

Double-Cross

My Heart

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First few chapters preview

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Chapter One

“This is hardly meditation,” I heard Aiko say. I recognized her voice and her scent. “Hiding in a dark corner, with a bed sheet over your head and your knees folded up to your chest cannot be conducive to clearing your mind.”

She began to remove the makeshift canopy from atop my head. Quickly, I grabbed it and pulled it back to its former position. I hadn’t exactly been hiding. There was no way I could do that, not in the Lair, at least. This was my family’s home. Anyone could have found me with laughable ease; the same as my sensei had. Aiko’s presence alone was proof that they knew I was here.

It was then that I realized how I’d reacted when Aiko had removed the sheet. I reddened, chagrined at how childish it must have looked and was struck with a mental image of Derek teasing me. He would perhaps have done this and more, had he seen it, maybe even address me by that infuriating title of “old lady.”

Derek . . .

I gave a brief shudder at the thought of him, fingering the diamond encrusted heart shape of my tiny engagement ring. The sensation felt more like the ghost of pain, rather than the joy it was supposed to bring.

I caught Aiko’s orange spice scent, heard her light, catlike footsteps, and knew her thoughts long before she’d come into this unused room. Save Father, her mind was the most difficult of my family for me to read, but it had not always been so. Before her trauma, before the Others took her and tormented her, her heart had been quite easy to understand in spite of her natural rigidity and sternness. Now, she was guarded, cold, and for lack of a better word, broken. She had only talked to Father about what happened to her at the hands of Lothos, and only after being faced with the loss of her position as chief thaumaturgist. Still, even after three years of counseling and therapy, she had not fully recovered from those two months in

captivity, and probably never would. Even now, she was not exactly dressed for company. Barely in her panties and a white tank top undershirt, I gathered she'd merely used her Jewel to fold space into this room. Her hair was slightly unkempt, and she was without the makeup with which she was usually so fastidious.

My recent experience might have done this to me as well had it not been for Derek. I wanted so badly to speak to her about it, but not here. Perhaps we would at last have common ground; perhaps I would be able to help her with the effects of her trauma. However, there was no way I could do so here, or like this, not while having problems of my own.

"Your sense of humor leaves a lot to be desired, sensei," I told her. Truth be told, she never had much of a sense of humor to begin with, and even less in recent years.

"I wasn't joking," Aiko said flatly.

"Really, now? I murmured with sarcasm sharp between our minds. "I'd never have guessed."

"I know you preferred Roland to come." Aiko sighed as she removed the bed sheet from my head a second time. This time, I did not attempt to put it back on, but rather fussed with my curls, which tended to become unkempt rather easily because of their volume. "But he sent me in here to talk with you first. He thought you'd react better with me."

I opened my mouth to speak, indignant at first. Though I'd evolved a newfound understanding of Aiko's condition, my sensei had all the compassion of a brick! How could Roland have made such an unabashedly stupid decision?

But then I realized something that surprised me. I hadn't understood it at first, but this plan actually made sense. I noticed something unbelievable. For the first time in years, I could touch Aiko's mind. It was actually open! I could see that she very much wanted to talk.

"You're in pain, Eri-chan," Aiko said as she kneeled beside me and used her familiar name for me. She rarely did now.

"So are you," I said, catching the landscape of her mind, with echoes of torment from areas she kept hidden from me. I wanted so badly to commiserate with her, to help her know that she wasn't alone, but instead I only felt ashamed. I felt Aiko's

mental frown confirming my gaffe. Why would I put this back on her?

Shit, was the only word that came to mind.

“I’ve been in pain for a long time,” she said in a surprisingly even voice. Even more surprising was how she’d seemed to pay my words no mind. She had accepted her pain. It was now merely a part of her. She’d integrated it into her psyche. She’d even expected me to lash out like I had. “But this is about you, isn’t it?”

“Yes, it is,” I admitted. I sent my feelings of contrition to Aiko, and felt her acceptance; not a word needed to pass between us for this. Then I took a deep breath, more to steady myself than anything else.

“I learned something . . . disturbing,” I said.

“Disturbing, how?” Aiko asked.

“This mission, it . . .” I swallowed, feeling a tremble of terror begin somewhere deep within my nerves. I forced myself to become steady. My ordeal was over. Derek and his clan were safe. I had won. My mission had been accomplished. There was no need to be afraid anymore. If I was lucky, I’d never have to face him again. “It became more . . . complicated than I thought it’d be.”

Aiko nodded, her gaze falling to my left hand. “I’m guessing this is part of your . . . complication?” she said as she handled my ring between her thumb and index finger.

“A small part, but not what I wanted to say,” I said and decided to no longer mince words. “Lothos got involved. Personally.”

Aiko froze. Her eyes seemed to flash a brighter shade of crimson as they widened. I saw a tremor shoot through her, and I watched as she gritted her teeth against her extending fangs. The flare of rage in her heart was like a jab to my sternum, but she mastered it, calming down only moments after flaring up. The rage was not aimed at me, but at Lothos himself and not solely because of me.

“Did he . . . hurt you?”

Aiko’s words were careful; her thoughts again sealed up and guarded, though I felt a residual echo of shame that surrounded the now closed door that was her mind.

“Not physically,” I said, then allowed her to see what happened.

I felt the storm of her shock like a peal of thunder. Had it been a true sound, we would have been deafened by its intrusion upon the silence of the room. It took a while for Aiko to steady herself from what I had showed her; it had been a long time since I’d seen her thrown off-balance like this. She muttered some phrase in Japanese that I couldn’t catch, swallowed, and breathed in deeply.

