

# ~ The Devil's Greatest Trick ~

by Zee  
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## Disclaimer:

This is a work of fiction. None of the characters may be taken and used and abused without the author's consent.

This work of fiction is of the horror genre. This means there will be gore, blood and bad nasty things happening. Violence factor is high.

This work of fiction contains lesbians and the affection and love they show one another (nothing to graphic sex wise) if that bothers you - DON'T READ THIS! -

Those under 18 should not read this work of fiction. If you are under 18 comeback when you are older it's a great story, really.

Oh, and I have a potty mouth.

Thanks to Ar, Bri, Joanne, and J. Without you guys this story would never have gotten over a page long and my grammar and punctuation would have been really bad.

PS - This is not a sequel to Past is Present, but I promise I am working on one.

On with the show. Please send feedback to [zeeamy@gmail.com](mailto:zeeamy@gmail.com)

## Part 1

The low hanging sun was slowly setting to the west, slicing through the darkening evening sky turning it a bright reddish-orange. A dented chipped Ford blazed a fierce path down the empty desert highway. Inside the car, warm air blew out the vents, blowing stringy blonde hair. The AM radio cracked out the crooning voice of George Jones.

The young woman behind the wheel nervously kept checking and re-checking the mirrors. With each check, she expected something to be there, following; each time she looked and found the mirrors still empty she was afforded a moment of relief.

The car continued on into the night, driving away from the dying sun.

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The State Patrol cruiser slowly rolled to a stop. Corrin Adams exited the cruiser and followed at her partner's heels.

"This, Corrin, is Mary's Truck Stop and Diner, the finest and only place to stop for food on this godforsaken highway."

Corrin nodded and removed her hat. She was 22 years old and had just started working for the Arizona State Troopers. Until she finished her probation she was partnered with James Addler. The older man wasn't too bad; she could have done a lot worse, and he didn't pull a lot of that old boys' club shit.

As they entered the restaurant an older woman with tight curly purple hair came running up and gave James a hug. Corrin took a double take at the purple hair.

"Officer Addler, I haven't seen you in awhile," the purple-haired woman stated with a slap to the man's slightly bulging stomach. "Who's this?" She had let go of James and gave her attention to the woman standing there. "My, aren't you a tall drink of water. What are you, six foot?"

Corrin blushed, "I'm only 5'10", ma'am."

"And built like a brick house. Look at those shoulders and that stomach, not an inch of fat." Corrin turned even redder.

"Mary, quit teasing the rookie," James broke in, trying to prevent the corners of his mouth from curling up into a smile. "Mary, this here is Corrin Adams."

Corrin stuck out her hand only have it ignored as Mary gave her a bone-crushing hug. For an older woman Mary seemed to be as strong as a bear.

"Follow me and I'll show you two to a booth."

As they sat down Mary poured them each a cup of coffee and promised to be right back for their orders.

James sipped his coffee and gave a sigh. "Best coffee in Arizona."

He sipped his coffee again. "Corrin, on a serious note, Mary's is a good place for info. She has an amazing ability to read people. If she ever tells you anyone looks off or wrong, listen to her and follow it up. She can spot a drug dealer or a truck driver who's running on fumes. She even once helped bag a kidnapper and a man wanted for murdering his family."

Corrin's jaw dropped open in amazement.

James gave a chuckle. "I don't shit. I think she must have worked for the FBI before opening this place."

Corrin closed her mouth. "Gotcha. Mary's the woman in the loop."

He nodded, swallowing some more of his coffee.

Mary returned for their orders. James ordered a burger and fries.

"How about you, tall, dark, and lovely?" Mary asked with a wink.

Corrin choked on her coffee. "Uh, just a chicken caser."

"You got it."

"So, Mary, anything going on we should know about?" James asked.

"Had a driver for Royal Trucking headed north - he was burning it at both ends. The booth in the back with three young men, one white and two Hispanic, doped up on something."

Corrin glanced to the right. She could see three young men in baggy jeans and shirts huddled around the table whispering.

"Thanks, Mary. I'll get a call into Paul and have him keep an eye out for that trucker and we'll check on the boys."

Mary gave another wink and took their orders to the kitchen.

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The blue Ford pulled into a spot in the gravel parking lot of Mary's. Scared eyes quickly looked around at the rest of the cars and trucks sitting there. She pulled the keys from the ignition, reached over to open the glove box, and pulled out a dark gray canvas wallet stained a darker black in areas. As she pulled out the wallet, another object came out with it and fell to the floor. Green eyes watched it fall and hit the floor of the car with a meaty smack. In the garish light from the diner she could see the pale flesh, the protruding whiteness of bone, and the faint crimson splashes of blood. Her eyes were riveted to the red wetness and a shiver raced up her spine, causing the flesh to goose pimple. She shut the glove box and picked up the thumb.

As she walked toward the diner she threw it into some bushes. She nervously wiped her hands on her jeans and absently stuck her own thumb in her mouth, removing a smear of red.

She entered the diner. Looking around she got a sinking feeling in her stomach sank as she saw two cops sitting at a table. Nervously she wiped her hands again.

"Hey there. What can I do for you?"

She looked at the older woman, taking in her purple hair and kind smile. She opened her mouth to respond in a voice barely above a whisper, "I ... I would like some dinner."

"Well, hun, you came to the right place."

She was seated next to a booth of young men; she barely even glanced at them. She had looked into the Devil's eyes; what did she have to fear from horny adolescent boys? Blinking, she realized the waitress had asked her something. "What?"

"Hun, I asked if you knew what you wanted."

"Uh, yes. A steak as rare as you can serve and a large glass of milk."

"Coming right up."

As the waitress left she turned her eyes towards the windows, looking for something, hoping never to see it.

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Corrin looked up as Mary came by to refill her coffee. "The girl in the booth next to the boys."

Corrin turned her head to look and then nodded to show that she saw her.

"She's in some deep shit. Probably running from somebody abusive."

Corrin nodded again. She covertly studied the redhead. The girl had long reddish hair that was pulled back in a ponytail. It was limp and greasy; she probably hadn't showered in a couple of days. Green eyes were dull and large dark circles rested under those eyes. The body language screamed tension. The girl was ready to bolt.

James came back and slid into the booth. "What's up?"

"The redhead. What's your take?"

He paused for a moment. "Abuse, a boyfriend, maybe her father."

"That's what I was thinking."

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She was wolfing down her food, chewing just enough to let the juices flow out of the meat and into her mouth and throat. She didn't even pause as she felt the plastic seat of the booth dip down with the added weight of another body.

"Hey, girl; what's your name, pretty thing?"

She almost laughed at the juvenileness of the pickup line, but food was more important. She was so hungry. She nearly growled as her hand was grabbed, stopping the food before it got to her mouth.

"Bitch, I asked you a question."

She looked up blankly into the face of the person who had stopped her feeding. Another boy behind her laughed. "Shit, dude; she's so strung out she probably doesn't even know her name."

She had a name. Her forehead crinkled in thought. It had been months since she'd been little more than a thing to be used. Her mind shuddered away from those memories, looking elsewhere. Harley - her name was Harley. She smiled; she had a name.

"What's so funny, bitch?" the boy next to her said, trying to be menacing.

She looked at him. His scrawny skinny pale arms had thin blue veins etched strongly under the skin, helping to traffic the flow of blood. She took in his shaved head, narrow weasel shaped face, and beady brown eyes. There was nothing to fear from this piece of flesh. She tried to move her hand but he grabbed tighter and this time she did growl, her eyes zeroing in on his hand.

"What the fuck? Don't make me smack you up, bitch."

She growled again and bit his hand at the wrist. The boy screamed and his two friends laughed at his expense. Harley smiled and then shoveled a piece of red steak into her mouth, chewing happily.

She growled again, realizing the boy hadn't left. "Go away," she said, shoving him out of the seat and onto the floor, causing his two friends to laugh even harder.

As he was getting back up, a smooth commanding alto voice broke in, "Is there a problem here?"

"No, Officer, no problem," the two Hispanic boys spoke up.

"That bitch bit me."

Harley shrugged. "He came into my booth, sat down uninvited, and then grabbed me."

"I see. I want you boys to pay your bill and clear out. If you don't, I'll go search your car."

The youths, thinking about the bag of pot and tabs of acid in the car, quickly agreed and left the booth.

Harley paid little attention to it, returning again to the pleasure of food. It took her a moment to realize that the body attached to the alto voice was still standing there. She paused and looked up from her food; her stomach lurched, as she took in the State Trooper's tan uniform. She gulped slightly. It was a woman towering over her booth with short curly brown hair and piercing pale blue eyes. Those eyes seemed to cut through her for a moment and Harley nearly panicked, thinking, *'She knows. She can see into my soul and she knows'*.

She slowly set her fork down on her plate, using the moment to collect herself. "Can I help you, ah, Officer Adams?"

Corrin stared at the piece of steak on the girl's plate; she thought the thing might still be mooing. "Oh, um, I was just wondering if you were okay, Miss."

The girl looked up, giving a demure smile. "It's Harley, Officer, and I'm fine. Thank you for stepping in."

Corrin thought the smile slightly macabre considering the girl's lips were stained a liquid red from the steak she was eating. "That's what I do. Um ... look, me and my partner are sitting right over there if you want to talk or if you're in any kind of trouble."

Harley blinked, her muscles tensed to bolt, and then she relaxed, "Thank you again, Officer, but I'm not in any trouble." To herself Harley thought, *'At least nothing you could help me with'*.

"Okay, but the offer still stands," Corrin said, waiting a moment, but the girl returned to her food with a vengeance that was kind of sickening. She returned to the table where James was paying the bill.

"You get the little bit's story?" James asked, looking up.

"No. I scared off the punks, but I get the feeling she may not have needed my help."

James gave a snort. "A little thing like her? Right."

"I could have sworn she was growling when I came up to the table."

"Come on. She looks a little wild but growling?"

"Yeah, probably just hearing things."

"Come on; let's go."

Mary gave them both hugs as they left.

Their boots crunched on the gravel as they walked over to the cruiser. Out of the corner of her eye Corrin caught a glimpse of a vehicle that hadn't been in the lot when they had pulled in.

"Hey, James, what's the description of that car we were supposed to keep an eye out for?"

"What? The rapist?"

Corrin nodded.

"Uh ... blue Ford Mustang, I think. It had California plates."

Corrin jerked her thumb. "That piece of shit over there is blue with California plates."

"Let's take a look."

Harley looked on nervously as the two troopers approached her car, and then let out a sigh as they walked off, got in to their cruiser, and drove off.

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James and Corrin pulled to a stop behind a large rig, which allowed them to watch the road without being seen themselves. James put down the CB, his brown eyes slightly wide. "Good catch, kid. We got a positive match on the plate. It belongs to one Herbert Franks; he's wanted for questioning on four rapes."

"I didn't see anybody in the diner that fit his description."

"Maybe he's slinking around outside in the shadows looking for number five?"

She nodded but she was starting to get a very bad feeling in her gut.

They sat there for maybe twenty more minutes until they saw the car pull out onto the highway.

"Shit," James said and he pulled out, flashing his lights. The car didn't slow down; in fact it sped up even more. "Corrin, get on the horn. See if anybody's nearby, traveling west."

She nodded and made the call.

Harley's eyes widened as she saw the lights in her mirror. "Fuck," she whispered and pressed the accelerator to the floor; she didn't have time to mess with the cops. She needed to get away, put more distance between her and him.

"Fuck, he's doing nearly 95. Thank God this stretch of highway is quiet this time of night," James shouted out.

"I got a hold of Eddie and Jon; they're going to try and set up a roadblock."

"Good, kid; my night's getting better."

Harley tried to urge more speed out of the junker but it wasn't giving it. It tapped out at 100 mph. She could see red flashing lights following behind her and they seemed to be catching up. Fuck. She had nowhere to hide; it was a fucking wide open desert. She came over a slight rise and her eyes widened. There were two cruisers blocking the road. Distantly she could hear a voice commanding her to stop. Time was running out. She could try to ram through and hope the blue piece of shit made it or try to go around and hope she didn't puncture a tire in the black shrouded desert.

Suddenly there was a popping noise and a tire blew out, jerking the car to the left. The wheel snapped out of her hand, and as she ran off the highway, the car dipped low and she smacked her head on the steering wheel. The car plowed through sand, rock, and cactus patches. The front hit a large boulder, flipping the car, and it slid a few more feet before coming finally to rest. The lights were busted out in the front while the back glowed an eerie red, highlighting a portion of the desert night in crimson. The AM radio played "Hooked on a Feeling" and a pale hand pressed against the driver-side window smeared a bloody handprint.

"Oh shit!" Corrin yelled as she saw the car jackknife into the desert.

James came to a stop in front of the other two cruisers. He got out yelling, "What the fuck are you two doing?"

Corrin also got out, pulling her service gun and carefully walking out to the downed car.

Harley was trapped and panic was beginning to set in. Frantically she pulled at the seatbelt that held her trapped. She finally ripped it apart, freeing her suspended body, but gravity slammed her head into the roof. She gave a grunt and twisted her body around. Wiping the blood out of her vision she reached up, rolled the window down, and crawled out.

Corrin saw a body get up and begin to walk away. "I've got a body trying to run," she yelled back

to the arguing officers. Then she took off, shouting for the person to stop, firing her weapon into the air when her command had no effect.

Harley heard the voice telling her to stop and she began to run. She couldn't stop; she needed to get away. She flinched as a gun fired but kept going.

"Damn it," Corrin muttered and took off, her booted feet digging into the sand. Her long legs ate up the distance between her and the runner; she leapt, bringing the person down in a tackle. She leaned up, holding the struggling figure down. "You have the right to remain...Harley?" She stopped; it was the blonde from the diner. Poor girl. Herbert must have gotten her.

Harley didn't care if it was the nice cop from the diner; she needed to get away and the cop was hindering that. She growled and brought her hand up; that hand had managed to grab hold of a rock. She swung, catching the officer in the jaw. Corrin went sprawling into the sand and dirt. Harley staggered up and started to walk away.

"Freeze! Put your hands where I can see them," Eddie yelled, his weapon pointed at the girl's chest. The other two officers, more out of shape, were slowly catching up.

Harley narrowed her eyes, gauging her options. She dropped the rock and put her hands on top of her head. Eddie sighed and put his gun away, pulling his handcuffs out.

"You okay, Adams?"

She nodded, getting up and rubbing her jaw. "Hey, Addler. It's not him. It's the girl from the diner. Check the car; he may still be inside," she called out.

James, wheezing, nodded; he and Jon stopped before walking over to check the car out.

Harley watched the baldheaded black-mustached officer approach her. As he got her first hand into the cuff, she felt him relax. She turned her free hand against his thumb, freeing herself. She quickly grabbed his arm, and with a strength that seemed far larger than she was, she whipped him around and into Corrin. They both fell to the ground in a heap. She turned and sprinted away.

Gunfire cracked out and the redhead fell with a boneless grace into the rock and sand.

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Corrin sat in the back of the cruiser with the girl. The Harley's head was pillowed on her lap and she was applying pressure to the bleeding wound in the girl's shoulder. The bleeding seemed to be slowing down but she wasn't sure; the girl hadn't regained consciousness since she'd collapsed

to the desert ground. "How much farther?" she questioned.

James didn't look back. "Another 10 to 15 minutes."

"This doctor is expecting us?"

"Yeah, I had Jon call him and make sure he and his staff were up. All the town of Infierno Cocina has is small local clinic, but it's the nearest thing."

She just grunted.

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Franklin Halstead wasn't feeling so good; the bite on his wrist throbbed. *'Bitch,'* he thought darkly. If he saw that freak again he'd show her. Damn, he was warm; sweat was starting to roll down his skin. He wiped his forehead and rolled down the window.

"Dude. It's cold out. Roll that back up," Mark shouted from the front seat.

"I'm hot, so shut it, wetback," he yelled back

Both Hispanic youths yelled at him, "Wetback? You fucking gringo!"

"Just watch it, asshole, or this wetback will be dumping your ass in the desert and letting it walk home," Hector shouted from the driver's seat.

"Jesus, I'm sorry," Franklin said, wiping his forehead again.

"Dude, are you okay? You're not looking so well. Maybe that bitch back at the diner had some disease."

"I'm fine," he shouted.

The two youths went back to talking, ignoring Franklin in the back.

He watched the sign flash by proclaiming only 8 more miles to Nettles. *'Almost home,'* he thought. Maybe there had been something in that pot, but Hector and Mark seemed to be fine. His stomach cramped and he let out a moan.

"Shit, dude. No puking in my car."

"I'm fine," he wheezed out. There was a faint buzzing in his head, and his limbs felt tingly. He

almost felt like there was somebody else inside his body, looking through it.

As the car turned the corner they saw another car stopped on the side of the road. A shapely ass and two just-as-nice legs were visible from the road; the upper body was hidden under the hood of the car.

"Damn, boys; would you look at that?"

"I think she might need our help."

"Oh yeah."

Hector slowed the car down and came to a stop. He rolled down the window and nearly drooled on himself as not one, but two, extremely hot ladies walked over to the window.

"Uh ... you ladies need some help?" he said, trying to inconspicuously adjust himself.

The blonde came forward, leaving the African-American woman to blend in with the night. "Oh, yes. Thank you so much for stopping," she said in a breathy whisper.

Franklin wanted to tell his friends to drive off. There was something wrong here, but then his brown eyes caught hers and he was lost in their cold hardness. Her eyes widened, catching his, and then she smiled a wicked smile. Something passed between them; his muscles became locked and his voice no longer worked.

"Yes, " she cooed, "my friend and I seem to be having some car trouble. Do you think you two could help us?"

"Oh yeah." Hector nodded, opening his door and springing out of the seat, followed closely by Mark. Neither one noticed that Franklin wasn't moving. Franklin whimpered, watching his friends go.

Hector stared at the engine. "Um, what seems to be the problem? From what I can see, everything's fine. How about you, Mark?" he asked his friend.

"The engine looks good. Maybe it just overheated?"

"My mistake, boys. It looks like I don't need your help after all," the blonde purred out.

Franklin wanted to scream and run but he remained immobile in the back seat. The door flew open and the blonde's face appeared. Her face was cold and white. Her eyes were calculating and aloof, the eyes of a predator; they seemed to say, 'Nothing personal - just survival of the fittest'. Red streaks ran from her mouth down her chin and darkened the yellow T-shirt she was wearing. The shirt, now wet and tight, highlighted her breasts and he could see her nipples straining against the material. Darkness appeared at her shoulder and formed into the shape of another woman, a shadow at the blonde's elbow. A voice came from the shadow; it was thick with an

accent he'd never heard.

"This puppy has information on our little runner."

The blonde smiled. "Oh yeah. Puppy here has come into personal contact with our little runner. Haven't you, Puppy?"

Franklin felt the buzzing in his head get louder. They were waiting for him to answer but he was scared and confused; he didn't know what they wanted from him.

"Oh look, Puppy is scared. He piddled on himself." Both women laughed and the blonde turned away, walking toward the Mercedes. "Tasha, bring the new pet. The moonlight won't last forever."

The black woman reached forward, dragged him out of the car, and tossed him in the back seat of the Mercedes. Then she got in on the passenger side. The blonde turned and looked at boy cowering in the backseat. "Well, Franklin, looks like you just became our bitch." She gave a laugh and started up the car. The headlights came on, piercing the night, highlighting two bodies staring sightlessly into the infinity of the night sky. The dry earth under their bodies was stained a brownish red.

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Corrin sat in the uncomfortable plastic chair, waiting for either the doctor or her partner to show up and give her information. She sighed and rested her head back against the fake wood paneling of the waiting room. Her eyes were drooping closed as she heard a door click open and then shut; groaning, she opened her eyes to see who was coming. Squinting, she saw the shape of her partner walking away from the doctor's office.

She gave a weak smile. "What's the word?"

James sat down with a sigh. "I just got off the phone with Captain Phillips. He's got a wrecker on its way to pick up the car so they can take it apart for any clues on the guy. It could be we got the wrong license plate number."

She held up her hand, stopping him, and then reached down to pick up a plastic bag. "Shortly after you went to use the good doctor's phone, a nurse brought me the girl's clothes that they'd cut away to do surgery. There's nothing too exciting - shirt, shoes, undies, and jeans. However, she did have a wallet on her." Corrin reached down and picked up the wallet. "The interesting thing is it's not hers. It contains the driver's license for one Herbert Franks."

James whistled. "No shit."

"No shit," she said, flipping the wallet open to expose the gaunt balding head of Herbert.

"What do you think is going on? Was she running from him? Did she just steal his car and wallet? Or is she working with him?"

"I have no clue, partner. All I know is we most likely have Herbert Franks' car and his wallet, but we don't have Mr. Franks."

James nodded. "Hope that kid is alright, 'cause right now she's maybe the only one who has the answers." He sighed, rubbing his eyes. "Depending on what's up with the kid we either get rooms over at the motel for the night or we drive her back to Phoenix tonight."

Corrin groaned. "Sleep is sounding so good right now."

"I hear you."

Corrin was coming back from the bathroom when she saw the doctor approach. He was an older man, maybe in his forties, probably of mixed heritage; he had salt and pepper brown hair and sharp hazel eyes. He paused before the two officers. "Officer Addler, Officer Adams," he started respectfully.

"How is she?" Corrin jumped in.

The doctor cleared his throat. "She, that is the young lady, has suffered some extreme trauma. The bullet entered the side near the shoulder, traveled through the body, and came to rest next to the spine. We were able to stop most of the internal bleeding, but felt it was best to leave the bullet where it was." He paused, giving a sheepish cough. "This is, after all, a simple country hospital, and we are not really trained for such trauma."

