*

Kalia saw what she had failed to see before. *She thought her handler was gone. Ah...Gyn, you were looking for death, weren't you? Stars... What was I thinking? You hide yourself well, human. Too well...*

Romi's voice on the loudspeaker startled Kalia. "Jo, we are going in."

Josephine's answer was calm, but Kalia could hear the strain in it. "Hunt well."

Kalia looked at the screens. At all the images merging as the soldiers moved ahead. She could

see the different teams.

Kalia's eyes caught a flicker of darkness in one of the screens and the harsh intake of breath from Josephine told her she had seen it too. Regret flickered for a moment in Kalia's mind. *What would it be like to be out there, a soldier among soldiers?* Ruthlessly she suppressed it. That was not the life she had chosen for herself.

Kalia's hand tenderly found that of the young vampire next to her and held it gently. Josephine turned and her gaze was clouded with emotion, pain, guilt, regret. Kalia wanted to take her in her arms but knew that neither the place nor the time was right. Josephine turned abruptly to the screens and Kalia looked too.

Bursts of fire could be seen in all the screens and Kalia looked from one screen to the other desperately trying to see how the battle was going. She felt a firm touch just below her ear and then a sudden sting. Kalia looked at Josephine. Before Kalia could speak, the wave boomed in her ears, followed by voices.

Romi's voice, commanding controlled. "Cover me."

Kalia searched the screens for the telltale patch of darkness. Josephine's whisper was barely audible over the sounds of battle from the earpiece. "Third down on the right is Cloe."

Kalia looked at the screen division indicated and saw the darkness that was Romi kill a straw-haired man with a flick of her wrist, sword shining silver in the moonlight. It was strangely detached and even more strangely so near. Kalia heard the sounds the soldiers made as they progressed through to the inside of the quarries.

The loud orders of a man, Josephine supplied the name, Ari. The whispered comments of soldiers, muttered invective, calls for help, small cries for someone to care back, left, right, up. And through it all a cold commanding voice intoning short laconic orders that Kalia could barely comprehend.

Kalia could see the soldiers opening doors, bursting into rooms, killing Zindramas soldiers, looking around corners in the corridors, the small flashes of their guns, the shining arcs of their swords.

Josephine's gasp made Kalia turn to the woman beside her. Josephine's cry made Kalia turn to the screens. "Zeno."

Kalia immediately found the screen that had brought Josephine to her feet. A tiny cell, a small body, a boy hanging chained from the ceiling.

Ari's voice sounded loud in her ear even as Kalia saw a large man gently take the body of the boy down. "We got Zeno, Jo."

Josephine was looking at the screen, tears in her eyes, her mouth working but no sound coming

been pinned down enough times already. Would these corridors never end?

Cloe moved by rote and instinct. She peeked around the corner quickly. The single glimpse made her blood cold. Her whisper was harsh but she had lost all control of her voice long ago. "There are lots of them. Set of doors at the end."

The answering nod was curt. The order delivered in a whisper. "Move back to the last intersection. Go."

Cloe didn't want to go. She feared this order more than she has feared anything else. But her body moved of its own accord, responding in the command of the voice.

At the intersection she turned, Cloe's eyes scouring the darkness trying to make out the tiny movements.

The voice that boomed in the now silent corridor was cold unfeeling. "You have three seconds to put down your weapons."

There was no answer but a lot of low sniggers. Cloe cringed as she saw the small red light in the darkness.

The voice on the wave was small. "Take cover. Fire in the hole."

Her legs moved propelling her against the wall. Cloe hunkered down. Her heart hammering. The sound was too vast to comprehend. The flash shined through her closed eyelids.

Seconds passed before the wave came alive with a strained whisper. "All clear."

Cloe was up on her feet and running before the words are finished. Once more she peeked around the corner. Bile rose in her throat and she had to swallow quickly to keep from heaving her guts out on the cold cement.

With a shake of her head Cloe moved into the corridor. The dark shadow that was a few feet away turned and Romi's blue eyes pierced her soul. She knew they would haunt her nightmares along with the blood and shreds of flesh on the walls, the floor, the ceiling. Cloe had known about them but she had never seen one been used. She hoped she would never see a deathstar again.

The shadow was moving slowly but inexorably towards the double doors at the end of the sea of blood. Cloe could hear the others retching behind her but she did not turn. The gesture was clear and Cloe was moving again. The silent orders were hardwired into her mind. Cloe could hear booted footsteps following her and she knew the others were behind her.

Their positions were fixed. They all knew what to do. The door opened slowly and Cloe scoured the shadows inside looking for movement. There was nothing. Cloe glanced for instruction but there was no order forthcoming. Romi's eyes were trained into the darkness. A clenched fist

Romi's voice was harsh. "Which way, Cloe?"

Kalia could not suppress her smile as she realised that Romi had left the voice-chip on in her hurry to get out of the underground passages.

Kalia watched the shots with worry as silence descended over the subwaves. Those who had been in the attack were already moving away from the site. The motorcycles revving in the night. The tyres of the cars screeching.

But it was the other screens, those showing what the third wave was seeing that captured Kalia's eyes. She could not believe it. *It truly looks like a well.* Kalia chuckled. *The Zindramas are actually having the moon dance.*

Josephine's exclamation echoed Kalia's feelings. "What the hell are they doing? We are in the middle of fucking war and they are doing the moon dance?"

The Count's voice whisper broke the silence. "Not the supplication... I'll kill that ingrate with my own hands."

The hatred in Count Hugo's voice made Kalia look more closely at the medley of images and she felt the blood leave her face and her stomach clench in revulsion. The revellers were dancing wildly, gyrating and leaping high but it was not them that made Kalia swallow to stop herself from retching.

In the middle of the huge depression in the ground, Kalia could barely make out the naked woman chained on a pole and the group of people dancing around her. Kalia was thankful that the vision-chips were not strong enough to zoom into exactly what was happening. Not for herself. Kalia knew exactly what was going on, but for the young woman next to her who was desperately trying to understand what had made her father so angry.

Josephine's voice was clearly puzzled. "Maika, zoom in, please."

"No!" Kalia's cry was too late as the heavy-set vampire on the other screen zoomed in, reacting instinctively at the order.

Kalia averted her eyes from the screen even as her hands gripped Josephine's shoulders turning her away from the image, hoping against all hope that she was quick enough, that the beautiful young woman had not seen too much. Kalia's hopes were dashed as she felt Josephine retch. Quickly she turned the young woman holding her hair as Josephine gagged and vomited convulsively.

Kalia held Josephine as she emptied her stomach. Her own belly was cramping and she heard another of the vampires retch. The sour smell wafted through the lorry making Kara's stomach even more unsettled. She swallowed trying to push the bile back down.

Desperately Kalia tried to push the memories that flooded her mind. The metal tipped whips, the

Alden tried not to think. He fired without thought, his boots thudding on the hard ground. His eyes swivelled around. Everyone he could see was an enemy. The shadow in the moonlight guided his steps. Alden followed unthinkingly. Peripherally he knew they were going deeper and deeper in the thong.

Bad tactics, a small voice whispered in his mind. He ignored it. *What else is there to do? We could have stayed put. Hit at the edges of the crowd, winnowing them down. But we didn't. How could we? Somewhere in the middle of the milling crowd was the treasure we have been looking for months.*

Not one of them could endure the notion of waiting. They had followed like the avenging hounds of hell the darkness they had come to trust with their lives.

Alden tasted the blood on his lips. Cloe's blades a step away were dripping blood as she danced among enemies. From the corner of his eye, he could see Shie's long blade flash in the moonlight.

Shie looked like the knights of olden times as she cut a swathe of bodies in her wake. Her double-handed grip delivered precise stroke after precise stroke. Tsan was dancing at her side. Alden knew he was there although he has yet to catch a glimpse of the smaller man. He could feel the others behind him.

The scream cut off as they moved further and further in. Alden did not know where they were going. He had to trust that she knew where she was leading them. And there had been no hesitation, no false step in the inexorable progress.

Alden could not see faces any more. Everything was becoming a blur of blades coming towards him. He heard the high whines of shooters but he could only ignore them. *You could not avoid a round. You can only hope to be lucky.*

Alden's breath caught before the iron discipline of his training kicked in and he ran to the side firing all the time. He felt Cloe at his side and he was certain that the others were spreading out as well.

On his other side he caught a glimpse of Kelso standing firm against the onslaught. He wanted to look back but he could not. He had to keep them safe. That was his job now. Yet a part of his mind could not help but go over every little sound on the wave, waiting.

The order to move out must come soon. It must... we cannot have been too late. They can't have...

^^

One of the shots captured her attention and Kalia looked closely, feeling Josephine lean over to look over her shoulder.

Josephine's anguished whisper made Kalia's heart clench. "Zoe...."

The gunshots flashed all around the screens but Kalia watched in rapt attention as a familiar patch of darkness was tenderly, obvious even on the impersonal screen, untying Zoe von Ottewald from the stake in the middle of the well. Kalia could see a tired face filled with pain turn around as Romi steadied the naked and bleeding woman.

Kalia felt a lump at her throat as the familiar, looking small next to the tall woman beside her, took off her cloak, gently settling it over her lover's shoulders. Kalia's own startled gasp echoed Josephine's as the woman that was Zoe von Ottewald with a smooth movement that belied the blood that dripped from her face took a sword from the twin scabbards on Romi's back.

Kalia blinked wondering whether her eyes were playing tricks on her when she saw the short-haired woman that had become a patch of darkness walk off into the fighting, sword in hand, Romi a step behind her guns blazing.

Josephine's voice sounded shrill. "Romi, what the hell are you doing? In and fucking out. Get out of there now!"

Kalia waited but there was nothing but silence for an answer. Yet she could see Romi on the screens blasting Zindramas soldiers left, right and centre clearing a path for the cloaked woman next to her.

The rest of the scout team was following. Their guns blazed making the screens flash. "Romi! I said get the fuck out of there," Josephine ordered loudly, her command ringing in the cabin.

There was a momentary silence before a deep voice was heard in the subwaves. Kalia for a moment thought it was the Count. "Jo, shut up! You are distracting her," Zoe said, her voice deep, sure and commanding

Kalia saw the silent word on Josephine's lips and the tears that flooded her eyes. "Zoe."

Gently Kalia took Josephine's hand and held it. She wanted so much to take her into her arms but this was not the time or the place. Kalia's eyes sought the tall figure of darkness on the screens.

The battle was bloody and chaotic. Kalia could barely follow the images as soldiers died, as soldiers killed. Somewhere she caught a glimpse of the Count, sword in one hand, gun in the other.

But Kalia's eyes always returned to the small cluster of screens with their constant flashing and the darkness that walked slowly but surely in front of them. Kalia could not help but admire the easy grace of the sword strokes. They looked like an intricate dance as they rendered through flesh and bone. *Does she feel no pain?*

Kalia could see that not many enemies came close enough for the dance of swords. Most were felled further away by the blasting guns in Romi's hands. "They make a good team," Kalia

whispered to herself.

Josephine squeezed her hand in answer and flashed a smile, mixed pride and regret. Kalia returned Josephine's smile with one of her own.

A gasp made both of them turn to screens and Kalia felt Josephine tense. A group of Zindramas were attacking furiously cutting off Zoe and Romi from the Scout team.

^^

Shie's side hurt. *A lucky strike.* She had let the woman come too close to her. But there was no time now for her to hurt. Her arm ached too. The long gash bled on the already bloodied ground. But she could not stop. She had to go on.

Her sword was heavy in her hands. But Shie could not think of that now. *Not now.* She stabbed and slashed without stop but there were too many of them. Her head swivelled at even the tiniest lull. *Where are they?* She could see no more than bodies. The voices of the others sounded faint in her ears.

She must lead, she knew. *But what was there to say?* Shie slashed a man's belly open, her feet instinctively stepping over the spilled guts.

The voice she heard on the wave, it took time to recognise it as her own. "Hold on. Damn, hold on we are coming."

Shie stepped forward again slashing blindly. The voice that whispered in the wave made her heart miss a beat.

Shie had never thought to hear it again. "Copy."

^^

Kalia watched desperately trying to catch a glimpse of the two women from the vision-chips of the Scout team as they fought their own battle. Peripherally Kalia could see that the Zindramas were falling back, retreating and dying all over the well, but not where it mattered the most.

Kalia could hear Josephine giving low-voices orders. "To the east of the crater. Go east."

For a moment, the crowd of bodies pressing around the two women parted and Kalia saw them fighting back to back, swords flashing in the moonlight. The vision was lost as the soldier turned to face another Zindramas soldier running towards him.

One of the screen shots caught Kalia's eye. It was from one of the soldiers left on the rim of the crater, and she gasped. It seemed like every Zindramas soldier still alive was in one large circle around the surrounded Scout team. The third wave of Ottewald soldiers hacking and slashing their way towards their trapped kin.

wanted to stay.

Yet another, darker, part doubted the wisdom of that desire. Josephine was young and Kalia had seen into her heart. Was it worth it trying to seduce the young woman?

As the lorry started moving, Kalia closed her eyes and breathed slowly. She was tired and all she wanted was to sleep, preferably with Josephine at her side. Maybe it would be easier if she treated this as a one-night stand. A temporary thing, ask for nothing, give nothing.

Kalia almost laughed, as if she did not know where that would lead. Almost three centuries of life and she had never managed to have a one-night stand. Henry, how she missed him sometimes, had always teased her gently for her tendency to fall in love with the most unavailable women she could find.

After all, he had witnessed enough of them in his sixty years as her familiar. Kalia silently debated whether it would be better to just pack her things and go back home, back among her books and her studies, among her own people.

Her household had been trained by Henry, including her two donors, and provided her with everything she needed, books, comfort, food and in the rare instances when her body could not stand the loneliness any longer, relief.

She thought of Ingrid and Sophia, her donors for more than ten years. They had married finally a few months ago and the memory brought a small smile to Kalia's lips.

The light touch on her shoulder made Kalia open her eyes to find Josephine looking down at her, a smile on her lips.

"Would you like to sleep for a bit? It's been a long night," Josephine said quietly.

Kalia smiled back. She simply could not resist Josephine's smile, and answered. "Thank you. I can wait for a few hours."

Josephine, her hand still lightly touching Kalia's shoulder, sat down next to her and her eyes roamed the screens.

There was silence in the cabin. The three operators kept their eyes on the screens, their mouths closed. Josephine knew they were giving her space, privacy, time, as much as they could.

Josephine almost sighed. Maika was a friend and the only person in the clan that Josephine trusted, except for her sister. Her eyes looked at the small cluster of screens from the Scout team. Zoe and Romi were nowhere in sight.

The Scout team was Zoe's special project and Romi had been leading them ever since the ambush. The members of the team would prefer to tear their vision-chips away rather than disturb the two women or invade their privacy with even as little as glancing at them.

Instinctively, Josephine squeezed slightly Kalia's shoulder. More to make certain that she was there than anything else. Violet eyes turned to her and Kalia arched an eyebrow in question. Josephine shook her head and smiled.

Kalia leaned in and whispered at her ear. "Take your time, Jo."

Josephine looked at Kalia surprise all over her features. *How did the woman know what I am thinking?* Kalia smiled again, a small mysterious smile, and Josephine shook her head in wonder.

A small voice whispered in her head, something about violet eyes. Josephine looked at Kalia's deep violet eyes and smiled. *Maybe...just maybe there was a spark there when their eyes met?*

Josephine wanted to shake her head. It was all too much. For a moment, she wished she could talk to Zoe. Her sister always heard Josephine out. Zoe had been a confidante, an advisor for most of her life.

Josephine felt a warm weight on her hand, the one that rested on Kalia's shoulder and looked at the vampire next to her.

Kalia was looking at her, her hand over her own and mouthed. "Are you ok?"

Josephine felt the honesty of the question and nodded slowly. Josephine closed her eyes and leaned back in her chair. Kalia's hand did not leave hers and Josephine just let herself feel the peace.

Kalia watched the screens absently. Occasionally sneaking glances at the young vampire at her side. She did not let her hand move from its place atop Josephine's. She was too tired to think. Dawn was coming and Kalia wanted to rest.

One of the screen shots caught her eye. The Scout team had reached the estate. Kalia saw Zoe's tall form walk confidently an arm still draped over Romi's shoulders. She thought about telling Josephine. A quick glance showed that the young vampire still had her eyes closed and Kalia kept silent.

Let her rest, Kalia thought, she needs it. Kalia closed her eyes. They felt grainy like there was sand in the air, and she leaned back on her chair.

A slight shake made Kalia sit up tossing her head.

Josephine's voice was soft. "We are home."

Kalia looked around. There was no one in the cabin but Josephine and she could see that they were inside the huge garage of the Ottewald estate through the open back doors of the lorry.

Before Kalia could speak, Josephine spoke again. "Don't worry about it. You needed some rest. We've been running you ragged."

Kalia laughed and answered. "It was nothing much. Tracking was easy. Sometimes it takes days even weeks."

Josephine nodded sagely. "Come, I'll take you to your room."

Kalia followed the beautiful woman out of the lorry and through the parked vehicles in the garage to the small door opening to the house proper. "What are you going to do?" Kalia asked suddenly.

Josephine stopped and looked back at her. A few moments passed before she spoke. "I am going to check up on Zeno and Zoe."

Josephine paused and then continued quickly. "Would you like to come? I am certain Zoe would like to meet you. We owe you their lives."

Kalia wanted to go but she wondered whether it was wise. *This is a family occasion. I'm a stranger here..* Josephine must have seen Kalia's hesitation for her voice was low. "You will be welcome, Kalia. In this house you will always be welcome."

Kalia heard the sincerity in Josephine's words and looked at her in surprise. Always the same words but it was merely words. Kalia knew that most of the clans she had provided with tracking did not really want her there any more than it took for the job to be finished.

It was the unfortunate fact that when you have seen into somebody's soul, they generally did not want you around. *Not for long anyway.* Kalia had always made certain she did not overstay her welcome.

But Josephine's voice was clear and warm. Kalia believed her and her heart clenched. "Thank you," Kalia whispered even as she tried to keep from crying.

Josephine did not know what had prompted that response or the tears that sparkled in Kalia's violet eyes but her reaction was instantaneous, hugging the older woman close.

"I don't know how things are back in the old country, Kalia. But for what you did for us, Ottewald will always be grateful," Josephine said quietly, her voice ringing with conviction.

Josephine stepped back from Kalia and without hesitation took her hand. Quickly she started walking down the corridor leading Kalia along. Kalia did not recognise any of the corridors or stairs that Josephine took. She certainly had not been in this part of the house.

Finally, Josephine opened a door, which brought them to the brightly lit corridors of the hospital she knew already. But Josephine was taking her further down the corridor than she had been

before. There was a large waiting area and Kalia could see that beyond the double doors at the other end of the room was a hospital ward.

A young human in an orderly's whites immediately came to Josephine and spoke quietly. "Are you alright, Jo?"

Josephine smiled at him warmly and spoke quickly. "I am looking for Zeno and Zoe, John."

The orderly nodded and gestured towards the back of the waiting room, Kalia turned to see Romi standing against a wall, before speaking quietly. "Sergei is still looking them over, Jo. It will be awhile I think." Josephine nodded her thanks to the orderly and led Kalia to the waiting familiar.

Kalia walked beside Josephine, while she observed Romi. She was standing against the wall eyes closed. Kalia could see a bandage around her head and a ragged hole in her shirt at the left shoulder.

Josephine's voice was very careful. "Romi?"

Romi opened her eyes and looked first at Josephine and then at Kalia. Silently she bowed low to Kalia.

"What's going on, Romi?" Josephine asked worry colouring her voice.

"The doc is looking them over. The boy looked fine to me, stunned but no damage. Falcon looks like hell. They roughed her over pretty badly," Romi said slowly, barely above a whisper.

"Sergei threw you out?" Josephine asked in a growl.

Romi shook her head and spoke quietly. "Falcon."

Kalia could hear the tightness in Romi's voice and it brought a rush of blood to her heart.

"It's going to be alright, Romi," Josephine said quickly.

Romi nodded silently and walked away towards the double doors of the ward. Kalia and Josephine watched as she walked to the doors, paused and then turned around and came back to the corner where she was standing before.

Josephine looked at Kalia and spoke softly. "It may be a long wait. I'll get someone to take you to your rooms."

Kalia answered without thinking. "I'll wait with you...If that's ok, I mean."

"Thank you," Josephine whispered and squeezed her hand.

Minutes passed slowly. Kalia watched the doors open and close as wounded vampires came out

one by one. There were others waiting in the room. Kalia knew. She had been in such rooms so many times. Lovers, friends, parents waiting for their loved ones to come out of the jaws of death.

Every time the doors opened Josephine tensed. Every time the doors opened Romi was half-way there only to stop and with a sigh turn back to her spot against the wall. *Time passes slowly in hospital waiting rooms.* Kalia tried to keep the memories of other times from her mind, when things were not so clear, so pristine, so silent, when there was screaming and begging and tears.

The door had not opened but Josephine tensed and then got up slowly and Kalia saw the Count walking slowly towards them. Behind him, Kalia could see his guard and a number of wounded going through the doors. Nurses and doctors were coming out to get them. Some were walking, many helped along by others, others yet were brought in stretchers.

The Count's voice made her look away from the river of wounded to the head of the Ottewalds. "Jo...you have not been hurt?"

Josephine's answer was immediate. "No. I am fine. We are waiting."

The Count nodded and said slowly. "Sergei contacted me on the wave. It's gonna be alright but it may take some time."

Josephine nodded and sat, even as the Count took a seat next to her. To Kalia there was a feeling of unreality in the scene. *It's the tiredness. Henry was right. I do get emotional when I'm tired.*

The river of wounded from the third wave dried up quickly and then Kalia watched, feeling almost detached. The door opened to let another of the wounded of the previous waves out. Kalia recognised her, the young blonde, Cloe. Both Josephine and the Count looked at her and so did Kalia. Her arm was on a sling and there was a sealed cut on her brow.

Romi was beside her in an instant. Her voice low but audible. "You ok, blondie? The arm?"

The answer was quiet but Kalia could hear it clearly. "It's fine. The Doc said a couple of days. Your shoulder, Roms?"

Romi's shrug was clearly unconcerned. Her voice was strong, commanding. "No worries. Get yourself some supper, Cloe. It's been a long night."