“You should go to the Master,” she said with a renewed sense of urgency. “He has been wanting to speak with you.”

“I know.” My voice was small. God, I knew that Father wanted to talk. He’d been waiting for me with patience for three nights. He needed to not only be debriefed, but I had to tell him about what I’d learned. My mind was an open book to him, the same as all of us, his children both by direct siring and through his lieutenants. He probably knew already what had shaken me so. I wanted so badly to speak to him of this, to ease my confusion, for him to dispel the lies and deceit that Lothos had tried to plant into my mind, disguised as truth, and allay my fears. Coward that I am, as soon as I made certain that Derek’s people were safe, I left him alone when he probably needed me the most! Now the ring on my finger felt more like a weight of shame: a reminder of a betrayal rather than the promise of my deepest longing fulfilled.

I left Derek alone . . . left him to go hide in an empty guest room in the very place Father could find me . . . but I was too afraid to go and talk to him!

“I’m a bloody coward,” I said. “And still a child.”

“Eri-chan, don’t you ever say that about yourself again!” Aiko snapped, the force of her words startling me out of my melancholy. She grasped me by my shoulders and made me look straight into her eyes. “No child could ever face Lothos . . . and I saw your memories. You were far stronger than I ever was. You dishonor yourself to think otherwise.”

I wiped at the tears that began to pool at the edges of my eyes. Broken as she was, my sensei’s convictions were abundantly clear. She saw me as few others did. Of course, she had trained me since the time that I was as much a child in mind

as I was -and still am- in body.

I stood and tossed the sheet away from me. If one as torn apart inside as Aiko could see the strength within me where I was unable, then I believed I owed it to her to display that strength as well, whether it was truly there or not. I looked at my sensei as she stood by my side, and swore that I saw her give a faint smile. It was such a small thing, but it gave me hope for her. Someday, I was certain she would recover. Her concern for me was certainly proof of that.

I cast about with my mind for Father and found him: the only mind in the Lair whose gates were always closed except for the unique timbre of his presence. He was in his sitting room, as I expected, most likely waiting for me. "I'm going to see Father," I said.

I saw Roland standing outside the door to the sitting room. Aiko, once I had assured her that I would be all right, had gone to her usual haunt at the training grounds. I met him alone in the hallway. At once, I knew that he was why she hadn't followed me. The two of them had had a rather complicated relationship, made only more strained in recent years since Aiko's ordeal. The two of them spent most of the time avoiding each other, and then Roland would suddenly vanish, only for an unlucky few to catch the timbre of their minds somewhere in the Lair as they broadcast their indulgences with each other in a manner that would take any human beyond exhaustion. I came to the conclusion that this was a coping mechanism that Aiko had developed, but I never questioned her about such a private matter. I was, of course, in no position to play psychiatrist to my sensei.

One passing glance at Roland's thoughts was enough for me to know that like Father, he had been waiting for me and was about as worried as any mother for her daughter. Of course, I was, in a way, his daughter as well.

His mirrored shades, which he wore indoors or outdoors were uncharacteristically stowed away in the breast pocket of

his gray turtleneck shirt. His eyes, which most people hardly ever saw, were soft, gentle, and strikingly beautiful for a man, but he concealed them with his shades as he tended to keep the company of humans outside our circle of knowledge. He could have easily used his Jewel to disguise their crimson, catlike appearance as his original human blue with round pupils, but instead, he chose to use the shades, explaining, rather pretentiously, that it “added to his mystique.”

“Had you been waiting for me this whole time?” I asked as I quickened my pace. My joy at seeing Roland should have drawn his attention instantly, but he had been somewhat distracted, lost in his own thoughts, and so he had never sensed my approach. I saw him turn towards me, a bit startled by my voice, and then break into a wide smile. He lowered himself to my level as I ran into his arms and hugged him.

In the days of my true childhood, Father had been more than generous with his attention and time, but as the leader of our clan, he had many responsibilities. Roland had always been like a second father to me, taking care of me whenever Father’s duties took him abroad. He told me bedtime stories, took charge of my schooling, and played with me when no one else had time.

“Poppet! I was right worried about you,” he said as I kissed his cheek. “I thought something might’ve happened to you during the . . . Crikey, but that’s new!”

When I noticed that his gaze was set upon my ring, I stifled a laugh. It wasn’t as if I never wore jewelry; how could something so small be so conspicuous? I knew of few in our clan aside from Amelia who had the talent of psychometry, so he could not have detected it by Derek’s emotions inscribed upon it. But then again, this was Roland. He had an eye for jewelry, as he always had some paramour that he tried to impress.

“So who’s the lucky man?” He asked as he turned my offered finger over gently, gazing at the ring’s shape and hues of reflected light as the hallway lights struck its tiny stones.

“His name is Derek,” I said. “He’s the . . . well, they don’t really have a leader, but if they did, he’d be it. They trust him.”

“Sounds like you’re speaking of a Vagabond.”

“That’s because he is a Vagabond.” I supposed Father had

kept him in the dark about my particular mission.

Roland fixed me with a curious gaze. “So you’re going to marry a . . . wait. How could he afford a ring like this? Those are flawless pink diamonds encrusted in a 24 karat gold frame. Pretty high-class for a bum.”

“They’re not bums!” I protested. “They’re transients by choice.”

“Ah. Hobos, then?”