"We understand, Doctor, trust me. We're very thankful that you could do anything," James broke in.

"When do you think we could question her?" Corrin asked hopefully.

The doctor sighed, rubbing his eyes. "Ah, that brings up the next point. She's slipped into a coma."

"Damn it!"

"Sir, please, wait and hear me out. This girl, I don't know what happened to her but she's very lucky to be alive. She's malnourished, anemic, and has severe scarring on her wrists, back, and neck. Someone has branded an upside-down cross onto her back."

"What?" Corrin asked, dumbfounded.

James just let his mouth hang open.

"The bullet your fellow officer put in her is a very minor thing compared to the other things that have been visited upon that poor girl."

"Doctor, is there a chance that she did it to herself?"

"Officer Adams, there is always that possibility but I doubt it."

"Well shit. Doctor, is there anyway we can get in and take pictures?"

"James," Corrin hissed out, shocked.

"Corrin, that scarring sounds ritualistic, maybe the work of a cult. We get a lot of whackos out here in the desert. Shit, Doctor, you remember those cannibals about seven years ago, eating transients."

The doctor gave a shudder. "Yes, it was about 30 miles south of here, near the Diablo Horca, but if I do remember correctly the two survivors were similarly marked." He nodded his head at the memory then mumbled, "Poor bastards."

"We need photos so we can run them for a match."

"What about Franks? Maybe he did that to the girl?"

"It's possible, but if so there would be photos. We could match them."

Corrin sighed. She didn't like it; it felt like they were violating the young woman.

"I'll go get the camera but, Corrin, it would be better if you took the pictures. If the good doctor has a female assistant I'll have her help you."

The doctor nodded. Corrin just gritted her teeth and counted to ten.

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Corrin sighed; holding onto the digital camera, she looked at the young woman who was to help her. "Um ... Lucy was it?" The girl nodded her head, her bobbed black hair swaying. "Great. Let's get this over with. Could you just fold the sheet down and ... eh?" Corrin faded off. She was feeling amazingly self-conscious; this just felt wrong. She understood the need for it to be done, but damn, why did it have to be her? The girl looked relaxed as she lay there in the bed; her skin seemed even paler under the harsh fluorescent lights. She watched the girl's chest rise

and fall; it was so peaceful she could almost believe Harley was just sleeping. She looked up at Lucy who was staring at her expectantly. "Oh, right. If you could just loosen the gown and then ..." She paused. "Is it going to be okay to roll her on her side?"

Lucy nodded.

Corrin really wanted to ask Lucy if she could speak. "Okay, um, just roll her on her side and we can do this."

Corrin watched as the hospital gown was pulled down. The girl's skin was so pale that the white bandage was almost invisible against it. "Okay, hold it. Let me get a photo of the neck from the front." She came forward, looking through the viewer; there were purple thick scars on the girl's right side from the shoulder to the neck. "*Jesus, it looks like some animal mauled her, maybe a mountain lion,*" she thought. She clicked the camera twice, then looked up at Lucy. "Do they have any idea what might have done this to her?"

Lucy shook her head.

"Okay, let's turn her over."

Lucy turned the girl over onto her uninjured side.

"Fuck me," Corrin whispered. More bite marks trailed around to the back of the neck and down both shoulder blades. Some looked fresh, others were faded white puckered scars. However the centerpiece was the burned image of a cross down her spine; it was about five inches long, ending right above her hips. Corrin winced in sympathy. She could only imagine how it must have hurt when it happened. She focused the camera, taking shots of the marks.

"Okay, that's it. Let's give her some peace," Corrin said, relieved that she was finished.

She walked out of the room paler than when she'd gone in. James was waiting for her. "Jesus, James, what kind of warped human being does that?"

"Got me, Corrin. "

"It looks like she's been attacked by an animal, and that cross - whoever did it burnt it right along her spine."

James winced. "Whoever they are, they're one sick fuck, I'll give you that."

She wordlessly handed him the camera. "What now?"

"You go get some sleep," he said, handing her a room key. "I'm going to use the good doctor's computer to send these to the Captain, then wait for this night watchman they have here to show up. I'll watch her till he comes in then he's supposed to keep an eye on her. We can't afford to have her run again."

She nodded wordlessly. She didn't care at the moment. All she knew was there was a bed nearby waiting for her to crash into it.

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Franklin summoned courage from somewhere and flung his body out of the bouncing car. They'd turned off the main highway and were traveling along a gravel and dirt washboard road. Franklin was not a brave or particularly courageous young man but he did recognize the fact that he was dead if he stayed in the car with these two predators hiding inside the skins of women. He figured his chances were better if he threw himself out of the moving vehicle.

He bounced into the road, small stones digging into the flesh of his hands, tearing them open. He bit through his bottom lip and he could taste the blood spurt back into his mouth. He shook himself like a wet dog; the world stopped moving and he got up, staggering away from the car that was slowing down.

He had gotten maybe ten feet when he was suddenly jerked up off his feet. He dangled in the air, choking for oxygen, his feet uselessly kicking. The dark skinned woman, Tasha, glared at him; holding him, she shook him and his head whipped around. When she stopped, he coughed, splashing her face with blood.

"What's this? Is puppy hurt?" the blonde spoke in a mocking tone. Coming up behind the pair, she leaned in and licked the blood from Tasha's cheek. The woman purred, closing her eyes; Tasha didn't move or blink. "He's a tasty one, and if the Master didn't want him, I'd say open him up and let's have a little party." She moved forward, grabbing Franklin's head between her hands, then she leaned forward, capturing his mouth in a brutal pillaging kiss. She finished it by sucking his split and bleeding lip into her mouth. He tried to rear his head away as the pain from his lip radiated out.

She released his head and stepped back, licking her lips. "Bring the puppy, Tasha. It's nearly time for the cock to crow and the Master wants to speak with young Franklin here."

She turned and went away, followed by her dark shadow; Franklin was pushed along between the two. Silently he cried, large fat salty tears rolling down his face, streaking through the dirt and blood.

He was placed back into the backseat. As the blonde started the car back up, she turned to him. "Feel free to try and escape again. It will break up the boredom," she said with a wicked grin.

They kept driving down the road. More and more trees began to appear; some sort of fruit tree growing wild. As they pulled out of the trees a single story ranch house appeared. It was

rundown, so was the large barn towering in the distance. The windows glowed faintly with light and Franklin began to tremble as they came to stop in front of the house. The black woman opened the door and he slowly eased himself out.

A dark shape pulled away from the wall of the house and Franklin shrank back. The shape became the form of a man; he had long black hair pulled into a braid down his back and he wore a black shirt with dark blue jeans. A shotgun was cradled in his arm. He looked them over, his eyes resting on the blonde. "Catherine, that don't look like no girl; that looks like a boy."

The blonde gave a shrug. "The Master told me he had info on the girl. Apparently she bit him."

The man's black eyes got wide at that. "You think she's turned yet?"

Catherine paused, seeming to give that some thought. "No, I think it will be maybe another couple of weeks. If she changed, boss man wouldn't feel her any more. It's only been two weeks since she escaped. She's probably changed enough that she can pass on the curse."

The man nodded and then snapped his fingers. Another man came out of the darkness. "Give your keys to Julius here and he'll take care of your car. San Pedro is waiting."

Catherine nodded and tossed her keys to the other man. She snapped her fingers and Tasha started pushing the boy forward into the house.

The house was basically bare; there were a few rugs and chairs and a small fire burned in the fireplace. They moved forward to a closed door. Catherine knocked; after waiting a moment the door opened and they entered.

The room was dark except for a single candle that burned on a desk. Sitting behind the desk was a man. He had short dark hair slicked back, his eyes were a large liquid brown, his skin was a dark tan color, and on his fingers he wore gold rings. He had around him an air of wealth and sophistication, and also of age. This man had seen a lot. He sat there petting a small tabby cat.

The blonde bowed. "My Lord San Pedro, I have brought the boy." The man looked up from the cat, studying them; he seemed to find what he wanted and smiled, placing the cat down on the desk. As he rose from the chair he spoke, "Tasha, you may go. Catherine will join you shortly." Tasha nodded and quickly obeyed. His voice was power and Franklin wanted to weep at it, to throw himself at it and beg forgiveness for every small sin in his short 17-year life.

The master came forward, studying the boy. His hand came out and softly his fingers trailed down Franklin's body, starting at his cheek, down his neck, to his shoulder, and then stopped at his wrist. "The girl who did this, tell me everything."

Franklin wanted to please the man, anything to make him happy. So he talked; he talked about his friends, Mark and Hector; about the pot and acid; and about the strange girl in Mary's Truck Stop and Diner. When he was finished he held his breath and waited.

"Very good, my son. You have made me happy."

Franklin wept at the praise.

"Go with Catherine, boy; she will take care of you." The boy smiled through his tears and eagerly followed the blonde out the door.

Mentally to Catherine he said, *"The boy can't live to see the sunrise. You and Tasha may have him. Tomorrow take Julius and go to this Mary's."*

*"As you wish, my Lord."*

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Corrin was grumbling as she threw open the door to her motel room. "James, it's six in the morning! What the hell do you want?" She glared at him; he was already dressed in his uniform and had two cups of coffee.

For his part James was taken a bit aback. He knew Corrin was a woman but he never really thought about it much. She was standing in the doorway wearing nothing but a men's undershirt, which did little to hide her breasts and everything to highlight them. Her uniform pants were hastily put on; they were buttoned but not zipped. He coughed and took a cleansing breath.

"Ah, Corrin, we got a call. Two dead kids were found about 7 miles outside of Nettles. We're closest to the scene so we get the call."

Corrin sighed. "What about the girl?"

"She hasn't woken up. When the doctor gives the okay to move her, we'll send someone to take her back to Phoenix."

Corrin grumbled; she didn't like it.

"Plus the boss man says we go look at the dead bodies, write our reports, and we get two days off."

Corrin grumbled some more but went into the bathroom to change.

-----

Corrin wiped her brow. It was damn hot out and it was only eight in the morning. She stared at the two boys lying in the dirt, their faces beginning to bloat; flies that were attracted to the scent of decomposition crawled over the flesh. She had a nagging sense that she should recognize them from somewhere.

"We got a second car track and footprints and it looks like a third body was dragged out of the backseat," James said. "What do you have?"

"James, why do you give me the gross things?"

The man shrugged. "Builds character."

"I got two Hispanic youths; looks like some sort of large animal tore their throats open."

"It just keeps getting weirder and weirder," James said under his breath.

Suddenly something clicked inside her head. "Damn it. These two boys were at the diner last night. There's one missing - the white boy."

"He must have been the one dragged out of the backseat. Doesn't matter. It's out of our hands; they called the Feebies in on this one once it started to look like a kidnapping."

"You think the girl and these boys are related?"

James scratched his head then replaced his hat. "Right now anything is possible."

The bad feeling in Corrin's gut intensified.

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Corrin sighed as she stepped out of the shower. It felt good to be clean; all she needed now was a good night's sleep and she might feel human. She wrapped the towel around her head and moved into her bedroom; opening up the dresser she pulled out sweatpants and a T-shirt. Her apartment was a modest one bedroom, scantily furnished. She just had the basics - a bed, a dresser, a table with two chairs, a beanbag chair and an old black and white TV. There was nothing very personable about her place, but then again she hadn't been in Arizona very long, only about a month. With her hours she didn't have enough time to meet people or make friends.

She rolled onto her bed, groaning in pleasure. She reached over, grabbed the remote off the floor, and clicked the TV on. She surfed for a while before she settled on an old Abbot and Costello; it

was the one where they met some monster that looked like Dracula.

She watched for a moment then her blue eyes began to close, her mind drifted, and she thought back to the girl. They had pulled prints from the car but so far there was no match. She felt the murdered boys were linked to the strange girl. What was she running from? Who had done that to her? So many questions with no answers. She sighed and threw an arm over her face in an effort to shut out the rest of the world. A stray thought floated through her head - the murdered boys had had bite marks similar to the ones on Harley's body. She sat up, cursing herself. "What the fuck are you doing, Adams? The two things are not related so just go back to bed, dumb ass. We are so not getting dressed and driving 170 miles to the middle of nowhere just to check on some girl in a coma." All the time she was berating herself for jumping to conclusions, she was getting dressed, putting on shoes and grabbing her keys and wallet.

Soon a forest green Jeep pulled onto the highway heading east, away from the setting sun.

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Justin slowly opened the door and peaked in. The girl hadn't moved all day; there was no motion to show she was even remotely regaining consciousness. From the window he could see the sun beginning to sink in the sky. He patted his pocket, feeling a pack of cigarettes; it was time for a smoke break, not like she would miss him. He gave a goofy grin and shut the door before heading out front.

Jerky movements began under pale eyelids, breathing increased, and muscles twitched. Eyelids snapped open, exposing green eyes to the buzzing florescent lights; they rolled in their eye sockets, taking in the room, the beeping of machinery, the pale yellow of the walls, and the absence of another human being. Harley sat up and gently eased her way off the bed. She removed the probes from her body, but stood stunned as the machines began to squeal.

She stood there, her face scrunched up in puzzlement. *'Make it stop!'* her brain screamed. The squealing needed to stop before someone came. Frantically she searched for an off switch; unable to find one, she finally reached behind the metallic annoyance and pulled the plugs out of the wall. Silence blanketed the room. She stood in the silence and the stillness for a moment, enjoying a second of peace. She took stock of her situation. She remembered the accident; she had no car, no clothes, and the wallet she'd stolen from the pervert was most likely gone as well. She needed clothes, money, and transportation because he was hunting her. Harley could feel his presence in the back of her mind, calling to her like a tug on a string; it was strong and compelling yet somehow she could force it away, bury it and ignore it. She didn't know how or why, only that she could; she had escaped hell, and no matter how seductive the devil, she wasn't going back.

Harley doubled over as pain raced outwards from her stomach; she clenched her teeth and fought

back the nausea. This had happened once before shortly after she escaped; she'd stopped at a roadside diner to eat. Before her capture she'd been a vegetarian but that night her body had rejected the salad she tried to feed it. She had rushed to the bathroom and vomited up great amounts of blood and salad; she'd been scared, but after a minute it passed. Maybe this hospital had fed her something she couldn't digest. Frantically she searched for a wastebasket. She opened a door and found a small bathroom with a shower; she lunged for the toilet but didn't make it.

Blood ran from her lips and nose; she groaned and heard something metallic hit the floor. Harley ran water in the sink and washed her face and hands. Wiping her hands she threw the now pink-stained towels into the wastebasket. Bending over she picked an object up out of a puddle of blood; wiping it off she found a small caliber bullet. She frowned. *'Where the hell did that come from?'* Her eyes widened. She'd been shot; she remembered the tearing pain in her chest. Looking down she ripped away the sterile white bandages to find a star-shaped scar.

She peaked out the door of her room. She needed clothes; she needed to get out of here. She could sense them getting closer. They had sniffed out her trail and they were coming for her. Not seeing anyone she slunk down the hallway, checking doors; some were locked, others were rooms like hers or examining rooms. Hearing footsteps echoing from back down the hall, she sprinted and ducked into the first available door. She found herself in a small locker room. Searching the lockers she found one that wasn't locked and she opened it. Harley pulled out a wad of clothes from the bottom that were stiff and smelly, but she didn't care; the jeans had to be rolled up and the rugby shirt was too large but the shoes were a near perfect fit. She pulled items out, looking for a wallet or purse but could find nothing.

Harley crept out of the room. Looking around she wondered where everyone was; she slunk back down the hallway to the front. Scanning the waiting area, she spied a black leather jacket and a Playboy magazine. She grabbed the jacket; putting it on, she found that some money and change had been absently shoved into the inside pocket. She grinned; things were looking up.

"Hey, baby, you miss me?" asked a cold voice behind her.

Fear ran through Harley's body, turning her legs into frozen ice. How had they caught up to her without her feeling them? She could sense them being close, but this was off-the-radar-map close. She turned and faced the blonde; hard brown eyes swept over her frame and a cruel smile emerged on pale red lips. If the blonde was here so was the African; her green eyes swept around the room trying to pierce the shadows.

"Looking for Tasha? Don't worry; she's around. She's just having a spot of fun with the deputy. She'll join us in a moment."

Harley shivered; she knew all too well how Tasha liked to have fun.

The blonde clapped her hands. "How lovely! You remember all the fun we use to have. We've missed you so; you were always a tasty one." Catherine brought a hand up and trailed it along the young woman's face down to her neck where she lightly fingered the puckered scar tissue.

Harley shivered and tried to pull away. She had no idea what the blonde's name was. It was always Master; they were all addressed as Master, but her memories of her nights and days spent in the blonde's company would haunt her nightmares forever. She tried to back away only to have her face grabbed.

"Oh no, my little runner. Can't have you escaping again; you've already caused enough problems."

Harley knew she needed to get away; she couldn't go back. She squared her shoulders and looked into the brown eyes. "Fuck you," she growled out, knocking the blonde's hand from her face.

Catherine's eyes lit up. "So the little piece of meat has a back bone, does she?"

Harley backed away from the other woman until her legs bumped into a desk. All the while she was going backwards Catherine was matching her stride for stride and pinned the smaller woman to the desk in a blink of an eye.

Harley screamed in rage and hit the body on top of hers with her fists.

"I love it rough, honey." Catherine laughed and licked the woman's neck; she could feel the blood dancing under the pale flesh. It was tempting, so tempting; she could feel the power and the strength in the red liquid so close to her face. The blood of not one but two Lords flowed in it, mixing with the human's own pitiful hemoglobin.

Hands frantically scrambled, searching for anything that would help; grasping a metal object, Harley screamed and plunged it into the vile flesh above her.

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Corrin pulled into Mary's in need of a cup of coffee; the lack of sleep was getting to her. She got out of the Jeep and walked into the restaurant, only to be immediately assaulted by Mary herself.

The purple-haired woman came tearing around the counter and grabbed the tall woman in a fierce hug. Corrin was released and she gasped for breath. "Nice to see you, too."

Mary looked the tall woman up and down. "You're late."

"What? What are you ... late for what?" Corrin asked, confused. This was the second time she'd been in Mary's presence and found the older woman confusing.

"Got your coffee waiting and there's a sandwich and something else in the sack you may find

useful. That will be five bucks even."

"How did you? Eh, okay, here." She paid the five bucks and decided just to go with the moment; someday maybe should look back on this and have a clue.

"A man was by earlier, a little before dusk, asking about that blonde girl who was in that accident last night. Bad, bad vibes on that one. He talked to my busboy, Jimmie; the poor kid told him everything. He was here maybe 25 minutes ago."

Panic bubbled up. "Thanks, Mary. I'm on my way out there to see her now."

"I know. Now hurry up and don't forget to put bullets in your gun."

Corrin paused at the door. "How did you... never mind." She ran out to her Jeep, thinking someday she'd look back and laugh, but probably not; more than likely it would still be as creepy then as it was now.

She sipped her coffee as she pulled on to the road, looking over at the sack Mary had given her, wondering what that something else she'd find useful was. Curiosity burning in her brain, she reached over and spilled the contents out onto the passenger seat. A large nice-smelling sandwich wrapped in butcher paper and a sliver crucifix tumbled out. She just stared at the cross. How did Mary think that it was going to help her? She was hardly religious. Her father had tried to raise her Catholic, but as she got older she had a harder time reconciling it in her mind, so she had just drifted away from religion. Her eyes flickered from the road to the cross as she drove down the highway. What did Mary know?

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Catherine reared back screaming, blood spurted out of her neck where the letter opener had torn her skin, piercing tissue and blood vessels. Pain - a blood bag, a human had caused her pain. It had been 60 years since that had happened.

Weakly Harley slipped her legs up between their bodies. She ignored the blood sprinkling on to her upper body like a warm rain and pushed the woman off her.

Catherine staggered back, a hand going to the wound on her neck, watching as the human sat up on the desk holding the bloodied letter opener in front of her in hopes it could protect her. Already the wound in her neck was healing and Catherine's anger bubbled up and she roared her frustration. The illusion of humanity slipped away and her true face appeared. Brown eyes became a rusty red color, the color of old blood, the mouth stretched wide, the jaw unhinged to expose large sharp fangs, ears became large and pointed, and large claw-like nails curved wickedly from hands. Skin paled and sunk into the body, causing the bones and muscles to stand

out, giving the appearance of a sallow corpse. She charged the woman, no longer caring that San Pedro wanted her alive.

Harley was not thrown by the change in appearance; she'd seen it before. Some looked worse, more demonic, and others looked more human. The blur of charging flesh came at her and she tried to move out of the way, only to be knocked back into the wall by a fist. Her jaw snapped shut with a loud click and her skull vibrated and rattled. Above her a small shelf came loose on the wall and dumped its contents onto her head. Dazedly she slumped; the floor right in front of her eyes was a symbol she had come to despise. Slowly fingers inched forward. As they got closer, a feeling of revulsion swept through her; gritting her teeth she wrapped her hand around the icon of the crucified God.

The monster shuffled around the desk, looking at the small body crumpled on the ground. She watched as the feet slowly twitched; sniffing, she knew the girl was still alive. Long nails clicked on the floor, getting closer to the blood bag. Catherine bent down. "Come on, blood bag, time to get moving. San Pedro is waiting; we have a contract to honor."

Suddenly, quicker than a human should be capable of moving, Harley flipped over, swinging the large wall-hanging crucifix to catch Catherine in the side of the face. The skin smoked and burned where blessed wood touched cursed flesh. The momentum carried through, whipping Catherine's head back into the side of the desk, knocking her out.

Harley stared from the cross to the unmoving figure. She finally gave in to the urge and dropped the cross on the floor. Slowly she got up, her eyes never leaving the figure on the floor, and she took off running.