Kalia could see the slight hesitation in the young blonde and Romi's gentle push towards the corridor. Without a word, the blonde vampire slowly walked away and Romi quickly returned to her spot against the wall.

The Count's words were clear and loud in the silent room. "You were hurt?" Kalia could feel Josephine tense next to her.

Romi's voice was low, tired. "Just scratches, Sire. Nothing new."

The Count did not speak further and Kalia looked over at the familiar. *Not just scratches, Gyn.* Romi had her eyes closed again, her face impassive.

It's like a play, like an old twentieth century DVD stuck in one scene, replaying it endlessly. The doors open and Josephine tenses. The doors open and the Count stands up and with a sigh sits again. The doors open, Romi is halfway across the waiting room only to sigh and return to her spot against the wall.

Time passes slowly in hospital waiting rooms. Kalia could see the covert glances from the vampires waiting. There was a space left empty between the ruling family and the others. Kalia could remember that same space between her and the rest of her clan that day more than two hundred years ago when her mother had died.

Kalia tried to push the thought from her mind. *It still hurts even after all this time and now is not the time to think of death.*

The doors opened and Kalia felt Josephine tense and then stand quickly. The Count was already on his feet and walking towards the woman who had just exited. Romi was running across the waiting room and Kalia watched in rapt attention as Zoe opened her arms and hugged the familiar tightly.

Kalia saw her close her good eye and almost with reverence bow her head until her lips touched the crown of her familiar's head. The black eye-patch made the vampire look like a pirate from some old movie. *A very battered pirate*, a small voice whispered in her mind.

The bruises and cuts visible on Zoe's face and neck made Kalia's stomach roil. Kalia could only imagine what was hidden by the clothes.

Kalia's sensitive ears caught the whisper. "I am fine, Baby. Don't cry, Love. It's alright now."

The Count's voice was loud in the silence. "Zoe...."

Kalia stood as Zoe raised her head and her deep voice, a deep heavy baritone, answered. "Father."

Zoe's moves were gentle. What difference from the sword-yielding warrior Kalia had watched on the screens, as she tenderly let Romi from her embrace.

Kalia could see the gentle touch as the tall vampire dried the tears of her familiar. Romi slowly stepped back and to the side before going to stand against the wall, just a few steps away from Zoe and the Count. Kalia could see the tension in the familiar's stance and the hand that came to rest on the knife in her belt.

Zoe's voice was calm, cold, commanding. "Zeno is well. Sergei has put him to sleep in the visiting wing. He is in shock. He's seen some bad things but they did not touch him."

The Count nodded and spoke slowly. "We should talk...later."

Zoe nodded slowly and watched as her father walked away towards a small door that Kalia had not noticed before. Zoe's face showed no emotion as she turned her gaze back to the waiting room and started walking towards Kalia and Josephine. Kalia straightened her shoulders and suppressed the tinge of fear inside her. *This is a formidable woman.*

"How are you, kiddo?" Zoe said with a smile at Josephine.

Kalia watched entranced as Josephine smiled shyly at her sister. "Welcome home, Zoe" she said.

"It's good to see you. I was worried," the deep voice continued and Josephine laughed.

With another smile, Zoe turned to Kalia. A grey eye looked at her, its intensity burning. Without a word, Zoe bowed formally. "You have my eternal gratitude, Lady Kalia," Zoe said still bowed.

Kalia had to lock her knees to keep herself from curtsying and her voice trembled slightly. "Please. It was my pleasure."

The tall vampire straightened slowly and spoke quietly. "Whatever you need, Lady, it shall be provided. Now and ever."

Kalia's thoughts seemed derailed. There was nothing she could think of saying, so she simply inclined her head.

"It has been a long night, Jo, Lady. Would you like to join us for dinner?" Zoe said in her deep voice, her gaze taking in both Kalia and Josephine.

Josephine turned to Kalia, questioning. Kalia looked at Zoe in surprise and then glanced at Romi, who stood a couple of steps away.

Kalia did not know what she was expecting to see but certainly not the warm smile that transformed Romi's face. *I was right... The harsh features soften when she smiles.* Kalia turned to answer but her words were lost in the coldness of Zoe's eyes. Before any words were spoken, Romi was there, a hand on Zoe's arm.

Kalia watched in amazement the icy fury in the vampire's features transformed into warmth as she looked down at Romi. Zoe had to lean down and Kalia's sensitive hearing caught the low whisper. "She's an empath and you look all hard and fast now. Easy."

A grey gaze turned to Kalia and narrowed as it met her eyes, drilling into them. Kalia forced her lungs to breath and spoke as clearly as possible. "My apologies, Lady Zoe."

Kalia almost jumped at the low laugh from Zoe. "I should be the one apologizing, Lady. I tend to overreact at times."

Kalia could see from the corner of her eye Josephine shake her head and her whisper was too low for ordinary ears to hear. "At times only?"

"After you, Lady," Zoe said with a small bow.

Kalia tried to keep the amazement from her face. The heir to the Ottewald looked more and more like she had come out of some twentieth century film on the perfect gentleman.

Kalia felt Josephine's hand take her own and allowed herself be led away. There were steps behind her and her extraordinary hearing could hear the tiny whisper. "Thanks, Baby".

Romi's answer was even lower. "She led us to you. Another day...."

Kalia snuck a tiny look back and her heart warmed at the sight of Zoe putting an arm around Romi's shoulders drawing her close. Josephine's abrupt stop made Kalia stumble.

Josephine looked at the large man with the shoulder length hair that had stepped in front of them. Kalia could hear the footsteps behind her stop.

Josephine opened her mouth to speak but before any sound emerged, the man spoke. "Zoe, Jo. The Count requests your presence for dinner at the Great Hall."

Kalia felt the immediate tension in the air around her as the man turned to her and bowed carefully. "Lady Kalia, the Count would ask if you would honour him with your presence at his table?"

Kalia could only nod. The air seemed heavy around her. Josephine stood ramrod straight, like something bad had happened.

The man bowed to her once more and turned on his heel disappearing down a smaller corridor, the same where he had come. Josephine turned slowly and Kalia could not resist the impulse to turn as well. The anger and rage on Zoe's face made Kalia take an involuntary step back. *What has happened?*

What could be so bad about a dinner invitation? There was such cause of celebration this day that Kalia would have thought that a communal dinner was a certainty.

The shadow of a suspicion made her eyes move from the fury in Zoe to the familiar next to her. Romi appeared calm. Her face showed no emotion. Her eyes were clear and impassive but Kalia could see the underlying tension in her stiff posture.

Zoe looked ready to speak and Kalia could already hear the anger in her voice but another deep voice, if of lighter timbre was first.

"Humph. Well, just about time for a shower before bed. I don't know how you people can stand

spending all night on your feet. I am half-asleep already. If you would excuse me, Ladies?" Romi was already moving away before she had even finished speaking.

The tone was so casual that it would make Kalia suspicious from anyone but from Romi it sounded positively alien. It was like a stranger was speaking with Romi's voice. Romi sounded like one of those eternally happy go lucky people. There was an easiness, a familiarity in the tone, like a well-learned script from a mediocre actor.

"Don't take another step!" Zoe's order cracked like a whiplash in the closed confines of the corridor.

Kalia watched as Romi stopped dead on her tracks and slowly squared her shoulders but did not turn immediately.

When she did, Romi's face was coldly impassive, her eyes lidded and she was looking beyond them. To Kalia she looked like a soldier at attention.

Zoe's next words were softer but there was steel in them. "Dinner first, Romi. You can get cleaned up later."

The familiar did not answer nor did she look at Zoe. Romi looked determined to stand there till the end of time.

Josephine spoke quietly. "Zoe, please. Not tonight. This is a celebration. This isn't the time...please."

The flash of anger on Zoe's face made Kalia move without thought, pure instinct guiding her, to stand in front of Josephine. Kalia did not know why but she was certain that this could descend into violence any second. Zoe looked at Kalia, clearly weighing her, there was power and the fires of rage in her grey gaze.

Any other time Kalia would run, try to avoid confrontation, but she was not willing to leave Josephine to face that rage alone. *This might not be my fight. I do not know what this fight is about. But, stars, I'll fight anyway.* Zoe took a careful step back but Kalia did not relax as the vampire's deep voice reverberated with fury.

"Not the time, Jo? A celebration? A celebration of what, sister?" The sarcasm was so heavy it dripped from Zoe's words.

Kalia felt a hand at her shoulder. She recognised Josephine's touch, and allowed the younger woman to gently push her aside.

Kalia could only watch as Josephine looked at her sister and answered quietly. "For your safe return, Zoe. The return of the heir...Please...not tonight."

Zoe glanced at her familiar, still standing stiffly a few paces away, and her voice warmed. "Don't

even think of moving, Romi."

The contrast was chilling between that warmth and the ice of her answer to Josephine. "I see... The return of the heir..."

Before Josephine could speak, Zoe continued and this time anger raged in her words. No more cold sarcasm, this was the heat of fury. "Another spectacle, Jo? Another fine parade of the heir to the eyes of the clan? As if they do not know. No! It stops now! Either with or not at all and the proprieties be damned."

Kalia could see the widening of Josephine's eyes and struggled to understand. There was something important but she could not get her head around it. *With what?* The question echoed in the halls of Kalia's mind. A small voice inside her sniggered. *With whom, you mean...*

Kalia immediately looked at Romi, whose eyes reflected surprise and pain in equal amounts.

"Falcon... don't. It's not worth it." Romi's voice broke at the last and Kalia wanted to shake her head. *This is insane, pure insanity.*

"Don't you dare say that! Don't you dare!" Zoe's voice was hard like granite.

Kalia could only watch as the tall vampire walked to stand in front of the smaller human.

Zoe's voice was not low. It could be clearly heard and it carried tears in its heat. "Have they spent two months in pain? Were they beaten senseless every night? Did they bleed to stop from screaming... from giving those bastards the satisfaction?"

In the slight pause, Kalia could hear what can only be described as a cut off sob. Kalia could see tears in Romi's eyes.

Zoe's voice was harsh. The words bitten off. "Have they spent the last two months regretting every word unsaid? Every cowardly step back? Every hurt? Every word said in anger? Every promise broken? Have they spent two months praying to whoever listens for another chance? For a day, a moment?"

Kalia could feel tears stinging her eyes at the pain, the regret colouring Zoe's voice.

Romi's words were low. Kalia could hear the anger, the strength, the love in them. "Don't say that. You have never been a coward. And you have never broken a promise. You are who you are and I am who I am. I accept that."

Romi's next words were almost too low for Kalia to hear. "I love you as you are. Nothing changes that... Nothing!"

Kalia wanted to look away but some deep-seated instinct stopped her, made her look on.

The strong, almost manly, hands that took hold of Romi's shoulders, the deep voice that held the depths of despair. "But I don't, Romi. I cannot accept that. I will not let you take the fall any more. You love me? Why? For what? For all the insults I stood and watched you take with a smile? For all the times I left you to fend them off on your own? For all the nights, you waited up for me to come back? For all the times, I came back reeking of cheap perfume and blood? What is there to love?"

It was the small familiar that put her arms around the tall vampire. Kalia saw Romi had to stretch to reach up and kiss Zoe on the lips.

Kalia looked away then. She wanted to turn away but that same instinct stopped her.

Romi's whisper was low, almost inaudible. "Don't torture yourself. Not over this, not over me. Please, love, I beg you. I am proud of who you are. I know my place. I don't mind."

Zoe's answer was delivered in a strong clear voice. "So do I. Your place is exactly where it should have been all these years. By my side. I claim you, human."

Josephine's gasp echoed Kalia's own. Claims had fallen into disuse for years. As had so many other customs in the wake of new eras and new ways.

Claims were relics of another age. Josephine had her hand outstretched as if she could somehow stop the scene unfolding in front of their eyes. Kalia felt her breath catch as Zoe carefully knelt and bowed her head. A moment passed and then another before Kalia looked at Romi.

Romi looked shell-shocked and was blinking rapidly. Her whisper was choked. "Falcon?"

Kalia heard herself speak and could not believe her own words. "You have to accept the claim or not, Romi. Put your hands on her head and accept or decline."

Blue eyes drilled into her, fear, surprise and wonder in them. Slowly, ever so slowly, Romi touched the sides of Zoe's head lightly and looked at Kalia in mute appeal.

Kalia whispered. "I accept your claim, vampire. My blood is yours."

Kalia saw the deep breath that Romi took. Kalia's eyes flooded at the trembling voice. "I accept your claim, vampire. My blood is yours."

Zoe's deep voice resounded in the corridor. "By your blood, I claim you. By my blood, I absolve you. My moons are yours."

The ritual woke old memories for Kalia. The formula was unique. A promise that had to be fulfilled. Kalia knew in her heart that Romi had no idea what Zoe had just vowed and a quick glance at Josephine showed that the young vampire had no idea either. *You will not stay human for much longer, Pietren.*

Kalia watched and held herself as witness as Zoe stood and gently, ever so gently, brought her mouth to Romi's neck. There was no sound except the hissed intake of Romi's breath as Zoe fed. It was barely a moment before the tall vampire stepped back. Kalia felt warmth in her heart for Zoe, Romi had lost too much blood today already.

The blood letting was kept to the minimal needs of the ritual. Kalia's eyes were captivated by the two small drops of blood on Romi's neck and she barely stopped her laughter at the tiny drops of sealant that appeared almost like magic on the spot.

Zoe had probably not planned this to happen in an underground corridor but Kalia was certain that she had planned to lay her claim before sundown.

Josephine's voice broke the moment. "What have you done? Father...."

Zoe's answer was delivered with her back turned. "He'll just have to deal with it, Jo. I said enough and I mean it."

Zoe von Ottewald turned, an arm around Romi's shoulders. "Time for dinner, I'd say. I am starving."

Kalia saw the immediate hesitation in Romi's stance and had to remind herself that she in all probability had no idea what she had just agreed to.

Kalia made a mental note to take Zoe aside at some point, sooner rather than later, and tell her about what had happened after her rescue. The last thing Kalia wanted was for the Ottewald heir to be her enemy.

Josephine's sigh made Kalia turn to the young woman next to her. "Oh, Zoe...."

Without hesitation, Kalia took the young woman's arm and when she turned, mouthed. "It's ok."

Kalia looked back and could see Zoe whispering faintly in Romi's ear. Kalia did not want to pry but she could hear the words clearly. "Trust me, Baby. Just trust me. I won't leave you alone this time or any other time. Promise."

Kalia felt anger rising at the brief look of pain in Romi's eyes. *By every hell that humans believe in! I've seen into that young woman's soul. Stars, I almost drowned in the love she has for you.* Kalia felt her anger bring blood to her head and breathed trying to force it down but a little voice inside her vowed to make certain that this promise was kept. *Culpa Draconis, Zoe von Ottewald. This promise shall be kept.*

Their walk down the corridors was silent. Kalia kept glancing at the backs of the two women in front of her and at the look of anxiety in Josephine's face beside her. There was a barrage of sound coming from an open archway at the end of a well-lit corridor and Kalia felt Josephine tense.

Zoe was walking confidently but from behind Kalia could see her squaring her shoulders. What made Kalia speak out was Romi's instinctive movement to the LAC on her hip. "Zoe, a moment."

Zoe turned to look at her and Kalia spoke carefully. "I don't know what's going on. I am a stranger. But going in there armed does not look like a good idea."

There was a puzzled look in Zoe's eye that was quickly replaced by realisation as she looked at the small familiar next to her. "Romi, you are leaving the lot at the door. All of it."

Romi nodded silently and Zoe flashed a smile of thanks at Kalia.

Josephine was looking at her with wide eyes and whispered. "Romi would never...."

Kalia kept her voice as low as possible. "Twenty-four hours ago, Romi thought your sister was dead and that all she could do was die avenging her. Just a few hours ago, she had to rescue her out of a charnel-house. She is hurt and tired and this is not going to be easy."

Kalia cursed inwardly as she heard the indrawn breath from the vampire in front of her. Zoe had heard and that was not good. At the archway, there was a large closet space, where Romi with a little help from Zoe divested herself of what Kalia could only think of as an armoury.

The twin LACs were first, then the swords on her back but Kalia had seen those already. What made her eyes widen was the sight of the inside of Romi's heavy black vest when she took it off. Kalia had wondered why the familiar would take it off but the briefest of glimpses showed a brace of knives, another gun, strips of explosive and variety of other implements that Kalia could not readily recognise but certainly did not look peaceful on the inside of the vest.

A quick glance at Josephine showed the young vampire's surprise at the secrets of the vest and Romi's voice was defensive. "You never know what you're gonna need."

Zoe's laugh was infectious and Kalia found herself smiling. "That's my baby," Zoe said teasingly.

It was with smiles on their faces that the quartet entered the huge Great Hall of the estate. Zoe's steps were confident, her shoulders thrown back, her head held high. She was every inch the image of the heir designate of one of the most powerful clans in this part of the world.

Kalia kept glancing, however, at Romi's back, who was matching the taller vampire next to her step for step and the stiffness of Romi's shoulders was clear to Kalia's eyes. The Hall was full of sounds. Not rowdy certainly, but full of people talking and laughing. Kalia could hear music in the background but not too loud.

Kalia looked ahead at the head table, where she could see the Count seated, along with the large man, she could recognise as the captain of the second wave, Ari. They had taken no more than ten steps inside the crowded room before sound lessened as more and more heads turned to watch the four women entering.

Kalia knew that the attention was not on her or Josephine as she could see vampires all around her, their eyes following Zoe as she walked nonchalantly down the aisle.

Kalia's sensitive ears could hear whispers in their wake. 'Zoe...she looks ok, ain't she?' 'The familiar...oh fuck!' 'What the hell is that one doing here?'

Kalia felt her own shoulders stiffen as the hall became quieter and quieter with each passing moment. Kalia could see Romi's back and the stiffness there was gone replaced by a fighter's slight bunching. Even her gait was that of a soldier readying for battle. Zoe was walking unconcernedly, an arm draped around Romi's shoulders.

All eyes were on them. Kalia could see Josephine's eyes moving around the room, expectant and worried at the same time.

A loud voice shattered the silence that had fallen over the hall. "Here I thought that trash weren't allowed in the house."

Kalia swivelled taking in a flaxen-haired man. Her sharp eyes caught the waxen tone of his skin.

Not a soldier. Soldiers were easily distinguishable in the crowd. Most of them still in the clothes they had battled in, many with freshly sealed wounds. The man's words echoed in the cavernous hall and every eye focused on him.

He continued, mocking. "Oof...It's started to smell already."

A low growl made Kalia turn to the vampire in front of her. Zoe was looking at the man and a low growl, more wolf than human, emitted from her throat.

Romi's low voice was clearly audible. "Let it be. It's not worth it. He is either drunk or high."

Kalia could hear no fear in Romi's words. Only a tiredness, a sadness that made her heart clench.

Kalia heard the indrawn breath before the man spoke again. "Are you talking about me, trash?"

The sneer in his voice was unmistakable and Kalia felt her own anger rise.

Zoe's voice was like a bell in the deafening silence that greeted the man's last remark. "The next words out of your mouth, Silas, had better be an apology or, by every star, you won't see another moonrise."

The ice in Zoe's voice made Kalia shiver. She felt Josephine's hand at her arm and her heart jumped at the contact. A young woman, Kalia guessed a newly turned, was trying to hold the flaxen-haired vampire back, to make him sit down again.

With a jerk, the man disengaged himself and sniggered. "Are you threatening me, Zoe? You

would threaten a brother over a trashy human slut?"

The tension was unbearable in the room and the silence was thicker than snow. Kalia saw immediately the effect the words had on Zoe. She clenched her fists. It became clear to Kalia now what had remained opaque in the cryptic remarks between Zoe and Josephine in the corridor.

Kalia wanted to shake her head. *Sometimes I wonder what does a long lifespan afford if vampires remain as deaf to experience as humans?* Inside Kalia bristled. That was a low blow to level against anyone but more importantly, it was a card that could only be used so many times before it was completely and utterly ignored.

Kalia suspected that the flaxen-haired loud-mouthed vampire was certain that Zoe would back down over that challenge. *What a fool...*, Kalia thought.

Zoe's answer was icy calm. Not even Kalia's preternatural hearing could catch a tremor or hesitation in it. "Wrong answer, Silas. Your choice of weapons?"

Kalia could see the shock rippling through the massed vampires. Such an outcome they had not expected.

Silas' reply was clearly incredulous. "What? You would uphold a human over one of us? Have you lost all sense of propriety, woman?"

Zoe's laughter rocked the room. "Choose your weapons, Silas. I wish to eat and have no time for your pathetic pleading."

Kalia watched as all colour left the flaxen-haired vampire's face and the influence of whatever beverage or drug he was under drain from his mind under the steely grey gaze. His mouth worked but nothing but incoherent sounds came out.

A deep male voice made everyone turn. "Enough!"

Kalia turned too to see Count Hugo standing mere steps away.

The last one to turn was his daughter and Kalia saw her square her shoulders. Kalia's breath caught and could only hope that the Count had learnt his lesson.

"Zoe, your forbearance," the Count said simply.

A steely eye looked to him and Zoe inclined her head a fraction. Her body language was clear. Her forbearance would not last for long.

The Count's voice whipped out, loud and stern. "Silas! You will apologise immediately. Unless you wish to take up my daughter's challenge."

The man's voice was trembling. "Forgive me, Lady. The drink talking," Silas said his eyes darting between the floor and Zoe.

There was a collective sigh of relief in the room, quickly cut off by Zoe's cold words. "Wrong choice again, Silas. You should apologise to those you insult."

Kalia heard her own breath hiss. She looked at the Count in worry. *Zoe is taking this too far.* But the head of the Ottewalds did not speak. He merely looked at Silas, his face a closed book. Silas' head swivelled between daughter and father and then looked around frantically searching for support.

Kalia looked around the assembled vampires too. Many were looking away, into their glasses or plates. Others, most of them soldiers, were looking at the flaxen-haired vampire with hooded eyes and cold faces. Silas realised there was no support to be had from his peers and Kalia could see the realisation dawn in his eyes. *Two months ago he may have had some support but not this day.*

"I am sorry, Romi," Silas croaked in a small voice.