Roland laughed as I fumed, though I knew he was only teasing. Vagabonds were hardly “bums.” They could acquire money, and great amounts of it, as easily as any of our clan could, though it sometimes required resorting to less than scrupulous means. Long ago, there had been a devastating schism in both our ranks and those of Lothos. Certain members of our kind, disillusioned by our war, chose to take no sides. Vagabonds were their descendants. Their clan sizes ranged from individuals to close-knit “family” groups of sire and fledglings to small nomadic tribes, all scattered across the world, with no allegiance to anyone but themselves. They generally got along with each other, but shied away from us. Our respective clans, in turn, tended to stay out of their way unless they interfered with us, became a threat to our secrecy, or asked for help. The latter was far more likely these days, as Lothos and his minions occasionally used them for target practice, or hounded them if they took in defectors from his clan. Otherwise, they followed their own rules.

“Well, hobo or not, I know you think the world of him,” Roland said, and his face softened. “And of course, he thinks the world of you, considering the ring. All things considered, I hope he makes you happy.”

“I know he will,” I said, not bothering to hide my feelings. Idly, I played with the ring and smiled, then felt the sting of shame over how I had to leave Derek. It felt forcibly thrust upon me as a reminder to what was soon to come. Roland, however, did not seem to catch that part of my thoughts. Instead, he interjected with both an unexpected and rather inappropriate question.

“So, ah . . . have you two . . . ?”

“That’s private!” I snapped. Instantly, I submerged those

intimate memories in a well so deep inside my mind that I was certain that Roland would not be able to detect them. “And you asked it in front of Father’s sitting room! What the bloody hell?”

“Sorry, sorry,” Roland said, making emphatic placating gestures. “I got a bit carried away, is all.” But you know the Master will probably look even deeper than that.”

I couldn’t challenge that; Roland and I both knew Father well enough to know that nothing remained hidden from him if he chose to look into the events of the past. Surprisingly, I was more comfortable with this prospect than I was with Roland doing the same. “I know,” was all I could say, but not without some irritation. This, however, was the least of my worries. Father was not overprotective, but he could be intrusive. It was never without reason, but it had the disobliging habit of involving the things you most wanted to remain unseen. And so I sighed, steeling myself for what lay ahead. Father was just inside those doors, and though all I could ever feel from him was that powerful presence, I was certain he knew that I was here.

“He’s waiting,” I told Roland as I faced the door. “I’ll see you after it’s done.”

“You’ll probably want to see Derek first,” Roland said. Then he held his hands up defensively at the withering glare I gave in return. “I didn’t pry, poppet,” he explained in a gentle voice. “That was something you’ve been thinking about since I saw you. I couldn’t help but pick it up.”

I frowned, letting go of my emotions. Again, Roland had been right. He was more sensitive to my feelings than most and was always my choice for moral support . . . at least since Aiko’s misfortune. I knew that I owed Derek an explanation. I could only imagine how cross he would be with me. My frown slowly gave way to a wan smile, and I hugged Roland’s waist.

“Thank you,” I said, as I felt his hand stroke the curls atop my head.

“As you said, he’s waiting,” Roland reminded me.

I nodded, and gave him the mental equivalent of a kiss before knocking on the door.

Father's spacious, high-ceilinged sitting room was also his study. Near the entrance door and beside a fireplace set into the nearby wall to the right were several high-backed leather couches that surrounded a coffee table. A rounded cherry wood table surrounded by lacquered wooden chairs sat in the middle of the room and was used for meetings with his chief Lieutenants. Shelves upon shelves of books lined every wall of the elongated, rectangular room, broken only by alcoves where the windows were and the door to his chambers on the opposite side of the wall where the fireplace was built. Standing lamps were set at even intervals beside the shelves. Father had them all switched off at the moment, opting instead for the full moon's light through the open windows for illumination. This was too dim for humans; but for our kind, it was more than adequate.

I sat across from Father at the coffee table. A carafe was set between us, and we each held a wine glass of its former contents. The blood was surprisingly fresh and warm, and almost as satisfying as that which had come from a pure source. Father had obviously made preparations prior to my arrival.

"I hope you don't think I'm angry," Father began. His brow furrowed ever so slightly as he brought the glass to his lips. Its contents left a stain that stood out upon his ivory skin like dye on a snow drift. "I'm just concerned. To say I was surprised that you came home, and then hid from me for the last three nights . . . well, I'm certain you would be confused as well."

"I'm sorry I didn't report to you, Father." Despite the fact that I had not fed in three days, I'd barely taken a sip out of my glass. I was quite hungry, but still too nervous to feed. "Did you send an envoy?"

"I went to the site personally," Father said.

"Personally?" I sat forward in my seat, almost spilling the contents of my glass. Not only had Father rarely done this unless it was a matter of extreme importance, but I couldn't imagine how his arrival would have affected the vagabonds. They'd been distrustful even of me -more so once they learned who I truly was. I had to earn their respect by inches. How did they respond to Father?

"I spoke with Derek most of the time," Father said,

answering my thoughts.

I smiled with relief. "Then he's awake?"

Father nodded. "He'd only just woken up when I arrived. I learned about you two quickly enough. His mind is quite well-guarded for a Vagabond, though. I never expected that."

"Was he angry?" I asked after a very uncomfortable silence passed between us. I suspected that he had been waiting for me to ask it.

"Angry that you'd vanished?" Father wasn't being accusatory; nevertheless, I felt as if his words were passing a death sentence. I bit my lower lip, unable to hide my shame, would that I could. I replied only with a vague nod.

"No, I wouldn't say that he was angry," Father said after slipping into a momentary thoughtful state. "But he was confused. I know you left him a letter, but I think he was expecting, or rather, hoping that someone from our clan would come and fill him in on what happened with you." He grinned, and I heard him chuckle. "I just don't think he expected me to show up, of all people."

I couldn't help but laugh at this myself. "So, what did you pry from his mind?"