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Corrin pulled into the parking lot of the clinic. She undid her seatbelt and reached for her gun box; pulling out the revolver, she swiftly loaded the chambers. She started to exit the car then stopped to grab the silver crucifix, wrapping it around her wrist. She ran to the entrance, feeling a strong pull in her gut; something was wrong and something inside her was telling her she needed to hurry or she'd miss it. What 'it' was exactly it wasn't saying.

Corrin pulled on the door only to find it locked. She pounded on it with her fist, but nobody came; she peaked inside and didn't see anything. She looked down at the large metal ashtray wondering if it could bust through the glass window. She bit her lip in thought. Backdoor - she should check the backdoor. She scrambled around the side of the building, gravel spraying out under her feet; she slid to a stop, staring down at a bloody mass of flesh and bone left crumpled in the dirt and stone. She nudged it with the toe of her boot. Nothing happened. She squatted down and removed the bloody T-shirt wrapped around the head. *'Please don't be gross. Please don't be gross,'* she thought over and over. She jerked back. It was gross. Whoever it was had

been ripped apart: the eyes dug out, the tongue bitten off, and the throat chewed on like a dog with a bone. Corrin felt the bile rise and she breathed deeply, trying to get control of her body.

Corrin would need to call it in, but first the girl; she was certain everything revolved around the girl. She reached the back of the building. Looking around she crept along the building, staying in the shadows; she found another body but didn't waste any time checking it over. Pulling the back door open, she slid silently into the building.

Silence. The building seemed to be holding its breath; all was silent. The flickering of emergency lights lit the hallways. The power must have gone out. Somewhere down an unlit hallway she heard the scraping of wood on tile. Cautiously she stepped into the blackness, occasionally her body lit by an eerie half-light.

Behind her a body slipped out of the shadows and followed.

Corrin stepped around a corner and brought her gun up. "Freeze!" she shouted.

In front of her stood two figures, one light and the other dark, their forms made hazy and unclear by the lighting.

"Officer, I'm so glad you've arrived. There seems to have been an incident," one of them spoke. Corrin was unsure which one.

"Who are you two?"

"Just travelers."

Corrin didn't believe this; there was something very wrong here. The two bodies moved toward her, and she jerked her gun up. "Don't come any closer and keep your arms where I can see them."

The bodies stopped moving and the blonde spoke, "We seem to have misplaced someone - a small blonde girl. You didn't happen to see her, did you?"

"Harley. What do you know about..." Suddenly Corrin realized that the darker body had vanished. "Where did she go?"

"Who?"

"Your friend."

"She's around."

"Don't play games with me. Your hands - put them up in the air."

The blonde complied and Corrin stepped forward, checking for a weapon. She could see the

evidence of a struggle; all the while her eyes darted around looking for the other one. As she got closer she studied the woman. Dried blood streaked down her neck but there didn't seem to be a wound of any kind. Cold brown eyes followed her and she decided that they were predator eyes; fuck if she'd be prey.

"What happened here?"

"A little misunderstanding."

"Uh huh."

The blonde tossed her hair back and Corrin had the perfect glimpse of the shape of a cross burned into what should have been a flawless piece of skin. Her eyes darted down to the crucifix on her wrist. What the hell was going on?

In that moment Catherine struck, grabbing the taller officer and pushing her into the wall.

Stunned Corrin reacted slowly; the gun fumbled out of her hands onto the floor. The woman charged her again and she brought her hands up to protect her face. The silver cross gleamed in the dim light and the woman was brought up short, hissing and spitting. Confused Corrin brought her hands down slightly, trying to figure out what was going on. Her brain nearly snapped at the vision in front of her. It wasn't human; it was ... shit if she knew. Whatever it was it was certainly all teeth. Keeping the cross in front of her, she reached blindly for her gun and picked it up. Out of the corner of her eye she caught movement and the other figure charged; she turned without thinking and fired two shots into the thing.

Claws ripped into her back and she screamed; more shots were fired from somewhere and the creature's head jerked back, splashing her with blood. It howled and then it was gone, both shapes tearing off down the hallway. Getting her bearings she took off after them. As she turned a corner she came face to face with a gun.

"Shit!" two voices screamed out.

Corrin threw her hands up in front of her face, the silver crucifix glittering as the light from the emergency lighting caught it. "Don't shoot," she yelled in the vain hope that words could shield her from a bullet.

"Jesus Fucking Christ!" another voice bellowed out.

There was a soft click and the gun was lowered. "Where are they?" a voice demanded angrily.

Corrin lowered her hands. Puzzled she asked, "Who?"

"The vamps; I know they're here. I shot their wheel man."

Corrin felt lightheaded and nothing was making sense. "Vamps?"

"Would you stop answering my questions with a question? It's annoying."

Corrin stared into the flickering lights, trying to see who was talking to her, but she was having a hard time piercing the shadows. A hand grabbed her and pulled her down the hallway.

"Come on. We have to stop them."

"Who?"

"God, are you being annoying on purpose? Shut up, do as I say, and I'll try to get you out of this alive."

"Did you say vamps?" Corrin wasn't trying to be annoying, but she was in a lot of pain and she could feel blood trickling down her back. The world was becoming blurry around the edges.

They emerged out the back door just in time to see a dark car speed off. The person who had been leading Corrin took off after the car, firing a weapon. She took two steps to follow but stopped as the ground began to wobble.

"Shit!" a voice screamed from somewhere, but Corrin wasn't really worried about it or anything else.

Athena Jones was throwing a temper tantrum, screaming and kicking dirt and rocks as the fucking vamps sped away. So close, she'd been so close. She turned just in time to see the woman she'd pulled from the clinic crumple to the ground.

-----

Left foot, right foot, left foot, right foot, left foot, left foot; damn. Harley was tired, and she felt bruised down to her bones. However, she kept moving into the desert away from the small hospital and the demons that chased her. To stop moving meant death. She refused to give in; she needed to get away and hide and get her strength back and when she did she would go back and get revenge. She would burn them all, grind them into dust and piss on their ashes. She wouldn't forget the ones that the demons had taken from her. She would honor them by getting revenge, but first she needed to get away, and get strong.

She kept walking as night rode through the sky, painting everything in darkness. She was staggering as the night sky began to give in to the advances of dawn. She wasn't sure her feet were still attached so she would look down every once in a while to confirm that they were still there. In the distance, illuminated in the weak morning light, was a rock formation; on the top were arches that formed to look like an M.

As the daylight grew in strength she began to grow weaker and sleep invaded her limbs. She needed to sleep, hide deep away from the sun and rest. As she drew closer to the red and tan rocks, voices sang in her mind.

"Come," they sang, "come rest. Follow the trail, the one that ambles to the left from the strange looking cacti that resembles cats mating. Come, come rest."

She was going mad, then she saw the cacti and damn if they didn't look like two cats getting it on. She laughed and then winced as sunlight caught her in the face. She almost screamed; it burned for a minute then the feeling went away but she was blinded.

"Come," the voices sang again, "hurry, run. We shall be your eyes."

She ran, cutting left and right as the voice directed then she was in the cool belly of the rock. She collapsed onto the smooth floor of stone and the voices sang into her mind, "Welcome to the Diablo Horca, little sister. Rest; we shall watch you as you sleep."

She knew she should be afraid, but she was too tired to be cautious and she slipped into sleep as the voices sang of comfort in her mind.

As the blonde woman lay asleep on the cool stone surface, figures emerged out of shadows on silent padded feet and looked at the girl, black eyes peering out of furry angled faces. They moved around her body, taking in her scent.

"Is she one?" one asked.

"Not yet."

"Who does she belong to?" another asked.

A gray and tan-colored body moved closer. "If she survives she will belong to herself. I see two demons fighting for control; they will merge and make her a Master or kill her."

"Is she the one the Master told us of?"

"Maybe, it is uncertain."

The smallest of the three whined. "Her feet," it said, taking fanged jaws and trying to pull off the tattered shoes. Finally the shoes were torn off and the pack began to doctor the bloody and torn feet. With rough pink tongues they licked away dirt, blood, and cleaned the wounds.

The elder gave a toothy grin and bumped shoulders with the youngster. "Good work," she praised.

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Athena cleaned and bandaged the wound on the woman's back; the clawed flesh still wept blood. She went to her bag and pulled out a small vial and unwrapped a syringe. She jabbed the needle into the vial and pulled the clear liquid inside it. Sliding the woman's underwear down she jabbed the needle into the exposed flesh. She didn't think any vamp blood had gotten into the wounds but it was better to play it safe. The woman groaned and thrashed a little bit then settled back down into sleep. Athena unwrapped another needle and injected the liquid into a vein in her arm. She threw the stuff into the wastebasket and moved over to the jeans she'd pulled off her visitor. Slipping a pale hand into the pockets she pulled out a wallet; flipping it open, her pale brows lifted. "Well, Officer Adams, it looks like you've stumbled into a real mess." She flipped the wallet closed, moved over to the other bed, and sat back, opening a brown paper bag with grease soaking through the bottom. She flipped on the TV and pulled out a burger.

It was the shrill ringing of a phone that woke Corrin. She stirred, wincing in pain as the nerve endings in her body started to fire messages to her brain. They weren't good messages; they were bad messages of pain and muscles and skin badly abused.

The shrill cry of the phone was cut off and a voice barked, "Athena speaking."

Corrin turned her head and noticed that she was on a bed. From the smell it had to be a motel bed. Next she noticed that she was naked except for underwear and some sort of wrap on her back. She was worried but decided to let gravity pull her head back down to the pillow so she could get her bearings. She was in too much pain to be overly concerned about her place in the universe at the moment. Corrin lay on the bed and listened to the conversation.

"Sir, yes, sir. I know I'm late checking in; I apologize, sir. Sir, if you would just let me ... if I could just say." There was a frustrated sigh and Athena bent her head, rubbing a temple.

"Sir, didn't Juan file a report? He said ... but ... yes, sir." Another sigh.

"I found the nest in Santa Cruz but they were gone. It was burning as Agent Vargis and I located it. From what little we could see they just left after cleaning house. There were some survivors, some might recover from being used as blood bags, and others were too far gone and infected. Vargis and I terminated them. I snooped around, came up with their trail, and followed it here to this hellhole of sand and dirt." There was a loud voice shouting through the phone. "I'm in Arizona, sir." More noise. "Yes, I'm sure your wife finds the state very pretty."

Athena sighed again and pinched the bridge of her nose. "I caught a break. There was an attack, two boys dead and one is missing; it has vamp written all over it. I stopped at some truck stop and came out of the restroom to see one of Catherine's lackeys working his charms on some busboy. I hid until they left and followed them to some town. They must have spotted me 'cause their wheelman led me on some goose chase until I figured out what was up and retraced my

path back to Catherine. She went to some shit-hole clinic in some sheep town. Get this - the name translates to Hell's Kitchen." More loud noises came through the phone.

"No sir, I'm not sure what they were doing there. I think they were looking for something or someone; I'm not sure at this time. Catherine and her shadow escaped. I need you to look up somebody for me; it's an Officer Adams of the Arizona State Troopers. I pulled her ass out of there after she decided to take on two elder Vamps. I think it was a fluke but I don't want any surprises."

"Yes, sir. I'll type up a report and email it to you in a day or so. Sir, the injections are working; there are no signs of infection. Yes, sir, you should probably send in a clean-up team to the clinic. No! No, sir; I don't need help. Saint Peter is close; there's no need to risk other agents. Yes, sir, I'll check in tomorrow and on time. Goodnight sir."

Athena shut off the phone and let it fall to the bed as she cradled her head in both hands. She calmed herself and looked over at the resting officer. With a chuckle she asked, "Confused yet, Officer?"

Corrin opened her eyes and blinked. "How did you know I was awake?"

"Bodies in rest and in motion are both quite different from one another. How are you feeling?"

"Like a tiger used me for a scratching post. What the hell was that?"

Athena popped a fry into her mouth and slurped her cola before answering. "I could tell you the truth but you wouldn't believe me. So for now lets just say it was some gang member looking for a fix."

"That wasn't human; it was something else. It was horrible."

Athena shrugged. "Couldn't be too bad, you didn't piss yourself," she said, popping another fry into her mouth.

Corrin groaned and sat up. "I'm not positive but I'm fairly certain I don't like you."

Athena shrugged. "Got you a burger - want it?"

Corrin stared at the blonde woman sitting across from her. The woman was tiny, maybe 5'3", with bloodshot blue eyes that stared impassively back.

"Yeah, fine. Can I have some clothes?"

Athena tossed a greasy burger bundle before getting up to root through a duffle bag. "I'm not sure I have anything that will fit you, but your other clothes are nothing more than bloody rags. What are you - six foot?"

"I'm 5'10"," Corrin responded automatically

"Ah ha," Athena said with a grin. "Try these."

Corrin stared at the shirt. It was worn and black with bold red lettering that said 'Hunter University, Stake and Bake Champion.' "I don't get it."

"Oh, it's just a joke my classmates and I started.'

"Okay," she said, still confused. "Since I still don't believe you about those things back at the clinic, why don't we start with an easier question. Who are you?"

Athena sat back down. "I am Special Agent Athena Jones."

"Like FBI."

"Sure."

Corrin glared from where she was zipping up her jeans. "Well, are you or not?"

Athena reached into her black leather coat lying on the bed and pulled out her wallet and flashed her ID. "See, I'm all legal."

Corrin grumbled and then winced as she slowly pulled the shirt over her head, then sat down to eat her burger. Athena seemed content with the silence; she ate her food staring at the blank TV.

Corrin tossed her garbage into the wastebasket. Noticing the needles and empty vial, she shrugged it off and went to lay down. Her back was throbbing and she needed to rest and collect her thoughts; she had too much information to sift through.

Athena sat on the bed ignoring the other woman; she stared at the blank TV and tried to zone out, but she couldn't so she pretended not to notice the other woman. She finally moved when she sensed the other woman drift off to sleep. She slowly got up off the bed, grabbed her laptop, and sat back down. As it booted up she stared over at the sleeping woman. What was she going to do with her? At this time she wasn't sure; she couldn't just let her go in case she'd been infected, but to keep her around would be dangerous and suicidal. However, if Officer Adams stuck around, she'd have to tell her the truth.

Athena sighed and closed her eyes. For a brief moment she thought she smelled Old Spice aftershave and felt strong hands squeezing her shoulders. She opened her eyes and swore she could sense Jake.

"Jake?" she whispered. As always there was no answer. Of course there was no answer; Jake was dead. As she looked down at her laptop she found it had opened to the web page of the Phoenix Post and was displaying an old archive story. As she read, her eyes got wide. It had to do with a cult sacrificing and eating transients. It had happened about seven years ago at a place called

Diablo Horca or the Devil's Pitchfork. Looking at a map she saw that the Diablo Horca was about 30 miles away from where she was currently located. She swore she could still smell his aftershave on the air currents and a single tear slipped down her cheek.

Athena was just drifting off to sleep when Adams sat bolt upright in bed and shouted a name, "Harley!"

Grumbling, Athena was debating whether or not to open her eyes and see what the fuss was about when she heard the other woman get up and start rummaging through things. She opened a sleep-deprived eyelid and stared at the tall woman's ass with a bloodshot eyeball. "What the hell are you looking for?"

Corrin straightened up and turned to face the blonde. "My shoes."

"By the door. Where are you going?"

"The clinic. Harley was in there. I think those women and those, those things were looking for her. I need to go back. In all the insanity I forgot all about her."

"Okay, Officer, get your shoes. We need to get a move on and get back there before the cleanup team cleans up," Athena said, getting up and slipping on her coat. She felt a spark, a rejuvenation; hopefully there'd be a lead or a connection. She slipped on her shoes and pulled out her keys.

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They pulled into the gravel parking lot and Corrin could see her Jeep sitting as a silent sentinel. She climbed out of the black Honda and raced to the front doors; this time she was willing to smash the glass to get in. Guilt pulsated in her gut. How could she forget about the girl and just leave her helpless?

A hand grabbed her arm. "Hold on there, champ. It's open."

"What?" Looking closely in the dim morning light Corrin could see that one of the doors rested slightly on the other.

Athena hummed to herself and popped her trunk open. She lifted up the carpeting, removed a black case, and opened it.

"What is it with you and black?" Corrin questioned. "Black clothes, black car, and mysterious black cases."

"This, my piggish friend, is my toy box," Athena replied, looking over the contents. She pulled off her jacket and slipped on a shoulder harness and gun. Quickly she released the clip and checked to see if it was full; happy, she replaced it. Pulling out a belt she wrapped it around her waist and clicked it closed, then slipped her jacket back on.

"What is that?" Corrin asked, not sure she had seen what she had seen.

"It's protection."

"Were those stakes?"

"Nope. You're seeing things."

Corrin wanted to scream. "When are you going to start being honest with me and stop giving me the runaround?"

"So, Corrin, tell me about this Harley person?"

Corrin slumped in defeat, and followed the short annoying blonde into the building.

Athena cracked open the door. Looking at the knob, she noticed that it had been nearly ripped out of the door on the inside; somebody had been in a hurry or panicked, maybe both. Her gun was drawn and she felt safe with the larger woman following behind her, covering her back. She felt a rise in emotion as sadness crept over her; it reminded her of the past with Jake and his burly 6'2" frame guarding her ass. She swept it away and concentrated on the here and now. They stood in the dark reception area listening for the sounds of anything that shouldn't be there.

Athena looked around. The emergency lighting had failed and everything was clothed in darkness. She pulled out a flashlight and her gun and swept the reception area. The signs of a struggle were evident.

"Do you think anybody is here?" Corrin questioned.

Athena shrugged and looked behind her. Positive that the other woman couldn't see her, she turned back around and for a brief second her eyes flared red, flashing like an emergency flare, then they went back to blue. Athena held her body rigid, not wanting to give herself away. She hated giving in like that, but she needed to know quickly if there were any vamps in the building. If her boss knew, he'd have her brought in and staked. Everyday she called in and reported that the injections were working, and in a certain sense they were, but it couldn't stop it completely. She was still changing. She had found it to be a boon in a way. By dropping her guard and letting the demon have a brief moment of control, she could sense them. It had made tracking them easier but she knew one day she would let her control slip and not be able to get it back and the demon would win.

"What is it?" Corrin asked.

"Nothing," Athena replied, putting her gun away.

"You went tense for a second. Are you sure nothing's here?"

"Yep, I'm certain it's clean."

"You go turn the lights on while I go check on Harley," Corrin commanded.

Athena watched the taller woman's back as she moved into the darkened hallway.

Athena stared into the contents of the switch box. No real damage had been done; somebody had just switched all the breakers off. Running her hand down the switches, she flicked them on one by one then went in search of the officer. She found the taller woman standing in an empty room; the bed sheets were thrown back and equipment unplugged.

"Think they got her?" Athena whispered in to the still air.

Corrin made no immediate response; looking around the room, she felt a certain amount of self-loathing rise into her consciousness. That poor abused girl was thrust back into the clutches of those that had hurt her. Corrin knew deep down that those two misshapen women were responsible for the horrors and abuse inflicted on Harley's flesh.

"Too late. If only I had been thinking. They have her," Corrin said out loud. Moving slowly around the room, she started towards the restroom.

"Maybe she escaped," Athena offered helpfully.

"She was in a fucking coma; it's not like she just woke up and walked away," Corrin replied. Walking into the bathroom, her tan skin paled to a shade of gray and she staggered into the door jam.

"What? What is it?" Athena rushed to her side. With her changing body makeup, she could smell the blood. It was old, lying around cooling and congealing on the tile of the floor; it smelled of dying humanity and powerful darkness. The smaller blonde grabbed Corrin's arm roughly and prevented her from entering. "Don't," she hissed.

Corrin looked down sharply. "What is it?"

"It could be infected. These people, those women and the gang they hang with, have a disease," she responded lamely.

"And you're just now mentioning this. Jesus, they attacked me! Am I infected?"

She looked at her feet to avoid looking up into those blue eyes. "It's too soon to tell." Still not looking up, she moved into the bathroom, her own blue eyes tracking around the room. There was a lot of blood splashed on the floor but not enough to be life threatening. Whoever the girl

was, she was at the first or second stages of the change; she could smell it in the blood.

Out of the corner of her eye, she caught a gleam from a shiny object on the floor. Picking it up she saw it was a battered bullet. "Was, ah, Harley shot?"

"Yes. One of the officers trying to stop her fired; it lodged near her spine and the doctor wasn't able to remove it. What made you ask that?"

Athena held up the small piece of metal. "She's fine. All this blood is from her system purging a foreign element and repairing itself."

Corrin stared at the metal, then at the blonde. "We need to talk and soon."

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## PART 2

Pedro pulled a white handkerchief out of his jacket's breast pocket. Wiping his face, it came away impure, stained red with blood. He stared down impassively at the body trembling at his feet, and absently he wiped the blood from his knuckles. His gaze then fell on the blonde woman who was snarling and being held by two of his men.

"Catherine, this is the price of my disappointment. I asked you to bring me the girl and you bring me nothing. Your lover pays for your mistakes." His eyes bore into the African on the floor before him. He could smell the blood and he heard it as it seeped from open wounds and fell to the wooden floor. Through sheer force of will, he kept her wounds open, preventing them from healing. He sneered; demons had no use for love. He allowed this dalliance between Catherine and Tasha because they were two of his best enforcers and Tasha seemed to keep Catherine more balanced in the here and now. However, he mused, maybe he had allowed it to go on for too long. Apparently it was affecting their hunting. He would give them one more chance then, either way, he would kill one of them.