Kalia saw Zoe open her mouth but a hand on her arm stopped her. Romi's voice was not loud but it carried clearly in the silence. "No worries, Silas."

Kalia looked closely at the stocky familiar as she stood there. There was no rancour in her voice. Josephine's remembered words came to her. *"Papa, Romi does not hate you. She does not know how."*

Kalia looked at the familiar with new eyes, seeing the truth of Josephine's words. Kalia had known another like that. A man incapable of hatred, her own father. Kalia could remember the old man's words. *"Hatred is a waste, princess. Someone tries to hurt you either leave or kill him. Don't let him take over your soul."*

Kalia saw clearly that Romi, much like her father, would walk from an insult or kill for a slanted look without any emotion or compunction. Kalia whimsically wondered for a moment. *How will you react, Gyn, if the insult is not directed at you but at Zoe?*

Kalia's heart skipped a beat as Romi's words the previous night, at the icy storm barely held in check in her voice, echoed through her mind. *"Oh... your father wanted to hurt me, that much was clear. I wasn't the one hurt, though."*

Kalia pitied whoever was fool enough to insult Zoe in Romi's presence. Kalia had the horrible suspicion that there would be no words said, no warning, no challenge, merely the crack of a gunshot.

Josephine's slight touch on her arm brought Kalia back from her thoughts and realised she had to move. The Count was walking away back towards the table and Zoe was stepping forward too, her arm once more around Romi's shoulders.

Low conversations could be heard again in the hall and Kalia smiled in thanks to Josephine before moving forward. As soon as they reached the table, raised upon a low dais, the Count bowed to Kalia and politely held a chair for her. Kalia was pleased to see that it was the one next to him.

On his other side sat Zoe, Romi next to her and opposite the Count, with their backs to the room, Josephine and the captain, Ari. The first few moments flowed easily as Ari was introduced to Kalia. Kalia felt a movement at her right shoulder and turned to see a white clad human bring over dishes, followed by more.

Kalia smelled the fresh blood and her stomach rumbled. *It's been a long night.* Kalia watched, hunger pangs in her belly, as the servitor poured warm blood in a tall wine glass, which Kalia accepted happily. Another servitor was providing the same service for the others on the table.

Kalia sipped the blood slowly, trying to savour it in spite of her hunger. Kalia turned to look at the chink of glass only to see Romi's hand covering Zoe's glass and her shake of the head to the servitor.

Kalia watched with interest, mirrored in Josephine's eyes and Kalia could see the Count watching as well, as the servitor nodded and left the carafe on the table without a word.

Zoe was watching too, unspeaking but Kalia could see the concern in her stance. Kalia sipped again, savouring the full flavour, and smiled when Romi very prominently put her hand on the table in front of Zoe.

Henry had a tendency to do exactly that. Kalia could not truly understand it but apparently Romi was one of those familiars who had very specific ideas about feeding. *I would never have guessed it for you, Gyn.* Henry had been adamant in his refusal, no matter what no matter when, not to allow her to feed off another in his presence.

Kalia smiled in remembrance. That had led to some monumental fights with her familiar. Zoe's movement was careful as she took Romi's arm in both her hands and bowed over it. Kalia heard the tiny sound of suction.

Kalia turned her eyes away. Feeding was feeding but the look in Romi's eyes as she looked at Zoe feeding was so intense that Kalia felt like a voyeur. Somewhere deep inside her, she could feel a glimmer of understanding.

Two long months. Two months of fear and trying to keep the panic from taking over. Kalia could see that there were things that the familiar needed to believe that this was no dream. Kalia smiled. Zoe understood Romi's need for touch and feel to make reality feel real and not a dream.

The arm that the tall vampire had around her familiar almost continuously since the battle in the quarry made absolute sense now. A simple tactile reminder that it was real. Kalia felt sorry. *How it must be for both of them to be denied any sort of privacy. The battle, the ride back, the hospital*

and then the dinner invitation, always under the eyes of others, words that could not be spoken, the touches that were denied in a public space.

Kalia knew that she would not have found it in herself to deny the need for touch and affirmation as staunchly as both Romi and Zoe had for all these hours. For a moment, she wished they were in her own house. *Then I could send those two away from the crowd and the proprieties be damned.*

Dinner was a leisurely affair and Kalia enjoyed both the food and the wine. There was a moment of tension when the Count realised that Romi was not eating any of the well-prepared dishes.

Kalia had been surprised that the Count kept to the archaic practice of not addressing the familiar but her vampire.

Zoe's answer was delivered after a low laugh. "Katrina knows we are here. She will bring Romi's meal soon."

The Count had nodded then, some irritation showing. Kalia had been intrigued. She wondered whether the familiar had some sort of special dietary requirement. Kalia had met a few vegetarian familiars but they were a rare sight.

Some time later after the main course had been served, a beautiful matronly woman came to the table carrying a huge tray, which she put in front of Romi.

Katrina's voice was almost motherly. "Here you go, Roms. Enjoy."

Romi's smile was radiant as she thanked the woman. Kalia watched in fascination as after a glance at Zoe, Romi tucked in.

At the Count's raised eyebrow, Zoe answered simply. "It is morning, father. Time for breakfast."

Kalia could see her own puzzlement reflected in the Count's face and in Josephine's too.

Ari had stayed silent throughout the meal except for the initial pleasantries but his soft baritone was clear. "It's the army, Sire. Cantos fight at night, so breakfast is their last meal of the day."

Three sets of eyes came to rest upon the human woman in their midst, who was happily eating a huge plate of eggs and sausages complete with toast and coffee. Even Kalia had heard of the infamous Cantos, the death squads. Her stomach roiled at the thought.

Romi slowly raised her eyes from her plate and looked at the vampires looking at her. Kalia saw the infinitesimal movement of her body and immediately Zoe's hand was at her shoulder squeezing slightly.

Kalia's curiosity was piqued and she held her breath for Romi to speak. Clearly, neither the Count nor Josephine had known that part of Romi's past judging from the clearly incredulous

expressions on their faces. Yet, the familiar remained silent and slowly bent her head again to her meal.

Zoe's voice was calm but Kalia could hear the emotion held in check as she looked at her father. "Singapore, Zimbabwe and Kurdistan."

Romi's fork stilled for a split second at the last word and Kalia could understand why. The massive massacres of Kurds by the death-squads had made international news and led to a series of high-profile trials all over the world.

Kalia tried to keep her eyes impassive but she looked at the familiar, trying to imagine her as a member of the dreaded death-squads. Her mind provided images seen on the vid-link. The piles of bodies, the laughing soldiers, the burnings, the signs of torture. Yet linking the quietly eating Romi with the images was too difficult for Kalia.

Not that Kalia could not imagine Romi killing. She had seen the familiar kill easily, but she would have sworn that there was nothing in Romi's psychological profile to suggest that sort of callousness.

Kalia felt the tension in the air and looking around the table, she felt it rising. Zoe was looking at her father, her gaze challenging, Ari looked like he wanted to magically disappear. Josephine's frown was half pain and half regret but it was the Count's lidded eyes that caught Kalia's attention.

Kalia wanted to bang her fist against the marble table-top. The constant undercurrent of veiled threats and challenges between Zoe and her father was making her edgy. The silence stretched interrupted only by the slight sounds of Romi eating. To Kalia the familiar looked determined to ignore anything but her plate.

The Count's voice was low, almost a growl. "Discharged?"

Kalia wondered what that was about. *What did that matter?*

Zoe's answer was equally low, challenging, anger barely masked. "Deserted."

Kalia for a moment thought that the anger was directed at the Cantos but the Count's sigh and minute shake of the head disabused her of that notion. Zoe's anger had exactly one target, the grey-haired man that was her father.

Kalia from the corner of her eye saw Josephine's eyes flash and felt a flicker of fear, there was something in the young woman's face.

"Zoe. Enough. Please," Josephine said looking at her sister with flashing eyes.

But Zoe did not respond. With a glance at her sister, she turned back to her father.

Kalia felt anger rise in her at the obvious dismissal. Josephine was trying to somehow bridge the gap and Kalia bristled at Zoe's ignorance of her sister.

Josephine's voice had an odd tone. "Are you just going to stand there?"

Kalia could not understand. Josephine's words made no sense, until Kalia heard Romi's voice answering. "Yup."

Kalia's eyes swivelled to the woman who was still bowed over her plate seeing both the Count and Zoe turn as well. Romi was eating with no sign of discomfort at the two burning grey-eyed gazes as both father and daughter looked at her.

Zoe's voice was low. "Romi?"

Kalia watched as Romi slowly left her fork on the side of the plate and looked up at Zoe.

The timbre of Romi's voice, cold clinical, surprised Kalia. "I've already said all I have to say."

Romi turned from Zoe to the Count and Kalia gasped at her arching an eyebrow at the head of the clan.

Kalia saw Count Hugo tense and feared the worse. Silently she prayed to whomever would listen for the familiar to look away, but Romi went on simply looking at the Count, eyes and face expressionless.

Kalia expected the flush of anger in Count Hugo's face but she was once more surprised to see the old vampire not show any sign of anger. There was an infinitesimal nod by the Count in Romi's direction. So small that Kalia debated whether she had truly seen it.

His voice was emotionless. "Zoe, come with me."

Without looking whether his daughter obeyed him, the Count stood up and walked away from the table towards a small inconspicuous door at the back of the hall.

"Romi?" Zoe whispered. Kalia could hear a lost child behind the calm façade.

The expressionless mask slipped from Romi's face as she turned to face Zoe and Kalia could see the emotion in her eyes.

"Go. Make peace." Romi's whisper was so low that Kalia almost did not make it out.

Kalia did observe however, the miniscule nod as Zoe got up and turned to walk to the same small door her father had disappeared into. Kalia watched Romi looking on, her heart in her eyes, as Zoe opened the small door and disappeared from view.

Romi's voice was low. "Thank you."

Kalia looked at the nods of the other two vampires on the table in surprise. *A setup?*

"You think it's gonna work?" Josephine asked tightly.

Romi glanced at the door before answering. "It's up to them now."

Kalia felt a warm body slide into the seat next to her and a hand hold her own. She turned to look into Josephine's luminous green eyes. Her puzzlement must have been obvious because Josephine spoke in a low voice. "No family is perfect."

Kalia nodded. She did not understand all the subtext yet but she could see the sincerity in Josephine's face.

"I should go, I think," Kalia said slowly. She did not want to. Her curiosity was burning, but leaving was the right thing to do.

Josephine opened her mouth to answer even as she was shaking her head in the negative but another voice intruded. "Bullshit, Lady. What's there you ain't knowing already?"

Kalia turned to look at Romi. Blue eyes looked at her and there was a light in them. *What do you know, human?* The question must have showed in her eyes, because Romi spoke in a low drawl. "Tis a beautiful thing, the net, ya know."

Romi smiled at the widening of Kalia's eyes and continued in a normal voice. "Lady Kaliana Zimmer ni Dracula. But that's well known, isn't it? How about you working with Freud? Or being the foremost theorist on familiarity and inverted vampirism?"

Kalia felt her mouth fall open and hastily controlled her features. She felt the intake of breath from Josephine, though.

"Inverted vampirism?" Josephine whispered and Kalia barely suppressed a wince. *How did the familiar even know what inverted vampirism was?*

Romi laughed silently. "What did you think, Jo? We've all been examined and catalogued three times by now."

Kalia felt anger at the slight mocking tone and her eyes flashed. Romi's arched eyebrow stopped her before a word left her lips.

Josephine spoke though. "Romi! Kalia is a guest."

Romi inclined her head, a half-smile on her lips. "Forgive me, Lady. Familiars can be so *unpredictable* at times."

Kalia could not help but laugh at the emphasis on the word. The unpredictability theory was one

Chapter 9: The Karakin

The silence was absolute with only the sloshing of brandy in the glass whispering. With careful slowness Count Hugo brought the glass to his lips. Words swivelled in his mind but none found their way to his lips. He raised his eyes from the glass to the grey gaze impassively watching him.

There was no glass in his daughter's hand. She had refused him. He understood but he felt the loss keenly. Count Hugo could not help the memories rising in his mind. The memories of time past, when they would sit in front of the fire discussing some matter or other of the clan, full glasses in their hands.

By every star and moon, I miss those nights. Seirius' death had brought them together. Count Hugo had discovered his daughter in those dark days after his son's death. *The stars have heard my prayers.* He could barely believe that she was there opposite him.

Zoe had changed in these two months. Count Hugo could see it in her lone eye flashing shadows in its depths, in the new lines that adorned her face, in the slow tapping of her fingers on the armchair.

Yet still words escaped Count Hugo. *How do you undo the mistakes of the past? How do you unsay words of venom and anger?* Count Hugo never got the chance.

Zoe's voice was deep, as deep as ever, but there was nothing in it, no love no hate, nothing. "I don't have time for games, Sire."

Count Hugo took a breath to speak but Zoe spoke before he could utter a word. "Don't...."

He heard the warning clearly and he could only incline his head. He would hear her out, no matter what she said. A part of him wondered at the reversal of roles. All these years, she had stood there listening to his words, unspeaking. *Now it's my turn to listen.*

"You lead this clan. The decision is yours and I won't dispute it whatever you decide. I claimed my familiar this night. With a member of the First Clan and a blood relative as witnesses. Law and custom have been satisfied. I will not renege on that claim even if I could. If you wish, you can have my three years. The decision is yours."

Count Hugo felt his eyes close. He could not help it but it was the only reaction he allowed himself. *A claim, who would have thought of it?* He had not heard of a claim being made for the better part of a century. *And the three years?* For a moment the Count wondered whether he was in the grip of some nightmare. One of the many that had been plaguing his days.

Slowly Hugo opened his eyes. The grey gaze that observed him was unblinking. Slowly carefully he put the words together. "You would leave the clan?" He heard the despair in his voice but there was no strength in him to disguise it.

Zoe's nod was curt, her words icy. "I would never betray the clan. If I would, I have had ample opportunity. But this situation is no longer acceptable."

Count Hugo's insides flinched at the icy reminder. *As if I needed to be reminded. The situation is no longer acceptable...*

Hugo wanted to turn away from the accusation unsaid. He had been blind and now he would pay for that blindness. Count Hugo cleared his throat before speaking. He could feel his voice ready to crack. "And if the situation changed?"

There was a flash of something he could not recognise in his daughter's eye but her voice was even. "That would depend on the change."

It was his turn to nod then. His nod slow and thoughtful. "A place on the rolls and a captaincy within the year," he said quickly.

Zoe's shake of the head was immediate and he felt ice in his heart.

Count Hugo's next words were careful. "What do you want, Zoe? You said this was not a time of games."

A half-smile appeared and disappeared so quickly from his daughter's lips that for a moment he doubted it had ever been there.

"A place on the rolls and your blessing." Zoe's words were measured cadences.

Count Hugo blinked to keep the tears from forming in his eyes. *His blessing? Oh stars, how much have I hurt you, my daughter, that you would need to ask for that after all that has happened?* But he could not utter such words. He knew Zoe. Even before she would not have accepted such words from him. Now he would not even dare think of saying such to her.

Count Hugo knew his voice would crack but he could not care. "You have it." A blind man would not have missed the surprise in his daughter's face.

Yet Zoe schooled her features quickly. Her voice was expressionless as before. "Done then." Zoe stood up then and Count Hugo watched with tear filled eyes as she walked to the door. She was his daughter. He could see the signs others would miss, the slight hitch to her step, the bunching of her shoulders.

Fear made him speak before thought. "Zoe?"

She turned then, eyes unreadable. She did not speak merely waited for him.

Count Hugo found the words then. He could not let her go like this. "I am sorry."

It was the saddest smile Count Hugo had ever seen that graced Zoe's face. "I know, Papa...I

Kalia nodded. That was exactly what she was feeling, time slowing, edges softening.

Josephine talked quietly as she walked pulling Kalia with her. "There are two sides to the Ottewalds. The soldiering is one thing. But there is this side as well. The library is downstairs and in this wing there are no soldiers. We are all one but sometimes it feels like we are worlds apart."

Realisation dawned in Kalia. "The Centre?" Kalia asked in a low voice.

Josephine smiled and nodded. "Part of it. The living quarters are here but the whole of this side of the estate is the Centre. I've missed the calm and solitude here these past few months."

Kalia was immediately interested. She had been surprised when Josephine revealed that she was not a soldier, nor training to be one, but to learn that she was part of the Centre was a revelation. "What are you working on?" Kalia asked immediately.

Josephine looked down shyly. Her voice was small. "Nothing as important as what you do... History."

Kalia could not help but laugh. "I must say I surmised that, darling". This was the Centre after all.

Josephine looked at Kalia and laughed sheepishly. "Ancient Civilisations," she said quietly.

Kalia could see the young vampire was shy about her work. In a soldiering family like the Ottewalds choosing the path of the scholar was anything but common. It had fascinated Kalia ever since she had first heard of the Centre. How did a family that churned out soldiers by the dozen become involved with Recording?

Even more surprising was that in so many generations that the Centre resided with the clan, Josephine was the first Ottewald Kalia had known that had not chosen to be a soldier.

Before Kalia could frame a question, Josephine stopped in front of a door and quickly opened it, smiling at Kalia to get in. Kalia smiled back and went through the threshold. Once inside she looked around. The rooms were not large. Nothing like the massive suite that her sister had. Josephine lived a lot more simply.

There was no decoration in blue and gold. Kalia had not seen much of the rooms that the heir to the clan lived in but what she had seen was enough. The only similarity between Josephine's quarters and her sister's were the books. Tall bookcases covered every wall.

Josephine's voice was warm and so near that Kalia's heart fluttered. "Not what you expected?"

Kalia turned to see green eyes only inches from her own and she barely stopped herself from leaning forward into those inviting lips.

"No..." Kalia stammered out, finding her breath again.

Josephine smiled and Kalia could see a hint of her sister in that smile. It was a predator's smile. Kalia felt warmth in her belly at the eyebrow that Josephine arched at her. With supreme effort, Kalia stepped back.

Josephine laughed. "Come on in. Have a drink?"

Kalia followed, her heart hammering. All she could think of was Josephine's lips just inches from her. Kalia simply could not turn her mind around it. One moment Josephine looked young and unattainable, the other she looked at her with lust in her eyes.

Josephine was pressing a glass in her hands and Kalia let herself be pulled down to a comfortable couch. A small voice inside Kalia insisted she leave. *You are tired. The wine from dinner makes your head heavy. Your mind is sluggish.*

"Kalia, are you ok?" Josephine asked, concern clear in her voice.

Kalia looked at the luminous green eyes and felt like she could fall in them forever. The light brush of a fingertip on her lips made her gasp, even as she felt the warmth expanding in her belly.

"I'll kiss you now" Kalia heard Josephine's voice. Its huskiness sent shivers down her spine.

Josephine's lips against her own were soft and tender and Kalia could not stop her gasp. Without thought, she returned the kiss and felt a tremble in Josephine that mirrored her own.

Their kiss deepened quickly and Kalia felt soft but strong hands pull her closer. The ringing did not register at first but as sirens started blaring, both women looked around startled.

Josephine was first to react. "Attack. We are under attack! Come quickly, you are not safe here," Josephine said breathlessly.

Kalia looked at Josephine, her mind not responding at first. The sirens blaring made her ears and head ache and the tiredness of the last two days made her thoughts sluggish.

Josephine seeing Kalia's hesitation quickly took the woman's hand and pulled her off the couch.

"Come. Do you know how to use a gun?" Josephine said as she literally dragged Kalia to a display case among the bookshelves.

The situation was finally coming clear to Kalia and her answer was swift. "Yes."

In a matter of moments, Josephine had opened the case, taking out two automatic pistols and giving them to Kalia. A brace of clips was next and Josephine was relieved to see Kalia settle the

brace around her waist.

Quickly, Josephine repeated the movements. This time settling the brace around her own hips and taking her own automatics.

A voice made her turn, gun raised. "Jo, we must go," a tall lanky woman in soldier's garb said quickly.

"We're ready," Josephine said immediately feeling immense relief at the sight of the soldier. Natasha was a newly turned but a good soldier nonetheless.

As they exited the room, Josephine could hear the calls and the heavy tread of the soldiers as a squad came down the corridor. A number of men and women, with pistols and braces similar to Josephine's, followed in their wake.

Without delay, Josephine took Kalia's hand and pulled her towards them. They were her people. The scholars and students at the Centre, and Josephine felt immense pride to see them following the soldiers, guns in hand.

Down the corridor they went, following the soldiers and Kalia tried to get a feel for the unfamiliar guns in her hands. Kalia had not held weapons in her hands for decades and wondered whether her aim, never very good, would be any good this night.

The people around her looked determined but their moves betrayed their fear and their unfamiliarity with their weapons. The comparison with the squad of soldiers in front of them was telling. Going down the stairs was quick but they had not yet reached the ground floor landing before the soldiers started yelling for them to take cover.

Kalia clutched the guns in her hands and tried to stop them from trembling. She could hear the staccato whines of the automatics in the corridor below. The squad was hard pressed. In moments three of the six were down, bleeding from gaping wounds.

The people around her tensed and Kalia heard their sobs, even as she tried to keep hers inaudible. A warm hand on Kalia's shoulder made her look.

Josephine's whisper was for her ears only. "Do not fear, Hon. Zoe says they're coming."

Kalia tried to smile but knew that it was more of a grimace. She saw as another soldier from the squad fell, blood running from a headshot.

"Get back up the stairs," Natasha cried out.

Josephine's voice was calm commanding. "Come on, people. Back up the stairs. Do not panic."

Kalia looked back. She could see at the top of the stairs the press was lessening as people went back into the corridor.

There were only two members of the squad still alive. One clearly hurt from shrapnel. The other the tall soldier that had come into Josephine's room to get them. Natasha was trying valiantly to stop the advance that Kalia knew was coming down the corridor. Intermittently firing with her rifle and trying to keep pressure on her comrade's wounds.

Kalia looked back. The stairs were empty but she could see a press of people on the next landing.

"Nat, we are going up," Josephine said in a low but carrying voice.

"Go. I'll cover you," the soldier rasped quickly.

Kalia felt Josephine's hand turning her gently and pushing her forward, Kalia started climbing, trying to keep the fear from stealing all her wits. Kalia had climbed two steps when she heard soft invective. "Fuck".

Kalia turned quickly to see the tall soldier falling on her side, half her chest was gone.