"Pry?" Father fixed me with a blank stare.

"You didn't interrogate him?" I was surprised, to say the least.

"There was no reason to," Father said. "Derek was very forthcoming. He told me everything he could about what happened during the past month involving your mission . . . and involving you and him. Besides, it would be disrespectful to tear into the mind of my future son-in-law, wouldn't it?" He gestured toward my left hand and smiled in his gentle way: the way that made me love him even more. "That's a beautiful ring he gave you by the way."

"Thank you," I said, feeling my face grow somewhat warm. I wanted to use that comment to derail the conversation, to distract Father somehow, but I knew it would be useless. He was too meticulous for that. And besides, he would immediately know my intent, so I didn't bother. "So he told you everything?"

"Everything he felt comfortable giving," Father replied. "There were some details he held back, but I didn't dig any

deeper. He told me that you would be able to fill in the holes . . . that it felt right that you should.”

“He would say that,” I murmured, turning away from Father. I took a deeper draft from my glass, nearly emptying it. The rush of pleasure from its contents gave me a bit more courage; nevertheless, I swallowed against my annoyingly tenacious remnant of fear. “And he’s right. There are . . . things I know that he doesn’t. Things . . . that I was told.”

“Told by whom?” Father asked.

I could no more hold back my tears than I could hold back my thirst when it would come. I drew in a ragged breath and bit my lower lip until even my retracted fangs threatened to pierce the skin. Though I could not detect even a trace of emotion from his mind, I saw my Father’s expression become increasingly less placid as he observed me. He leaned forward and placed his half-full glass upon the coffee table as his hands gripped the arms of his chair.

“Elisa . . . who was it?” I heard him say, even more insistent. I could bear it no longer.

“Lothos.”

Only the senses of my kind can pick up movements made at preternatural speed. I saw Father rise from his chair and move forward, leaping over the coffee table and coming to rest on his knees before me, faster than any human could detect.

“Child, what did he tell you?” He said. God, I had never seen him this way, nor heard him sound so alarmed! Through the blurriness of my tears, I could see how his normally gentle eyes were wide, and his slitted pupils dilated. As Aiko had been when she saw what was in my mind, his fangs were extended, and his face was a mask of pleading and uncertainty. If I hadn’t known better, I would have said that he was afraid.

“Father . . .” I said as he took my hands into his own. “Aren’t you looking into my mind? Don’t you see it?”

“Your thoughts are a jumble,” Father said. His face was drawn as he shook his head, “and they’re suffused with so much emotion. You, me, Derek, Lothos . . . And I’m afraid that my own emotions are resonating with yours. This makes it difficult to see the whole story.”

I had never heard of this happening before. It must have

indeed been a very rare situation. I had never known just how deep Father's understanding of my mind went, but this was unmistakable. He had just admitted to being unable to read my mind. Despite my initial amazement, I tried to clear my thoughts, to push away as much of the emotional static as I could, and give Father as vivid a picture as possible. I knew that clearing this path would open him up to everything that I experienced, even things that I held private, but I could not afford to be embarrassed by more private details. I wanted him to know how it all came together, and what had happened between me and Lothos. Perhaps I would regret it, but even I had to know what this meant. I was terrified, but at the same time, I was determined.

"It really started in the beginning, when you sent me on the mission," I said as I closed my eyes and opened myself to Father's unknowable mind. "It's . . . complicated . . . a lot more so than you could believe. I don't want to do this, Father, but I need to show you the whole story."

I felt Father's hands touch my temples and guide me towards him. I leaned forward and felt his forehead gently touch my own. For a moment -the blink of an eye, actually, I was privy to the unfathomable depth of his mind. Ten thousand years of experiences: love, joy, rage, pain, tears, gladness . . . I was breathless with astonishment, despite the woefully ephemeral experience. All the memories flashed by my mind's eye with incalculable brevity. I could hold on to nothing -and then a great door shut upon them. I had become aware only of Father's presence once again and only as one is aware of an unseen person in the same room. He became a completely passive observer as my mind opened the stage of events that began one month ago.

Chapter Two

I had wasted little time after Father gave me the orders. The mission was about as priority one as it could get, but it had surprised me that this involved a tribe of Vagabonds. We'd had dealings with them before, rarely ever pleasant, as some tribes would overstep their bounds and threaten the veil of secrecy—the mutually advantageous, unspoken pact between all our kind that we honored, regardless of clan. Fortunately, this visit was not over an issue of such a breach. There were no sloppy members of our kind who couldn't keep their fangs sheathed or went on a blood-soaked tear, leaving the local human law enforcement officials baffled and burdening our clans with the very grueling and unpleasant task of cleanup. This assignment would be far more pleasant . . . relatively speaking.

I folded space to the coordinates of the vagabonds' encampment, stepping from the quiet and comfort of our Lair and into the unknown. Father had told me that swift communication with the group had been impossible, as they'd gone radio and phone silent after their leader's brief exchange with him. At this point, the clan was cut off from the grid: no cell phones, radios, or Jewels. I was none too comfortable with this. I feared my arrival would be something of a surprise for any group not in the know, but Father assured me that I would be expected by at least the one who requested our aid, a vampire by the name of Derek.

I found myself in a densely wooded area, but the scent of my kind was unmistakable as I carefully moved towards the glow of lights ahead. I had intentionally arrived outside of the encampment as not to frighten them. My movements were also casual and deliberately nonthreatening. I was unsure about how many of the lot would know of my arrival. I did not need to reach out with my thoughts to know how guarded and tense their minds were. The feeling suffused the area just ahead. If Lothos had been harassing them recently, as Father had said, then they indeed had good reason to be on edge.