He looked to the two men holding the struggling woman; he nodded at them and they let her go. As soon as their hands dropped, she launched herself at him. His liquid brown eyes flashed red, and in a blur of movement he had her pinned to the floor. He was careful not to hurt her in any way. That was Catherine's punishment; she would be unharmed while her lover bore the marks of their failure.

"I'll give you one more chance to make yourself worthy of my blood. Find the girl. The pact must be sealed between our clan and the Ravenwood Clan. Already their leader grows weary of your failures."

Catherine spit and snarled, trying to get loose.

He shook her violently. "Do I kill you and Tasha here and now? Or will you do as I wish?"

The blonde slumped, the fight leaving her. "Yes," she slurred out through spittle-slicked lips.

He shook her again. "Yes, what?"

"Yes, master. Please let Tasha heal herself."

He grunted, letting her go, and she crumpled to the blood-splattered wooden floor. He waved a well-manicured hand in an offhand manner and Tasha's dark skin began to heal.

He sat down and told the two men to leave. He caught Catherine's brown eyes with his own. "I can't sense the bargaining chip anywhere. That means either she is dead, changed, or . . ."

"Or what? There is no other option," Catherine hissed.

"I have heard rumor of a place that is a safe haven. It is near here but I'm not sure where. If you find it, I have a feeling you'll find her." He paused, picking a piece of gore out from under a nail. "By tomorrow evening I expect you to be gone. I don't think I need to tell you that you either come back with the girl or you don't come back at all." With that he patted his leg and a sleek tabby leapt onto his lap out of the shadows, then crawled onto his shoulders to curl up, purring into his ear. He stood and walked out of the room without a second glance.

Catherine crawled over to her lover and curled around the beaten woman. She pulled her slowly into her arms, trying not to hurt her. Slowly she began to lick the gradually healing wounds, cleaning away blood and tissue. They kissed softly, their tongues intertwining. Catherine let her tongue slide around one of Tasha's large canines, and then quickly she scraped it along the tip, cutting her tongue open, letting small drops of blood fall into Tasha's mouth.

They lay together, bodies intertwining. Catherine watched over her lover as the moon set and the sun rose. She felt the shifting patterns of the world as it woke and the night creatures hid as the darkness melted away. She wondered briefly if one could become so old that the sunlight would no longer break down the blood, no longer kill them. She had heard it whispered in their legends that some of the firsts who had been nursed on the demon founts were so aged that they no longer feared the sun. She drifted, wondering what it would be like to walk in the sun again. She kissed Tasha's temple, smiling in relief as she felt her lover's wounds heal.

Despite the rumors about her life before becoming a Vampire, she had not been a daughter of wealth. Actually she had been little more than what would have been considered white trash. She had grown up working in the kitchens on a tobacco plantation in the South before the Civil War erupted. She worked in the kitchen of a mean-spirited bastard; she forgot his name now - something like Harrison . . . or had it been Cromstock? She had been little better off than the African slaves who worked in the fields. Catherine had met Tasha when some of the white farmhands had cornered her outside the barn and decided to have some fun with her. Catherine

tried to fight them off but the three young men had easily overpowered her. One had just been getting off her to let his friend have a go when Tasha had come screaming at them with a hatchet. She didn't remember exactly what had happened, but the three men were killed and she and Tasha had run.

Their lives had meant nothing compared to the loss of the three young men. She had fallen in love with the slave their first night hidden in the forest. Tasha didn't speak English, having only been sold to the Plantation two months previously.

They'd run like that for a month before Tasha allowed herself to be caught so Catherine could escape. San Pedro had found Catherine delirious and crying. He must have seen something in her that he liked because he picked her up, gave her a bath and food, and then finally his blood. Her change was quick. She didn't fight it or fear it because she knew it would make her strong and give her the ability to do what she couldn't do otherwise - free Tasha.

After she rose from death, she rode to the plantation where they were holding Tasha. She found her friend tortured and beaten; they were holding off her execution, trying to pry out information on where Catherine was hiding. She freed Tasha and gave the African her blood so they would never be parted.

San Pedro had been furious with her, but after he saw their viciousness; they had killed every last thing on the plantation. He took them both under his wing; he personally molded them to be his enforcers.

Her brown eyes narrowed; this was all the girl's fault. They would find that piece of flesh and bring her back barely alive. She grinned, snuggling up closer to Tasha, waiting for the daylight to burn itself out and for night to return. Everything would be back to normal soon.

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"They're what?!" Corrin shouted

"You heard me. I really don't think I need to repeat myself."

"I think you do."

"Don't make me pull this car over, young lady. If I have to do that, you're in for a world of hurt."

"Whatever, munchkin, and I think you need to pull over anyway 'cause I'm not sure you're fit to drive."

"What I said was that I work for a top secret government agency nicknamed the Hunters and I

am currently hunting Vamps or Vampires, the hyenas of the reanimated dead."

"That's it. Pull over."

"Make me."

Corrin smiled, pulled out her gun, and pointed it at Athena's head.

"Okay, I guess I could pull over if you put it like that," Athena grumbled under her breath and pulled over to the side of the road. "Happy? Now would you please put that away?"

"Only when you get out of the car."

Athena sighed. "You promise not to leave me in the middle of the desert?"

Corrin gave a small smile. "I promise."

Athena turned off the engine and stepped out of the car. Her blonde hair lit up in a crown of orange flame as it was caught by the sunlight.

Corrin got out as well, holstering her gun. They met back by the trunk of the car. "Keys," the taller woman said.

Athena dropped the keys into the open hand then with the other punched Corrin solidly in the gut. As the taller woman doubled over, Athena brought her elbow flying straight up, catching Corrin in the jaw and thrusting her head back. Athena started yelling, "Don't you ever pull a gun on me again unless you intend to use it right then and there, motherfucker!"

Corrin wheezed, sitting in the dirt that was still warm from being baked all day in the sun. "You're a nut job. You know that? A nut job."

"What do you want from me? You keep badgering me, telling me that I'm not telling you everything or even the truth. Now that I do, you think I'm nuts."

Corrin glared up at the small blonde. She stuck a finger in her mouth and wiggled a few of her teeth, making sure they weren't going to fall out. "I should just shoot you anyway."

"Yeah, but if you do who will save you from the Vamps?" Athena said. She held out her hand and helped Corrin up. They stood in the desert, sizing each other up in the blazing light of the sun.

Corrin threw the keys back at Athena. "Never mind. You drive so I can keep an eye on your crazy ass."

Athena grabbed the keys out of the air and rolled her eyes. She opened the trunk and pulled her black duffel open. "Since we've stopped for the moment, we might as well take our medicine."

Corrin had gone to the front of the car, opened the door, and pulled out her bottled water. She rinsed her mouth out, spitting out blood. Looking up she saw Athena stab a needle into her arm. "What the fuck?" She marched over to the shorter woman. "What the hell are you doing?"

The blonde pushed up her sunglasses; she removed the needle and threw it in a plastic bag to dispose of later before sitting on the back bumper. Athena's eyes grew distant. "Three months ago my partner and I were on a routine nest burn outside Portland. Some outcast Vamps had made a nest and were causing some havoc. Outcasts aren't a big deal; they're normally weak and prey on livestock. Because of the lack of concern, just two of us were sent in instead of our full team. We drew the short straws and the rest of the team got some R and R in Portland. Unfortunately, one of the Vamps had insulted a Master Vamp called San Pedro; he killed his personal blood slave. San Pedro had tracked them down and had come personally to kill them. We arrived at the same time. It was a clusterfuck of the highest order. My partner, Jake, was ripped apart and San Pedro thought it would be funny to share his blood with me and then leave me. He knew my fellow Hunters would have no choice but to kill me. What Saint Peter didn't know was that the Hunters had developed a vaccine for the Vampirism disease. It doesn't destroy it, but it does slow down the change, buying the person some time. If you can destroy the Vamp who shared his or her blood with you before the final change, you can stop it. It's the only real cure."

Athena held up a vial. "This is the vaccine." The rays of the sun hit the vial, making the clear liquid inside appear as red as blood.

Corrin stared at the liquid then at the smaller woman. "I . . . I'm not sure I understand." She pulled the silver crucifix that Mary had given her out of her pocket and thrust it at Athena.

Athena stared at the silver object that had quickly taken up her field of vision. She sighed, realizing what it was. She lifted it up and kissed the smooth surface, feeling a slight rolling in her gut. She looked up into blue eyes and patted the bumper next to her. Corrin hesitantly sat down. Athena smiled crookedly. "See? You do believe me."

Corrin sputtered, "No, I still think you're nuts."

Athena laughed.

Looking sheepish Corrin sighed. "Yes, I guess I do. I know it's nuts, but I saw those women; they weren't human." Suddenly she paled. "Oh God, they attacked me. I'm I infected too."

"Don't know. Simply getting bit or clawed by a Vamp won't do it. You have to ingest some of their blood. The demon is the blood. It mutates the body, warping it and finally causing death, and in death it ravages the body, causing the final metamorphosis from human to demon. Until that point you're human. After that there's no hope. The blood has a binding that links it from Master to slave or Sire to childe; a psychic bond is formed and the Sire can sense their childe through the blood. Some of the Hunters theorize that the Master wills their blood to become active and start the process. After the body starts to change, the Sire can sense a childe, locate

them, and bend their will. So by destroying the Sire, the link is destroyed and the blood becomes inactive in humans who have not fully changed. There is a rumor that in Russia, near the end of the reign of the last Czar, a small nest was destroyed by a group of soldiers. They were cornered and nearly dead when one of them got lucky and shot an arrow into the heart of the Master. Now when I say Master, I mean "The Master"; he was the first, the creator of the nest, and he fed off the blood of a Demon. All the others slowly turned to dust. I don't know if it's true; we've never hit that sort of jackpot when we hunt."

Athena looked into Corrin's worried eyes, "Corrin, it's possible some blood from those bitches got into your wounds. I have no way of knowing unless you start to show symptoms of the change. All I can do for you is give you a shot of this and hope it works."

"Hope it works. What's that supposed to mean?" Corrin replied angrily.

"It means it doesn't work for everybody. In reality, it doesn't work at all; it merely slows the change down."

"Is it working for you?"

Athena slipped her sunglasses back down and tossed the vial at Corrin. As she walked away, she whispered, "No."

They continued to drive around the desert. Corrin tore her eyes away from the sand. "What are we doing?"

"Looking for our runaway?"

"Do you really think she would have made it this far outside of town?"

"I don't know but I expected some sign, maybe a circling of vultures." The blonde sighed, rubbing her face. "Tell me again about the girl, anything that stands out about her."

Corrin rubbed her own tired blue eyes. "She was scared and running from something. She was pale and thin; her eyes were pale green and her hair long and a gold-red color. After we put up the blockade, she tried to keep running and one of the other officers shot her . . . um. " She pinched the bridge of her nose, thinking. "She was maybe 5'6" a little taller than you. The doctor who worked on her reported massive scarring and what looked like ritualized branding on the skin. She had thick scar tissue around her wrists and neck."

A tick developed near Athena's right eye. "Branding?"

"Oh, shit yeah. It was nasty. Somebody had burned an upside down cross along her spine."

Athena hit the brakes and they jerked to an abrupt stop. Cursing, she pounded on the steering wheel.

She gazed over at Corrin, glaring at her. "And you're just now mentioning this?"

Corrin shrugged. "I take it that it's important."

"Fuck yeah, it is." Athena started driving again; turning the wheel sharply, they headed back into town. "We're going to need backup. The upside down cross represents a pact made between two Master Vampires. Vamps are territorial and the different Vamp clans tend not to intermingle too much. When they do they make a pact unless it's neutral territory. This pact involves picking a vessel. The Master Vamps will drain the vessel, both feed their blood to it, and then both drain it again to seal the pact. This symbolizes drinking each other's blood without one having to be submissive to the other. By drinking each other's blood, it makes them brothers for a short time."

Corrin's eyes widened as she got the idea. "So this means we're not dealing with one pack of insane loonies but two."

The blonde rolled her eyes. "Vamps not loonies."

Corrin rolled her eyes in return.

"However, we have another problem. The girl escaped before the pact ritual could be completed. Other than taking the blood from the demon race that created the first Vampires, the only other way to become a Master is to be fed the blood of two Master Vamps. If we don't find this girl soon, we'll have a whole new clan of Vampire on our hands."

"Has that happened before?"

"Once. A beautiful queen gained the attention of two Masters. Both visited her and tried to woo her. What they didn't know was that she had fed from both of them. She turned and started her own clan, nearly wiping both of their clans out."

"So what do we do?"

"Go back to the motel and call for help."

Athena burst into her motel room. She sat on the edge of the bed, dialing on her cell phone. "Sir, it's Agent Jones. I got some deep shit going down here in the desert." A voice barked through the phone. "Ah, yes sir. I apologize again for my language. Now, about my problem. Is the cleanup team still here? Send them back; I need manpower."

Corrin phased them out. Lying gently on the bed, exhaustion drugged her limbs. There were things that needed to be done: call Addler, take a shower, have Athena check her wounds again, and then sleep for a few hours. Hopefully she would get it all and in that order. Her eyelids were becoming heavier, growing sandbags faster and faster as the seconds ticked by.

She slipped into the space between waking and sleeping. While she floated in her body, her mind worked to digest all that had happened in the past 72 hours. Vampires were real. God, what did

that mean? What other demons and legends of the dark existed as well? She had a flashback to her childhood on the Indian reservation with her mother, before her father had come back and wrestled custody away and she had gone to live with him and his money in Seattle. They had been hiking in the valley on a beautiful day, just her and her mother. They came across an old shack, barely standing, and a crazy old man who had been howling and growling in the dirt. He had been dirty and old with wild gray hair sprouting from everywhere.

She'd been scared of him and had picked up a rock to throw. Her mother had grabbed her hand and told her, "Don't draw attention to us." Pulling Corrin with her, she had slowly backed away. She had told her, "Beware those who are lost to the beast. Respect them but never let down her guard or the beast will get you."

She had looked over her shoulder, she remembered, for one more look at the beast-man. Now she could see what she'd seen then - he'd had golden wolf eyes and long fanged teeth.

Corrin snapped back into the present. She stared up at the ceiling, listening to Athena's call.

"So they'll be here by morning, right? We need to look for that girl, and our best bet is during the day so we won't have competition from the Vamps. What? No, sir. I'm not trying to tell you how to do your job. Look, this is critical. I'm close to San Pedro. I'm so goddamn close I can smell the blood sweat off his fucking 800-year-old body! No, sir; it was a figment of speech. I haven't turned into a leech yet."

Corrin got off the bed, walked into the bathroom, and sat down on the toilet. For a moment she enjoyed the silence. She was beginning to like Athena but she could talk really loud. She pulled her cell phone out and dialed the station.

"Hi, this is Officer Adams. I'd like to speak with James Addler; is he around?" She sat on hold while they looked for Addler. She was eyeing the shower lustily, the thought of hot water washing over her body was almost orgasmic.

"Adams, where the fuck are you? I got this huge break in the Franks case that I've been dying to tell you about and you haven't been home all day. Is that any way to treat your partner?"

"James, I'm sorry."

"Where are you calling me from? Are you in a bathroom? My god, did you get lucky? Do you need me to come arrest you so you don't have to do that whole awkward 'don't call me, I'll call you' crap?"

"James, I really don't want to know how your mind came up with that little scenario. Actually I'm in that little town where we dropped that girl off for medical attention."

"Why? Didn't they have the local sheep sheriff on that?"

"I . . . ah . . . I..." Corrin stumbled, not sure what to say. She was fairly certain James wasn't

going to go for the whole Vampire thing. "I just felt bad and stuff."

"Yeah, I understand women are like that."

"James, please don't start the macho crap. I was beginning to like you."

"Sorry. Can I tell you my news now?"

"Yes, please."

"Okay, first off the girl is one Harlequin Vaughan. She and her family were on vacation down in Santa Cruz when they disappeared from their rented beach house. Six people gone and nobody heard or saw a thing. The parents and two brothers showed up in the morgue days ago. They have the same scarring on their necks and wrists but not the brand. Herbert Franks showed up a week ago; he was dead, stuffed inside a dumpster. Somebody bit his thumb off and beat his head in with a rock. My guess is he attacked our girl and she defended herself. That sick fuck didn't realize he found somebody who'd been through tougher shit than him and lived."

"Thanks, James."

"No, thank you. I nearly bust a gut keeping all this info to myself all day."

"Corrin, you okay in there? I know I kept you up most of the night and day but you really don't have anybody but yourself to blame for that," Athena yelled through the closed door. "Come on; open up. I wanna check your bandage, make sure those scratches are okay."

"Wow. Corrin, you go, girl. You're a lot kinkier than I thought. Scratches and all that. Wait 'til the boys hear this one." Addler snickered through the phone.

"Athena...Addler... Athena, I'll be right out. Addler, it's not at all what you're thinking. "

"Tell you what, partner. Why don't you take a few more days off? I'll clear it with the boss. Go blow off some steam. The boys here have been running you ragged, and with the crap that's gone on, you deserve it. Go get your rocks off with your new snuggle bunny. I'll call if the chief doesn't go for it."

"Addler, don't . . . it's not." It was too late; Addler had hung up. She opened the door, staring at Athena.

Athena blinked. "What?"

"My life use to be normal."

"Yeah, well, normal is boring."

"It's better than Vampires."

"True."

"Come on. Sit down and take off your shirt."

"What?" Corrin blushed, remembering what James had implied.

"What's the big deal? It's not like I'm going to jump you. Yeah, you got nice tits for a girl, and a really cut back, but I like guys so get over yourself. Of course, if I switch sides, I'll keep you in mind."

Corrin blushed harder. "Its not . . . I mean, I just talked to my partner on the phone and he implied I was taking a break from reality here in the motel room with you in a, well, a kinky way."

"Oh, well, you'll be popular at the station for awhile."

Athena unwrapped the bandages, checking the wounds to make sure they were healing. They were no longer bleeding, but they weren't healing at an unusual pace either, which made her feel better. There was a good chance Corrin was not infected. "It looks good. Go take a shower and I'll rewrap your back. Then let's hit the hay, we have a team coming in at 4 a.m. to help us look for the girl and our nest."

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Harley was aware of the sun as it crossed the sky. Even in sleep she knew when it began to set in the west, burning the sky 'til it was a deep red and orange. As her body began to awaken, she opened her mind to see if she could sense the Devil and his minions, but all was silent in her head. There was nobody there but her. She opened her eyes and brought a hand up to wipe away the gunk that had formed while she slept.

She looked around and saw the cave entrance highlighted dimly in the dying sunlight surrounding her. Around her she sensed something. She wasn't sure what it was, a presence of some sort.

"The Master told us the story of this place." The voices that had guided her here were back.

Startled, she looked around.

"He was a wise man to a tribe now long gone, deep in the jungles to the south. One night, returning to his pack from gathering herbs, he was attacked by a demon. He survived but the demon had placed part of itself deep in his soul. That small piece sat there, deep inside, and

infected him from the inside out. Blackness seeped from this dark seed and tainted our Master. It blackened his soul; it poured through his body, corrupting the flesh 'til our Master became weak and lay down to rest. During that rest his heart stopped and death stole over him. His tribe wrapped his body and threw him into the river to feed it and complete the circle of life. However, our master was so changed by the demon that he could no longer fulfill his destiny and he was thrust outside the circle. While death held him, the demon's darkness infected his whole body, filling it completely with darkness. When it was finished, his soul was afraid and sought to flee his no-longer-human flesh. The demon rejoiced, for now it would have a body of its own. Our master sensed this and refused to leave; he fought the demon for what was once his body. They struggled and merged together then he awoke, tearing himself free from the skins he'd been wrapped in, rising to the surface of the water, and swimming to shore."

Harley sat enraptured of the voices weaving the story in her head; they had a singsong quality that was soothing and hypnotic. She could almost see the events as they'd happened.

"It was night and the moon was hidden behind a veil of clouds, yet our Master had no need for light' he could see just fine. His body was changed; it was stronger, faster, and more resilient to damage. He no longer was hungry for food. However, as night turned to day, he found himself tiring and sleep invaded his new body so he lay down under a tree to sleep. But as the first rays appeared and touched his flesh, pain came. His demon-infected flesh burned in the light and he screamed and sought shelter. The first lesson was learned - light is pain. As the sun set and darkness came, he awoke to a terrible thirst. It clouded his mind in a red mist, and the next thing he knew he was coming back to himself covered in blood. He had killed a wild boar, snapping its neck with his bare hands and tearing the flesh away to reveal the wetness of blood. He sank to his knees and cried. The second lesson was learned - blood is life, life that must be stolen to give life to the demon. In horror he fled, traveling at night until one night he heard the call deep in his blood. The one who had made him, who our master thought destroyed, was not. The Alpha demon called for him, commanded him to come to join the nest with his brothers and sisters. He resisted but barely, and he ran faster, knowing in his being that the Alpha was not pleased. The third lesson is that the newborn must obey the command of the Alpha unless the newborn is an Alpha or a master of their self. Still he fled, looking for a safe haven, often fighting those who would be his brother and sister in this new life. Then one night he dreamt of a different demon made of white light and gold wings. It told him to come to this place, that it was safe place where he would be alone with his thoughts and deeds. This being told him a story. When the world was made there was a great battle for the world. These demons or angels of white light drove the darker ones away to other realms to live. Then a second war erupted among the angels. Some grew jealous of this world; they turned to the dark and fought their brothers and sisters. One made of light was trapped here and therefore this place of stone and rock is blessed. He came and found the new demon's words to be true. In this place of the fallen angel no one can invade your thoughts; they are yours alone. Our Master grew old yet never aged. He grew lonely and took in a stray coyote who had been chased from its pack; he gave it some of his blood and it healed. Next he took in a mongrel dog and then another until we were a pack. Still it was not enough, so he decided he would try to find others like him and help them learn to fight the demon and the darkness. Often it did not work and he had to fight them to the death, but on rare occasions he saved one from the demon's call. However, nothing is forever; our Master's Alpha found him and he sent twelve of his best soldiers to destroy him. Our Master bid us to hide. They came in the

night, ripped him apart, and fed on his blood, but what the Alpha had not counted on was his mental commands being blocked. Now freed in this place, the twelve banded together to strike out on their own. They terrorized this territory and we hid still, waiting, and then a pack of human hunters came and put the demons down. No longer did we have to hide but we were not sure what to do. We are no longer like our kind. Our Master's blood changed us; we are a pack, but we are a pack without an alpha. We are waiting, but now you have come, lost in the desert, with the demon chasing at your heels. Your change will come soon. We will help you."