Kalia felt a peculiar clarity in her mind. She could hear the heavy boots of the attackers as they neared the corner of the landing. Kalia could feel Josephine's hard breathing next to her. She could see the glint of the guns in her hands.

Time seemed to slow down. Like sluggish water in a swamp, it almost ceased to flow. Kalia raised the guns in front of her, training them to the corner of the landing, where she knew that the first enemy would come through.

This was not her fight. Kalia did not know whose fight this was, but she would fight. Kalia felt the feral smile on her lips. Kalia could almost hear the harsh tones in her memory. The ugly words of the SS as they were coming.

Kalia felt her hands relax. The guns fit better in her palms and her heart beat eased. The words were out of her mouth before she knew it. "Culpa Draconis". The cry of the Draculas for centuries uncounted.

The head of the soldier barely cleared the corner but Kalia was ready. The triggers were squeezed automatically. The blood sprayed the wall on the other side of the landing.

Kalia thought of the rugged mountains of Transylvania and felt their peace. Time was running out she knew. Kalia wanted to cry. She wanted to laugh. A voice, a playful voice filled with humour she had not heard for more than a century, sounded in her mind. *"What better than this, Kali? Fighting the bad guys with a beautiful woman at your side. Way to go, sis."*

The movement was explosive as three enemy soldiers rolled through the corridor, rounds flying. Kalia shot at them, not knowing whether she hit anything. She could hear the rounds leaving Josephine's pistols at her side. Everything was quick, chaotic now and Kalia did the only thing she could, she shot at the soldiers.

Kalia's eyes did not interpret the scene in front of her immediately, as more enemy soldiers appeared only to be cut down like mowed wheat. Kalia realised first that it could not be her that was doing it as her pistols were empty. Fumbling, heart pounding, she tried to change the clips.

The silence more than the hand on Kalia's shoulder made her raise her head and turn around.

One grey eye met her gaze, deep voice, calming. "You did well, Lady. Go upstairs with the others. We got it here."

Only then did Kalia register the group of people behind her. She recognised them immediately, the scouts.

The hand that gripped hers in a crushing grip made her turn once more. Josephine's eyes were pools of light looking at her, inviting her to fall in. Somewhere deep inside her a voice whispered, *You are in shock.*

Josephine's quiet words pulled Kalia out of her dream state. "Come on, Kalia. We got to get upstairs."

Kalia nodded and slowly got up on unsteady feet, letting Josephine pull her up the stairs. As she passed between the Ottewald soldiers, Kalia felt their glances and she almost giggled. She knew very well the opinion of soldiers for scholars.

A whisper as Kalia was brushing through the bodies caught her attention. "Nice shooting, Lady".

Kalia looked up and saw a pair of laughing blue eyes looking at her. Kalia could not help but smile at Romi. A half-smile answered her, softening the hard planes of Romi's face.

The huddle of people on the upstairs landing made Kalia cringe inside. *Sure, they were no soldiers but every clan provided some basic training to its members. They cannot have forgotten everything, surely?*

Josephine's voice was brusque, business-like. "People! Move into the corridor. Kira, Simon, Danny, Alein, move to the other end of the corridor and keep an eye out. Come on now, people, we can't just sit here and stare. The squad will take care of things downstairs."

It was true too. Kalia was watching as the scout team moved out of the landing into the corridor. Faint sounds of battle could be heard in the distance but nothing was near enough to be worrying.

The curdling scream made Kalia jump. She was sure her ears were playing games with her. The second scream made her run without thought down the stairs. *No. No. It can't be. They never finished the ritual,* Kalia's mind screamed.

Kalia did not hear Josephine's running steps behind her. If Kalia had, she would have stopped her head long rush into nightmare. The sound of the scream guided Kalia down the corridor and into

the great hall.

Her mind recoiled and her stomach heaved at the sight. It was not the mass of the Ottewald soldiers, all with weapons drawn and trained to the centre of the hall. Certainly, it was not the small group of Zindramas remaining alive in the middle of the carnage.

What Kalia could not tear her eyes from was the impossibly tall form in the exact centre of the room. A man she was certain, or at least it had once been a man. What it was now was another matter.

Josephine's exclamation pulled Kalia from her sickened fascination. "What the fuck is that?"

Kalia's voice was raspy, breathless. "Abomination."

The creature heard the low word because it reared its head, staring with mad red eyes at Kalia, its sibilant voice echoing the hall. "Scion of Dracula. Your blood will taste the sweetest of all."

Something snapped in Kalia's mind. Where once she would have huddled and run away from the filth that coated that gaze, she spoke, her voice clear and strong. Kalia Zimmer had taken a step back allowing Kalliana Dracula to come forth from the depths of Kalia's soul.

"Count Hugo. Kill it now. Culpa Draconis". Gone were the soft tones of the scholar. Everyone in the hall recognised the force of command in Kalia's voice.

Every eye in the hall turned to the grey-haired Count standing on the dais, flanked by his daughter and heir and Ari, waiting for the command that was certain to come.

The Count was the ultimate authority in the clan but Kalia's 'Culpa Draconis' had taken the matter beyond clan. When the blood of Dracula spoke, what vampire would dare disobey?

The Count opened his mouth to shout the order but the sibilant voice of the creature echoed in the hall. "Challenge! I challenge!"

The silence was ominous. Kalia felt like screaming. Inside her mind she already was. Before she had time to voice anything, the creature spoke again. "Zoe von Ottewald. Hugo von Ottewald. Josephine von Ottewald. Kalliana Dracula. My challenge is for you."

Kalia could only mouth. "No...no."

But the challenge had been delivered. None of those called by the abomination could speak now except to answer its challenge. The law was adamant and the custom too powerful for anyone to disobey.

A part of Kalia's mind, the clinical self of the scholar, could not help but admire the simplicity of the plan. *With a few words, that...that monster has effectively sealed its victory. In their own hall with the honour of their clan in the line, none of the three Ottewalds challenged could stand*

down from the insult.

And Kalia knew well that even if she ran, she could not get far away quickly enough. Her life would be over within the next hour. No one had ever managed to defeat one of the Karakin in single combat.

Kalia could only hope that their deaths would not be in vain. That there was enough firepower in the hall to kill the creature after it had killed them. Her heart clenched at the thought of Josephine. The beautiful young scholar had as much chance of avoiding death as Kalia.

Like in a dream or a play, Kalia watched the mute glances that passed between Count Hugo and Zoe as they stood upon the dais. Kalia felt tears in her eyes as Zoe, the black patch over her eye giving her a rakish look, stepped forward, her mouth opening to answer the challenge.

The sibilant hiss of the creature echoed in the room. Kalia recognised it for what it was, a laugh of triumph. Yet the voice that reverberated in the hall was not Zoe's deep tones but another of lighter depth that brought shivers to Kalia.

"Fuck this. Shoot to kill. Shoot to kill!" Romi shouted putting herself between the Karakin and Zoe before squeezing the triggers on her guns.

For a moment all that could be heard in the hall was the harsh pounding of the LACs in Romi's hands.

The creature surged forward. Its speed impossible to follow even with a vampire's superior eyesight. Before it had covered half the distance, the hall was covered in an avalanche of sound as every gun in the room spouted forth death and destruction.

Kalia did not bring her own guns to bear. The part of her soul that was Dracula stopped her. The challenge had been issued. She could not attack now except in single combat. Yet Kalia watched, part of her observing clinically, part of her wanting to laugh in relief as the bullets hit the creature from all sides.

Its progress slowed but not before it stood before Romi, who was standing shoulders back, defiant, shooting at the huge creature before her from nil range. Kalia watched as if in a DIV, motion slowed to a crawl. For a second she thought she could even see the rounds flying in the room.

The creature's clawed hand slowly rose and even more slowly started its fatal descent, a blue-eyed human its only target. Kalia wanted to scream but no sound came from her lips as Romi did not move, her arms raised straight ahead. Kalia could see the play of muscles underneath her shirt at every recoil of the LACs as she shot round after round into the creature's chest.

Blood was sprayed everywhere. Blood was flowing from the creature without stop but still the clawed hand came down in its deadly arc.

Time snapped back into focus making everything chaotic as a tall form dived into the fray and with the strength and speed that so many had envied knocked Romi away from the creature's swipe.

Kalia screamed as she saw the creature's clawed hand hit Zoe in the air sending her tumbling in the air to hit the wall on the other side of the room. Josephine was there in a flash, Kalia a step behind her. Zoe was unconscious blood seeping from her nose, her breathing shallow.

Over the sound of gunfire, over the creature's screams, Kalia heard clearly the rending cry that bled her heart. "No! No! Falcon!"

Romi was covered in blood. Kalia did not know how much was the creature's and how much her own. She could see that at least one of her old wounds had opened.

But the familiar was oblivious to any pain as she knelt next to the still form on the floor. Large hands with the calluses of the warrior gently touched Zoe's face. Even in the surrounding cacophony Kalia could hear the words. "Hold on, Baby. Don't leave me now. Please, Love. Just hold on."

Kalia could hear Josephine's urgent instructions. "Sergei, to the great hall. Zoe has been injured. Head injury, probable internal bleeding."

Kalia wondered how long it would take for the doctor to come and whether he would even be able to do anything. Rounds were still flying around the hall, although Kalia's sensitive ears knew that the barrage had lessened.

Slowly Kalia turned and glanced around. The Karakin was sprawled almost on top of the dais, blood pooling around it. Guns were still blasting opening more and more holes on its pasty white skin, spraying its blood all over the hall. Kalia knew that the soldiers did not know what they were doing but they could see that it was still alive and were merely following their training.

Yet Karakin could not be killed like that. Only the burning glare of the sun could kill them. A rasping whisper made Kalia turn to the woman on the floor in front of her.

"Roms. Kill it," Zoe whispered a froth of blood marring her lips, her good eye searching Romi's face.

Kalia saw the slow nod and heard the answering whisper. "Hold on."

A slight twitch of her lips was the only answer before Zoe fell back into unconsciousness.

Romi stood up slowly and turned to look at the creature still breathing and hissing on the other side of the hall.

Kalia heard her whispered invective. "Fuck! Will that thing not die?"

Kalia jumped to her feet, a hand gripping Romi's shoulder. Romi's flinch and step away made Kalia wonder at the reaction but there were more important things to take care of now.

Kalia tried to make her voice soothing. All her training warned her that Romi was anything but stable right now. "You have to get it out in the sun. Nothing else can kill a karakin."

Cold eyes met her own and Romi nodded before walking away.

Romi's voice was command through and through. "Alden, Komas to me!"

Kalia watched as two vampires immediately obeyed the summons. A part of Kalia could not help but be amazed at the alacrity that the two obeyed a human.

Certainly, it was not the first time Kalia had seen vampires in a similar position but usually it was only under duress and anyone could see the dislike of taking a subordinate position to a human.

Kalia could not hear the whispered commands that Romi gave to the two vampires over the sounds in the hall. A part of her wanted to stand up, take charge of things. She was after all the only one in the room who had ever faced a Karakin before.

But Kalia turned away from the scene and looked at the woman who breathed shallowly at her feet.

Josephine was whispering intently. "Hold on, Zoe. Sergei is coming. You'll be alright."

A rasping breath and a grey intense stare made Kalia kneel on the side of the prone vampire once more. The grip on Kalia's hand was crushing. Zoe's words were barely audible. "Romi."

Kalia tried to find the right words. "She is taking care of the karakin. I'll call her."

The grip clamped down even more making Kalia grimace in pain and Zoe's stare intensified. Zoe's words were slow, coming with difficulty. She was in obvious pain. "Don't... let her... die."

Kalia looked at Zoe trying to understand. Slowly realisation dawned and Kalia spoke quickly. "Don't speak! Hold on, the doctor is coming."

The flash of anguish in Zoe's good eye was more telling than any words. Again she tried to get the words out.

Kalia saw the effort the injured vampire had to put into even a single word. "I will take care of her. Don't worry about it. Just breathe. Don't give up, Zoe," Kalia said quickly.

The words seemed to calm the vampire down and the vice-like grip on Kalia's hand loosened. Kalia's heart went to her mouth. For a moment it seemed that Zoe had stopped breathing, but the small rise of her chest made Kalia sigh in relief.

A harsh broken accent made her turn in alarm. "You! Away!"

Kalia did not know the tall man with the bushy moustache standing behind her but before she could take offence, Josephine cried out. "Sergei! Finally!"

Kalia breathed a sigh in relief. The doctor was here. The tall man grunted and quickly knelt next to the prone form. With quick movements he checked for pulse and then gestured impatiently. Only then did Kalia see the white-dressed orderlies standing nearby.

Without a word, a young human put a neck-brace in the doctor's outstretched hand, which he immediately put around Zoe's neck. More orderlies appeared guiding an air-stretcher as Kalia looked around her eyes seeking out Romi's muscular form.

Kalia found Romi almost immediately, near the karakin, attaching ropes to its clawed legs. Kalia was relieved that the barrage of fire had not stopped, though it was not as intense as before. They could not kill the beast with rounds but they could wound it almost to death.

Kalia watched as Romi and six vampires started dragging the karakin away. Kalia was happy that more than twenty soldiers had taken places near the head of the beast shooting continuously.

The harsh gasp from behind made Kalia turn. The orderlies had moved Zoe to the stretcher and the vampire was obviously in pain as nurses took care of her damaged body. Kalia could see the intense concentration in Zoe's face and the froth of blood with every shallow breath.

Kalia could not help but admire and wonder at the strength and the stubbornness in the woman to keep her pain hidden. Kalia knew she would never have been able to do the same. Kalia was not certain whether it was some innate wish not to show any weakness that made Zoe try so hard to keep silent or the memory of her captivity.

With the shock of the blow, it would not be surprising if she had been thrown back to the memories of her two months in the hands of the Zindramas. The direction of Zoe's gaze showed Kalia her mistake. She was not looking at the doctor at her side or at the attendants. All her attention was directed towards the hall.

Zoe's pained gasp would not be heard over the sound of gunshots but a scream would and as Kalia turned she immediately found the eyes that were trained on the stretcher even as Romi strained against the ropes dragging the karakin towards the exit.

Josephine's hand on her shoulder made Kalia turn once more. Green eyes looked at her, the desolation in them evident, and Kalia felt her insides clench. Slowly Kalia put her arm around Josephine's shoulders. It was the only thing she could think of doing. The contact was brief as the air-stretcher started to move guided by the attendants.

Kalia followed keeping step with Josephine, yet she could not avoid a last glance towards the hall. The karakin had been dragged almost to the exit. Romi was straining against the ropes

trying to move the heavy body. Kalia's eyes surveyed the hall, her gaze lingering for a moment at the lone figure on the dais. The Count looked on, bound by law and tradition not to move or speak until the challenge was void or give up his honour and his clan's forever.

The walk to the hospital was quiet, broken only by the shuffles of the orderlies' feet and the laboured breathing from the stretcher. Josephine's eyes were full of tears but no sound came from her and Kalia could do nothing to ease her anguish.

When they reached the waiting room and the double doors that led to the hospital proper, Sergei glared at Kalia, his voice harsh. "You. No more."

Kalia felt anger rise in her gut at the insulting tone but her anger deflated at the doctor's next words. "Romi no come in. Da?"

Kalia nodded realising the brusque manner was the result of worry and the language barrier, not deliberate insult. Still she wondered how anyone could have so little use of English. The doctor did not seem a recent addition to the clan. Kalia nodded in acquiescence at the question and saw Sergei sigh in relief.

Without a word, the big man went inside the hospital. Kalia looked at Josephine. The question in Kalia's eyes was answered immediately. "I am going in. Will you be able to handle Romi?"

Kalia nodded once more although part of her wondered how she would manage that without hurting the familiar. She had no illusions that words would keep Romi from Zoe's side.

"Thank you. I am sorry you had to get involved in this," Josephine said slowly and Kalia could see the sincerity in her eyes.

Kalia contemplated a platitude but simply could not voice it. The truth came out of clenched lips instead. "Don't be. It's the least I can do."

Kalia saw the question in Josephine's face but did not answer it. Instead she gestured the young vampire towards the door and her sister. Josephine nodded and entered through the double doors.

Kalia took the seat nearest the double doors and settled in for the long wait. Dragging the karakin to the sunlight would take time and Kalia knew that the only one who could finish it was Romi, which meant she would not manage to find her way to the hospital for a while yet.

Wearily she closed her eyes for a moment, squashing the guilt that threatened to choke her. *How could I have been such a fool? I should have checked. I should have made them look into every nook and cranny in the quarries for signs of a Karakin.*

A pointed cough made Kalia open her eyes to find the small blond vampire of the scout team looking at her. Cloe's arm was still in a sling but there was blood all over her clothes, so she must have taken some part in the fighting.

Kalia wondered what the vampire wanted. When Cloe spoke it surprised her. "Jo put you in charge?"

Before Kalia could formulate the question, the blonde spoke quickly. "Stopping Roms from going in."

Kalia nodded. *How did the woman know?* The question must have shown on Kalia's face because the blonde answered. "Zoe never wants Romi there if things are bad."

Kalia could not help but wonder how many times this vigil had taken place. The vampire's next words made Kalia smile. "Of course, Romi doesn't want anybody around either. But who would dare stop Zoe?"

Kalia could see what the young vampire was doing. The Count had trained his clan members well. Kalia was a guest, an important guest. Her name if nothing else guaranteed that. She could not be left alone, certainly not without some entertainment, even under these circumstances.

"I will be fine, child. There is no need for you to stay. You should rest," Kalia said simply.

Kalia recognised the gesture and was warmed by it but the young vampire was injured and the small beads of sweat on her forehead betrayed her tiredness and pain.

Kalia watched in fascination as the young woman's countenance changed before her eyes. "Forgive me, Lady. I did not wish to intrude but I cannot leave you alone," Cloe said seriously looking squarely into Kalia's eyes.

The question left Kalia's lips without thought. "Why?"

A slight smile graced the vampire's face and Kalia could see the intelligence in her brown eyes. "Romi may not recognise you. She will certainly recognise me. I do not think your clan would be pleased if you returned in a box."

Kalia had to laugh. "I would think I am perfectly safe. I am not entirely defenceless."

The look in the young vampire's face was unreadable and her words slow but grave. "A round is a round, vampire or human. And blast rounds will kill a vampire."

Kalia felt a worm of doubt. She would never have thought Romi would dare to shoot her. Kalia's doubt must have showed because Cloe spoke again. "No offence, Lady. But no one in his right mind would dare stand in Romi's way. I have seen enough try it in the past few months. Romi is still around, they aren't."

"Then, why are you here?" Kalia asked licking her lips.

The young vampire smiled at the implied insult. "I am injured. Our Worm has a soft spot for injured females of any species. She will not kill me immediately."

Kalia's first thought was the young vampire was playing with her. Kalia had seen the familiar in action and surely Romi could kill without much effort but nothing in her had hinted at the disregard of life the vampire was implying. Kalia's next thought was more sobering. True the familiar was not a random killer. Certainly Romi showed no inordinate pleasure in the act but many subtle signs coalesced in Kalia's mind making a frightening picture.

An image of Jackson came to Kalia's mind. The sandy-haired always-smiling familiar that had practically raised her. The same man that had literally ploughed through forty men to save a teenage girl giving his life in the process. Jackson and Romi had nothing in common. Jackson was a small man, studious and full of humour. Romi was a soldier through and through with the weight of sorrow on her shoulders.

Yet the signs were there nonetheless. The same intense depth of emotion. The same, *dare she say it?*, unpredictability of action and response.

Kalia wanted to kick herself. As if she had not made a study of the phenomenon for centuries, she had not recognised any of the signs.

Romi's words during dinner earlier fluttered through her mind. *"Familiars can be so unpredictable at times."*

Then Kalia had taken it as mere teasing but now she had to wonder. *Was the familiar trying to warn her?* Kalia shook her head in exasperation. For someone to recognise the symptoms from a random skimming of her work and try to warn her would take more brains than most people Kalia knew.

A rustle of cloth made Kalia remember the vampire in front of her. "Sit then, child. No need for you to stand. It will be awhile."

The vampire looked at her with unreadable eyes and nodded quietly before taking the seat next to her. Kalia knew she should think. She should go back through every encounter with Romi and try to evaluate whether her instinct was correct.

Yet her head felt heavy, her thoughts sluggish. She was tired and the last few hours had been anything but restful. Kalia's eyes closed without her even realising. Cloe watched as the clan's guest closed her eyes and her breathing evened into sleep. She smiled.

Maybe if the Lady could sleep through the confrontation with Romi everything would go well and if not a bit of rest never hurt anyone.

The growl awoke Kalia, her heart thumping in her chest. Her eyes did not immediately recognise where she was and tired muscles propelled her clumsily out of the chair. It took her tired mind a moment to interpret the tableau before her eyes.

First and foremost, was the silvery presence of the LACs glinting in the cold hospital light. Then

the darkness that played across blue eyes.

Romi's voice was a growl. Kalia could barely understand the words. "I am going in, Blondie. Get out of my way."

Cloe's tone was soothing and Kalia knew that was wrong. "Roms, you cannot go in now. You have to wait here."

Romi's growl intensified and this time there were no words.

Kalia forced the words out. "Romi, I will take you in."

Blue eyes, the darkness behind them obvious to all, turned to Kalia, pinning her.

Kalia tried to speak. The first attempt came out as nothing more than a squeal. Quickly she cleared her throat and tried again. "I will take you in. On my name, Romi. But no guns."

Kalia could see the comprehension of her words slowly seep through the darkness in the familiar's eyes and sighed with relief at the slow lowering of the LACs.

Kalia waited until Romi had put them in the holsters in her hips before speaking again, trying to keep her voice even. "You will leave them outside, Romi. You must not lose control with guns in your hands."

Blue eyes found deep violet and Kalia tried to keep her eyes steady on the burning gaze. The slow nod made Kalia breathe again. She had not realised she was holding her breath. With slow even movements, Romi unbuckled her belt letting the guns fall to the floor.

The twin swords on her back were next, followed by her vest. Once more Kalia was amazed at the array of weapons hidden inside the garment. She certainly did not expect Romi's next move as the familiar tucked her shirt out of her trousers and hitching it up unbuckled a hidden belt.