My concentration on that stress was perhaps the reason why I didn't notice the approach of the two guards. This was rectified when a flashlight from the top of a ridge ahead nearly blinded me.

"You there! Hands where we can see them!" One of the two barked in a gravelly voice. I couldn't see him through the glare of his partner's flashlight, but the posture of his silhouette suggested he was carrying a rifle of some kind. I froze, but not because I was afraid. Though it still hurt to get shot, buckshot wouldn't kill me. I could use my Jewel to deflect it, but I preferred not to start an unnecessary fight.

"Drop the purse and get your hands up!" I heard gravel-voice say. I let my supply satchel slide to the ground -slightly miffed at him having called it a "purse"- and showed my hands with no sudden moves. There was no reason to be aggressive; they were just nervous. Well, at least the one with the flashlight was. Gravel-voice was releasing a rather large amount of hostility along with his fear.

Let them overreact if they must, I thought to myself, forcing calm in spite of the tension I sensed from the two men ahead. Show them you're no threat.

"It's just a kid, Joe!" I heard the one who held the flashlight say to his partner.

"Like hell it is!" Gravel-voice -Joe- thrust his finger my way. "You can't smell her, Wadih? She's one of us!"

"Ain't never seen a kid vampire." I could sense genuine surprise mixed with confusion at the sight of me from the one named Wadih as he scratched his head with his free hand. "But you're right about the smell." He then projected his voice my way. "You there! What are you doing here? You one of the mind-readers or shape-shifters?"

Their pithy names for our clans were inadequate to say the least. It would have been a mistake to assume that all of my clan were "mind readers," just as much as saying that all of Lothos's clan were shape-shifters. Nearly all of my clan was telepathic to some extent, but we did have a few who had honed the opposing talent, usually found in Lothos' clan. It was well-known that Lothos had had a few telepaths in his ranks, but I didn't quibble over details.

“Fa- Talante sent me,” I replied to Wadih. I hardly ever needed to refer to my Father by name; it felt somewhat awkward, especially saying it to someone who was pointing a gun at me.

“So you’re a mind-reader, then?” Joe asked.

“I can read minds,” I said, correcting him.

“Why’d your master send you here?”

“I was invited.”

“Bullshit.”

“So I wasn’t invited?” I sensed he was trying to hide something. I had to keep him talking and make him tip his hand somehow.

“Well, what if we did invite you?”

That did it. I stood in silent consternation. He’d just denied that I had been invited, and now he was lying to me outright. Did he think I was a total idiot?

“You didn’t invite me,” I said, tapping my forehead as a reminder to him of my abilities, “But somebody did. You’re not going to be able to lie to me.”

I supposed that this was a proverbial “no-win” situation, since I felt Joe’s panic spike to unbelievable levels.

“Get out of my mind!” he screamed, and I heard him cock his rifle.

I guess that was a bad idea, I thought, cringing inside from embarrassment.

“I’m not in your mind,” I said, trying, however futilely, to defuse the situation, “but I can read what’s on the sur-”

“And you call me a liar, you little midget?” Joe snapped, stepping over my words with panicked fury and a voice that was several octaves higher. “Keep flapping your little baby doll lips now! I dare you!”

His silhouette shifted, and I was certain he would fire if I said the wrong thing. Actually, I surmised that he might fire anyway. His fear had made him irrational. Even I could feel Wadih’s helplessness. He was wary, but didn’t see me as a threat. This Joe, on the other hand, was itching to shoot something.

A little bit jumpy doesn’t even begin to describe them, I thought with chagrin. I was beginning to wonder if Father had made a mistake by selecting me.

“Joe! Wadih! What are you doing?” The voice came from

beyond the ridge, and I became aware of another, much calmer and self-assured mind approaching, though it betrayed the youth of the voice I'd heard. It was male, but sounded only a bit more mature than the timbre of my own prepubescent vocal cords. It also contained a slight rasp, as if puberty had not quite caught up with him yet. The flashlight's glare still annoyingly blocked my view, but I could see the silhouette of the other person who appeared at the hilltop. He was significantly shorter than the other two men, though he seemed taller than me. Joe's sudden shift from loud and posturing to deferential, however, told me volumes more than even the new arrival's air of authority.

"Well, is someone gonna say something?" I heard the stranger say. I felt the force of his personality prod against the two men. Their fear and respect were quite evident, though Joe resisted. Wadih remained silent more out of confusion. I suspected that Joe was the one who took initiative, but this felt like an unusual situation. It was, in effect, a battle of wills between Joe and the stranger. Despite his respect for this shorter individual, there emanated a background of carefully hidden anger.

"We caught an intruder," Wadih finally said, taking initiative. This, I gathered from his apprehension, was most likely a rare thing. "Says Talante, the mind-readers' leader, called her here ... that someone asked for her."

"It was me," the stranger said almost on top of Wadih's last words. "Let her in."

"Derek, I don't think that's a good idea," Joe had started to say, but the one I now knew was Derek cut him off.

"You guys put me in charge, right?" Derek's thoughts aimed that question at Joe more than Wadih. I could sense Joe's assent but couldn't see whether or not he nodded.

"I thought my putting you in security could put your trigger-happiness to good use," Derek continued, "but it still hasn't stopped you from jumping at shadows, Joe. So, do your damn job and stop worrying about who I invite to our home." I then felt a flash of near-fury from both of them after what came out of his mouth. "You sure as hell didn't care about it before. If you had, we wouldn't be in this mess."