The voices grew silent. Her head grew silent. Out of the silence grew questions. "What do you mean change? And how can you be in my head if this place is safe?"

"We mind speak with you to communicate and not command. You could not understand our real voices. As for the change, you know of what we speak; the blood of demons flows through you."

In the back of her mind she did know, she'd always known what was happening to her. "NO! I will not become like those monsters. I refuse. I can't, I can't..." She trailed off into choking sobs.

The youngest canine scrambled to the upset woman, its inherent doggy nature seeking to provide comfort. It butted its brown and white furry head into her leg.

Unthinking, she reached a hand out and buried it in the warm fur; the canine licked her face. She sank her other hand into the fur and held it close; as her tears stopped she looked at the small furry mongrel. It barked at her, seeming to smile, and thumped its stumpy tail. She couldn't help but smile. "Aren't you a little warm in the desert with all that fur?"

"The Master's blood ensures we feel no discomfort."

She jumped, startled by the voice in her head; this time it had been a singular voice, peppy and cheerful.

She eyeballed the little dog. "Was that you?"

"Yes," came the response.

"You must forgive Lupa. She is most tenderhearted and tends to act without thinking." Two other canine forms emerged from the shadows.

Staring Harley whispered, "Weirder and weirder."

-----

Harley sat on the rocky ledge under one of the arches of the Pitchfork. Her legs dangled in the air and she kicked them back and forth, bouncing them off the rock face. She scratched Lupa's furry head as it rested in her lap. She felt lighter. There was no one else in her head; it was all her. She

rubbed a furry ear and asked, "So I'm going to turn into a bloodsucking monster?"

The dog twitched but didn't open its eyes. "Yes," was the response in her head. "Probably within the week. Sometimes, if you can find the one who shared its blood with you before the changing death comes, you can stop it and remain as you are. But in your case it wouldn't work."

"So I'm fucked."

A nose twitched. "What does sex have to do with anything?"

"I meant I'm screw . . . ah, there's no hope for me."

Intelligent brown eyes opened and blinked at her. "There is hope. The hope is that you will not let the demon win and overcome your humanity. If that happens, then hope is lost."

"How likely is that?"

"With you it is uncertain since two Masters gave their blood to you to make a pact. That blood is old and powerful, but my Master kept some knowledge. Perhaps there is something in them that will help."

Harley gave one last scratch and got up. Looking over the edge she mused, "Is there really an angel trapped under here?"

Lupa gave a doggie grin. "What do dogs know of devils and angels?"

Harley laughed. "Probably better than humans."

Deep in a cavern Harley found the resting place of the packs' deceased Master. It was a simple place; the fur of some beast lay on the ground, a table and chairs looked on the verge of collapsing, and three large ornate trunks sat lined up next to the far wall. She held up an old battered flashlight, shining the light over the room.

"On the table there is a lighting device and matches," Lupa spoke softly in her head. She walked slowly over to the table; the light from the flashlight reflected back when it hit the glass of the oil lamp. She found the matches and soon the room was lit in the warm glow of the lamp. She realized that Lupa stayed at the opening to the room, not entering. She could sense the packs' unease and sadness. They still missed their master.

She traced a finger over one of the large trunks; there was a faint blanket of dust. Looking over at the small dog she asked, "Where did they come from?"

"The trunks? They each came from a different person my Master was trying to help. The one you are touching came from a large man, dark as if he had been burned black by the sun. He came with that; it was a family possession, but when he left he chose to leave behind all reminders of his life. The smaller one next to it belonged to a warrior. He fought in the Mexican-American

war. He fell to a Vamp on the border after the war was over. My master could not save him and the warrior was killed. The last belonged to a little girl; my master found her. She was the only survivor of a Vampire attack. She was barely alive, sitting in the back of a truck, clinging to it. Blood from one of the Vamps had fallen into her wounds. She changed much too young, and after some time went mad and ran off into the desert. We think she died but we don't know for sure."

The trunks were tombs of history connected to three very different lives. She ran her hand over the wood and jewels of the first trunk, and then lifted the lid. She stared into its depths. There were clothes, what looked like dolls, books, letters, and a large flat box. This last object she carefully removed and opened. Inside, nestled on blood red velvet, were five silver stakes. Each stake's handle was carved into a figure. The first was a knight, the second a monk kneeling in prayer, the third a leaping tiger, the fourth a falcon in flight, and the last was the grim reaper. As she went to lift one out, a piece of paper fell to the floor. It was yellow with age and it said in a neatly flowing script:

To My son on his 18 birthday. The weight of the family line now passes on to you.

With much sorrow and love.

Josiah Williamson"

She placed the piece of paper back inside and shut the box. She set it down and pulled out a thick leather-bound book. Upon opening it she found, much to her surprise, that it was not a book but a journal. Skimming through it she found that it had belonged to a young man named Jacob Williamson, whom she assumed was the son of Josiah.

As she read, it soon became clear what the weight of the family line was. The Williamson's were, or had been, Vampire Hunters, which explained the silver stakes. She pulled out each leather volume, skimming from section to section. With her eyes straining in the flickering flame of the lamp, she came finally to the demise of Jacob. He had come to America from England, hunting the Vampire who had murdered his family. In his journal he admitted that this Vampire had become his obsession. He knew that it made him weak, but he was unable to turn his thoughts from this Vampire, from one known as Karl Burke. It blinded him and made him thoughtless. He fell easily into a trap; he was tortured and fed the blood of three different Vamps, all from Burke's clan. He was then stripped naked and tossed out on the street. The time period was somewhere around the 1900's, she estimated, and since he was black he was jailed then released. To his humiliation Jacob knew he was changing. His only course of action was to find all three and kill them before the change was complete. So he headed west after them, only to find a strange Indian shaman.

Harley was fascinated. She didn't know how accurate Jacobs's journals were, but in them were thousands of tidbits on Vampire culture, hierarchy, and the methods of killing them. There were anatomy charts showing the best places to strike for a killing blow. Occasionally, there were notes on other demons.

Harley grabbed a journal and lay back on the fur to read. Deep in her bones she felt the earth rotate, coming full circle to face the sun again. Protective sleep bled into her body, making limbs heavy. She curled into the fur, letting her body repose in slumber. Her breathing slowed, but inside the demon taint was working, tearing down muscle and tissue and remaking it into its own image. The neurons in her brain were rerouted, opening up parts of her brain that had never been used. The blood tapped into the darkest parts of her soul, breathing life into them.

Harley's dream turned dark. She hunted prey in a shadowy dirty concrete and steel jungle. She slunk along the buildings, wrapping their shadows around her. Her prey was slow and stupid; in its pride it stupidly believed itself to be the top predator. Its hubris would be its downfall; cattle would be more of a challenge. Teeth lengthened and she felt a sensuous thrill as the night wind kissed them. She sprang toward her target, the shadows following her, wrapping them both in their secret embrace. This one was not worth some gentle lover's kiss; it was just a piece of meat and she tore into it hungrily. Teeth burst through the thin skin into the sweet juice contained within. Life enveloped her teeth, stroking them, caressing them with salty warmth. Heat flashed in her belly with knee-shaking eroticism; she pulled away, staring into sightless eyes now frozen in terror. The terror was a sweet reminder of her worthy position at the top of the food chain. She let the body drop to the dirty and cracked ground, blood pumping out, coating everything in shiny wetness. She screamed to the night.

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The alarm screaming into the early morning silence in the hotel room woke both Corrin and Athena with a start. Athena got out of bed, knocked the alarm to the floor and began jumping up and down on it until it was silent. Corrin blinked into the sudden silence that reclaimed the room.

"You're not an early morning person I take it?"

"I hunt things that go bump in the night. What do you think."

"I think that would explain why you're so pale."

"Ha ha. Come on; let's go meet the cleanup crew. Um . . . Corrin, they're not as nice as me."

"I've never considered you nice, just nuts. Well, this should be a treat. Anything else I need to know?" she asked as she moved around in the dark, getting dressed.

"Uh, well. They'll give you crap for being a civilian and they'll give me a lot of shit for being infected. All in all, it'll be a hoot, but we need backup. Two possible nests are not something we can handle on our own."

Corrin watched the four people approach them from where the helicopter had touched down

seconds before. It had landed long enough for the team to unload then it was gone, flying up into the pre-dawn gray.

The new team was comprised of three men and one woman. Corrin hung back as Athena stepped forward to greet them, not really sure what to make of them. All four of them were tall, around six feet, and heavily armed. She could see the glint of metal.

Athena gave a big grin, seeing two people she knew. She stepped forward. "Mo. Larry. It's good to see you two. Where's Shep? I know you Three Stooges are never separated; you're a package deal."

Larry was a huge man with a shiny bald head while Mo was a tall lanky woman with long dark hair. They smiled and greeted Athena, their smiles turning into frowns at the mention of Shep.

Mo gave out a big breath. "The Omega team was caught in some deep shit. Me, Larry, that bitch McBride, Shep, and Mel were the only ones to survive. Larry, McBride, and I were in the van when it happened. Shep and Mel were at Ground Zero where the rest of the team was killed. Mel committed suicide shortly after and Shep is . . . she's in a padded cell, screaming at visions only she can see."

"Damn. I'm sorry, guys," Athena said, wishing she had kept her mouth shut.

"This isn't a tea party, kids," a burly man sneered from behind them. "We need to clean up Agent Jones' mess. Although I'm not convinced this isn't a trap her and her leech Master have set up."

"Fuck you, Thorne," Athena bit out.

"Yeah whatever, Jones. They should have staked your ass, or you should have had the guts to off yourself before you started to change."

"The injections are working. I still have time to get San Pedro," she said through gritted teeth.

"Yeah right. You're going to go in by yourself and stake a Master Vamp. In who's wet dream?"

Corrin watched the interaction. Everyone was tense; the tall man next to Thorne said nothing but looked at Athena through hate-filled eyes.

"Jesus, you also got a civi involved! Could you be any more pathetic?"

Corrin had had enough. They were wasting time. She pulled her gun and shot at Thorne, the bullet striking the dirt not even half an inch from his foot. Automatically she brought the gun up to Thorne's face. Surprised, it took everyone a moment to react. Thorne started to pull his own gun and stopped when he saw where her gun was pointed.

"What the fuck? You put that gun down and I won't have to hurt you, little girl."

"No," she shouted. "You listen to me. First, I'm not a little girl. My name is Corrin and I happen to be a State Trooper, which means I know how a gun works." She saw Thorne's buddy stop inching his hand to his gun. "Second, shut the hell up. I don't give a fuck about your issues with Athena. I use to have a normal life. Now I'm chasing goddamn Vampires in the fucking desert. I want to go home but I can't in good conscience until these suckers have turned into dust."

"Actually they turn into an organic goo or jelly," Athena broke in helpfully.

Corrin rolled her eyes. "Whatever. Third, you're here to help us. So quit posturing and start helping." With that she holstered her gun, turned around, and started walking back to where her Jeep and Athena's car were parked

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[Continued In Part 3 \(conclusion\)](#)

### [The Athenaeum's Scroll Archive](#)

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## ~ The Devil's Greatest Trick ~

by Zee  
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#### **Disclaimer:**

This is a work of fiction. None of the characters maybe taken and used and abused without the author's consent.

This work of fiction is of the horror genre. This means there will be gore, blood and bad nasty things happening. Violence factor is high.

This work of fiction contains lesbians and the affection and love they show one another (nothing to graphic sex wise) if that bothers you - DON'T READ THIS! -

Those under 18 should not read this work of fiction. If you are under 18 comeback when you are older it's a great story, really.

Oh, and I have a potty mouth.

Thanks to Ar, Bri, Joanne, and J. Without you guys this story would never have gotten over a page long and my grammar and punctuation would have been really bad.

PS - This is not a sequel to Past is Present, but I promise I am working on one.

On with the show. Please send feedback to [zeeamy@gmail.com](mailto:zeeamy@gmail.com)

Part 3

Athena, Mo, and Corrin dragged themselves into the motel room. Their clothes were ripped and dirty; Corrin's eyes were wide and she walked mechanically.

They had split the team up along gender lines. None of the women had wanted to work with Thorne and Parker, so Larry got the short straw and went with the unpleasant men.

Mo collapsed on the bed while Athena went into the bathroom to wash the cuts on her face and hands. Corrin continued to just stand inside the door, her body trembling slightly.

Mo called out, "You think she's going to be okay?"

"Sure. You remember what your first fight with a demon was like. Give her some time to process and she'll bounce back," Athena replied.

"Oh yeah. I was so scared I pissed myself. I was in New Mexico, all of 14, tending my parents' sheep. It was night and the sheep started bleating and crying out. I thought it was a coyote. I go out there with a flashlight and my dad's pellet gun thinking 'Coyote, no problem. I'll just go out, make some noise, and it'll run away.' To this day I have no idea what it was, but it was no coyote. It was maybe four feet tall with grayish skin, and these big flapping ear-like things and this huge ass mouth - it was all teeth. It was eating a sheep - blood everywhere - bones, skin, and flesh. It didn't care; it just shoveled it all in. I start screaming and it looks at me with these yellow eyes and comes at me. I ran but it trapped me. I'm looking at this demon coming closer and closer and I piss all over myself. You know what?"

"No what?" Corrin responded. Mo smiled; the kid would be okay. Her voice sounded a little hollow but she'd responded.

"The thing couldn't stand the smell of human urine. It let out this bellow and took off." Mo started laughing; Athena joined in.

Athena studied Corrin carefully as she came out of the bathroom. The tall woman was in mild shock. "How's it going, Corrin?"

"Good," came the single word response.

"Good to know. Why don't you go use the bathroom to clean up? You got Volmak goo all over you."

"Okay."

The two hunters watched the woman but she made no move toward the bathroom. Athena motioned for Mo to come over and help her.

"Athena?" Corrin started.

"Yes."

"I almost got eaten by a giant worm from hell." The State Trooper began to sob.

Athena grabbed a side and Mo grabbed the other and together they hauled the woman into the bathroom. "It's okay, Corrin. Let it out; let it all out. You've had a rough couple of days. But you wanna know something?"

"What?" Corrin hiccupped through her tears.

"You handled it all like a champ. I wouldn't have wanted another person at my back," Athena said.

"Thanks," Corrin said with a watery smile.

Mo got the shower running while Athena talked to Corrin. Then both women picked Corrin up and threw her in the shower. Corrin yelled as the hot water hit her.

"We don't wanna see your ass until it's clean." Athena turned and dragged Mo out.

Mo pouted. "Can't I see if she needs help washing behind her ears?"

"No. Now come on, you pervert." Athena shut the door and went to see if she had any more of Jake's clothes that would fit Corrin.

"Hey, Athena."

"Yeah, Mo?"

"Did you leave your laptop on?"

"No, it's in my bag if you want to use it."

"No, it's not."

Athena turned around to find her laptop sitting on the small table in the room. She walked over to it; she thought she caught the faint aroma of Jake's aftershave. She saw the words 'Diablo Horca' typed over and over again. The Devil's Pitchfork - she remembered the article that had come up on her computer the other night.

"Athena, that's just creepy," Mo broke in.

"Mo, do you smell that?"

"Smell what?"

"Nothing. Do you believe in ghosts?"

Mo was silent, then in a subdued voice she said, "Yes."

"I think Jake is trying to tell me something. There's a place called the Devil's Pitchfork about 30 miles from here. There's something important there."

"Okay, let's go check it out. I'll call the boys and tell them we're checking on a lead."

"What's up?" Corrin broke in. Both women turned to the wet woman who was wrapped only in a towel and dripping all over the carpet.

"Ah, you need to get dressed or I can't guarantee your safety from Mo," Athena said, pushing Corrin back into the bathroom with an armful of clothes.

"Athena, you ruin all my fun. That girl is hot," Mo pouted.

"Business. Come on; keep your mind on business. I don't have much time. I need to get San Pedro," Athena nearly shouted.

Mo went silent then she gave the smaller blonde a hug, holding her tight. "It's okay. We'll get him and make the universe safe for everyone."

Athena sniffed back a tear. "Come on. Let's get changed into clothes that don't have Volmak goo on them and arm ourselves. We'll be going out after dark; I don't want to be caught flatfooted. Call the boys and I'll do a food run."

Mo nodded, pulling out her cell phone.

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Tasha felt the warmth of the sun leave the earth. She turned slowly in her lover's arms, seeing the worry that creased Catherine's face in her death-like sleep. Her hands reached out to smooth the lines, waiting for the heart to give its first beat of wakefulness. She knew what had transpired. She also knew San Pedro's lies, and she could feel the lies vibrating on every word coming out of his mouth. Their lives were forfeit no matter what. She had been expecting this for some time. Catherine would not believe; her lover's faith was still in the clan and San Pedro. She would have to be ready. Tasha pushed her thoughts away as she heard the first thump of her lover's heart signaling her awakening. She placed tiny kisses around Catherine's cheek and lips; as she felt her lover respond, she pierced her bottom lip with a fang. The skin burst and blood beaded out of the wound; she painted Catherine's lips red with bloody kisses.

Catherine responded, opening her mouth and sucking on Tasha's bottom lip, her brown eyes fluttering open to take in the new night. She released the lip with a wet pop. Giving a small growl, she rolled them over so her smaller body was on top. She scratched her tongue on a fang again and wrapped the bleeding muscle around Tasha's tongue. They kissed hungrily, their blood intermingling, sharing life. Dark hands moved like twin shadows over Catherine's back; they slipped under the tight shirt and lightly kneaded the skin then, switching tactics, ran sharp nails over pale skin.

Catherine gasped in pleasure and pulled away from the kiss, her eyes, no longer brown, glinted a dull red.

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It woke hungry and ravenous. The need for sustenance burned through its body, vibrating through every fiber of tissue, veins, blood cells, and down to the core of its DNA. It growled, hearing the beat of a heart and the swish of blood as it flowed from the beginning to end of the vessel only to be recycled and start over. Smelling the tang of fear as the vessel sensed its presence. It moved quickly, one moment still, the next erupting into liquid speed. Reaching out, it snapped the furred neck and ripped into the skin with blunt teeth.

Barking. Harley snapped back to herself; she looked around in a daze. Her eyes cleared and she stared at Lupa. She tried to reach out to sooth the upset animal but Lupa backed away, the animal's fur standing on end. The hand that stretched out before her was strange. Her skin was pale, almost white in the moonlight, and swirling around in chaotic patterns on her skin was a red liquid. Her fingers trembled and her muscles gave an involuntary jerk as her dream rushed back to her. She stared in horror at her hand and arm; it seemed unreal, like it wasn't hers. Her other hand was clenched around something, her fingers stiff and unmoving, but there was something grasped in it. Sense of touch told her there was fur, and something wet as well. She was outside, bathed in moonlight and shadow; she had no idea how she'd left her womb of rock or how long the sun had been set. Finally she had no choice but to look down at white knuckles, dark fur

poked up between her fingers. A rabbit, torn apart, lay in sacrifice in her hand; blood slowly trickled from torn muscle.

A scream, barely human, ripped through the night. She was scared and in pain; behind her eyes and in her teeth, pain throbbed. Feeling a presence behind her Harley turned with a growl. The other two pack mates were there watching in silence. Finally the leader, the gray lanky coyote, approached her. Unconsciously, Harley bared her teeth in a silent snarl.

The voice echoed in her head, "Control yourself. Do not give in to the demon," it commanded. "Do not give up your humanity or all is lost. You must be master and master alone of your body."

Taking a deep breath, Harley resisted the urges being fired into her brain. 'She would not attack; she did not want blood,' she told herself over and over. Tense moments went by and she doubled over, vomiting blood and flesh. Crying, she asked over and over again for someone to help her.

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Catherine pulled the small car over. Looking in the rearview mirror, she saw Tasha finish snacking on the former owner of the vehicle. "Come on, love; it's time to hunt our rabbit." She got out and helped Tasha from the car. Giving the woman a possessive kiss, she tasted the man's blood on her lover's mouth. "Are you feeling better?"

She'd been hesitant to leave with her lover, remembering the beating she'd taken at San Pedro's hands, but she knew they had to leave or face his wrath again.

Tasha smiled. "I'm fine, love. Stop worrying. " Pausing, she considered her next words carefully. "We should be careful. I do not think Pedro will honor his words."

Catherine stiffened next to her. "What do you mean?"

Sighing, Tasha continued, "I mean Vampires, like most demons, are passionate and lustful but they do not love."

Catherine remained silent.

"We have loved since the day we turned and it has not lessened in all that time. Pedro hates that because he does not understand it."

"He won't kill us 'cause we love. We are the best enforcers he has. As long as we don't fail, our place is secure. There is no need for worry."

Tasha smiled faintly and let it go, but she knew her lover was wrong.