Kalia saw the knife and the small pistol on the belt. Romi's voice was low, Kalia could hear the emotion in it but could not ascertain what it was. "Less chance this way."

Kalia could only nod. She had to speak to Romi and Zoe quickly, before the situation escalated beyond any semblance of control. *If either of them are alive by sundown*, the thought flitted in her mind.

"Lady, Romi cannot go in. We have our orders," Cloe said quickly.

Kalia realised the presence of others in the waiting room. She looked around to see the rest of the scout team standing in a loose circle around them.

"Culpa Draconis, child. I have given my word," Kalia said slowly, her voice that of command.

Without looking at the vampires around her, Kalia took Romi's arm, feeling the tension on the hard muscle beneath the cloth, and slowly led her through the doors into the hospital proper. Kalia ignored the orderly that came towards them. Touching Romi it was easy to tap into the bond and let it guide her steps down one of the five corridors.

Kalia knew the orderly was following them. He was speaking but she did not let her concentration lapse. Her steps brought her to the doors of what was obviously an operating room and there Kalia stopped. Looking through the tiny window, Kalia could see the doctor, Sergei, hard at work on his patient.

Kalia had seen enough operations to know that they dared not go in. Vampires were stronger than humans. Their immune systems were better developed but it would not do to jeopardise the injured vampire further.

Kalia tried to keep her voice calm and even, her grip on Romi's arm tightening, readying to hold the woman back if Romi lost it. "She is on the table, Romi. We cannot go in, it is too risky. Do you want to look through the window?"

Kalia felt the tremor that passed through the human at her side and her grip on her arm tightened even more.

The answer was barely audible. "Yes. Thank you."

Kalia moved to the side still keeping a hold on Romi's arm as the familiar stepped forward and looked through the window.

Kalia felt more than heard the sob that wracked through the smaller woman but she did not dare release her hold. Unpredictability Kalia had called the condition and it was the perfect description. Kalia almost jumped at the hands touching her shoulders. Slowly Kalia turned to see Josephine behind her.

"Is this wise?" Josephine whispered.

Kalia looked at the fear and worry in her eyes and tried to be as calm as possible. "Not wise, necessary."

Josephine nodded and squeezed Kalia's shoulders. Their whispered words had passed unnoticed by the familiar, or so Kalia hoped.

The arm she held in a strong, almost crushing grip, was stone hard under her fingers, constant tremors passing through it. Kalia tried to think. No past experience had prepared her for this. She had always been there later. After the crisis had passed. To talk to shame-faced familiars and heart-broken vampires.

Never had she been there when the darkness descended and instinct took over. When eyes glowed and throats growled. When bullets flew and swords arced dripping crimson.

Josephine's gentle hands started kneading Kalia's shoulders and Kalia sighed. They would be there for hours, she was certain. Romi would not leave her post without a fight and Kalia had to be there.

Kalia knew in the depths of her heart that leaving now would lead to disaster. Tiredness threatened to bring her down but no one here knew how to handle this. For a moment Kalia felt a spark of anger. *They had let it go on for months without care. They had certainly noticed that something was wrong.*

Kalia remembered clearly Solei's wariness when he entered the safe-house. *They knew that the familiar was teetering on the edge and yet they had let it go on unchecked.* Kalia took a deep breath forcing the anger down. She had to keep calm. Patients always responded better to a calm even voice. Anger only sparked their own barely concealed fury.

Kalia let her mind settle, concentrating on the feel of Josephine's hands on her shoulders. Josephine was gently slowly massaging the tension there and Kalia could feel the healing heat spread from Josephine's fingers into her.

Time passed slowly. Kalia felt her fingers cramp after some time in their grip on Romi's arm. Her voice was low but even. "Romi?"

Romi did not turn from her contemplation of the scene inside the surgery but the soft murmur told Kalia she had been heard.

"I will let you go, now. Is that ok?" Kalia asked quietly trying to imbue calm with her voice.

Blue eyes turned to her and Kalia gasped to see them clear, not a sign of the darkness that had marred them before. Romi's voice was as calm and even as her own. "Sure, Lady. I am fine now. Thank you."

Kalia nodded even as Romi turned back to the small window and her quiet contemplation of the doctor's efforts. Slowly Kalia let her grip on the familiar's arm slip and equally slowly took a step back.

Part of Kalia's mind was stunned. Usually days had to pass before a familiar calmed down enough for the shadow to leave their eyes, yet Romi seemed calm and collected.

Kalia felt Josephine's body against her own and the gentle hands that steadied her. Kalia knew she should step away but a tiny squeeze kept her in place. Kalia's exhaustion surfaced once more and she leaned back, closing her eyes.

Time passed but all that Kalia felt was the breathing, twin breaths as she allowed strong hands hold her upright. The whisper in her ear made Kalia turn. "Father is here."

The Count was standing a few steps away, his face pale and drawn. His eyes met Kalia's and she

could see the question in them.

Without speaking, Kalia walked to the Count, seeing the exhaustion in his face. Kalia's voice was low, trying to keep her words from being overheard. "Sergei is working on her. He has not come out yet."

Count Hugo nodded and Kalia glanced back over her shoulder. She could not help but sigh in relief at the sight of Josephine standing where she had left her. Kalia felt uneasy at even the thought of the familiar being left alone even for a moment. *Clear eyes or not, the respite will not last for long.*

The Count's voice made her turn to him once more. "And...Romi?"

Kalia could not keep the flash of anger from her eyes. *So he knew as well.* "How long, Hugo? How long has she been having these...spells?" Kalia growled, surprising even herself at the vehemence in her voice.

The Count looked at her with unreadable eyes and then Kalia show a flicker of guilt cross his face. His voice was low. "Since Zoe was taken."

Kalia felt her fists clench and tried to keep the anger from her face. She should have known. *The stress and the guilt had been the catalyst. There was always a catalyst.*

Kalia saw that the Count did not move towards the door, neither had Josephine. Kalia knew that if there was any justice, that place was reserved for the woman that occupied it.

The sound made her turn as Sergei exited pulling off his mask. His voice was low, trying to keep the echoes from travelling along the corridor in his broken accent. "She breathes. Damage...much damage. Now wait...ah...wait. ICU now, eh?"

Kalia took a step forward. Instinct propelled her.

Romi's voice was cold. It seemed to burn with its intensity. "Sergei?"

The tall doctor looked down. His answer was barely audible. "No can tell. Ah...sorry."

Kalia saw the slight movement as the doctor tried to grasp Romi's shoulder but he was not quick enough.

Romi was already walking away down the corridor, long strides eating up the paces. Her feet were already running before Kalia thought about it. In moments she had reached Romi's side, her hand snaking out to grasp her shoulder.

The eyes that turned to her were almost black, shadows dancing in them. There were no words in the low growl that emitted from Romi's throat but Kalia felt the warning in her gut.

Without a sound Kalia stepped away, her hand releasing the black cloth. As Romi walked away, Kalia followed, her steps slow as her thoughts churned. She owed the familiar her life, twice over. But Kalia doubted that anything could be done now. The hand that gripped her shoulder brought her to a sudden halt.

Josephine looked at Kalia full of worry. "Kalia, don't. Please, you don't understand. They are coming."

Kalia shook her head. Josephine's words did not make any sense. The sound of heavy boots treading quickly on the tiled floors made her turn and she understood.

Cloe was first, the tall man they called Alden a step behind her, and behind him in a bunched group faces she recognised. With barely a glance, they passed her and Josephine by, their faces set determinedly.

Josephine's low voice was stressed. "They know what to do. You should rest."

Kalia looked at her letting her incredulity show. She would not dignify that with an answer as she turned and slowly continued her way down the corridor.

A moment passed before she heard Josephine's steps on her side. Kalia did not look at her but her heart warmed still at her proximity. The end of the corridor was abrupt into a large room, obviously another waiting area.

The small sign over the door on the other side said clearly ICU. Kalia looked around avoiding the hunched figure standing in front of the doors. The scouts were standing all around the large room, seemingly at ease but their tension was palpable. Kalia took a step further but a small lithe figure stepped in front of her.

Cloe's words were low. "No further, Lady, if you please."

Kalia looked at the impassive features of the vampire that dared stand in her way.

She sighed. *Would these people never learn?*

But Kalia had no time to sidestep the vampire in front of her. The smaller woman gripped Kalia's arm in her good hand, the grip strong like steel. Kalia felt her anger rise. *How did the woman dare hold her against her will?* Kalia knew the power made her eyes flash when the young vampire gasped taking an instinctive step back.

Kalia stepped away, putting the vampire from her mind. All her attention was riveted on the hunched black-clad figure in front of the doors. Even from a few feet away she could feel the waves of menace from Romi. There was pain there flashing red in Kalia's mind and anger that threatened to drown her in its intensity.

The sound of heavy steps behind her made Kalia turn to come face to face with Count Hugo's

pale face. His eyes held her gaze, the worry in them clear for all to see. But the Count did not speak merely gestured gently towards the seats lining the walls.

Kalia did not want to sit. The doctor in her knew what she should do. But another part of her hesitated. Memory flashed in her mind. *Shadows in the alley, the glint of the LAC, the bloody sword flashing crimson in the moonlight, the low cold voice.*

Wordlessly Kalia followed the Count to the chairs. As Kalia sat heavily, she felt tears sting her eyes. *It was so easy to fall into the trap. Humans were weaker after all, vulnerable, fragile.* The warm hand that touched her fingers was balm to her soul.

Unshed tears glinted in Josephine's eyes. Her sorrow was etched on her face. Kalia blinked and felt a single drop of moisture run down her cheek. Kalia sat back into the chair, her fingers lightly grasping Josephine's offered hand even as her eyes returned to the unmoving figure on the other side of the waiting room.

No matter how part of her rebelled, Kalia knew there was nothing for her to do. *Not now maybe not ever.* All Kalia could do now, all anyone could do was wait.

Chapter 10: Waiting

Her shoulder hurt but Cloe did not have enough strength in her even to acknowledge the pain. Her eyes roamed the room constantly but always returned to the statue-like figure. Cloe wanted to step forward, to go stand by Romi's side.

To speak, provide whatever comfort words could provide. But she could not. There was nothing that Cloe could say that would give even the tiniest measure of comfort. So Cloe waited, leaning against the cold wall, her eyes roaming the room.

A small voice in her mind was crying but Cloe ignored it. There would be no tears, not from her eyes. Tears did not solve anything. But still Cloe could feel them rising in her heart. *Why now? Why this? Had there not been enough suffering?*

A tiny movement to the side. Less than a flinch. A small whisper. "Keep going." Cloe can hear the chuckles and she knows her cheeks flame up. But the whisper is there again. "Ignore them. Go on." Cloe steps forward her heart thudding.

She stops again. Cloe can feel the strong steady presence somewhere in front of her. Blood makes the stone feel slick. She takes another step. Her breathing is ragged. Her chest heaves. Cold sweat runs down her back. Another step and she can feel the edge under her sole. She cannot control the trembling of her limbs.

The blindfold feels wet. Cloe knows it is from the tears she cannot stop. Another step and she has to swallow to keep the bile from reaching her mouth. She grits her teeth and takes another step.

The trembling is so violent Cloe is afraid she won't be able to go on. With a grunt she takes another step. The voice is warm, sounding far away. "Well done."

Her knees turn to jelly but Cloe locks them to keep from falling. Long moments pass before her legs can support her again. With trembling hands Cloe takes the blindfold off. The first thing she sees is a pair of deep grey eyes full of pride.

Cloe looks down to the ground her heart filled with warmth. Only then does she look around. There are some mocking smiles among those watching and anger rises in her at the sight.

The whisper is only for her. "Ignore them. You did it."

Cloe nods slowly. *Let them mock.* She did what she had to do.

"Thank you," Cloe whispers in the silence of her heart.

Cloe must not speak. She is not allowed yet but she hopes her eyes reveal her heartfelt thanks. The imperceptible nod tells her she has been understood.

Cloe does not look down at the chasm or at the narrow stone bridge she has just traversed. She knows that if she does, she will not be able to keep her stomach from rebelling.

Cloe turns slowly and starts walking towards the small door that will take her outside. No one follows her. No one comes to speak to her. Cloe is not expecting anyone. She has friends, she knows that much, but they would not come to her now.

With the eyes of the clan watching and the decision yet to be made, no one would come near her. Cloe can smell the blood. Its scent has clogged her nostrils for what seems like hours. She can feel it dripping from where the spears have marked her flesh.

But Cloe walks on. That is what she must do. The ritual has been drilled into her since childhood. She puts one foot in front of the other and walks on. The small door comes nearer with every step. As Cloe opens the door her eyes catch a glimpse of the bloody fingerprints on the knob. Bile rises in her throat but she swallows it down.

Gently Cloe closes the door behind her. Only after she hears the click of the lock does she collapse.

Cloe barely feels the strong arms that lift her up like a baby and gently move her to the small bed. The touch on her brow is gentle but Cloe can feel the hard calluses. Cloe opens her eyes to see deep blue eyes looking at her with a smile in their depths.

Cloe had hoped for another but that was an empty hope. Anger begins rising in her but she bites

the harsh words down. *It is not the human's fault.* Cloe suspects the human does not even know what it means that only she is here now.

Cloe feels the competent touches that bathe her wounds in antiseptic. The smell assaults her senses sending another wave of nausea through her. The sound of the door opening makes her look in sudden hope.

Cloe cannot help the smile that threatens to split her face. The answering half-smile warms her heart. Zoe's eyes full of pride look at her and Cloe can feel the blush on her cheeks.

Cloe watches silently the strong hand that touches the kneeling woman tending her wounds. Cloe watches as blue eyes meet grey and Romi's small nod as she rises to her feet and moves away.

Cloe does not even blink as the small sharp knife comes out of its sheath. Cloe feels the cold steel against the throat but her eyes never move. Its bite is sweet as it makes a small but deep cut on the side of her neck.

Still Cloe does not speak waiting for the final part of the ritual. As the knife touches her lips smearing them with her blood, Cloe lets the breath she had been holding leave her lungs.

The deep voice is low. "Salve, centurio."

Cloe cannot help the laugh that escapes her lips nor the tears that sting her eyes. *It's over. It's done!*

"Thank you," Cloe whispers blinking to keep her tears from falling.

The deep voice that has guided her all her life is warm. "You did well. You earned it."

Cloe's smile widens even further if that's possible. With the corner of her eye, Cloe catches the small gesture and turns to look at Romi standing motionless at the corner. The movements are sure but silent and within moments she can once more feel the sting of antiseptic on her ribs.

Cloe does not wish to speak so she stays silent looking at the wall. Her silence is respected but she can hear the small movements as Romi seals her wounds in short order. Cloe does not need to look to know that a strong hand touches a black-clad shoulder.

As always Cloe wonders at the need. *It is not as if the human is flighty or anything.* But she accepts it as she has for the past two years. Cloe has never felt the need for a human companion and in some ways she finds such a need difficult to understand.

But it does not bother Cloe much. The ways of others are theirs and not hers to judge or understand.

The tiny sting of the sutures on the cut on her neck make her lips twitch. For the third time in her life, Cloe endures the small pain. As she has done before, she wonders what it would have been

like when every wound would have to be treated so.

Cloe shudders even to think of it. The stitches are done quickly. For a moment Cloe wonders how the human knows such things. *It is not like she would ever have to do it.* A small voice in her mind laughs and mentally she nods to it.

Who knows what someone would need to do. Not everyone was lucky enough to have the clan, maybe the human did not always have access to sealant.

The low voice sounds almost too loud in her ears. "Cloe?"

Cloe turns to look at Zoe's worried eyes searching her face. Her voice feels gruff. "I would like to rest now."

A slow nod and a soft pat on her shoulder is the all the answer she needs and Cloe closes her eyes.

The soft blanket that covers her is welcome and Cloe lets it cover her in the warmth it intended. Another soft pat on her now covered shoulder and Cloe can hear two sets of footfalls head toward the door.

As the door opens, Cloe can hear the low voice filled with worry. "Are you alright?"

The light tenor that answers the whispered query sounds tired. "I'm alright. It was a long few days."

Cloe smiles at the words. She had been right. There had been someone following her. Truly Cloe had not been expecting the human. But it did explain the soft sounds that had so alerted her during the past few days.

Her smile deepens. For Zoe to send merely the human as her shadow it must mean she thought Cloe able to take care of anything on her own. The smile is still on her lips as sleep takes her.

The loud clearing of a throat snapped Cloe out of her memories. She looked around quickly. Tsan looked shame-faced at her. She nodded. The sound was small but the silence in the waiting room was such that a pin could be heard dropping.

They are all tired, too tired. Cloe looked at the clock high on the wall. The hours passed slowly in waiting. Her eyes roamed the scouts studded around the room, all silently watching.

Her sigh was barely audible even in the silence as Cloe leaned against the wall once more. Her eyes once more returned to the black-clad figure standing still in front of the double doors.

"Thank you," Cloe said if only in the silence of her mind. She never had said it back then.

Cloe had been too ignorant to know what that escort meant. It had been a good year before she had learnt of the ambush that had been waiting for her. The trap that had been sprung before she could walk into it.

And then Cloe had been too proud to voice her knowledge. Now, and her heart clenched at the thought, she might never have the chance to say the words out loud.



Alden could feel Cloe beside him. Not in the way that empath's felt but in the little ways that were his alone. The sound of her breathing, controlled, so controlled that he knew that something was wrong. The clenched fists motionless at her sides that told him of her anger, the rage bubbling within.

The slight narrowing of Cloe's eyes, focused and unwavering, that told him of her worry. It was the same worry that made his breath hitch uncontrollably. He felt like he should be doing something but there was nothing for him to do but wait. Alden's eyes walked the same road again and again and again.

From the little window on the doors of the ICU to the black clad figure standing in front of the doors to the woman beside him. Alden swallowed the sudden anger born of despair. He had no control over anything that matters. All he could do was stand there ready.

Alden had examined every possible scenario he could think of. He knew what he must do no matter what happened. But nothing happened. The room was silent but for the sounds of breathing, and all he could do was stand ready, wait and worry.

"You will stay out of sight. You will not move in unless told to do so. Is that clear?" the voice is deep and Alden is used to obeying its commands. But all his instincts scream against it and the insult cuts deep.

Alden cannot stop the words that come out of his mouth. *"But it's human!"* He regrets them even before their sound dissipates from the still air of the small room.

The miniscule narrowing of grey eyes make a jolt of fear pass through him and instinctively Alden steps back in retreat.

The voice is controlled but Alden can hear the anger in it. *"You will not be seen. If Romi tells you to move, you will move. If she does not, you will not do anything. Am I clear?"* The words

are strong in the silence. The stress on them clear for anyone to hear.

Alden nods his eyes on the ground. He does not dare face the flashes of anger in those eyes. He can hear the others murmur their accent and the shuffling of their feet as they turn to leave. Alden turns too, slowly, letting them move before him.

Alden is the last to the door. Zoe's words are low delivered just before he passes through the open door. "Trust me."

Alden does not turn. He knows they are for him but he does not acknowledge them.

Part of Alden wants to run and hide. *How did he dare question her orders?* Another part of his mind sniggers thoughtfully. *Maybe the others are right. Maybe she is losing her might over this human.*

As always these past two years Alden silences it ruthlessly but in his heart he knows that he cannot dismiss it from his thoughts with ease.

The three weeks passed slowly. The days blended into one another as they traversed a continent. The others treated it as some sort of field trip, taking their time, looking at the sights. But Alden couldn't.

Alden's thoughts chased each other like angry dogs. *They were too far away. They were too near. They must not be seen. What if something happens? What if there is a trap? Cloe is who she is after all.*

Tsan watches him with that infuriating little smile on his face. Kelso seems oblivious to everything but sampling every wine and local spirit he can get his hands on. Natasha and Bie stay silent, too excited to notice his worry.

Alden thanks the stars for that. The last thing he wants is for the two humans to notice. They are too young to understand and he does not want to upset them.

In most ways he can ignore them all but it is Shie that makes Alden's stomach churn. She seems perfectly happy with the situation. Like there is no reason to worry. She looks at him with secrets in her eyes and he knows there is pity in them, too.

Alden has to restrain himself from trying to smash the expression from Shie's face and it is not only the knowledge that he would not be the victor of that contest that stops him. The first night he had tried to talk to her.

Shie's words then hound him still. *"You will follow your orders, Al. That's all there is."* Follow the orders, Shie said, as if it were easy. Alden knew it in his heart. They were too far away to help if something happened.

When the call came Alden almost did not notice. Only Shie's immediate tension warned him that

something was wrong. Only then did he spy the receiver on her wrist. He should have known it for what it is from the very first but he had not even thought of it.

Only as Shie opens the false cover does Alden realise. There is no voice. This is old technology from before the wave. He can read the words but he cannot understand. There is nothing there to explain why Shie's eyes have narrowed and her lips pursed into a frown.

The message reads like something old friends would write to one another. "How about a beer? I'm over at the cactus ring." But Shie is hurriedly looking through her unit. Some list or other he thinks.

Shie's order is short and terse. "Move. We got a problem."

Alden obeys because he is trained to obey his centi's orders but that is all. The car accelerates as Natasha revs the engine and he can see the headlights of the other car following them without delay.

Shie's whispered instruction barely registers in his ears. "It's about ten miles from here. Watch out for a right turn."

Natasha is speeding like hell's hounds are on her heels and Shie looks pale in the darkness of the cabin. Alden's heart thunders in his ears. *What has happened?* His thoughts churn and his imagination throws up images that make him swallow convulsively to stop his stomach from rebelling.

The sharp turn as Natasha almost misses the tiny road, more like a dirt track than a road in his eyes, makes him bump against the door. Alden catches a glimpse of something in the headlights but before he has a chance to say anything, the tires are screeching as Natasha hits the breaks.

Shie is out of the car before it stops moving and he is but a step behind. The darkness that crosses in front of the headlights seems like the shadow of death. Alden opens his mouth to speak. He can hear the running footsteps as the others come hurrying but Shie is there before him. "What happened?"

The audible fear in Shie's voice makes Alden notice the stark white of the bandage around the human's neck. Romi gestures dismissively and he blinks. This is not the familiar he is used to. The distain in the gesture is out of character.

But it seems to calm Shie immediately and Alden shoves the question to the back of his mind. The words are low but quick. "They've set up in the next town over. She ain't going that way, no worries."