"You're never going to let me live it down, are you, little

bro?” Joe retorted, and this made me confused for a brief moment. I felt no resonance between their minds as was what existed between two individuals who were blood-related, but I came to notice that there was a deep familiarity that existed between the two. I supposed they had known each other for a long time. I wished I could see them properly . . . and that was when I found myself really wanting Wadih do get that bloody flashlight out of my face. “And what’s up with not telling me about this? If we were waiting for some kind of ambassador, shouldn’t I have been the first to know?”

“You would’ve been,” Derek replied, and his silhouette shifted to suggest that he’d glanced at me, “but the harassment by the shape-shifters has only been getting worse. I’m almost certain we have a mole, and the fewer who know about this little China doll’s arrival, the better. And as for not letting you live it down . . . take responsibility and then we’ll talk.”

Live what down? I thought as I saw Derek gesture in the opposite direction. “Take the other side of the encampment,” he said to Joe. “Relieve Wilson. Wadih, you have this area. And cut off your light. You can see well enough without it, and you’ve been shining that thing right into her eyes for the last several minutes.”

Wadih blessedly switched off the flashlight. I lowered my arms, surprised at how stiff they were, and rubbed at my eyes where the large blur frustratingly blocked my vision almost as badly as the flashlight had.

“You, down there,” I heard Derek call out as I slung my satchel over my shoulder. I squinted in his direction, wishing that I could see him better. “You want to stay there all night?”

The ridge rose about ten or eleven feet, a height I could easily jump, and I quickly joined Derek at the top.

“Not a word of this to the others,” I heard him say to Joe and Wadih. Both then moved with preternatural speed into the woods to their assigned posts and out of sight. I hadn’t gotten a good look at them before they left, and I felt somewhat annoyed by that. At least with Joe, I wanted to know the face of the man I would need to give a wide berth to, or possibly confront.

The area was lit by a series of floodlights, which were the source of the glow that I saw upon my arrival. I stood beside

Derek and the blur in my vision had diminished somewhat to where I could at last see him. He was a head and a half taller than I was, but significantly shorter than the adult-height Joe and Wadih. Now I saw why. It was obvious he had been turned at a young age like I had been, but not quite as young as me. Still, as adults went, I was a comparable height to him since I had been well on my way through my first growth spurt when I was turned. Because of this, I was quite a bit taller than most girls who were my physical age at the time.

Derek's most prominent feature was his nose. It was like a slightly curved isosceles triangle set between sad-looking eyes. His hair was a very dark brown that was slicked back save for several wisps that touched his high forehead. There were a few sparse strands of stubble on his strong chin, and I imagined that that was a frustrating position to be in- frozen so close to adulthood with only the beginnings of a beard. At least I hadn't heard any cracking in his voice in spite of the rasp; I couldn't imagine what it would be like to have been turned in the middle of puberty. As far as I could tell, he seemed to have dodged that bullet, or at least the worst of it.

"Derek, I presume?" I said, extending my hand. "My name is Elisa."

Derek briefly cast a narrow-eyed gaze my way before taking my offered hand. He shook it, but I knew that he did this for cordiality rather than out of friendliness. This troubled me. I knew that Vagabonds didn't trust us, and so I wanted to make a good first impression. This was apparently lost on him.

"So you're the one Talante sent?" Derek asked, gesturing for me to follow as he set off on a makeshift path through the woods. I kept pace beside him as we passed between the rows of floodlights.

"You're the one who asked for our help?" I said in return.

"Not by choice, believe me," Derek said. His voice was an indistinct almost-monotone, affected to perhaps disguise his feelings, but this didn't shield me from his mind. His simmering dislike was fairly obvious and not unexpected, but not exactly aimed at me. Rather, it was a generalized disdain towards all of our kind . . . at least the ones associated with Father's clan and Lothos'. I frowned and wondered how I could reach him. I

wanted to put him at ease, to let him know that we weren't the bad guys, but I knew very little about Vagabonds. Many were turned and raised by their respective clans, but others had been members of our fold or part of the Others, and had run away from the war for their own personal reasons. Turning him to our point of view would perhaps be an exercise in futility, but I at least wanted to understand him.

"If this hadn't happened to us, we'd be happy to never see you guys. But at least you're not trying to hunt us down."

"So you supposed the enemy of your enemy would be your friend?" I asked.

"More like the enemy of our enemy would be useful," Derek corrected. "Don't be naive, little girl, I—"

"I am not a little girl!" I stopped in my tracks and grabbed the sleeve of Derek's charcoal gray hoodie. He fancied himself something of a leader, and I sensed that had I not done this, he would have been content to ignore me. I needed to make a stronger show of force to let him know that doing such a thing would be a bad idea. I believe I succeeded when I spun him around until he faced me. My strength was enhanced by my Jewel, and I felt him resist at first. It must have been quite a shock to him to see me overpower him so easily.

"How old do you think I am?" I said, keeping a hard gaze into his eyes. They as crimson as my own, though nowhere near as large.

"Well, that's hardly fair," Derek said, still nonplussed at what I'd done. "You know that's impossible to tell. You could be three or three thousand... who knows?"

"Oh, bloody hell," I whispered, keeping no restraint on my exasperation. "Do I look like I'm three?" I was incensed at his having made such an asinine guess. I felt my fangs extend, and I was certain my eyes had flashed. His decision to be either coy or obtuse was a sticking point to this charade. If I were too old, he'd figure trying to play the alpha male would get him a trip to whatever clinic they had to reattach a severed limb; too young and he could figure out a way to get back at me. "Yes, I know we all look whatever age we were when we were turned, unless we were elderly, and then the process reverses the aging to where we look almost thirty. But . . . three?"