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As the heaving of her stomach stopped, she wiped her hands in the dirt and lay unresponsive. Her body was weak and she was tired.

"Go with Lupa. She will guide you to a pool deep within the rocks; you can clean yourself there. Think upon what has happened. Reflect, then try to guide yourself to the core part of yourself which makes you, you. Hold onto it and make it sacred. It will help you fight your demon nature."

She turned to go, feeling a moment of disquiet as she took orders from an animal. She let it go, rationalizing that with the blood of a demon running in both their veins that the line between human and animal was blurred if not non-existent. How many other vampires had learned this lesson and kept beasts to watch over them? Maybe these canines were unique, maybe the shaman had seen the animals as having a closer connection to humans, and maybe it depended on one's viewpoint of matters. She was startled when Lupa nudged her knee.

"Come," the words whispered in her head.

Slowly she followed Lupa out of the desert and into the hallowed blackness of stone and rock.

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They parked as close to the base of the Devil's Pitchfork as the desert would allow. Corrin looked out at the rock formation then back at Athena. "Why are we here again?"

"I have a hunch."

"Let me guess. Little green men."

"Ha ha. Keep it up, Sparky. No, it does not involve little green men. I think the girl is here."

"Why do you think that?"

Athena opened her mouth then closed it; she had almost said a ghost had told her but thought better of it. "A hunch." Not waiting for more questions she opened her door and climbed out into

the cool desert air.

Corrin turned and looked at Mo in the backseat. Mo just shrugged, not elaborating, and got out of the car, following Athena out into the night. Corrin growled in frustration and got out, slamming the car door. Two pairs of eyes glared at her.

"What?"

"We're trying to sneak here and you ruined the mood."

Corrin flushed in embarrassment. "Sorry."

They walked up to the Devil's Pitchfork, making their way through cactus and jagged rock. All the time the silver eyes of an animal watched.

"Athena, do we know anything about this place?"

"I found some stuff in the archives. The agency sent a Hunter team in years ago to take out a satanic cult. It was really a pack of Vamps. The team staked and baked the Vamps and that was it. Local legend says that there was a war between light and dark. The skies were filled with flying angels and demons. One of the angels was felled by a devil's pitchfork and came to rest here."

"Odd," Corrin broke in.

"Odd how?" Mo questioned.

"You think having an angel buried here would make it sacred."

"As far as I can tell, nobody comes here. They know about it, but for some reason they don't come here."

"Hey, Athena?"

"Yeah, Mo."

"What does that cactus remind you of?"

"You have to be shitting me?"

"And me without my camera."

"That's just obscene."

"What are you two talking about?" Corrin asked. She followed Athena's upraised arm. "Oh my God. Is that two cats?"

Mo chuckled.

Athena swung her flashlight around and it highlighted the torn-up body of a rabbit. She walked over and nudged it with her foot.

"Coyotes?"

She looked at Mo and shook her head. "We have a human getting ready to turn."

Corrin looked at the ragged body. "How can you tell?"

"Coyotes wouldn't waste food. Vamps would have done a clean job of piercing the skin and not left all that blood splattered, so it's more than likely our girl and she's going to change soon. If not our girl, then another poor soul."

Mo nodded at an animal trail she spotted with her flashlight.

"Corrin, I want you to go back and call the guys. Tell them to get out here. Mo and I are going to look around a bit. We'll meet back here in 10 minutes."

"I'm not an errand girl," Corrin snapped back.

"No, you're not, but Mo and I know what signs to look for - you don't. By doing it this way we're all helpful," Athena said levelly.

Corrin grumbled and started back to the car.

Mo smiled and nudged Athena as they moved into the darkness. "I like her; she's a firecracker. You like her too. Maybe you just found a new partner?"

Athena snorted. "She's a cop."

"So? After seeing the world as it is, you think she can just go back and pretend the things that go bump in the night are harmless?"

"God, I wish I could. Just go back to college and pretend that that thing never jumped out and attacked my roommate and I on our way back to the dorms," Athena said, absently tracking the ground. "Mo, over there. I think we have a shoeprint?"

"Switching to night goggles. Turn off the lights." The lighted area was reclaimed by the night.

Corrin grumbled on her way back to the car. She knew she was being childish but she couldn't help it. Damn it, she had helped them take out a huge Vol... something, a big ass worm from hell. She had proved herself capable of taking out the forces of evil. She bent over to unlock the door and felt a presence behind her; she turned, going for her gun. From above her, her arms

were grabbed and pulled up. The gun tumbled uselessly to the ground as she struggled to free herself.

"Lookie what we got here. It's our friend from the clinic," a voice purred out of the darkness. Slowly the night pulled away, revealing the blonde woman she'd fought with. Corrin struggled harder as Catherine approached her. Using her stomach muscles, she brought her feet up and kicked out at the approaching demon.

Catherine easily moved out of the way and Corrin was released to fall to the ground. She landed with a jarring thump that vibrated up her spine. The car rocked slightly and a figure leapt off it onto the ground. Corrin was now faced with two vampires. Frantically she searched for her gun.

"What do you say, love? A bit of fun with the Hunter wanna be? She looks like a tasty one." Catherine ended her comment with a toothy smile that showed off her large pointed canines.

With a sense of relief Corrin found her gun. She swung it up only to have her hand forced back into the door of the car. The metal bent inwards with a shrill groan and her hand went numb. Teeth ground together to prevent her from crying out. The gun again fell back to the earth.

"Oh no, none of that," the black woman purred in Corrin's face. Corrin struggled, trying to break away as the blonde straddled her legs. Slowly Catherine leaned forward and licked the vein that was frantically working to pump blood to parts of Corrin's body.

"Yummy," Catherine whispered against Corrin's skin. "Enough playtime." With that Catherine struck the tall woman's temple, knocking her unconscious.

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"They're coming. Go find Lupa. You two must hide," the coyote spoke.

"What of the young one?" the other asked.

"Things happen for a reason. Her time comes to a head. She will survive or she will die. I was hoping for more time, but we can only work with what we are given."

"I will go find Lupa. What of you..." The question died as the other dog found the coyote gone.

-----

Harley closed her eyes and fell into the water. She let herself sink down; she wondered briefly how deep it was as her body kept sinking slowly. The water was cold and her body lost heat as a chill penetrated her flesh and bones. The cold water soothed the pain behind her eyes, but the hot pain in her mouth remained. Still she didn't try to kick back up to the surface. She thought maybe it would be best if she drowned. She wouldn't have to face the change, losing herself in her darkest self. She remembered a night on the beach, a family vacation. Her and her brothers ogling the nearly naked women who ran on the beach near the beach house her family had rented for the summer. Night had come and they were horsing around in the light of a bonfire and the blonde had walked by, earning Harley a Frisbee in the face for her distraction. The next night the blonde came again, this time the rest of her family had gone into town for a movie. The blonde had intruded in her personal space, running a finger down her throat to the valley of her breasts. Harley had been lost to basic brain function and invited the blonde into the house.

The next thing she knew she was waking up in chains with the rest of her family. Her brother Rory lay spread eagled before them, tied to a wooden table, while all around him demons cut him and sipped from his cup of life. Her fault. She had killed her family because she wanted a quick roll in the hay with a hot woman. Her fault - all her fault. Now she was becoming like the monsters. Slowly it invaded her, taking over and unlocking the deepest darkest parts of her heart. How long before she changed? How long before she repeated the history done to her family to some other family? How long before she was responsible for destroying somebody's world?

Find her spark of humanity was what the coyote said. Reflect. What made her, her? She thought hard, back to biology and psychology classes; nothing came to her that could explain what was happening. She let out a scream of frustration, the bubbles moving upwards as her body went down farther. Water rushed in to take the place of air.

-----

Athena stared at the opening. "I think we've found an entrance. Why don't you go back for Corrin while I scout it out?"

"I don't like that, Athena. Wait here 'til I come back."

Athena grumbled but nodded. As soon Mo was out of sight she ducked inside, looking around. She saw a nest made of fur and brush that looked like it belonged to a large animal; there was some gnawed-on bones that supported that. Looking around she saw three tunnels leading away into further darkness.

Mo just knew in her gut that Athena wasn't going to stand there and wait. She picked up the pace, wanting to return as quickly as possible before something bad could happen to the small blonde. She returned to the kinky-looking cactus and looked around. Her worry doubled when

she didn't see Corrin. "Great," she whispered to the night. She switched her flashlight on and ran to the car. Skidding to a stop, she saw the black car sitting alone, a tangible piece of night in the blackness. "Fuck." Then, as she got closer, she saw the dents on the side and top of the car. Shining her light on the ground, she saw signs of a struggle. She reached into her jacket, pulled a stake out, and spun on her heels, going low as she released the stake.

Catherine jerked back, twisting her body to avoid the lethal piece of wood. She was turning as she hit the ground; she got her feet under her and flipped back up. "Perhaps you'll be more of a play date than that cop."

"What have you done with Corrin?" Mo hissed, her golden eyes flashing with anger.

"Don't worry, Hunter; she's alive for now. Tasha and I will have fun with her later."

Mo yelled in anger, charging the vampire. They came together in a silent impact of muscle and flesh. With her greater demonic strength, Catherine snapped Mo's wrist. The tall woman screamed as bone ground against bone and then fell to her knees. Her other hand reached under her coat, pulling out a stake and slamming it into the blonde's foot.

Catherine reacted with an inhuman scream of her own. Mo quickly went for another stake, ignoring the pain in her hand. Without warning, her shoulders were grabbed from behind and she was thrown back onto the hood of the car. Tasha quickly moved to her love, removing the stake. She held her lover close, giving comfort. "Love, you must stop underestimating the humans. They will always do the unexpected."

Catherine nodded, chastised, and nuzzled her lover's neck. "Yes, you're right. I'm sorry."

"It's okay but I don't want to lose you, especially not to a Hunter." They kissed passionately, tongues dueling. Slowly they turned, looking at the stunned hunter who was starting to come around. "So, love, what shall we do with it?"

"I'm not sure," Catherine said, all the time flipping the bloodied stake over and over in her hand.

The night erupted into an orchestra of screams, and then they fell back in on themselves, leaving silence behind.

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Athena picked the tunnel on the left; sticking to the side, she silently followed it. She picked up the sound of feet first, slapping rhythmically on the stone floor, then her goggles picked up something human-shaped coming her way. She pulled herself deep into a crack. She was blinded as a light was lit and she quickly pulled off her goggles. The light came from an opening slightly

further down from where she was hiding. She thought briefly about going back for the others but she figured she could handle one girl.

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Harley pulled herself out of the cold water, coughing up water. Her limbs were heavy and she rolled out and onto her back, not moving. The rock felt warm under her, and she enjoyed the tingling feeling in her limbs as the feeling returned. Her eyes moved slowly, taking in everything around her. She didn't see Lupa but figured the dog might want some space from her. That hurt; she had grown to like the canine and missed Lupa when she wasn't around. Her eyes came to rest on the roof of the cavern she was in. A fungus coated the roof and it glowed softly. She could make out a faint pattern; it looked almost like a bird wing. Also coming out of the ceiling were two large spiky looking stalagmites; they almost looked like they pierced the roof coming from above. The first one was centered over the pool she had bathed in and there was a constant drip of water from the tip. She shuddered, imagining it falling onto her while she had been in the pool. Shaking off such thoughts she got up and wandered out of the cavern back to the room with the trunks, hoping she would find clothes in one of them.

She pulled out a pair of gray woolen trousers and a rough cotton shirt. She rustled around the trunks looking for something to keep the pants up; grinning, she pulled out a pair of suspenders. She felt something enter the room and saw a shadow flicker on the wall out of the corner of her eye. She reached a hand down into the trunk and pulled out the old Calvary sword resting inside. Turning, she brought it up, swinging the sword around. The leather and bronze sheath flew off, striking one of the old wooden chairs. Green and blue eyes watched it go, then turned to meet each other. Harley stared at the short blonde woman standing before her; she held the sword diagonally across her body.

"Harlequin Vaughan?" the woman asked.

Harley blinked; it had been a long time since she'd heard her full name. She hated it; nobody but her mother called her by her full name. Sadness stabbed her chest as she realized that her mother would never call her that again. "I prefer Harley," she spoke slowly, eyeing the gun held loosely in the woman's hands.

"Harley it is." The woman gave a smile.

Harley just stared uneasily because the gun never wavered. "Why are you dressed all in black and carrying a gun?"

"Because, my little runner, she's a Hunter and she's here to kill you before you can change."

Both women spun to face the new voice.

"Catherine," Athena spat out in rage.

"The one and only. Thank you for doing our job for us. You and your Hunter buddies made it easy to find the bargaining chip."

"What have you done with Mo and Corrin?"

"Corrin's fine, but Mo . . . well, Mo is getting closer to Christ."

"You bitch." Athena opened fire.

With speed enhanced by anticipation, Catherine moved out of the bullets' paths; they hit the rock behind where she'd been standing, sending rock fragments everywhere.

Harley ducked as Catherine lunged at her and sailed over her head. Catherine hit the ground in a roll and came up onto her feet. Grabbing the lit lamp, she tossed it at Athena as Harley advanced on her. Athena knocked the lamp away; it hit the floor and went out, sending the room into darkness. Athena fumbled for her goggles. As she got them on, she screamed as Tasha's face materialized right in front of her. Tasha picked up the small woman and threw her at Harley; the two bodies collided, sprawling to the floor.

Catherine picked up the sword as it slid to a stop at her feet. As Athena struggled to get up, Catherine kicked out, her foot connecting with Athena's solar plexus and sending the woman flying backwards. Athena staggered to her feet; leaning against the wall, she reached under her coat for a stake. It was knocked out of her hand and she was held firmly to the wall. Catherine's head snaked forward and her tongue came out, licking the blood that flowed from her nose. "Oh my. You've got San Pedro's blood flowing in you. Naughty Hunter, do your friends know?"

Athena struggled, trying to get loose.

"Don't worry, little sister. You'll be one of us soon enough." As she said this, Catherine's arm went back then came forward, using the sword to pierce skin, muscle, and bone. Onward it went, in one side of the shoulder and out the other, deep into the rock. Pinned to the wall, Athena howled out her pain. "There. That should keep you 'til you change." Then Catherine ducked her head, licking the blood that ran dripping from the edge of the sword, before whispering in Athena's ear. Turning, she saw Tasha holding the rabbit cradled in her arms.

Catherine smiled. "You were always very fond of her."

Tasha smiled and ran dark fingers lightly over Harley's pale cheek. "We had the best fun with her until the Master wanted her."

Catherine felt a twinge of jealousy and wondered again how Harley had managed to escape. She wondered how fond her lover was of the blood bag.

Helplessly Athena watched them leave with the girl. Pain clouded her eyes and she felt blackness creep around her awareness; it seductively called to her to give in to it. She just needed to get loose. Catherine had told her where to find the Clan of San Pedro when she changed, whispering it in her ear before she left. Her good arm came up, grabbed the sword hilt, and pulled with all her strength. Nothing; she was too weak. She began to cry in frustration and pain.

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Corrin woke, her head throbbing and her mouth feeling like she'd tried to swallow a bale of cotton. She was lying in the dirt. As she tried to push herself up, a cry of pain escaped her lips and she fell back to the ground. Her right wrist was sprained. Gentle hands reached under her and helped her sit up; she found herself looking into Harley's green bloodshot eyes. She took in the girl; her face was battered and deep bruises were beginning to darken her skin. She tried to speak but only a croak came out.

"Shhh. Don't speak. Here, drink this." Harley held up a small green mug. Seeing the other woman eye it suspiciously, she gave a small laugh and took a sip. "It's just water."

Corrin drank the water slowly, not wanting to become sick. Weakly she leaned back onto Harley's chest and looked around. They were underground; the floor and ceiling were made out of rock and dirt. There was a steel cage door and on the other side sat a man reading a magazine. She wondered if he was a Vamp. "Where are we?"

Harley absently stroked Corrin's hair. "We're in the pens."

"Pens?"

"It's where the Vamp clan keeps their food," Harley explained.

"Oh God, you mean there are more people down here?" Corrin felt sick.

"Yes. I would guess 10 to 15 others. I'm not sure. I saw a few other pens when they brought us here, but they put us by ourselves."

"Why?"

"Just in case I change, I would guess."

"What would your changing have to do with anything?"

"If I change before they can finish the pact, I'm going to be hungry and they don't want to lose their food."

Corrin paled as she took in Harley's words. "But you're not going to change anytime soon. Right?"

Harley frowned. "Within a day, but don't worry. They're going to kill me in a few hours. So you're safe."

"Jesus, how can you be so calm about your death?" Corrin was almost yelling.

"Shhh," Harley tried to sooth the woman. "One way or another, Officer, I'm dying. It's just a matter of degrees."

"My name is Corrin."

"It's nice to see you again, Corrin. I do wish it was under better conditions."

"Yeah, me too."

"Do you mind me holding you like this? I'm feeling clingy at the moment, a deep desire to be close to another human being."

Corrin hadn't realized how intimate their position was. "No, I don't mind. It's nice. You know my one regret if we don't come out of this alive?"

"What?"

"I never got to fall in love. I wish I would have experienced it."

"Yeah, me too," Harley whispered into Corrin's dark hair.

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Athena wasn't sure how long she'd been hanging on the wall, standing slightly up on her toes to prevent the sword from ripping through more of her skin. Her eyes were closed and her head felt light. She knew if she died she'd wake up a vampire, but it didn't sound so bad anymore, anything to stop the pain. Actually she didn't feel the pain at the moment; it was more like background noise. A hand touched her face and she jerked, blue eyes flying open, and she saw Jake standing before her. He smiled his trademark crooked smile

"Have you come to take me away from all of this?" she asked.

The large man threw back his head and laughed. The laughter rolled through the cavern. "No,

quick draw. You have things to finish before you can leave this mortal coil, and the human race couldn't survive you as a vamp." His large hand grabbed the sword hilt and pulled. Athena screamed and fell to the ground sobbing. She felt herself gathered into Jake's arms; they felt real and strong.

"Is this the part where you tell me you'll always love me but I need to move on with my life and love again?"

Jake laughed. "Hell no! If you fell in love again I'd haunt his ass. However, you do need to get on with living your life and quit waiting to die. Go home and see your mamas. Your sister Art is going to need your help soon, but first go kick San Pedro's ass. Corrin is going to make a fine partner for you."

"I don't want another partner. I want you," she sobbed into his chest, burrowing deeper.

"I'm dead, quick draw, but I'm waiting for you. When your time comes, we'll be together again. Go on now." He grabbed her wounded shoulder between his hands; Athena screamed and then the pain was gone. "I'll always love you, quick draw." Bending his head he kissed her then was gone. Athena was left with the smell of Jake's aftershave and the feel of his lips on hers.

She stood on shaky legs and looked around; her flashlight reflected back at her from the table. Investigating she found an open box. Inside were four silver stakes; a fifth one was missing. They were beautifully crafted. She looked at them: the knight, the monk, the tiger, and the falcon. Her hand hovered over them then picked up the monk and placed it in her stake belt. Unsteadily she made her way out of the Diablo Horca and back to the car.

She gasped and held a hand over her mouth. She looked sadly down at Mo; the light from her flashlight seemed harsh as it lit pale skin. "Oh Mo, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have stayed; I should have come back with you." She knelt by her friend's head, slowly stroking the dirty matted hair out of her face. The Vamps had used Mo's own stakes on her. They had crucified her to the desert floor, wooden stakes piercing tan flesh in a human cross.

"Shut up, Athena, and get these things out of me," a scratchy voice whispered.

"Mo?"

"Don't make me repeat myself."

"Oh Mo. Thanks goodness. I thought I'd lost another person. Wait there."

Mo's hazel eyes blinked open. "I'm not going to go running off, Athena."

Athena returned with the blanket and the bottle of water she retrieved from the car. Gently she laid the blanket over Mo's body and held the bottle to her bloodied lips.

Mo gagged at first but finally got some water down. "This isn't getting me loose."

"I can't remove them without doing more damage, Mo. You'll have to wait until the boys get here with the medical team."

Tiredly Mo looked up into Athena's blue eyes. "How come I get the feeling you're not going to wait here with me?"

"Because I'm not. I'm going to go get Corrin and kill San Pedro."

"Athena, you can't do it by yourself. Wait for the boys."

"I can't. Here, when they get here give them this." She pressed a piece of paper into Mo's hand.

"What's this?"

"It's directions to Pedro's lair. Give it to the boys. Thorne will send in a bomb squad if I know him. If I can't get us out by the time the bomb squad shows, it means we're dead anyway."

"Athena, please don't."

"Shhhhh. Just rest. They'll be here soon; you'll be okay." With that Athena got up, went to the car, and drove away, not looking back.

#### Part 4 - Conclusion

Harley hummed absently as she ran her fingers through Corrin's hair. The repetitive motion and the feel of the silky strands moving between her fingers was soothing. Occasionally she would remove a piece of rock or a tangle.

Corrin felt her tensely coiled muscles relax. "Harley, how old are you?"

The motion stopped. "What?"

"How old are you?"

"I recently turned 21." She faded into the memory as she spoke. "We celebrated at the beach house. My brothers took me out and laughed when I made an ass out of myself and puked in the bathroom at Denny's." Harley laughed at the memory. "It was a great time." The laugh turned to a sob as she realized she'd never see her brothers again.

"It's okay. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to upset you." Corrin moved so she could cradle Harley. She tried to sooth the girl by gently stroking her back in slow circles.

Harley sniffed into Corrin's shoulder. "I . . . it just hit me that they're dead; my whole family is

gone." She cried harder. Corrin held the crying woman, slowly rocking her.