The question explodes from his chest in a growl Alden barely recognises as his own. "What the fuck are you talking about, human?"

He can hear the insult in his tone and part of him cringes inside but Alden is too wound up to

care. *The human has never seemed to care before no matter what others tell her. Why would she care now?*

The icy feel of the LAC under his chin makes Alden blink. *When did the human move?* Alden has no time to react as the whisper hits his ears. "Back off, bloodsucker."

The menace in the low voice is such that his feet move without him realising. The blue eyes that look at Alden are almost black in their intensity. He sees the death in them and sweat pops on his brow.

Before his anger has time to return, Shie has stepped between him and the familiar. "Easy, Roms. Remember." Shie's voice is placating and Alden wonders how she can be so calm.

The voice that answers Shie is so cold he shivers. "They're eleven now. Shouldn't be too hard. But you need another shooter."

In the light thrown by the car's headlights Alden can see Shie nodding and the anger takes over once again.

The belligerence in his voice surprises even him. "And how do you know all that...human?"

Alden bunches his shoulders for the attack he knows is coming. But there is no reaction from Romi.

The sound of Romi's spit hitting the dirt is loud in the night. Alden's eyes follow the shadow as it turns without a word and walks out of the light. The sound of the motorcycle engine is like the boom of the waves. A small dust cloud makes particles dance in the headlight beams as it speeds away.

Alden is taken by surprise at the thunderous slap that hits his face throwing him to the ground. He is on his feet without thought crouching to attack. The glint of long canines on the moonlight catches his eye for a precious half-moment.

Shie's words hold warning. "Be careful, boy. Be very careful."

Alden looks at Shie with hooded eyes as she nods at him curtly and turns to leave. He bites his lip to keep the words from his mouth. Tsan's hand on his elbow makes him turn abruptly, his eyes flashing in the moonlight.

The small man does not speak. He merely gestures to the side. Alden narrows his eyes looking at the direction that the small man is gesturing. It takes him a moment to recognise that what he had taken for a large bump is a dust covered body.

Alden's steps are without thought as he rushes towards the fallen body. He knows he is stupid to think that it could be Cloe but the image is playing in his mind making his heart thunder in his ears.

It is a man. A man Alden does not know and he sighs in instant relief. It takes him a few moments to realise Tsan's silent presence behind him. Alden turns to the small man who nods quickly before crouching low. With a swift abrupt movement Tsan rips the man's shirtsleeve to reveal the double-headed snake tattoo.

Alden hears his own breath hissing and his visions seems suddenly tinged with red. His hands find the rifle slung on his back and the feel of cold steel seems to galvanise the rage building inside him.

Tsan's whisper is for his ears only. "Don't be so rush, Al."

Alden turns eyes flashing red in the darkness but he can find no words. There should be words, he knows that much. But the blood drumming in his ears, the beat of his heart that shrivels his chest stops all words from his mind.

Without a word, without even a nod, Alden moves away, taking long strides towards the car. He never even sees Tsan's sad shake of the head.

Alden does not speak as the car starts moving. If there was something to see in the short ride to the town that was their destination, he never saw it. All he saw was the redness of rage that made his vision swim. All his mind held was the image of the double-headed snake. *They will pay, oh how they will pay.*

When the car stopped, Alden was the first to get out. He did not move further although his nostrils flared trying to catch the sharp-tinged scent of vampires in the vicinity. Alden barely noticed the shadow that seemed to appear out of nowhere, nor did he pay attention to the hushed exchange between Shie and Romi.

Alden certainly was never given any orders about the coming fight, or if he was he never even heard them. He followed the others, his hands stroking the rifle, as they moved away. Tsan's hand on his elbow guided him as the team divided in two groups.

Alden let them guide him to the side door of warehouse. He was silent. He made certain that his footsteps were light making no sound in the night. His rifle was primed. It had been primed long before in the car.

Alden did not remember doing it but the gauge was red and that was enough for him. Tsan's gesture made him turn his eyes upwards. The tiny light once twice made him blink.

Tsan's whisper was almost too low to hear. "Soon as it starts we go in." Alden's mind could not make sense of the words.

The first blast was muffled but his feet propelled him forward. Tsan was opening the door. The chain clanged uselessly off the latch. Alden caught a glimpse of the large crab.

And then he was inside, his rifle already brought to bear. Alden squeezed the trigger on the bunched bodies without thought. Somewhere on the other side he could see Shie, her long sword in hand, charging into the fray.

Alden let the whine of the rifle carry him as he stood tall. He would not run. He would not hide. It was as if all his training was gone from his mind. All his eyes could see was the blood, the blood spraying everywhere.

Part of his mind recognised the boom of the LACs but his eyes never left the scene in front of him to travel upwards. Alden went on shooting even after all the vampires in the small group were down.

Alden felt the feral smile on his lips and somewhere inside knew that his eyes shone red in the half-darkness of the warehouse. The sharp blow on his arm pulled him out of the incessant loop of his thoughts. Alden turned slowly, shaking his head, his thoughts felt so sluggish to look at Tsan's worried face.

He tried to nod but it was too much effort. Alden never felt the moment his feet fell from under him, only when his shoulder hit the cold concrete.

Tsan's voice seemed far away. "Easy, Al. Easy. It'll pass."

Alden wanted to ask what was wrong. But his mouth would not move, no matter how hard he tried.

Romi's tenor had strange echoes in his ears. "What's wrong with him?"

Shie's low reply. "He'll be fine. It's the blood lust. He just needs a bit of time."

The curt grunt as the black shadow turned away from him. Alden could only watch as if on a vid or something.

Shie's hesitant question rang in his ears. "Roms? There is only eight of them here."

Alden felt the blanket of rage come over him again giving strength to his powerless limbs.

The answer made him fall back to the concrete like a marionette. "Three on the roof. It's done." Alden closed his eyes. *It was done.*

The slight touch on his elbow made him shake his head to clear the memories away. Cloe's low words were full of worry. "Easy, Al. Easy."

Alden closed his eyes for a moment hoping the redness would recede.

Even now he still could not believe it. *Him, him of all people, a berserker. Who would have thought about it? And it always came at the most inopportune moments. Like now.*

His eyes opened of their own accord to look at Cloe's worried face. Alden tried to smile not sure whether his lips would manage more than a twitch.

But the relief on Cloe's face was obvious before she turned to her quiet contemplation of the room. Alden looked around as well. Everyone was motionless, waiting as he was waiting. His eyes were drawn to the still figure in front of the ICU doors. It had not been easy to say sorry. But he had managed it.

It was even worse since Zoe was there, her eyes burning with anger. Alden would never forget the sadness in the blue eyes that looked at him, the low voice. *"No worries, Al. It takes us all in different ways."*

Alden had not really understood then. He was just relieved that his apology had been accepted. Now he knew better. His eyes shone red when the rage had him in its grip but it was a rare thing and it lasted for only a little while.

He was weak as a newborn afterwards and Alden hated the feeling so. *It takes us all in different ways.* When blue eyes turned almost black from the shadows and the voice he knew so well turned to ice, then he knew the rage was there.

Tightly controlled, wound inside like a coiled spring ready to strike. When it did death walked in the footsteps of shadow.

^^

As usual Tsan looked on. *What else is there to do?* Part of him knew that he should be worrying to death like everyone else but he couldn't really. It was bad he was certain. He had taken a tiny peek through the window and he had seen the motionless body with all the IV lines trailing from her and the machines that seemed to hold her heartbeat in their wiring parts.

Absently Tsan rubbed his cheek, feeling the flakes of dried blood with distaste. He knew he should be worrying but he couldn't. His eyes travelled lazily to the familiar black-clad form standing motionless in front of the double doors.

Tsan's ever present smile turned sad. *They would go through this as well.* He was certain of it deep in his heart and his certainly outdid any worry that he should have felt. *It wasn't like there had not been other times. Sure nothing as serious as this but,* Tsan shook his head in silent denial, *they would come out of it alright.*

Sergei was good. Hell he was the best there was. And Zoe was tough, real tough. She would fight to the last. Tsan could see the worried frowns directed at the broad back. *They worried for the*

little one too.

Tsan could see the violet eyes of the Dracula and he knew the lady thought all was lost. He shook his head in sudden consternation. *Ah the kiddo will be alright*, he was certain. *Sure the darkness was a bit worrying at times, specially when she looked at you and it brought shivers to your spine.*

Still Tsan didn't worry, not really. He'd seen it before and it didn't take long for the shadows to go away. He almost laughed aloud, managing to school his wayward thoughts only at the last moment. *Hell's bells, the woman could drink them all under the table. What is that joke that humans say about hollow legs?*

Tsan bows low.

"What is it, Tsan?" Zoe's deep voice asks, a tiny note of annoyance at its depths.

Tsan smiles. He can't really help it. "Shie was wondering whether you'd care to join us for a drink. To celebrate you know?"

"Another time, Tsan," Zoe answers quickly, her tone one of warning.

Well tough luck, he thinks, *you ain't getting away with it this time.* "Come on, Zoe. It's not like every night that your niece gets her third," Tsan says in the most winning voice he can muster.

Romi's light tenor sounds tired even to him even as Zoe opens her mouth to reply. "I am off. Dead on me feet. See you later?"

Tsan wanted to kick himself. As always he has forgotten. Sometimes he wants to curse the stupidity of some people.

He can see the anger in the grey eyes he has come to respect so much over the years. "Roms? Come on now, Kiddo, you know better than that. Shie has gotten a whole case of that rotgut you like," Tsan says not able to stop the consternation from colouring his voice.

Tsan can see the anger receding from Zoe's eyes but it is a pair of blue eyes that make his heart clench. The voice is low, almost sad. "Thanks, little man. Not tonight though."

Tsan can see the flash of worry in Zoe's face and he reacts without thought. The arm he has gripped instinctively is rock hard under his fingers. He tries to keep the worry from his voice. "Roms?"

Tsan watches as blue eyes, shadows flitting in them still, turn to him. He has to swallow before

the words come out. "Come on, Roms. Promise no questions."

The large hand that appears quickly on a black-clad shoulder makes Tsan take a step back. The deep voice holds such care that it almost brings tears to his eyes. "Come on, Baby. Maybe it's for the best?"

Tsan turns his eyes away as Romi turn to look at Zoe. In the estate, privacy is a precious commodity. He knows. He misses it most acutely than anything else. Whatever little he can give, it is theirs to have.

Long moments pass before a deep voice sounds low in the narrow corridor. "Lead on, Tsan."

Tsan smiles then and quickly turns. The loose arm around the familiar's shoulders makes his smile even wider. *Shie will be so happy.*

Truth to tell Shie had been worried about the little human. Well, not exactly little, but she was young. Well, not exactly young but, well, younger than I am, Tsan thought. In all honesty, he had been a bit worried too.

He wouldn't wish that sort of running point on anyone. Tsan certainly did not want it himself. For the thousandth time he wondered what had possessed Zoe to make Romi do it. *Not that the human was not good at it. Hell, she was probably better than Kelso,* and Kelso was the best in Tsan's book.

But still, it hurt her something fierce and those shadows could not be a good thing surely. With a shake of the head, Tsan put the thought out of his mind. *They were home now and everything would be alright.*

It was almost midmorning when Tsan stood up and came to sit on the floor next to the couch. For a moment he looked around the room. Kelso was gone, more than an hour now, drunk as a lord as usual.

Young Al was sleeping it off, half-sprawled on one of the deep armchairs. Tsan's eyes travelled to Shie. She had not drank all that much but she had been dead tired. Long trips always wore Shie down. She was sleeping peacefully curled up like a kitten on the couch. Finally Tsan looked up into deep grey eyes.

He cleared his throat before speaking. "Is she alright?"

The answering nod was quick even as a large hand caressed the short black hair. Tsan could not help but smile. The human had drank the better part of a bottle on her own. Now she looked so young as she slept.

Tsan cleared his throat again. For a moment he thought of letting it go. He had never been much for serious conversations, not of this kind. This was much more Shie's style. She always knew what to say.

With a sigh, Tsan started talking in a low whisper. "There's been a couple of things...ah...."

Before Tsan could finish the sentence, he was interrupted by a sleepy voice. "Falcon?"

Tsan closed his mouth as Zoe turned from him to the head cradled in her lap, her voice deep soothing. "It's alright. Go back to sleep."

Tsan watched unable to keep the smile from his face as Romi turned slightly on the couch and one eye opened to look at him.

An eyebrow arched at him and the gravely voice still shrouded in sleep asked. "Sure?"

Zoe's voice held laughter. "Sure. Come on. Get back to sleep."

A sleepy humph answered the tender voice and Romi closed her eyes snuggling further into the embrace that held her.

Within moments Tsan could hear her breathing evening out into the deepness of sleep. Zoe turned to him. Her voice was serious with a tone of warning. "Out with it, Tsan. What's bugging you?"

He had to swallow hurriedly before speaking. *Stars I am really not good at this.* "Your Romi...ah...she changed...ah...you know...out there," Tsan stammered out finally. He wanted to kick himself.

I've not drank a drop and that is what I come out with? Stars, sometimes I think father was right. I am so useless.

But Zoe was nodding and Tsan breathed in relief. Her words were careful. "Don't worry about it. It's alright. A couple of days, a bit of rest and she'll be fine."

Tsan nodded then. If Zoe said it was fine then it was fine. He nodded again. This time with conviction, before standing up.

Tsan moved quietly towards the bathroom and he could not stop the half-smile from his lips as he heard the whispered words. The light tenor sounding not a bit sleepy. *You are a real actor, aren't you little human?* Tsan thought barely stopping from shaking his head.

"You alright?" Romi whispered, worry clear in her voice.

Zoe's answer was barely audible. "He was worried. Shie must have been too, judging from the looks she's been giving you."

"Sorry." The reply was soft.

The sound of a tender kiss almost did not reach Tsan's ears but the whispered words did. "It ain't your fault, Baby. I shouldn't have made you go."

Tsan's throat closed to hear the clear pain in Zoe's voice.

The answer was quick. "Hey... You ain't made me do nothing. Clear?"

Tsan was amazed at the harsh words filled with anger. He almost turned in sudden alarm but Zoe's deep voice stopped him. "Easy, Roms. Easy. Come 'ere."

Tsan heard the shuffling of bodies and the almost inaudible whisper that accompanied it. "I missed ya...."

The answer came as Tsan was closing the door to the bathroom. "I know, I know, Baby."

Tsan tried to keep his smile hidden. He knew everyone was worrying. There was darkness in the human's eyes. But Tsan didn't worry. He had not these past two months. Not even when Shie started fretting.

He wouldn't start now. *Soon as Zoe opens her eyes, the human will be fine.* It was not much different from Xao. *He has his dark spells, too.* But they always passed. His cousin's dark green eyes rose in his memory and this time Tsan could not help his smile.

Xao is alright now, up on the mountains. He so loves the mountains, the crazy bugger. Tsan's eyes travelled to the black-clad presence standing still in front of the doors. *Don't worry, little human. It's gonna be alright, you'll see,* he thought.

^^

The sight of the ICU staff coming out of their small common room at a run was like a knife in her heart. She didn't have to hear the beeping alarm, audible even through the heavy double doors, to know.

She was moving without thought. What was there to think? Somewhere inside her mind, she knew they would try to stop her. The slight twitch of her lips was the only reaction she allowed. Her steps were quick but steady.

She couldn't see over the backs of the nurses and the doctor at the tall body she knew was on the bed. She watched with half-closed eyes as the doctor called out. "One, two, three. Clear!"

The glimpse of an alabaster body spasming as the current hit it made her fists clench uncontrollably. She could hear the steady beep. She could see the flat line on the monitors as her

mind seemed to shut down.

The doctor's voice sounded far away. "One, two, three. Clear!" Her eyes did not move from the monitor and the flat line that never wavered.

Instinctively her hands moved to her waist, at the guns that were not there. The doctor's voice sounded like it came from the bottom of a deep well. "One, two, three. Clear!" The flat line seemed to peak but everything was blurry.

She never even felt the tears coursing down her cheeks. It was the sound that made her blink trying to clear her muddied vision. The sight was almost too much to bear. Her hands found the wall behind her back even as her knees gave out. She slid to the floor without realising it.

The world had contracted to a single point. The line peaking and falling at the rhythm of a steady heartbeat. She closed her eyes for a long moment but when she opened them again the peaks were still there on the monitor.

The hand that touched her shoulder did not register. Neither did the shadow that fell across her. Someone was speaking but their voice did not penetrate the haze. All she could hear was the tiny beeping sound that signalled a heartbeat.

The fingers that turned her head to face the doctor kneeling next to her felt insubstantial. Somewhere in her mind some small voice provided a name, Catherine. As soon as the pressure from insubstantial fingers was gone, she turned back to the monitor.

Her eyes moved with the steady peaks appearing and disappearing in a short line. She would have been surprised at the deep male voice, "Help me get her up, soldier", but it never registered in her mind. She certainly did not feel the two pairs of hands, one older and surer, the other young and strong, that got her to her feet and gently moved her to the side of the bed.

She never saw the tears in soulful green eyes as Josephine moved a chair. She never realised the gentle pressure on her shoulders that led her to sit. The world was a small screen filled with peaks chasing each other across its length. She never registered the gentle fingers that guided her head downwards.

The bloodshot grey gaze that her eyes met made her heart stop for a moment. She did not feel the fingers that took her hand depositing it gently in a weak grip. She only felt the slight squeeze on her fingers.

The slow wink of one grey eye made her lips widen into a reflexive smile. Another slight squeeze and she watched as a grey eye closed. Her eyes travelled along the strong body riddled with IV lines and tubes to stop at the chest rising and falling with every breath.

Long moments passed as she watched the gentle rise and fall before her mind fought through the haze surrounding it and the world intruded upon her. There was no sound but the beeping of the monitor and Catherine's clearly irritated voice. "All of you out. I said out!"

Shuffling steps as people moved reluctantly and then Catherine's voice once again, this time straining for calm. "Please, Sire. You must wait outside." More steps and then the doors closing with a small bang.

The voice next to her ear was clearly worried and trying not to show it. "Gyn? Romi?"

She did not take her eyes away from the gently rising and falling chest. She meant for her words to be calming but the voice sounded gruff in her ears. "I'm fine, Doc."

She felt the hand touching the base of her neck but she merely smiled. She waited until the doctor had taken her pulse before speaking. "I'm fine, Cathy. No worries."

She didn't see it but she felt the doctor nodding. She did hear the whispered words. "Heart like a horse."

The squeeze on her shoulder made a flash of pain pass through her but she ignored it. It was nothing. It would pass. Catherine's light steps as she walked away sounded loud in the silent room.

Slowly she leaned forward until her lips found the fingers that still held her hand in a limp grip. When she straightened once more, her eyes found the gently rising chest and stayed there.

^^

Sergei looked around at the three vampires and his voice was grave. "All good. Now wait time. Little time...no little time...we see. You all go sleep."

Three pairs of eyes looked at him and he shrugged before turning and going through the door to his domain.

"Lady Kalia, once again the clan is grateful for your help," Count Hugo said with a small bow at Kalia.

Kalia looked at him and she spoke simply. "I will stay for a while longer, Hugo. Unless that is a problem."

Kalia could see the surprise in his eyes and the unspoken question that replaced it but she would not answer him. There was another grey-eyed vampire that she needed to talk to first.

"Of course, cousin. My hearth is yours for as long as you wish," the Count said after a few moments.

Kalia nodded. The Count was surprised but his welcome seemed genuine enough. She was surprised to see the grey-haired man look at her once more and with an abrupt nod of his head turn on his heel and walk down the corridor.

For a moment Kalia felt cold. *Chances are I am overstaying my welcome*, but Josephine's low words stopped that train of thought. "Excuse him. It's been a hard few months and a hard night tonight."

Kalia looked at Josephine and nodded slowly. *Of course, he is not young anymore and the rigours of the night had taken their toll. Much like father. He prefers to leave rather than show weakness or tiredness.*

Josephine's warm hand enveloped her own and Kalia smiled at the contact. The warmth seemed to seep into her. Josephine's voice was hesitant. "Do you want me to call someone to get you to your room?"

Kalia looked into soft eyes and asked quietly. "Where will you be going?"

"I want to check on Zoe before..." Josephine answered slowly.

Kalia nodded. "Let's go then." The shy smile from Josephine made Kalia's stomach clench. *By every power that be the woman is beautiful.*

Sergei's gaze was clearly worried as they opened the double doors but Josephine's head shake stopped whatever he wanted to say. Kalia walked carefully, trying to make no sound as she followed Josephine deeper into the ICU. When Josephine stopped a few yards away from the bed surrounded by machines, she stopped also holding her breath.

The soft words could be heard clearly. "Come on, Falcon. Hold on. Breathe. Yeah, that's right. Just breathe. I know it hurts but come on. Nothing can put you down." The cut-off sob wrenched her heart and Kalia could see Josephine flinch at the sound.

Carefully Kalia softly touched the Josephine's shoulder, squeezing slightly.

"Why did you have to be a hero? Fuck! Come on. Just breathe. Just breathe, love. I'm here, I ain't going nowhere. Just breathe, come on."

Kalia looked at Josephine seeing the concern in her eyes and Kalia shook her head. Josephine nodded and turned back towards the exit, taking Kalia's hand in her own. As she turned, Kalia could hear the whispered words and the quiet sobbing from the room.

The soft sounds followed Kalia as she followed Josephine out of the ICU. The soft click of the double doors closing felt so final.

Josephine nodded at the vampires in the waiting room and said in a low careful voice. "Cloe, no visits, ok?"

The vampire cocked her head before nodding slowly. "No one's passing, Jo. We'll keep the peace," Cloe said, her fingers twitching.

Kalia did not look at him directly but her eyes were drawn to the large man on the other side of the door. Alden's face was full of worry. Josephine was walking down the corridor and Kalia followed without a word.

Josephine's low voice sounded loud in the empty corridor. "Would you like some coffee? A drink?"

Kalia's answer was a belated. "Yes". She was tired, exhausted, but she could not sleep, not yet. Kalia followed mutely as Josephine led her through unfamiliar corridors up flights of stairs. Her only concern was the warmth flowing into her from the hand that held her own.