I felt Derek's ego finally cave in, and he capitulated. "All right, I'm sorry! Bad call, okay? How old are you, then?"

"I don't know if I should tell you now," I said, trying to avoid the appearance of sulking. "You called my Father, asking for help, and when I arrive, I see that you've obviously made it a point not to like me even though you barely know me from Eve. Why should I be accommodating for you when you're obviously not interested in treating me with the same courtesy?"

Derek's burgeoning anger at my furthering onslaught began to melt away into an uncomfortable shame, which he tried in vain to bury. There was, however, something else, but it was buried out of my immediate detection beneath many veils. Feeling that he should be grateful that private thoughts were sacrosanct to us except in dire situations, out of respect, I didn't pursue what he hid. He sighed deeply as his shoulders sagged and his clenched fists loosened. He beckoned me to follow as he continued down the lit path. When he spoke, I realized that the only thing that had not yet relaxed were his fangs. They were still extended, and slurring his speech almost comically.

"I'm sorry. I really am. I just don't have a lot of good things to say about either your clan or the Others. It's a long boring story that I'd prefer not to get into. But you're right. I did contact your- Wait! Did you say 'Father'?"

I think I froze for several moments because I felt his anger begin to flare again. He must have thought that my omitting that detail was some sort of a betrayal or obfuscation. I cringed inside, cursing myself. I had wanted to keep that secret. I would have enough issues to deal with working with a tribe of Vagabonds, and I didn't want to make them worry more about my pedigree.

"Well?" Derek said in a terse voice, and I could feel his impatience rising geometrically. "Didn't you?"

This time, I was the one who sighed.

"Yes. Talante is my father -adopted father, actually. But he raised me since I was truly a child."

"Holy freaking crap." Derek ran his fingers through his hair as he looked at me with new eyes. His thoughts were confusion as he re-assessed me, not sure what to think now. "So the king brought his princess to come to our rescue?"

“He’s not a king,” I retorted. “And I’m hardly a princess. I’m his daughter, but I’m no different from anyone else in our clan.”

“You’re too modest,” Derek said. “You’re the daughter of the father of your clan and half of our kind. You’ve gotta be treated with some deference, or at least were spoiled rotten.”

I bared my fangs and cast a hard gaze at him, but this time, he did not back down.

“Look, I’m not saying that you are spoiled. I know your father wouldn’t have sent someone who wasn’t competent, or who doesn’t have more than a few tricks up her sleeve for this job. So you and I both know that you’re more than just some goodwill ambassador. From the way you talk and carry yourself, I know you’re a lot older than you look, and I’ll bet you’ve probably figured that we’re alike in at least that way. I think it’s fair to say that neither of us were born yesterday. So let’s not play verbal footsie anymore. I’m Derek, and I was the one who contacted your father. You’ll excuse my abrasiveness from earlier; I haven’t had good experiences from either clan.”

I believe I smiled at him for the first time then. At last, there was some honesty. I felt free to be more forthcoming with him.

“I’m one hundred seventy-three years old,” I said. “I was turned when I was ten.”

Derek gave a low whistle. “Guess I was way off, then,” he remarked, giving a rather silly-looking smirk. “You’re an old lady.”

“That’s even worse than thinking I was three!” I said with a scowl.

“Geez, you need to lighten up just a bit.” Derek’s shoulders shook with a silent laugh, and I knew from his thoughts that he meant no disrespect. However, I figured his brand of humor seemed tailor-made to rub me the wrong way. “Besides, compared to you, I’m the ‘little kid.’ I’m thirty-four; I was fourteen when I was turned.”

“Now that is a very peculiar irony if I’ve ever seen one,” I said with genuine intrigue as we entered the encampment. The lit path hadn’t been that long, but we had been walking slowly from the slope in the hill. I wasn’t quite certain, however, if the pace was in order to allow time for pleasantries or to just

establish Derek's original idea of "an understanding."

The encampment was larger than I'd expected: a large clearing filled with several small trailer homes attached to various weathered-looking cars and trucks, about five or six Khyam tents, and a couple of large, Winnebago-type RVs, all arranged in a circle. A fire was set in the center of the clearing, but with no signs or scents of human food -I suspected it was more for ambiance. A few vagabonds, three men and two women, stood around talking; all of them froze when they caught my scent. Their spike in wariness at the sight of me made the very air seem unsettling. I saw one of the females bare her fangs my way, nearly slapping me with intense dislike before she vanished at preternatural speed into the camp's shadows. I'd barely gotten a glimpse of her, but she had straight falls of strikingly black hair that made the rest of her seem downright ghostly. The others simply stared at me. One of them, a very wide-framed man with a rounded, weathered-looking face and thick crown of graying hair, seemed eerily familiar. I believe it was because he had what looked like a parakeet on his shoulder. This made him seem not only familiar, but peculiar as well, since animals did not usually take to us.

"Are there more?" I asked Derek, nodding to the group.

"More than those few?" Derek's voice had lowered to a subvocal level that would be difficult for even our kind to hear from far away. "Yeah, we're about ten in all. Some float in and out. I told them you were a newbie."

"You told them?" I said. At first I was confused, and then it all fell together. "You can read minds? Like me?"

"Yeah." Derek made a vague nod, and I felt nothing from him that resembled pride. "I try not to do it often; it freaks some of the others out. I talked to them just now to tell them your cover story."

"So you're passing me off as a newcomer?" I said.

Derek flexed his shoulders and exhaled. "That's supposed to be the plan, China doll. Your dad and I didn't talk for long, but we agreed to that."