Harley finally got a hold of herself. "How about you?"

"How about me what?" Corrin said, wiping Harley's face.

"I don't know. Whatever you want to tell me I guess. How old are you? Do you have a family? You know, the basics."

Corrin laughed slightly. "I'm 25, just finished the Academy, and got on here at the State Troopers. I'm not even off probation. I grew up on the Coeur d'Alene Indian Reservation in Idaho with my mom, step-dad, and his two sons until my biological father decided he wanted me. He came sweeping in with a bunch of lawyers when I was 12. Then I went and lived with him, his wife, and their daughter in Seattle."

"That's quite the extended family," Harley commented.

"Yeah, it was weird. My mom and dad were always fighting, and my step-dad didn't like me because I wasn't Indian enough. My step-mom treated me like some savage. So when I got the chance to move away from them all I jumped at it. I did get along with my step-sister Karla; we still write now and again."

Corrin leaned back against the rock wall, now cradling Harley in her lap. She lightly brushed Harley's face with her fingertips. "Did you have anyone special?" she asked softly.

Harley yawned, partly because she was tired and partly to try and relieve the pain in her mouth. "No, not really. I dated around but never felt anything special for any of the girls I saw. My dad use to tease Rory, Simon, and I that he'd raised a bunch of players."

"A bunch of heartbreakers."

"Yeah, Thomas had a steady girl though. Uh, that doesn't bother you that I'm a . . . well, that I like girls?"

Corrin laughed. "If it did I would have dumped you out of my lap so fast you would have seen stars. Besides, I'm fond of women myself. I do wish my own family had been as accepting as yours."

"That's too bad. Yeah, my dad caught me making out with one of the girls from my high school volleyball team and I thought I was dead. He just looked at me and said, 'Dear Lord, I've got a house full of horny boys.' Then he said no sex until I was married or out from under his roof."

"Your dad sounds like a wonderful man."

"He was." Harley yawned and snuggled deeper into Corrin's embrace.

-----

Larry leapt out of the Jeep and ran over to where Mo was pinned to the ground. "Mo, please be okay. I don't want to lose you too."

"I'm fine, meathead; get these things out of me," Mo croaked, not even able to open her eyes.

Thorne surveyed the scene and directed the medical unit to the fallen Hunter. When he was satisfied that Morgan was taken care of, he began to pull weapons out of the back of the car. "Larry. Greg. Let's get ready; we got Vamps nearby to take care of," he barked out.

Mo motioned for Larry weakly. The large man went over and took the scrap of paper out of Mo's shaking hands.

"Larry, get your ass in gear. We don't have much time."

"Sir, I have a note from Athena, I mean Agent Jones, that she left with Mo."

"I don't give a shit about that woman. She's a wildcard that could turn on us at any moment," he ranted.

"And she knows where San Pedro's lair is," Larry broke in, waving the paper.

"Shit! Give me that and get me the boss. I need the bomb squad," Thorne ordered.

Larry left the unpleasant man and his cohort and climbed in the back of the van with Mo's unconscious body.

-----

San Pedro's brown eyes calmly took in the rival Vampires as they entered his lair. He made no move to get out of the chair he sat in and remained seated, stroking the furred back of the tabby that reclined in his lap. Finally the last man entered. He was tall, almost seven feet, and clearly of Nordic decent. He had deep blue eyes and white blonde hair. This man was a warrior; San Pedro had heard the tales of Erik Fenris, leader of the Ravenwood Clan. Pedro had to respect a man who took part of his name from the Norse myth about the wolf who would swallow the world whole.

However, while Pedro might give respect, he did not give his fear. Erik was only a warrior. Pedro knew he was much more dangerous; he was a politician. He smiled smoothly and slowly stood. "Erik, I'm glad you and your clan could make it."

"You should be since you need me and my clan to help you with the Tiger Clan out of Asia which is taking over your territories. You have the pact?"

"Yes, she has been found and is in the pens."

"Good. The sooner we finish the ritual, the sooner my clan can leave this awful place."

"Yes, I'd forgotten your kind prefers the lands of snow and ice."

"We find it's best to leave the desert for snakes such as you, Pedro."

"Don't be like that, Erik. Besides, we have so much in common. We both gave up our oaths to God to bed in immorality with demons."

Erik stiffened.

"Don't tell me after all this time you still harbor regrets about turning your back on God?" Pedro taunted.

"I am beginning to regret making a pact with you," the large man snarled, his five warriors getting tense. Out of the shadows of the room, five of Pedro's own children emerged.

"Come," Pedro said smoothly. "Let us not sink to our baser nature here. Let us relax and have a drink. I have a new one in the pens, untouched by fang and claw."

Erik nodded and sat in the chair facing Pedro. Everyone relaxed slightly. Pedro nodded to Anita and Carlos and they quickly left the room.

"Catherine and Tasha are preparing the room for the ritual. They will come and get us when it is ready."

"It better be soon. I want to be gone before first light."

-----

Athena hid in the shadows of the wild fruit orchard. A part of her brain idly wondered how the trees thrived and remained green in the middle of a desert. She watched the house, watching the patterns the guards made as they walked around the ranch-style house. Sadly she holstered her

gun; she would need stealth. She snuck out of the shadows as one of the guards went around the side of the building. Halfway to where she wanted to be, she froze and dove back into the shadows as she heard cars approaching. Cursing, she wondering how Thorne could have gotten her note so quickly and dispatched a team.

Two large SUV's pulled up and five people got out while two remained in the cars, keeping the engines running. Athena cursed, recognizing the tall man leading the small group that entered the house. It was Erik, leader of the Ravenwood Clan. They were a fierce Clan; Erik only turned those he deemed worthy as warriors. What was Pedro planning, making a pact with Erik? She blew out a breath. She didn't have time to wonder; she needed to get inside and now her plan for doing that was screwed because one of the large cars had its lights shining where she wanted to go.

She sat and watched, slowly trying to come up with a plan. Athena smiled, grabbed a good-sized rock, and as silently as she could she tiptoed toward the house. Staying out of the light from the headlights, she waited, and as one of Pedro's men glared at the lead SUV as he passed it, she threw a rock. In a flash the Ravenwood Vampire sprang out of the car and had Pedro's flunky slammed up against the bumper. They growled at each other, snarling and showing their fangs. With their attention thoroughly diverted for the moment, Athena dashed quickly to the house and disappeared around the side.

-----

Harley dozed, feeling safe in the circle of Corrin's arms. Sluggishly she stirred as she heard a sound at the door. Her body felt heavy; the pain was back behind her eyes and was intensifying in her mouth. She didn't want to move but leisurely cracked an eyelid. The sight of two of Pedro's children coming into the pen caused her to sit up quickly.

Corrin frowned in her own sleep and reached out for Harley; gradually she began to awaken. Harley moved in front of Corrin, blocking the officer's body from the Vampires. She bared her teeth and growled which only caused the two Vamps to laugh.

"Don't worry. We're not here for you yet," the woman spoke.

"Yeah, your time will come soon enough. Now get out of the way," the man spoke with his own snarl which exposed long white teeth.

"What's going on?" Corrin asked then froze as she saw their company.

"We're here to take you for a taste test," the woman growled. She reached out to grab Harley, but the young woman easily danced out of the way.

Harley's growls were becoming louder and more feral.

"Out of my way, meat," the man shouted and charged.

Harley's green eyes flashed red and she charged him; they met in a tangle of limbs, loud growls and snarls echoed in the pen. Corrin kept her eyes on both Vamps as she dodged a lunge from the female and backed away farther into the pen.

Harley twisted her head as a clawed hand went skimming past, just missing her. Before it could retract she bit down, locking teeth into bone and muscle; ignoring the screams, she continued to apply pressure, feeling tissue part and bone begin to groan and grate under the pressure.

Carlos howled in pain, thrashing around. He tried to move out of the woman's clutches but her jaw was locked onto his hand. He tried to raise his other arm but found it pinned to his side by her hand. *'How can she be so strong?'* he thought. Her fingers were digging in through his skin and blood began to weep from the shredding of his flesh. Her other hand ripped into the flesh covering his stomach. Suddenly Anita was there, striking the woman again and again; suddenly he was free.

Harley backed away slowly, never taking her eyes from them; her left eye was beginning to swell and her mouth felt puffy. Spitting out a mouth full of blood, she idly noticed a tooth sail out with the fluid. She ran her tongue around her mouth and found an empty spot where a canine used to be. Without warning the two Vampires moved quickly, both striking out at Harley. She dodged the first but was taken down by the other. The air left her lungs in a great whoosh and she fell to the ground. There was a loud crack as a foot connected with her face with such intensity that it flipped her on to her back. Then the two Vampires took delight in kicking and beating the downed woman.

Corrin cringed at the beating Harley was taking. As she saw the young woman go down, she yelled and charged, only to be picked up and tossed into the bars of the door. Her head connected with the metal bars and she fell limply to the floor, her vision blurring.

The pain built and built as each foot and fist met Harley's flesh, and then slowly it faded away. She was beyond it all, an observer to it all; she drifted further and further away from the physical constraints of her body.

"What the hell are you two doing?" a voice shouted, instantly stilling the two Vampires.

They stopped the beating and turned to face Catherine. "This blood bag attacked me. I was just showing her who was boss." Carlos' face went even paler as he saw her anger intensify.

"Do you know what you were beating on? That is the pact. You better not have killed her or your life is forfeit."

Both Vamps went pale and immediately bent over, picking up the limp woman. "She's not dead; she's not dead," Carlos said, frantically searching for a pulse. He couldn't find one. "Anita, get

me some water." He sat the body up, wincing at the glassy unresponsive eyes.

Corrin watched fearfully. Tears gathered in her eyes; Harley had tried to protect her.

Anita came back with a bucket of water and threw it on the bloody body. Nothing happened. Water washed the blood from Harley's face causing pink rivers to flow down over her clothes. "Damn it!" Carlos screamed. "She's just stunned. Come on." He slapped her face harder and harder. "Wake up!"

Catherine loomed over his crouched position; reaching down, she grabbed his neck and gave a violent twist. His golden brown eyes went wide as the bone snapped and he toppled over. Then the woman bent over Harley's unresponsive body and moved her fingers to the neck, searching for a pulse. She gave a smile. "Lucky you, Anita. Carlos is a moron. She's got a pulse, weak but it's there."

Anita almost collapsed in relief. "Yes, Catherine. I'm very sorry; I didn't know she was the one."

Catherine waved her arm dismissively. "Don't worry about it. Now take this moron up to Pedro and explain it in a way that makes him look totally at fault what happened."

Anita nodded, dragging Carlos' body out of the pen, "Wha - what about the blood bag the Master wanted?"

"I think you better go tell him what happened and that we're ready for the ritual. Now go."

Catherine turned back to Corrin. "Clean her up and make sure she stays alive," she ordered.

"Fuck you," Corrin muttered, standing up on shaky legs.

Catherine growled and moved quickly over to where Corrin leaned against the bars of the entrance. She easily picked up the taller woman and slammed her back into the metal bars.

"Listen to me carefully, blood bag. Do as I ask and I'll make your death quick. Fail me and I'll turn you and make you my bitch for all eternity." Catherine uncurled her hands from Corrin's shirt and let her drop to the ground.

As Catherine left, locking the door, Corrin staggered to her feet and rapidly went to Harley's side. Kneeling down she took in the crumpled form. Harley was breathing rapidly and blood sluggishly oozed from cuts on her face. "Are you okay? I think you're going into shock." She gently ran her hands over Harley's wet face. She turned as Catherine came back with a container of water and a cloth. The cloth was thrown at Corrin who plucked it off her chest where it landed.

"Clean her up." And with that Catherine was gone for good.

Corrin got up, grabbed the water, and returned to Harley. She wet the cloth and dabbed at the

blood and cuts. "Hey, talk to me. Are you okay?" She tilted Harley's face up and took in the panic shining out of green eyes. "Talk to me."

Harley felt like her heart was going to beat out of her chest. It was pounding out of control, pumping blood to the farthest parts of her body. She had a brief flash of blackness coating her insides. She shook her head, trying to dispel the thought. "I . . . I don't feel good." With that she lunged for the empty bucket. With painful contractions, she vomited into it. Pain racked her body and she leaned back with a soft sob.

"Shhh. Here swish this around and spit it out." Harley took the water offered and did as she was asked. When she spit a second tooth fell out, hitting the ground. They both stared at it for a moment.

"You saved me. I . . . thanks."

"Hey, what are friends for?" Harley said with a smile, but winced as cuts reopened at the movement of muscles around her mouth.

"Let's get you cleaned up, friend."

"Gotta look good for my execution," Harley quipped.

Corrin's hands stilled. "Don't. Somehow it will be okay. Don't give up yet," she responded fiercely.

Harley just gave a small half smile but wisely kept silent, not wanting to rain on Corrin's hope.

Corrin finished up as best she could, and they sat for a moment in the quiet, blue staring into green eyes. "Corrin, would you just hold me for a while? I just need . . . I want to just feel close . . . I."

Corrin silenced Harley by holding a finger to her lips. Without words being spoken, she took Harley in her arms and held her close. Harley sighed and closed her eyes.

"Your heart; it's beating fast."

"Adrenaline," Harley replied, knowing it wasn't true.

-----

Catherine walked up the stairs to the main floor and walked into San Pedro's meeting room. She barely gave a glance at the newcomers, her eyes focused on where Pedro stood over two large

piles of biological jelly. She knew what Carlos and Anita's fates had been.

"I had hoped you'd spare Anita; she had potential."

Pedro finished wiping his hands on a handkerchief and looked at his enforcer. "Ah, Catherine, I know you were fond of her but she was too stupid to live."

"Well, you choose to make her, I guess it's only fair you kill her."

Pedro's eyes narrowed at the veiled insult. The rest of the room stiffened and waited to see what would happen.

Erik began laughing; he stood and gave Catherine a hearty pound to her back, nearly sending the smaller woman to her knees. "I like this one. You have surrounded yourself with lapdogs and yes men. It's nice to see one with a pair."

Pedro smiled cruelly. "Then perhaps I'll give her to you as a present."

Erik laughed but Catherine's eyes narrowed. "I would be honored to have her only if you forsake your claim."

"We will see." He turned his attention back to the blonde. "Are we ready?"

Catherine nodded, not trusting herself to speak.

"Good, then let us finish this before anything else can happen."

As they made for the door, Erik paused and talked to two of his warriors; they gave a nod and left. Erik nodded to the other three and they walked out the door. His blue eyes took in Pedro's back and he whispered that Pedro was an idiot.

-----

Corrin rubbed her hands up and down on Harley's pale arms. "You're cold."

Harley shrugged. "I'm hungry."

"I'd give you some food but we seem to be fresh out."

"There's something you could give me," Harley mumbled and turned so her nose to nuzzled the warm skin at Corrin's throat.

"What was that?" Corrin said with a squeak as she felt Harley's cooler flesh touching the flesh of her throat. "Umm, what are you doing?"

"I dunno. I was thinking I'm about to die and thought there might be something more pleasurable I could be doing rather than thinking about dying." She trailed her tongue over Corrin's neck, biting softly at the pulse point.

"Harley, I . . . oh."

"Tell me you don't like it and I'll stop."

"It's not that I'm not flattered and it's not that it doesn't feel good, but..." She was cut off by another voice.

"You have a prior engagement that you simply cannot avoid."

Two heads turned and took in the distinguished-looking Spaniard. Harley sighed and slowly went to get up. She stopped as Corrin grabbed her arm.

"Don't."

Harley looked into blue eyes and gave a wink. "Don't worry; I've still got hope." She removed Corrin's hand, gave the palm a kiss, and then rose to her feet to walk over to San Pedro.

When Harley walked out of the pen, she was instantly surrounded by Vampires; a large man with blonde hair approached her sniffing. She cringed, remembering him and his fangs. His large hand came down and cupped her face. Sniffing again, his eyes went red then back to blue. Harley waited but he just gave a nod as if confirming something to himself and then he turned, passing Pedro on the way to the pen's door.

Corrin scrambled to her feet and lunged after the departing redhead. "No." A large man stopped her. He grabbed her, preventing her from moving forward, "You keep fighting even though it seems hopeless. That is a good trait in a warrior," he said smoothly, ignoring her struggles to get loose. "If this night was going to go well, I would bargain for you and make you one of my clan, but the Raven sees the night ending in blood and fire."

Corrin stared at the large man. "Are you insane?"

He shrugged, not answering. "Don't worry about your friend. She's already lost in the eyes of God." He turned and ducked out the door, shutting it behind him.

"No! Don't take her." She ran to the bars, shaking them, hoping to somehow get loose and stop the horror she knew was coming.

-----

Harley walked into the room; her eyes briefly took in the fire, the altar, the upside down cross, and the various other symbols that decorated the room . Now that she had read Jacob's journals, she understood the symbols on the walls. Some were the symbols of the clans entering into the pact and others were the symbol of their maker, the demons who had given their blood to Pedro and Erik. She walked forward and stood before the altar, running her hand over what would be her bed.

"I'm glad to see you're not trying to fight your fate," Pedro said.

She turned and took in the Vampires. Her eyes fell on Tasha. She smiled. "Did you ever wonder how I escaped the first time? Well, I'll let you in on a little secret - she helped." Her finger clearly pointed at the African.

Tasha's eyes went wide, Catherine's eyes narrowed, and Pedro's face went dark with rage. "Take her and lock her up in my study," he shouted.

Catherine sputtered, "Sir, she lies. She's just doing it..."

"I don't care. I will not take any more chances. Now do as I say or I will have you locked up as well."

Harley watched in relief as four other Vampires wrestled Tasha into submission and dragged her out of the room. This left her with Pedro and only three of his flunkies to deal with. Her hands went out and smoothed the rough fabric of her pants. She touched the reassuring weight of the stake she'd tied to her leg. She noticed that as Pedro came forward Erik and his men retreated back towards the door.

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Athena quickly jabbed the stake through the man's back. Her muscles strained against his struggles; finally the sliver slid between the ribs and collapsed the pumping organ. As the heart ceased to work, cells began to breakdown and the Vampire was rapidly reduced to organic goo. She grimaced and shook it off her boot. She heard a lot of somebody's coming so she ducked into a room and watched them pass. As soon as they went by she left her hiding place and quickly went to find where they had come from.

As she crept downstairs she hoped she wasn't too late. She paused in the darkness just at the foot of the stairs; there should be a guard somewhere. Her nose rankled at the stench drifting in the

air. She had to be close to the pens, the faint clink of chains could be heard as well as whimpers of pain. She took a few steps forward and suddenly she dropped into a crouch as a hand swiped the air above. She pulled her gun, aiming it straight up, and fired. *'Fuck being quiet,'* she thought. The bullet traveled up, heating slightly from air friction; it easily passed through skin and muscle and plowed through bones sending fragments stabbing into other parts of the body, before it burrowed into the softer tissue of the brain and came to rest. The Vampire stiffened and fell to the ground. She rapidly searched his body and removed a thick chain filled with keys.

Corrin fell to her knees, her bloody hands gripping the bars. There was no hope; they were all going to die. She let her head fall forward and rest against the bars, enjoying the feel of the cool metal.

"Hey there, miss me?"

Corrin flicked open a blue eye and stared at the battered form of Athena. She gave a weak smile and then let out a sob of happiness. "God, isn't there anybody who hasn't had their ass kicked?"

Athena gave a smile and fumbled with the keys. "Nope. It's been a bad day for team Hunter, but I have faith things are going to pick up in the fourth quarter."

Athena got the door open and rushed to Corrin's side; she helped the taller woman up. "Here, take these keys and this." She wrapped a stake belt around Corrin's hips and handed her a gun. "Go open the pens and get those people out of here. Normally I'd say check 'em to see if any of them are infected, but we don't have time."

"They took Harley."

"I'll do my best to get to her."

"Let me go..."

Athena cut her off. "There isn't time. Thorne will be here soon and he'll blow this place sky high. I need you to get these people out of here."

Corrin straightened herself up and nodded.

Athena watched her go and hoped she made it out alive 'cause Jake was right - Corrin would make a great partner. She hurried down the corridor, not even stopping as the Vamp guarding the door gave a shout of surprise. She threw the stake with all the force she could muster deep into his heart. He stared at the quivering piece of wood sticking out of his chest with amazement and then began to decompose.

-----

Harley didn't struggle as she was forced back onto the cool stone face of the altar. Her wrists were bound with rope and then the rope tied to metal circles embedded in the stone. She tested them and then leaned back on the stone with a sigh and a smile.

Pedro stared at the female, confused. She didn't beg or cry; she didn't resist. "I'm glad to see you're resigned to your fate."

"I'm not but I'm resigned to yours," Harley said, not looking at him. She stared at the ceiling.

"False bravado. There is no escape. This is the end of the line for you, as the expression goes." He smiled a thin cruel smile. Stepping forward he stroked her hair.

"You know, Saint Peter, I'm hungry. Think we could order out?" She winced as he grabbed her hair.

He snarled, "Enough. You waste time. No one is coming to save you."

She ignored him. "Well, I guess I could dine in."

-----

Corrin ducked a swinging arm and brought the gun around low, squeezing the trigger and firing two bullets into the Vampire's midsection. She didn't stop to finish it off but kept moving, moving her and the unfortunate souls she'd unchained in the basement out. She was grabbed from behind. She stomped a foot down and then jerked her head back, grimacing in pain as the back of her head snapped a nose. As she was released, she fumbled for a stake; spinning around she shoved it through a neck. God, she was awful at killing Vamps. She had yet to hit a heart, but she had incapacitated quite a few of the bastards. Detached she watched as the Vamp fell to its knees, struggling to get the stake out. She wiped blood off her face and out of her eyes. "Come on, people! Keep moving. If you get outside this will be nothing but a bad memory and 15 years of therapy," she shouted, moving the survivors out of the house and into the night where hopefully morning would be coming soon to wipe it all away.