She was retreating. Kalia knew it deep down but could not deal with the knowledge. Her thoughts turned to Henry. *How I miss you, boy*, Kalia thought. Henry would know what to do. How to snap her out of this despondency.

The abrupt mood swings that had not plagued Kalia for nigh on three decades seem to be coming back with a vengeance. Kalia did not even realise it when Josephine led her through corridors she had passed before. It was not until they had reached the door of Josephine's rooms that Kalia realised where they were.

Kalia's initial instinct was to turn and leave. She did not need this now. She could not handle it. Yet the warm hand that held hers made any movement almost impossible. Henry's voice flooded through her mind. *"You can't run and hide from who you are. You may not like it but that is who you are."*

Kalia let herself be pulled into the room and led to the couch. She sat heavily, her mind numb, her soul searching for the bond that was not there any more. *Almost two hundred years have passed*, Kalia thought passively.

Kalia felt the cool presence of a glass in her hand. "Drink." Josephine's voice ordered quietly.

Kalia's hands obeyed the command as her mind swam. The burning of the strong drink down her throat made her gasp.

"Want to talk about it?" Josephine asked quietly.

Kalia looked at her dully and shook her head. She did not want to talk about it. She had never wanted to talk about it.

The slight caress on her cheek was surprisingly gentle, as were the words that followed it. "It's ok, Kalia. It will be better in the night."

The echo of Henry was almost too strong. All the sleepless nights. The nights he had silently watched as Kalia paced restlessly in the overgrown gardens. The nights he had stood rock solid next to her as she sat on the small porch rocking herself, her mind lost in memory. The nights he

had sat just like Josephine was sitting now filling her glass as she drank herself to oblivion.

And always his strong arms as he carried her to bed, his light tenor trembling with pain and helplessness. *"It will be better in the night, Kali."*

The feel of stinging in her eyes made Kalia blink before she realised that it was tears forming. The tears were so easy, even after so long. Before she had almost never cried. Then again she had had little reason to cry.

The arm that pulled her close was warm against the cold she felt inside and Kalia could only sigh at the warmth that she could feel flooding from the touch. With barely a murmur of protest Kalia let herself be pulled into Josephine's arms, hearing the steady beat of her heart, feeling the gentle caresses along her back and arms.

A soft voice whispered in her ear. "It's gonna be ok. Relax now. I got you."

Without wanting to, Kalia felt her eyes close as she instinctively snuggled closer.

Josephine looked down at the woman in her arms and she leaned back on the couch, her arms securely holding Kalia. Josephine knew that she was not asleep but she was certain that sleep was not too far off.

Josephine could not help but wonder at the sudden weakness. She had been astounded to see the strength in Kalia. A strength Josephine would never have expected from her. From the moment Josephine had gone into the small safehouse off seventh, she had seen the intelligence and confidence in Kalia's eyes.

And later the empathy and goodness of heart that shone out of those eyes along with the cool professionalism. Even her actions in the command centre when Kalia had taken over, Josephine knew well in order to protect her from the horrible images. She had not expected the transformation of the last few hours.

It had astounded Josephine so that the woman she softly kissed on this very couch, that same woman had stood rock solid on the stairs her hands steady and her eyes deep violet pools as she shot at the intruders. Josephine could still not get her head around the strength Kalia had shown in the great hall. She had merely stood there mute in terror and surprise to see that monster.

The way Kalia had handled Romi was simply amazing. In the last two months Josephine had learnt, along with everyone else in the clan that when the darkness shone out of those blue eyes it was time to slowly and carefully back away. Josephine suspected that even her father knew enough to stay away when the rage consumed the familiar.

It was a different face from the one any of them had seen in the last five years. Gone was the soft-spoken loner they had all gotten used to seeing a couple of steps behind Zoe.

Looking back Josephine could see that the rage was only thinly veiled barely held in check under

the surface but none of them had seen it, none of them had experienced it.

And then the betrayal had come and Josephine had felt fear enter her heart as Romi, blood seeping from her wounds, had brought the Count home. Even now, after all these months, Josephine did not know what had scared her more that fateful dawn. Her father's deathly pallor as Sergei worked on him or the fact that it had taken Ari, Cloe and Alden together to stop Romi from getting out there to look for Zoe.

In the months since then the scholars had learnt to quietly edge away as Romi passed. Even the soldiers did not behave much better, following Romi's orders without question in the streets and otherwise avoiding her as much as possible. Not that she sought anyone's company, her days spent in Zoe's rooms and her nights prowling the streets.

Josephine was the only one whom Romi let close. Not close enough for comfort but close enough for the simple things of the everyday. Josephine was no fool and she knew well that the only reason for the difference in behaviour was that Romi respected Josephine's place as heir with Zoe in the hands of the Zindramas.

Josephine, like everyone else, had learnt to fear the flashes of darkness in Romi's eyes and to retreat quickly when they came. Not that Romi stayed around for long when that happened quickly taking to the streets to look for another lead or simply to kill as many Zindramas as she could find in her solitary excursions in the dark roads of the metropolis.

And yet Kalia, Josephine could not contain her surprise and, yes, her admiration, had quieted the darkness with nothing more than words. Kalia had not retreated but had stood there until it passed without even a flicker of fear in her ivory patrician features.

Josephine's eyes wondered around the still form in her arms. She could feel that Kalia's breathing had not yet evened out enough for sleep but there was a more relaxed feeling in the taut shoulders she held.

Something must have happened to bring about the abrupt change between the strong vampire that had given Count Hugo orders in the hall of his own house and the lost woman she had quietly led to this room only minutes ago. Kalia had looked fine until they had gone to see Zoe. Josephine had heard the muffled words and the even quieter sounds of weeping and knew that their presence would not be welcome.

But Kalia had reacted so strangely, strong and confident until they had left the ICU and then becoming quietly but certainly undone in the corridor. Josephine could only suspect that it had something to do with the quiet words that they had overheard but could not imagine what.

The historian in her tried to cast back into the corridors of memory for the history of this woman. Kalia's tracking abilities were legendary and her position as a daughter of Dracula made her one of the most sought out vampires in the world.

Yet, Josephine had been surprised to hear of her work on psychology. She still could not imagine

Zoe had to smile at how well Romi knew her.

Zoe's gaze took in the familiar figure but she didn't speak. There were a million things that she wanted to say but none passed her lips. *How long have I been unconscious? How many did we lose in the running fight in the corridors? How is father? Josephine?* But this was not the time.

The eyes that searched her face were empty of shadows but Zoe could see the pain in them. Anyone else would see merely an ice cold stare but she knew better.

"Come 'ere," Zoe whispered.

Long moments passed before Romi moved. Zoe felt the soft lips touching the palm of her hand and the breath left her burning lungs. She had not even realised she was holding it.

Zoe caressed the smooth skin even as she felt the tiny drops of wetness on her wrist. She swallowed painfully before speaking. "Easy, Baby. Easy."

Zoe didn't need to look to know that Romi was trembling like a leaf but it pierced her heart even so.

The loud clearing of a throat made her turn her gaze to the figure standing quietly at the corner. Sergei's bulk was instantly recognisable. Romi was already moving and from the corner of her eye Zoe could see the familiar shoulders bunch in readiness for an attack.

Sergei's voice was gentle. "Zoe...Roms...Move now? Room?...ah...Other room?"

Zoe nodded minutely, as much as the collar around her neck allowed, when Romi turned to her in question.

Romi's voice was even deeper than usual. "Sure, Doc. Anytime you're ready."

Sergei flashed one of his brilliant smiles at them both.

Moments later the orderlies came in, gently moving her to an airstretcher, Sergei's instructions booming in the ward. Zoe didn't have to turn to know the watchful figure standing just beside her head. She closed her eye as they started to move.

Zoe kept it closed even after they entered the new room and the orderlies moved her to the bed. Movement made pain rise in waves to drown her but not a single sound passed her lips. Zoe kept her eye stubbornly close. It would not do for anyone to see the pain in it.

Zoe waited until the soft voice spoke to her. "They're gone now."

She opened her eye slowly hoping that the tears would not escape. Zoe could feel the trail of wetness immediately start but before she could even shake her head in consternation, gentle fingers wiped the tears away.

"Easy, Falcon. It's just the pain." Romi's voice was soft.

A half-smile formed on Zoe's lips. For the millionth time this past few years she wondered how she could be so lucky. Romi was a woman of few words but somehow they always seemed the right ones.

The straw that touched her lips lightly was welcome. Her throat felt dry. Zoe sipped gratefully, her gaze never leaving twin pools of azure full of care.

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The soft sound woke Kalia. It took a moment to recognise it. A soft knock on the door. Almost instinctively Kalia tried to get up, only to feel the arms around her and slowly she turned to look at the perfect features of the woman holding her.

With utmost care Kalia disentangled herself from Josephine's embrace. She stepped away quietly but not before planting a feather-like kiss on one gentle hand. The last three days had passed almost in a blur. There had been no time for thought or reflection. There were too many wounded, many dead.

Kalia had volunteered her services. She was a doctor after all. Josephine had tried to decline but it did not take long for her to see the wisdom of letting Kalia help. Kalia smiled then. The nights had been hectic and somehow, she did not want to think beyond that, every dawn she ended up here. For a late coffee or a drink.

Almost on tiptoe Kalia went to the door and opened it hoping that the hinges would not creak and wake the sleeping beauty on the bed. The door opened without a sound and Kalia found herself before Ari, who looked clearly uncomfortable.

Ari's voice was pitched so low that Kalia wondered whether anyone without extraordinary hearing could actually make the words. "The Count is asking for Jo."

Kalia looked at the washed-out blue eyes of the vampire in front of her and nodded slowly before closing the door gently.

Quickly Kalia padded to the bed and knelt in front of Josephine, her eyes taking in the delicate features highlighted by sleep's repose. Hesitantly Kalia reached towards Josephine her voice low. "Wake up, Beauty."

Luminous green eyes opened at the contact and for a moment Kalia thought she would fall into them for ever. With a show of power she did not think she had, Kalia stood up and stepped away. Her voice was stronger. "Your father has been asking for you, Josephine."

Josephine sought Kalia's eyes and she spoke without thinking, her voice heavy from sleep. "Beauty?"

Kalia felt the flush creeping up her neck to her cheeks and she answered as nonchalantly as possible. "It's true. You are beautiful."

A slow smile graced Josephine's face. "Hmm...Not good enough, my dear."

Before Kalia could find the words to answer the young woman got up from the bed and straightened her rumpled clothes.

Neither of them had the energy to undress after a night spent on their feet. As she opened the door, Josephine turned back towards Kalia. "Are you coming?"

Kalia looked at her surprised and Josephine could only smile in invitation. Josephine's heart soared when Kalia walked to her.

The walk to the Count's office was quick with the guards and everyone else in the corridors bowing at her. Kalia felt strange. They were polite as they had been before but it was different.

It took Kalia quite a bit of time to realise what had changed. The tight faces she had come across when she had first entered the Ottewald house were gone. Now the vampires and the familiars roaming the corridors did not shoot looks of suspicion at her. In the faces of soldiers she sometimes saw quickly concealed smiles.

The reaction brought warmth inside of Kalia. After a moment she managed to identify it. She felt welcome. Kalia almost piled on Josephine's back when the vampire stopped to nod at the guards before opening the door to her father's study.

Josephine stepped inside the plush room and held the door open for Kalia. She hesitated for a moment before going into the room.

Her eyes found the Count standing before the unlit fireplace immediately. As he turned slowly to face her, Kalia could see clearly the signs of tiredness on his face. She inclined her head in greeting. It was difficult to find words.

She had ordered him about in his own clan's hall. Kalia did not regret it but it would chafe any man of the Count's stature. She had been busy the last three nights but inside her she had to recognise that she had been avoiding her cousin.

But Hugo's grey eyes looked at Kalia steadily. His short bow was respectful. His voice even. "Sit, Lady. You too, Jo. Zoe is better, Sergei called."

Kalia took her seat slowly. She felt doubt festering in her heart. *What am I doing here?* These were matters between the family. She had no place in this room. She almost stood up, to give her excuses and leave but the Count's words stopped her. "Lady, I wish to ask for your advice."

Kalia could not help the widening of her eyes, the only sign of her surprise. *What advice could*

he want? Kalia nodded carefully. She would have to listen. Maybe he was merely being polite. As soon as the thought crossed her mind, she had to discard it. Hugo von Ottewald would not ask if her advice was not needed.

His voice was serious. "Could there be another?"

A frown marred her features as Kalia realised the import of his words. She shook her head immediately. Her voice sounding strained in her ears. "It is unlikely, cousin. Karakin will fight each other. It is impossible to keep two in close proximity."

He nodded and started to speak but Kalia had not finished. "Still, however, there should be a search. Those caves looked substantial. And maybe there is one further away. Even..."

Kalia hesitated then. "This one should not have been, Hugo. The ritual was not completed, so this one could not have been born much less raised to such size in a few hours."

Hugo's curt nod told Kalia he had already reached the same conclusion. "So there had been another ritual," he said quietly.

Kalia had to take a breath before speaking. This was not something she wanted to think about but it was the only explanation. "More than one. It was too large for one ritual only. What you stopped would have been the completion."

Josephine's whisper was almost inaudible. "The completion?"

Kalia did not turn. She did not want to face that angel's face with the knowing in her eyes. She tried to keep her voice gentle. "Karakin fly. The ritual would have given it wings."

Kalia heard the indrawn breath from Josephine and she could not stop the shiver that racked through her body. She had seen only one completed Karakin and she had no wish to see another. The creatures were terrible enough when mere babies. When they reached their full growth and became airborne they were nigh on indefeasible.

The Count's words were thoughtful. "We need to search. And we need to find out how many rituals took place. Lady?"

Kalia looked at him waiting as he took breath to continue. "Lady, will you stay and help with the search? It is much that I ask of you but... I know nothing of the Karakin. I had never seen one in my life before that night."

Kalia looked into the eyes that had not for a moment left her face and nodded slowly. Hugo asked for much but this was a request she could not deny. The evil of the Karakin was something she had thought gone from the world. *How wrong I was...*

And there were other things that Kalia burned to know. *How had knowledge of the ritual survived the mass purge almost a century ago? And why did none of the empaths in this part of*

the world feel the monster's birth?

Kalia saw the relief in the Count's face and she smiled in acknowledgment. Her curiosity kindled as the Count prepared to speak once again. *What else did he want?* His words were slow, almost hesitant. "There is something else...."

Hugo's eyes strayed then, to the open book on the coffeetable. Kalia's eyes followed his gaze and she immediately understood. Kalia could recognise the book with its gothic lettering. There was only one set of books with that lettering.

Another complication Kalia had not thought about. Law and custom provided the framework of their long lives. Without them they would all be lost. They would be little more than savages preying upon each other. Yet those safeguards often became shackles that bore them down as well.

Her own words were slow then as Kalia tried to think. "I am certain the Council can be persuaded to be lenient. The Gyn did the right thing after all. And she was not among those challenged."

Josephine's exasperation was clear in her immediate exclaim. "What? What are you saying?"

Kalia did turn then to look at the young vampire seated just a few feet away. She tried to make her voice gentle, hoping her own anger at the injustice would not show through. "It is the law, Jo. A challenge has to be answered before any other business."

Anger rose in Josephine's eyes and her words carried its weight. "Are you mad? Even I saw the trap in that...that thing's challenge. What did you expect Romi to do? Sit and wait until we were all dead?"

Kalia could not answer that truthfully. By law and custom that was exactly what should have happened.

It was the Count's steady voice that answered the angry question. "Jo...please. You know the law as well as anyone. A challenge cannot be interrupted."

Josephine rose with fury transforming her face. "I cannot believe this! That thing should never have been created! What they did to us does not matter? What about Natasha? What about the others? Don't they count?"

Kalia's heart clenched as Josephine's voice fell, her words falling like pieces of ice. "What about Zoe?"

There was no answer to such questions. It was not often that humans got anything right but in this they were spot on. Law served justice but justice was blind. Kalia knew the law well and the penalties for what had happened.

But her words to the Count had not been empty platitude. Kalia knew many members of the council. More importantly she knew how many of them had been in the effort to end the Karakin. There were always loopholes in the law and the council could always exercise its discretion.

There would be punishment. That was unavoidable. Such breach of law and custom had to be punished or the law, and the council, lost their standing in the eyes of the tribe. But still Kalia did not believe that any punishment would be severe or blind. If worse came to worse, she knew that for the human that killed the Karakin, her father would lean towards mercy.

But these were not matters Kalia could speak aloud. All she could say safely had already been said. Hugo von Ottewald understood and that was enough. She could see it in the fury that lay unmasked on Josephine's face that the young vampire did not but there was nothing to be done about that. *Not here, not now.*

Josephine's steps were heavy, her voice cold as ice. "Excuse me, Sire. I have matters to see to."

Kalia's throat closed with tears but she let nothing show on her face. Josephine would have to understand. This was not petty revenge or anything of the like.

The Count's voice cracked like a whip. "Josephine!"

Kalia tensed but there was nothing she could or say. In the Ottewald lands, Count Hugo was lord and master. His voice was hard, leaving no room for objection. "You will not tell Zoe, daughter. That is an order."

Josephine's laugh was harsh and bitter. It made Kalia shiver. "Father do not insult my intellect. I will obey your...order. But if you think that Zoe does not already know...."

Kalia heard the words left unsaid and her fingers clenched into a fist, even as the door shut with a muted bang in Josephine's wake.

Marcus' sad smile flashed in Kalia's mind. His words, low and even as always, echoed in remembrance. "*She is a genius for the law, sister. But no council chamber or hall of arbitration could ever survive the cry of blood. The sword's call was powerful. ...Kalia...find her, please.*"

Kalia had grasped her brother's thin shoulder then in silent promise. Marcus had wanted to come, to try to find some common ground, attempt some sort of arbitration, but their father had been adamant in his refusal. Marcus was too vulnerable to risk in a war. Especially a war as ugly as this.

Kalia shook her head to clear the memory away. Belatedly she realised the grey gaze that studied her silently. She inclined her head to the Count. His words were slow with none of the formality that usually coloured his demeanour. "I am not a fool, Kalia. But Zoe needs to heal. She needs time."

rage in her sister's eyes and Zoe wondered what had made Josephine so angry. A smile half-formed on her lips. Josephine had tried to mask her anger, but she knew her sister too well to be fooled.

Something was going on. For a moment Zoe could not help the anger that rose in her heart. *Could we not even have a night to rest?* With a deep breath, Zoe forced the anger down. She would not rail. She would not be angry anymore. Whatever it was, it would be taken care of.

She had made a vow and it was a vow Zoe intended to keep. Whatever gods there were in this existence had heard and granted her wish. She would keep her vow. *No more would she ask. Not again, ever again.*

Zoe wanted to turn her head but she could not. The collar wound around her neck would not let her. But she could feel the warm weight on her hand and she closed her eye for a moment, savouring it.

With a deep breath she opened her good eye once more. Slowly Zoe swallowed, wetting her throat. "Roms?"

It sounded faint in her ears but it was enough. Zoe could not keep the smile from her face as she felt the weight lift from her hand and a split second later the quick kiss of warm lips on the top of her fingers.

The low voice warmed her heart. "I'm here, Falcon. Want some water?"

Zoe did not need to answer as a straw reached her lips. She drank deeply but all her attention was on a pair of shadowy eyes looking at her under raised eyebrows. As soon as she had drunk her fill, the straw receded but Romi did not move, merely leaving the empty glass on the nightstand.

"Red stuff?" the question made Zoe laugh.

It was an old joke. Zoe could barely remember how it had come to be. But for so long she had only heard it in her fevered dreams. To hear it now and know it for reality not merely another imagining brought on by the fever, made her want to cry as much as it made her want to laugh.

No tear passed her eyelids to streak on her cheeks. Zoe did not cry. She never cried. But something must have showed in her eyes because gentle fingers brushed her cheek. She leaned towards the light touch and felt it still.

"Falcon?" Romi's voice was gruff and it made Zoe's heart skip a beat.

There were tears unshed in the gruffness and Zoe could feel the coiled spring of emotion that made Romi's hand tremble. "Just a little while longer. Just a while," Zoe whispered. The slow blink and the even slower nod that followed it told her she had been heard.

Zoe had missed those slow nods, the small signs of trust and acquiescence. Their own needs

magical forest from her childhood fantasies.

Zoe would wake up. Not yet but it would not be long. And she would ask for reports. Worse still, she would get them. The scouts would not dare disobey. Josephine had not dared to order them otherwise. How could she when she knew that her orders would be ignored? And then Zoe would know.

And then the summons would come. The questions Josephine had no answers for. It would be the same again and as before, she would have no answers to satisfy her sister.

Her mind feels sluggish. Josephine knows it is no more than the shock. Less than an hour has passed but it feels like days. Somewhere outside the sun is climbing over the horizon but all she can think of is how much she wants to lie down and sleep. But she cannot stop the trembling of her hands or the shivers that run through her.

Josephine huddles in the cloak. It smells of blast rounds and whatever soap the human uses. A small part somewhere in her brain mumbles imprecations for the weakness that has let her accept the cloak. The human had not spoken, merely handed her the heavy garment with barely a glance. Josephine does not know what to feel.

What is she supposed to feel? *Gratefulness? Anger?* The world feels out of kilter. Josephine did not like this human. *How can I?* The human barely speaks and although her words are always polite, they sound cold.

But this human had fought on their side when all the others had tried to kill them. *Why?* Josephine cannot help but wonder. Part of her knows but she has ruthlessly silenced the small voice in her head. Such she cannot accept.

Josephine can hear the words clearly but they seem disjointed, like she is missing half the conversation.

Zoe's deep voice with a tone she has never heard before. "Rest, Gyn. I will keep watch."

The answer delivered in a tight voice. "Do whatever you want, Falcon. I'll be outside."

A quick step to the side brings the human almost to the door of the small room. The hand that grasps her shoulder has the strength of steel. The voice is so deep to be almost a growl. "I said rest, human."

A sudden jerk and the glint of the LAC in the lamplight. "You don't order me, bloodsucker."

Josephine watches as if in a play or a vid the slow step that brings her sister's body to touch the

muzzle of the LAC. The order is low. "Rest."

The answer is a harsh whisper. "Play your games another time. The credits you hold will make someone a rich man."