Catherine stared at her crying lover, wanting to believe that Tasha was blameless, but not entirely sure. Hearing noise she ordered the other three out of the room to investigate.

"Tasha. Tasha, tell me you had nothing to do with that blood bag escaping."

Tasha refused to look at her. "Tasha, look at me."

"You believe I'm guilty, so what's the point?" Tasha whispered.

"I..." Whatever Catherine was going to say was distracted by a scream. Catherine opened the door and saw the blood bags escaping. She didn't really care one way or another. Humans were stupid and it was easy enough to go get another one for feeding. However, if they were escaping that meant serious problems. "Fuck," she muttered and raced out the door to make sure Pedro was okay.

Tasha watched her lover leave her; she could feel her concern for the Master. Anger billowed out; first, doubt of her loyalty, and second, more concern with Pedro's safety than hers.

-----

Athena knocked the decomposing Vamp out of the way and kicked the door open. Pulling her gun she entered the room. She passed four Vamps on her way through; they did nothing to stop her. They were wary but let her pass.

Pedro spun away from the girl and stared at the intruder. His eyes widened. "I thought you would have been dead by now, Agent . . . Jones, was it?"

Athena smirked. "Surprise."

Pedro frowned at Erik and his warriors. "Well, stop her."

Erik laughed. "Pedro, you are an idiot, and not worthy of my help."

"What? Don't you dare," Pedro sputtered. "You would break the pact?"

"The pact was broken when your men killed the girl and she crossed over 30 minutes ago. Don't tell me you didn't notice? Of course you didn't; you were too caught up in your self importance."

Pedro stared dumbfounded at the tall man, and then he reached out with his senses. There was only one human in the room, when there should have been two. He turned, his rage flaring. "You played me, little girl." His jaw unhinged in his rage and his eyes flared red. "I will teach you to play tricks with the devil."

Athena stared warily around the room. Not sure what to do she really hadn't planned on getting this far. Erik turned to the small Hunter and gave a bow. He then nodded to his warriors and left the room, adding, "You are on your own to clean up your mess."

Harley's eyes flashed red as well and she growled. Jerking her arms up away from the altar, she easily snapped the rope and rolled off the side as Pedro charged.

Athena jumped back out of the way of the attacking child and fired a bullet at the rampaging Vampire. Dodging a kick, she fell back some more and fired again.

Harley ripped the stake out of her pants and slammed it down into Pedro's arm, pinning it to the altar. Turning, she leapt at the other Vampire charging her. They crashed together midair and fell, tangled together in a mass of flesh. Harley being the weaker of the two was flung off and crashed into the wall. Dazed she shook her head from side to side, trying to clear the fog out. The underling ran towards her and Harley rolled to the side. It skidded, trying to change direction; Harley pounced, sinking her newly sprouted fangs into its shoulder.

Athena scrambled for her gun while her other hand pressed against the Vamp's neck, keeping its teeth away from her throat. Grabbing her gun, she swung it up and fired a bullet right into its eye. The top part of its head exploded, drenching her in gore. Sputtering, she pushed the deflating mass off of her. Getting up she turned, coming face to face with Pedro. She froze, her limbs locking her out, no longer under her control.

He smiled. "You are of my blood and you will do as I command."

Horrified, she felt herself nod. Inside herself she screamed and tried to fight San Pedro's control.

"Kill her." He pointed a well-manicured nail at Harley.

She raised her gun and fired.

Harley gnawed on the thrashing Vampire's shoulder, ripping deeper into it, trying to get the blood flowing faster. Her hand shoved through its chest, deeper and deeper until she found the heart. Her fingers wrapped around the heavily billowing organ and squeezed it until it burst. At the moment of death she stopped, instinctively knowing not to feed on dead blood. She removed her hand and screamed as something pierced her skin. She staggered and fell to the ground.

-----

The Vamps in the SUV's watched detached as humans ran from the house. Several of Pedro's children tried to stop them only to be trampled. A driver looked up sharply as a Vamp pounded on her window. She unrolled it. "What?"

"Aren't you going to help? They're escaping!"

She shrugged and said, "Not my problem," before rolling the window back up.

Corrin followed the stream of people outside. "Run to the orchard," she shouted. Firing wildly at

approaching Vamps, she ran towards the trees. Skidding to a halt she raised her gun as figures appeared out of the shadows under the trees.

"Corrin?"

Corrin almost sobbed in relief. "Larry?"

"Thank God. I thought we'd lost you." He grabbed Corrin in a bear hug.

"I . . . Athena, she saved me. She's still in there."

"It's okay, Corrin. Why don't you come with me and we'll get a doctor to check you out?"

Corrin struggled in his grip. "No, I have to go back. Athena and Harley are still in there."

"Come on. You won't do them any good like this. We'll do our best to get them out." He almost winced at his words. He doubted there was much of anything he could do for anybody in the house. He watched as they gave the officer a tranquilizer and stayed with her until her eyes grew heavy.

He walked to where Thorne was standing, talking to the bomb squad. Larry could almost smell the stench of the man's self importance as it rolled off him in waves. "Thorne, Agent Jones is in there."

"I care how?" the man responded.

"She's an Agent and she's doing our job for us." Larry pointed to the nine people being checked over by medical staff.

"Agent Jones is now considered a hostile."

"What? You don't know that for sure."

Thorne shrugged and turned to the man standing next to him. "Blow it," he ordered.

Larry turned away in disgust.

Erik kicked a human out of his way and entered the SUV. "Go, the Hunters are close." The two black cars pulled away into the fading night. He flipped open his cell and dialed a number; he waited for somebody to answer. "T'suang Anung Mao," he uttered. "It's done just as planned. The Hunters are there now. He never suspected our loyalties were already aligned." He paused again. "By sunrise Pedro's clan will be no more and the newly risen Master will be dealt with by the Hunters." Erik listened then gave a laugh. "Trust me. It was my pleasure to bring that bastard down." His hand moved into his shirt, grasping a pendant as he said this. "Our pact is done. If you or yours comes into my territory I will rip you apart and see how Asian blood tastes." With that he shut his phone, ending the call.

-----

Pedro watched the new Vampire fall, grasping its side as blood gushed out. "Finish her," he commanded. He laughed at the Hunter's internal struggle. "You're mine now; stop struggling." He stroked her face.

Athena pulled the stake out and it seemed to grow warm in her hand. She could feel the texture of the monk as it knelt in prayer. Her eyes grew cloudy for a moment then she pulled the trigger on her gun.

Harley flinched as she heard the gunfire but gradually realized she was unharmed. Slowly she got up and looked around; her side was already healing. The last Vampire child was slowly crumbling back in on itself, its head ripped open by the bullet's path. Pedro stood his mouth hanging open in surprise.

"No. You can't . . . can't resist me." Panic began to taint the tone of his speech.

Athena looked the Master Vampire over. "Did you ever regret your decision to turn your back on your faith? Did you ever regret tearing apart your brothers at the monastery and eating them?"

He paled. "How do you know such things?"

She held up the stake. "This is you, isn't it? The monk."

His eyes went wide as he saw the silver stake.

"No, you never felt remorse. You joined the church for power and worked your way up until you pissed the wrong person off, and then you were sent to a monastery in the middle of nowhere. There was no power for you there. Then the demon came and offered you more power than could be found in the politics of the church, and you leapt at your own damnation." Athena paused. "This was made for you. It's your marker, shaped from the soul you gave up."

Pedro howled. His eyes blazing, he charged the Hunter only to be tackled from behind. Harley and Pedro rolled on the ground, fighting and snarling. Teeth bit into flesh and clawed hands tore at one another.

-----

Catherine ran down the stairs, ignoring the crumpled bodies. Down the hallway, her eyes came to rest on what had been the guard; her fears were confirmed. As she went to open the door she felt a pain in her chest and her strength began to leave her, bleeding out of her body as if she had a wound. Gritting her teeth, she threw open the door.

The two figures standing over the altar turned and looked at her. They did nothing to stop her as she approached, and they stepped back, away from the altar to let her get close. San Pedro lay on the stone, his eyes and mouth open in shock, a large stake sprouting from his chest.

Harley nodded at Athena and whispered for her to leave. Athena hesitated then fled the room.

Catherine's legs collapsed and she would have fallen if Harley hadn't caught her. "Why doesn't he crumble?"

"He's the source. He'll bleed out like a fount until he's dried up at the source then he'll crumble and blow away. When that happens your clan will be no more." Harley slowly let her down until she knelt at the side of the altar. Harley turned to leave, calling out, "If you should drink from the source until it is dry, then would you not then become the source?"

Mustering her strength, Catherine pushed herself up and leaned over Pedro's bleeding form. Lowering her lips she drank from the first. She continued to drink as a series of explosions rocked the house.

-----

Athena felt as if she were floating. She was free; she was no longer corrupted - she had killed Pedro. Well, she'd had help. She wondered about the strange silver stake, briefly wishing she had grabbed it out of Pedro's body. She had known all those things because of the stake; somehow it had been tied to Pedro. She certainly had not known that much about the Master Vamp's history before.

It was a moment of quiet, almost profound in its silence. Then the world under her and all around her screamed and twitched in pain; she was knocked off her feet. She rolled and tried to get back up. A piercing whine caught her attention; her eyes darted up and the irony was not lost on her. She was now free from a Vampire's blood curse only to die at the hands of her own people. The roof above her spilt open and she caught the smell of smoke just before the contents of the house above her were vomited down upon her. Vainly she threw up her hands.

-----

The sun was just beginning to rise, greeting the world with a lovely bouquet of colors. Smoke and ash drifted up, swept away on air currents, and the last of the Hunters surveyed the damage. Smoking wood and stone remained as a marker of where evil had once stood and good had wiped it out. Thorne stood overlooking his crew's work, hands on hips and chin jutting out, proudly looking every inch the superhero from a children's comic. He smiled widely, seeing Larry make his way up to where he stood. "Anything?" he demanded.

Larry grumbled, but held his tongue. "No sign of anything surviving. All the humans that tested negative for Vampirism have been sent to Phoenix to Mercy Medical Hospital."

"Good. I like it when things work out."

Larry clenched his fists so tightly his knuckles went white. He wanted to yell and shout that Thorne had killed at least one damn fine Hunter, but he knew it was pointless. Upper levels would just side with Thorne. "If that's all I want to go to the hospital and check on Mo."

Thorne just nodded absently, basking again in his own glory.

Larry walked over to the Jeep that he had borrowed from Corrin. As he bent to unlock it, he found it already unlocked. He pulled his gun and opened the door, one could never be too careful in his line of work. He blinked and cocked his head to the side. Unconscious in the passenger seat was Athena. There was a piece of paper stuck in her hand. He slid into the car, taking in the musty smell of old takeout and shut the door. He plucked the piece of paper out of her hand and read it.

To Larry -

San Pedro is dead and Athena is free from his curse. She has sustained a head injury and has been unconscious now for 20 min. There was an underground basement under the house. You Hunter's are really rather sloppy.

P.s. I'm sorry about Thorne

- H -

Larry's eyes darted up and looked to the tree line where Thorne had been standing moments before. It was empty. He did actually debate for a few moments on whether or not to go look for the man, but taking in Athena's hurt body, he started the car and drove as fast as he could to the hospital.

-----

"You're a lazy man, Thorne," a voice said, startling the large man. "Standing up here out of supposed harm's way while your men toil away in the ashes of death and destruction. Keeping your hands clean."

He spun around, looking into the dense growth of trees, trying to figure out where the voice was speaking from. His beefy hand went to his holster, removing the gun. "Come out. I'm not afraid of you." He stepped into the gray shadows.

"You should be. I'm afraid of myself. I'm not used to all these feelings and desires. I'm hungry, Thorne. I almost snacked on Athena, but I couldn't. Do you know why?"

The man snorted; he had some crazy Vamp on his hands. "You suck at being a Vampire?"

"Funny. I guess that's technically true. This Vampire thing is very new to me. I want to do such evil delightful things, but then a part of me stops me from doing them 'cause it's wrong. Do you know what it's like to be divided inside yourself?"

"No, not really," he said, creeping around a tree. He was fairly certain he knew where the voice was.

"You wouldn't," the voice said sadly. "You never listen to the voice that tells you that the things you do are wrong. I bet your wife and kids will be happy when you never return home. They won't miss your fists and your abuse."

His eyes widened in surprise and then narrowed in rage; he charged around two large trees and skidded to a stop. "Damn," he whispered. He had been sure the voice was coming from here.

"Close, Thorne." He whipped around. Nothing again. Then a hand darted out of the tree above him and snapped his wrist. He cried out in pain and the useless limb let go of the gun. He looked up and saw blazing red eyes coming at him from above. He let loose a scream that ended in gurgling wetness.

-----

The trauma team in Phoenix was on alert as the first of the cars arrived. "Jesus, what happened to these people?" asked a nurse after he had taken in the burns and sores on his current patient.

"Unknown, but I think somebody mentioned a cult," another nurse replied

"We got a bunch of FBI types hopping around getting in the way," another grumbled, swatting at a large man when he poked his nose too close to where she was working.

The sun was starting on the decline of its journey across the sky as Corrin's eyelids began to tremble, and then they cracked open. Tired blue eyes rolled around, taking in the room. They landed on Larry who was squished into a tiny chair, his large frame looking as though it would collapse the fragile plastic at any moment.

"Did we win?" she croaked out, trying to use abused vocal chords.

He looked up, startled from the magazine he was reading, his eyes warming at the sight of her. "Yeah, it looks like it. Mo's going to recover and the doctors think she'll be good as new when the holes heal in her arms and legs."

Corrin winced. "What happened?"

"Some Vamps used her as a pincushion. She'll be okay. Athena's out of surgery and they think she's going to be okay."

"Think?"

"She's in a coma. Took a blow to the head when Thorne blew the place up."

"He blew it up knowing she was still in there? That bastard," she rasped out.

"Hey now, take a sip of water, not to much," he said, holding a straw to her lips. "Yeah, he's a prick, no argument there, but she's okay. A few broken ribs and such, but the docs think she'll wake up soon." He gave a big smile. "The best part is she must have gotten Pedro 'cause her test came back negative for Vampirism."

She squeezed Larry's arm. "That's great. What about Harley?"

Larry looked down at her, confused. "I don't know anything about a Harley."

Corrin's face fell. "I . . . she was the girl, the pact. I was hoping she was saved."

"I doubt it, Corrin. I'm sorry, but maybe Athena can tell us something when she wakes up."

"Yeah, maybe."

"Ah, look. I'll go get a doctor to look you over. Be right back."

She lay back, trying to hold her tears at bay. She had hoped. She rolled stiffly over, giving her

tears to her pillow.

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Night fell over the remains of the house, soothing the still warm remnants like a balm. Out of the wild orchard of trees a figure weaved an unsteady trail to the house. Its head bobbed, looking over stone, metal and wood. Finally, it slowed and fell to its knees, digging frantically. "Love, love, love," it cried out. "Don't leave me." Ash and charred wood fell through fingers. At last she came to the blackened floorboards of what had been the study. "Please, love. Please tell me you knew of his hiding place." Her hands dug, ripping through melted and twisted plastic and hot metal. Blistered hands pulled, revealing a small tomb where a sleeping beauty waited, bloodied and battered.

Catherine gave a small sob and reached down to touch Tasha's skin. Cold, colder than death was how the dark skin felt. "No, love. Stay with me; I'll make it better. I'll make it all better." She pulled the woman's still body into her arms and rocked her back and forth, humming an old song she'd learned from the slaves in the field.

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Corrin stirred. Sensing someone in her room she grumbled, "No more prodding and poking."

"Ah, but if I prod and poke you, I promise you'll enjoy it," came a whispered reply.

"Harley?"

"The one and only."

Corrin turned over, blinking her eyes, trying to wake up. She sat up slowly, looking the other woman over. She sat in the same small plastic chair Larry had sat in earlier; she was reading a comic and sucking on a straw.

"Are you okay? I was worried. Larry said that he had no idea if you were alive . . . ," she babbled nervously.

Harley stopped slurping her drink, and looked up. "I'm okay. Much changed but okay. I wanted to come check on you and say goodbye."

"Goodbye? I don't . . . where are you going?"

"Away. It's not really a good idea for us to see each other. You being a hunter and me being . . . well, me."

"You're being obtuse. And I'm not a Hunter."

"You will be. They're impressed with you; they're going to ask you to join the club. On the bright side, you'll probably be Athena's new partner."

"So what?" Corrin interrupted. "I like you, Harley. I want to spend time with you outside some human food cage."

"I'm afraid that can't be."

"Why?"

Harley removed the comic and Corrin got a good look at what Harley was drinking. She had a straw stuck into a plasma bag and was happily slurping on the red liquid.

Corrin paled. "I . . . I . . . . Oh God."

"It's just a pint of O negative; I swiped it from down stairs. I fancied taking a bite or two of you, but figured that would be too forward. Seeing as we haven't even been on a date and all."

Corrin shrunk back, her hands going to the call button.

"It won't do any good. It seems I have the ability to put folks to sleep. They'll wake up once I leave."

"Why did you come here?"

"As I said - to make sure that you were all right."

Corrin frowned. "I sense an 'and' in there."

Harley stood. "There is no 'and'. I just wanted to make sure you knew where we stood. Me, Vampire. You, a slushy waiting for a straw."

Corrin struggled and got out of bed, standing up.

"What are you doing?" Harley rushed over to her side, helping her stand. "You shouldn't be out of bed. You need your rest."

"There's something you're not telling me. If you were a big bad Vampire, you wouldn't be helping me."

Harley froze. Corrin's hands came to her shoulders and then trailed down her arms to her wrists, holding them tightly. She watched with interest as Harley's eyes burned red and the smaller woman leaned in.

Suddenly realizing what she was doing she stiffened and backed away. "I'm not right. You . . . I . . .," she floundered. "I like you. In the cell it wasn't . . . I'm going to die so let's try and get a quickie. There's something - it draws me to you like a bug to a bug zapper."

Corrin tried to stifle a chuckle. "That sucked."

"Sorry." Harley blew out a breath and fidgeted. "I'm just not..."

Corrin had had enough and kissed Harley. Harley stood stunned and then began to respond. Her eyes flashed red and such nasty thoughts flooded her brain. She easily pushed Corrin back to the bed, her lips tasting the skin. She delighted in the difference in the textures between the skin of Corrin's lips and throat. She savored the delicate flavor of humanity that she licked off of Corrin's collarbone. She nipped and finally, as Corrin moaned breathlessly into her ear, she tore the smooth flesh of Corrin's neck with a fang. She parted it in a thin line, just enough to bring about a small flood of blood. The flavor burst on her tongue, different from the life she'd taken from Thorne. She could almost taste a summer day on the blood as it slid down her throat.

She wanted more. She wanted to take everything offered, wring it dry and leave it spoiled, unable to taste joy ever again. Harley jerked back, avoiding Corrin's clutching hands. "No," she cried out.

Corrin looked up, confused. She'd been in such a good place, floating in pleasure, only to come crashing back into her body. Harley sat back on the bed, her face pale and eyes back to their green depths. She noticed the fangs - one gleaming a virgin white, the other seeped in pink; it dripped from the tip onto the lip below. Then the pain came and her hand went to her throat.

Harley scrambled off the bed. "I'm sorry."

Corrin stared at her fingers. "You bit me."

"A love bite, I assure you," Harley said with a smile.

Corrin frowned.

"I'm not right in my head. Corrin, there's something wrong with me. I don't have control. I want to do such cruel evil things and then I want to help, do good, and just be myself. I'm at war with myself," Harley said in anguish.

Corrin started to go to Harley but stopped when she shrank away.

"Will I see you again?"

"I don't know."

"Harley, I can't forget this."

"You should."

They stared at each other, and this time when Corrin went to Harley, the redhead didn't resist. Their lips met slowly and Harley savored the moment, letting it linger. Then she swept her hand over Corrin's face and caught her before she collapsed to the floor. Reverently she placed her back on the bed.

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As daylight broke the sky, a figure burst into the cave entrance. Her skin smoked and burst blisters oozed blood. She ignored the three canines that stared at her, curiosity sparkling in their eyes, and walked down into the cavern until she came to the pool. Quickly she stripped and sank down deep into the water, letting it wash over her and sooth her sun-punished face and flesh. She rose back to the surface and stared at the three doggy faces, searching for one in particular. She found the silver-eyed coyote and caught a glimpse with her new sight of what human eyes could not see.

"Why?" she asked.

"You found your core of humanity?" a voice asked.

"Yes, and I gave it away. It sleeps in the heart of a woman who pierced my heart without a weapon - only a glance."

"You faced your demon?" it asked again.

"Yes, and it was the darkest part of me. She's with me still, begging to be given reign to run rampant."

"And she will on occasion. There is nothing you can do but hold onto that which makes you greater than any demon's promise."

"Love?"

"Perhaps."

She glared at the lanky coyote with silver eyes. "What do fallen angels know of love?"

The coyote remained silent on the subject.

She rolled out of the water, lying naked and wet on the stone, feeling the insanity inside her mind quiet. Smiling softly as Lupa curled into her side, a furry head resting on her stomach, she stroked the fur making it damp with her wet hand. Harley shut her eyes and let the false death steal over her body. She lay deep within the rock, away from the sun, under the devil's pitchfork, and waited for the kiss of night to reawaken her.

The End

Send comments to [zeeamy@gmail.com](mailto:zeeamy@gmail.com)

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