Josephine can see the tension in the wide shoulders she knows so well as the human steps away and through the door to the crypt itself. The bang as the door closes sounds too loud in the small room.

A strong hand reaches up to run through short hair still wet with sweat. Josephine can hear Zoe's muttered invective, "Fuck me!" but it is the tone of the deep voice, somewhere between anger and admiration, that makes Josephine's fists clench.

The grey eyes that turn to look upon her are full of worry and Josephine cannot hold their gaze. A few short steps and strong hands come to hold hers. Zoe's voice is deep, thoughtful. "Did he force you or trick you, Jo?"

Where are the words when she needs them? Should she lie? Can she keep a straight face? The silence is long as Josephine forces her struggling mind to come up with an answer. Too long, the whisper that sounds like a bell in her ears is somewhere between irritation and resignation. "Ah, Jo...."

Josephine doesn't raise her head. She does not want to see the disappointment in her sister's eyes. "Sleep, little sis. In a few days we'll be home." Strong hands gently push Josephine down on the narrow bed until she lies full length upon it. A light-feather kiss on her brow makes Josephine want to cry.

Zoe has not done this since Josephine was a little girl afraid of the dark. Josephine closes her eyes. She wants to sleep. She needs the rest, the oblivion. Let the night be racked by guilt. This day she wishes only to rest. The dark oblivion claims her even before her breathing slows.

The sweet smell of blood pulls Josephine from her slumber. Slowly she opens her eyes to survey unfamiliar surroundings. The lamp seems to send more shadows into the room than light.

But Josephine would know the tall lean figure leaning against the rickety table anywhere. Just then she recognises the slight sounds for the whispers they are.

Deep voice almost too low to be heard. "You don't have to, you know. We can go for a night without."

The answer is a short harsh laugh, the words mocking. "Yeah... right."

The movement is so quick that it blurs in the semi-darkness. The voice almost a growl it sends shivers down her spine. "Are you mocking me, human?"

There is no answer but the curt offering of a plastiglass. Josephine watches silently as Zoe takes

the battered cup and turns towards her. Josephine is too slow to close her eyes and the grey raptor's gaze holds her eyes. There are no words as her sister takes the few steps to her side, silently offering Josephine the cup.

Josephine hesitates for a moment. The cup is full and hunger rises in her. *Can the human give more or will we have to share?* Josephine feels the gentle grip that takes her hand wrapping it around the cup. *The human must be able to offer more or Zoe would have taken her share now.*

Josephine cannot contain herself any longer and she drinks. She can feel the coppery warmth down her throat and she sighs silently. No vampire suffers hunger easily. It is over too soon, much too soon. But she will hold her discipline. Quietly she leaves the cup on the bed beside her.

Josephine's eyes find the human but no gaze meets her own. The woman is looking down at her own hand as it presses on the opened vein waiting. From the corner of her eye Josephine sees the quick hands that take the cup from the bed.

But Zoe does not move towards the human. Instead she walks to the other side of the table. The cup makes a small chink as it is put on the pockmarked surface.

Josephine watches as Zoe moves around the table. She spies the small tube of sealant in Zoe's right hand. It is more like a dance than anything else as her sister takes the human's hand and slowly seals the tidy cut.

A single drop of wine-red blood falls to the ground. There are no further words exchanged but Josephine can see clearly the human trembling. *Surely loosing a little blood cannot have weakened her so.*

Josephine watches fascinated the slow movement as Zoe bends until her lips touch the human's neck. She can hear the whisper but cannot make out the words. The sudden jerk as the human steps back makes Josephine stand ready to attack.

But no LAC glints in the human's trembling hands. Zoe's voice is even but she can hear the strange tone in it. "Time to get going."

The loud knock on the door pulled her out of her reverie. Josephine had to clear her throat before she called for whoever it was to enter. As Romi came in, Josephine could only hope that the heat she felt in her heart did not show on her face.

Romi's eyes searched her face and for once in all these months, there was a slight smile on her face. "Hey, Jo."

Josephine shook her head to clear it from the memories. Years have passed yet still those early

with its intensity. Her mind felt numb. She had dreaded reporting and the reality was as dreadful as she had imagined.

Shie had kept it short, quick and to the point. Details could wait, she knew that much. And Zoe had not uttered a single word throughout. Only her good eye turned colder and colder until it seemed to burn Shie with ice.

The low knock made Shie turn towards the door and she went quickly to it, sliding it open a bit. The pair of blue eyes, an eyebrow arched that greeted Shie made her step back. Romi entered carefully and Shie could see her eyes immediately seek out the woman on the bed.

Shie could only watch as Romi walked with easy steps to the side of the bed, silently taking the glass from the nightstand and lightly touching the straw to cracked lips. Zoe drank quickly but the steel never left her gaze. The small clink of the glass as it was returned to the nightstand sounded loud in the room.

Romi's voice was even. "Everyone is alright. No changes, Kathy said. Lots in the yard. Jo said she just wanted to check on ya."

Shie had to shake her head. She had heard Romi report countless times but still she found it disconcerting how the sentences always seemed disjointed.

Zoe's answer was low. "Good."

Shie could only watch as Romi took a step back and slowly turned to her. Impassive eyes looked at her for a moment before turning back to Zoe.

"Nothing to worry." Shie could hear the low gruff tones in Romi's voice.

Shie could see the miniscule shake of the head from Zoe and Romi's immediate flinch. A grey gaze full of thunder turned to her and Shie flinched in turn.

Zoe's deep voice was low, little more than a whisper. "Leave us, Shie."

For a moment Shie stood still like a deer standing in the headlights. Zoe's voice was a growl of fire. "Now."

With a shiver, Shie locked her knees and walked outside, carefully closing the door behind her.

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Zoe's gaze roamed around the room for a moment before it settled on the bowed head. She breathed deep savouring the pain from her still healing ribs. Words danced in her mind but Zoe did not speak. She could feel the anger coursing through her and she closed her eye trying to force it down.

It was worse than she had thought. *Shie's hesitant words were only the tip of the iceberg, Zoe thought. It was worse than I could have imagined.* The hateful words of the Zindramas were only part of the picture. The soldier, the dark killer, that she had expected. *But not like that. Never again like that.*

Zoe let her breath out in a hiss. An impotent effort to vent her anger. Blue eyes rose immediately to look at her. Zoe could feel them on her and slowly she opened her heavy eyelids. She watched, half-pride half-rage shining in her gaze, as the black-clad human walked slowly towards her.

Zoe could not follow Romi's movements as she knelt at the side of the bed but she could feel the heat of a fevered forehead as it touched the edge of the bed next to her palm. Zoe bit her lips until her sharp incisors drew blood trying to keep the words from exploding.

She would not rage. She would not accuse. She would not complain. She had made her promise and she would keep it. Kalia's words flashed in her mind making anger surge hot in her veins. *"Twenty-four hours ago, Romi thought your sister was dead and that all she could do was die avenging her."*

Zoe had dismissed it then. Kalia did not know Romi. She had been there merely a couple of nights. But now Zoe knew it for truth. She could not keep the heat out of her voice. "Tell me."

Zoe could feel Romi flinch at the order. As blue eyes appeared above her once more, she turned her gaze away. The tiny whisper was meant only for Zoe's ears. "I'm sorry."

Zoe's heart clenched at the pain barely disguised in the light tenor that made her heart sing.

"It ain't your fault, Baby," Zoe whispered.

The drop of moisture on her fingers brought a surge of madness to her mind. Zoe needed to know but in her heart she knew that there would be no words now.

She should not have asked for words. Words now would be too much. Zoe could feel the pain emanating from the woman kneeling at her side. She had to grit her teeth against the pain but slowly she moved her hand just enough to tousle unruly locks. The immediate flinch, the sudden withdrawal pained her more than her broken body.

The trembling hands that gripped her fingers gently were a balm to her heart. The words were hesitantly stammered out. "I... I..."

"I know, Baby. Shh... I know," Zoe cut in quickly.

Zoe heard the tortured breath but before she could utter another word, the light tenor sounded low and cracking. "I'm sorry. I thought you were... I was so afraid. I didn't know what else to do. I am not fast enough on my own to take one of the suckers. And after a while... it didn't matter. It seemed like a lost cause. I... I thought better to be lost, better the madness than being alone."

of me."

The hard thud of booted feet on the carpet. The slight movement of the couch as the weight of a body leaves it.

Josephine's lips widen in a predator's grin before she schools her face. Her movement is smooth like a tiger's crawl as she rises. Her fingers tingle as they open another button on her skin-tight silk shirt.

Josephine's steps are slow, hips swaying in a dance of their own, as she walks to the black-clad figure now standing almost against the window. Her hand touching a naked throat before trailing down the leather vest. The sharp intake of breath, the slight tremble Josephine can feel under her fingertips.

Josephine's laughter silver as the moonlight streaming through the unshuttered window, mockery hidden in brazen invitation. "A soft body beneath you. Writhing against you."

The fists that clench for a moment before the step backwards that brings a broad back against the window.

Josephine's own step forward even as she opens another button on her shirt letting alabaster skin naked. The abrupt pressure on her shoulders as strong hands stop her movement.

The low voice, a deep growl in the night. "Don't do this. Enough."

Her hand grasping a steel forearm, a grasp that turns into a slow caress. "Why? She'll never have to know."

The grip on her shoulders that becomes painful without warning. Her own gasp of surprise as she is gently but firmly moved to the side.

The soft thud of booted steps on the carpet, steps away from her. The low voice, cold. "I will know. That's all there is."

Her breath, frustration fuelling hurt pride, her voice rising, cutting words spilling without thought. "What do you think you know, human? Where do you think your precious Falcon is right now? As you sit alone here, she is ...entertaining my father's guest."

Blue eyes full of fire bore into her and there is a darkness in them that makes Josephine's stomach clench in sudden fear. The sound of the door opening makes her turn in apprehension. Her thoughts churn, *Who could it be? It is surely too early still for...*

As Josephine's eyes take in the tall form at the door and the grey gaze that chills her to the core. Her hands fly to the buttons of her shirt desperately trying to cover herself.

The ice cold voice of her sister makes Josephine take a step back. "A bit late for that now,

Josephine."

Josephine can only watch as Zoe enters the room fully, leaving the door open at her back. The warm gentle tone surprises her. "Are you alright?"

Josephine opens her mouth to answer but another voice is there before her. "Yup."

Zoe's nod tells her that the gentle careful question was never for her. Her sister's words are careful. "Tis a beautiful night."

Josephine watches the exchange in fascination. The small nod. The quick steps toward the door. Zoe's hand as it touches a black-clad shoulder. The door quietly closing.

A pair of steely eyes turn to her and they burn like twin lances of fire. Josephine retreats slowly as Zoe moves towards her until she feels the wetness of the window panes at her back. There is nowhere to retreat and Josephine can only watch the imposing presence walking towards her.

Her heart thuds. This is not her sister. This is Falcon. The woman that leads soldiers in battle and manages the estate with an iron fist. The hand that grips her chin is sure and steady but there is no gentleness there. "I will tell you this once and once only, my sister. Romi is mine. You pull a stunt like that again and I will not care who you are."

She should stay silent but pride and fear spurs her thoughtless words. "I did nothing, Zoe. You should talk to your human."

Grey eyes flash in anger and the grip on Josephine's chin strengthens till it feels that her head is in a vice.

The deep voice holds the sound of rage in its depths. "I heard you, Josephine. I heard you...."

Josephine's thoughts come to a staggering halt. What can she say? What can she do? Zoe's hand leaves her abruptly and her sister turns away from her. Her voice sounds bell-like over the peals of thunder. "Get out of here, Jo. Get out of here."

Her steps hurried as Josephine leaves, head down, eyes blurring with tears. *What had I been thinking? What?* The people that she passed in the wide corridors of the house speak to her but nothing will stop her escape.

A wounded murderer leaving the scene of the crime. The journey through the city was a blur. Here out in the desert the rain is a watery cascade around the car. Josephine's mind balks at her thoughts. Zoe's words, her own words haunt her. Her hands have a death grip on the steering wheel as the tyres skid on the muddy road.

Josephine's eyes are far away. Not on the sharp bend coming up glimpsed only in the sudden flashes of lightning. Her mind barely comprehends the change as the car sails through the air.

The loud crash sounds in her ears as Josephine flies through the windshield to smash against the quarry's rock face. The rain splatters hard against the bare earth and her numb body.

How long does she lie there before the pain registers? How long before she realises that she cannot move her legs? How long does she watch the dance of the clouds against the ailing moon before she realises the inexorable passage of time?

Jolts of pain race up her arm as Josephine tries to reach the tell-tale bulge on her belt. It takes long moments to find the small panic button on the side of the device. She presses it with as much strength as her torn muscles can muster.

Maika's voice sounds muffled under the sounds of the rain. Josephine can barely make the words leave her lips. She can only hope that the microphone catches her faint voice. The single piercing shriek from the device tells her that Maika has hit the genal.

Long minutes pass hearing small voices at times obscured by distant thunder. The deep voice Josephine recognises immediately. "Where is she?..What?.. Stars! It's almost dawn!"

It is not until Josephine hears the words that she realises how the time has flown.

Josephine's eyes desperately search the sky above her. The clouds obscure stars and moon. *How long till dawn?*

Maika's voice keeps her sane as minutes pass. The words are lost in the fog that has covered her thoughts. The pain that crashes through her with every breath. The panic that wells in her gut with each passing breath.

Maika tries so hard to sound calm but the panic in her voice is an audible echo. *How close to dawn can it be? Has the sky lightened? Are the shadows lighter than before?* Minutes pass and Josephine licks her lips with an effort. *Is this how it's going to end? A car crash and the sun's unbearable rays?*

More minutes pass and she is certain. The sky has lightened. Somewhere on the edge of the horizon she is certain a tiny blue line has appeared out of the darkness. Josephine wants to close her eyes. A part of her wants to keep them open until the bitter end. To see the sun even if it is the last thing she ever lays eyes upon.

Josephine does not even realise that the rain has stopped until the roar of an engine sounds in the distance. She can see through the shadows now. The sun must be peeking out of the horizon by now. She can feel the edge of sunlight creeping towards her with every second that passes even if she cannot see it yet.

Her eyes find the edge of the quarry crater even as it lightens from a darker line in the darkness to a soft blurry greyness. The sigh escapes her lips without thought. *This is it. The end.*

The roar of the engine is startling even as sunlight softly illumines the edge of the crater. The

sudden sight makes Josephine blink in incomprehension. Darkness on sleek black metal. The cloak flying like wings on the wind of her passing as the motorcycle sails through the air.

A hushed gasp escapes her and Josephine twitches, the flash of pain not even registering, to stop the plunge. But the motorcycle sails on through the air steadily descending. Josephine can only watch as the front wheel hits the ground in a cascade of mud racing the leading edge of sunlight.

Everything seems to slow down. The motorcycle as it skids away. The black clad figure flying through the air. Gloved hands gripping the edges of the cloak billowing behind her. The sunlight creeping forward, death disguised as light.

The thud of the body as it lands next to her. The harsh movement bringing a cascade of pain through Josephine as strong hands gather her broken limbs. The total darkness as the cloak covers her.

The voice breathless. "Don't move. Just don't move."

Josephine can neither speak nor nod in acquiescence. She can only try to still any wayward movement of her body.

The sound of pain clear in her ears as the words spill out in harsh gasps. "I got her. Quick. Come...quick."

The pungent smell that assaults her senses takes a moment to penetrate to her befuddled brain. Josephine tries to form the words but her throat is dry and bitter as new panic grips her. The smell of blood is overwhelming. Josephine cannot move but she can feel the laboured breathing becoming fainter with every passing moment.

Josephine lies there immobile, silent, unable to offer anything but the tears that slowly leave her tightly closed eyelids.

Josephine shook her head to clear it from the memories. Slowly she rose from the leather armchair. Her eyes made a last-minute survey of the room that has been the centre of her existence for the last two moons.

The closed door was the last barrier between her and doom. In her mind's eye the dreadful vision flashed once again.

The body seemingly small and frail on the white sheets, lines and tubes a web of despair around it. Josephine's hands clenching impotently on the arms of the wheel-chair. The tall figure standing by the wall that never turns to look at her. Sergei's gentle pat on her shoulder.

It had taken weeks for her to walk again. It had been months before all traces of weakness had gone. But the guilt never left. Zoe's eyes stark with accusation had haunted her for months.

And when finally the silence ended, Zoe had asked her the simplest question of all in a voice filled with sadness. "*Why?*"

Josephine had not answered. There had been no answer for her to give voice to.

With another shake of her head, Josephine started walking to the door. Once again there would be no answer. She knew it in her heart. *What answer can I give? What answer that did not reveal her heart for all to see?*

Her fingers unthinkingly travelled to the small scar on the side of her neck. A single scar. Josephine had never gone further. There were seven little scars on Zoe's neck and Josephine knew it well that no answer she could give would ever be understood by her sister.

The coward's way out had never been Zoe's way.

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His steps were slow as Count Hugo carefully opened the door and stepped inside the room. The sound of his guards closing the door behind him was a quite rustle in the silence. His eyes roamed the room stopping first at the still form on the bed, the IV line snaking down to her arm, and then at the sleeping human on the chair next to the bed.

The Count stepped forward as silently as he could but blue eyes opened immediately. It was not until he met them that he saw the silver muzzle of the gun trained on him. His eyebrow arched without thought only to be met by a miniscule nod and the muzzle disappearing from his sight.

The Count's eyes turned to the still form on the bed and he slowly walked towards it. He kept his hands at his sides. No matter how much he wanted to touch his daughter, he had no wish to wake her from her healing slumber.

The low voice was almost too quiet to be heard. "She's getting better."

He nodded without looking at the human. Sergei had told him the same earlier.

There was nothing weak about his child but the weakness brought from her travails and injuries.

But still Hugo's heart bled to see her face marred so, the closed eyelid covering no more than nothingness, the bruising on her cheeks, the welts around her shoulders.

The deep voice startled him. "Father."

A pang of guilt coursed through him. He wanted nothing more than to see her. He had no desire to disturb her rest. But as Hugo had learnt painfully, desire and want were not enough. They were never enough.

His eyes caught the careful movement and he watched at the corner of his vision as the human stood, poured water in a glass and quietly offered the straw to the reclining vampire.

The Count watched as the patient drank thirstily and then as the straw withdrew and the human left his field of vision. He waited to hear the sound of the door opening but there was no rustle of cloth, no sound of steps.

Slowly Count Hugo turned only to see the black-clad figure resting against the wall, blue eyes lidded. He nodded sharply towards the door only to have the human look at him fully, eyes unreadable.

The deep voice, warm and gentle, surprised him. "It's alright, Roms."

He watched expressionless as the human walked away toward the door immediately. The slow sure movements that took her outside. The soft sound of the door as it closed securely.

Hugo chose his words carefully. "She's grown stronger."

The low chuckle was not what he expected and he turned to catch a grey-eyed gaze mirthless and cold. Zoe's voice held bitterness in its depths. "Not strong, Father, merely afraid."

He could not keep the incredulity from his voice. "Of what?"

After these two months he would have sworn that this human that his daughter has chosen knew not the meaning of fear.

The answer disturbed him more than he expected. "Of death, father... of death."

His disbelief must have shown in his eyes for Zoe continued after another low chuckle. This even more bitter than the first. "My death..."

The Count nodded his head silently. That he could understand. After all he had also grown afraid of her death.

Slowly Hugo sat on the vacated chair, turning to look at the strong, almost hewn, profile. "I just wanted to see you," he said quietly. There were so many more things he wanted to say but no more words found their way to his lips.

The voice that answered him was warm. Warmer than he had heard it in years. "Thank you. I'll be alright in no time."

He nodded before trying to find something to say. Finally he decided on something that he thought would make her happy. "I was thinking. At full moon after next would be a good time for... for the rolls. Nigel checked the alignments and everything seems right... for a soldier."

As the last word left his lips, Hugo turned his eyes to his daughter. The silence stretched and he sat back, his brow furrowing in sudden worry. *This should make her happy. That's what she's always wanted, to make the human one of us.*

The deep voice held sadness when Zoe finally spoke. "Better to wait for a little while more, Papa. Let's see what happens with the challenge."

He nodded quickly letting his head fall to his chest. Josephine's words haunted him. *"If you think that Zoe does not already know...."* It was so easy sometimes to forget the other face of his daughter.

The face she had abandoned for clan, honour and the baying of blood in her veins. "Whatever you think best," Hugo murmured.

Zoe's answer was low, almost inaudible. "Young humans are always given the burden of mercy."

He nodded once again.

The intricacies of law had never been something Count Hugo enjoyed. A blade in his hand was the best solution as far as he was concerned. But in this he could understand. The Council would simply see a human taken a mere five years before. Seeing a vampire would help their cause none at all.

Hugo tried to choose his words carefully. It would be so easy to misstep now. "It wasn't just Jo. We all knew. It was for the...the clan."

The grey gaze that was so much like his own had the intensity of fire but the words were calm. "I know."

The words left unsaid hung between them in the still air of the hospital room.

Hugo had to say the words in his heart. He was afraid how they would be received but his honour compelled him. "If there is anything...I could...." Somehow the words deserted him as anger flashed in a lone eye.

His daughter's voice was cold. "Let it be, Father."

Hugo nodded in immediate acquiescence. He did not dare to press, not on this. He knew that

even if Zoe accepted him in anything else, the familiar was out of bounds to him. He had made too many mistakes to be forgiven. He lowered his head to hide the sudden sting of tears in his eyes.

He turned to leave. He did not want to outstay his welcome. As he neared the door, the deep tenor stopped him. "Father...."

He turned to look at the woman lying on the crisp white sheets waiting for her to speak further.

He searched her face and he could recognise the change. This was the Falcon that spoke to him, not the girl that once sat on his knee. "I won't let you hurt her again. Never again."

The Count nodded silently, there was nothing more to say. He knew a warning when he heard it. He knew her words were a promise. A promise that would be kept. Slowly he turned and opened the door. His eyes found deep blue waiting, impassive.

His hand left the doorknob allowing the door to remain open even as he stepped to the side. The Count kept his eyes forward as Romi passed by him.

As the door closed, the low whisper reached his ears. "Come 'ere, Baby."

END

Thanks for reading. Any comments, good or bad, are welcome at rh.black@hotmail.co.uk ~RB.