I opened my mouth to protest his newest attempt at sticking me with another nickname, but decided to let it stay as he seemed more comfortable with it than first names. Besides, that

one was not too bad. Besides, I was certain that my given name made me sound even more of an “old lady” anyway.

“Oh, by the way,” Derek said with abrupt caution, “the one who ran away is Deb. She hasn’t been with us long, but she keeps to herself most of the time. For some reason, she doesn’t take well to noobs. I’d steer clear of her.”

“. . . As well as Joe, I guess,” I said in a quiet voice.

Derek’s mind became troubled at that name, but his thoughts submerged those feelings more quickly than I could sort them out.

“I’ll . . . talk with Joe,” he said.

“What is he to you?” I asked, prodding some.

“No offense, but that’s not your business.” Derek spoke tersely, though it sounded as if he was trying not to. I felt his flicker of shame at having spoken that way. His voice was much softer when he spoke again. “It’s . . . complicated.”

“As you wish,” I said without accusation and decided to change the subject. “So where will I be sleeping?”

“With me, it seems,” Derek answered. It was then that I noticed that we were headed for the largest of the RVs: one with brown and gold patterns on its chassis. “I cleaned out the living room area for you. The couch is almost the size of a bed. I also installed new sun shutters so you won’t fry in the morning.”

“How . . . thoughtful,” I said, uncertain as to how to take that information. I was sure that Derek didn’t mean it, but I wasn’t sure if he realized just how morose his assurances had sounded. Did he have any idea how indescribably painful sunlight burns were? And because they destroyed tissue, blood and all, they took much longer to heal than normal wounds.

“Well, the night is early,” I said, changing the subject and hoping Derek hadn’t picked up my mild discomfort and near-offense at his statement, “so settling in can wait. We ought to get on to plotting a strategy.”

“That’ll be between you and me,” Derek said. “Remember, you’re the newbie, and we need to keep that as our story. You’ll be put upon enough in the coming nights; but if they knew you were from the mind-readers, they’d eat you alive.”

“They don’t know me very well,” I said.

“They think they know enough,” Derek replied, reaching

in his pocket for his remote key. We arrived at the RV and he unlocked the side door. Derek entered first and flipped a toggle switch. The lights came on as I followed him up the stair well to the living room.

I was greeted by a spacious, carpeted interior. I had never actually been inside an RV before, and I was impressed, both by its size and its appearance of opulence. I'd never expected Vagabonds to live like this, but then again, I hadn't had many dealings with Vagabonds . . . or rather, none that I preferred to remember. They certainly didn't involve my getting a glimpse into their personal lives.

The sitting area beside the cab was quite nice and well-kept in spite of the pervasive background scent of tobacco mixed with cleaning chemicals. I believe that humans would have not been able to smell it, but very little escaped our kind's olfactory acuity. The furniture was leather and the cabinets in the kitchen area were made of varnished plywood. At the rear end of the vehicle, I glimpsed a very lived-in queen size bed through a crack in the sliding door.

"The sofa converts into a bed," Derek explained, gesturing towards the alcove near the cab, set across from a big screen TV. Even folded up, the sofa seemed twice as big as my bed at the Lair and far larger than my coffin. There was a blanket and pillow situated at one end for me. "The bathroom is next to the bedroom, and I have chilled blood packs in the fridge. You can warm them in the sink . . ." He cast me a brief sideways glance, ". . . or you can go hunting with me whenever there's fresh prey about."

I scowled briefly at the thought of hunting for humans. He knew that our clan found that to be uncouth and dangerous, even though we trained ourselves never to feed until death and to alter memories. Few vampires did it, except for emergencies; Roland was one of the few who still engaged in the activity for the sport of it, and his choice of prey was always young females -small wonder there, considering his notorious sexual proclivities. Father always gave him a hard time about it, and it was only because he was a master at memory alteration that he was given a marginal pass.

"I'll take the blood packs," I said after a groan. I knew that

I was consigning myself to meager living for who knew how long. Blood packs, depending on how long the blood had been preserved, were emergency rations in our clan: barely palatable compared to fresh blood from a live host, which we always had available in our villages.

“Sorry, but we don’t have humans hanging around us like needy babies,” Derek said. “We don’t have time to groom and care for them, or keep them as our pets. We stay on the road. Most humans don’t take well to that. And most of us haven’t exactly mastered our thirst like you.”

“You needn’t resort to needling me about it,” I replied, setting down my satchel next to the sofa. “We understand why you do what you must. We choose a different way.”

Derek’s face gave a slight twist into a vague scowl as plopped himself into the couch catty-corner to the sofa. “You mean a better way, right?”

“Derek, are you trying to provoke me?” I allowed a certain warning edge to creep into my voice as my fangs extended. I sensed a feeling of chagrin dampen his previous feelings of bitterness, and he seemed to capitulate as he lolled his head back and slouched, legs outward. I felt that same ghost of a sensation rise and then vanish within him before I could fully parse it out.

“No, I’m not trying to provoke you,” Derek answered me at the end of an especially long sigh. He was obviously in a less than cordial mood, and I felt him berate himself inwardly. His left hand went to the pocket of his hoodie and removed a box of Swisher Sweets. He sighed as he opened the hinge and drew out a cigarillo, then brought it to his mouth. He then glanced my way, and placed it back into the box, a flutter of something akin to embarrassment touching my mind. I found it almost amusing that he would be so caustic about my clan, but at the same time, feel so self-conscious about smoking around me.

“I’ve just . . . got issues, is all. And then this crap we’re now in. Of all the shitty luck.”

“Well, I’m here to hopefully make your luck better,” I said, and sat myself in the sofa. I curled up my knees and leaned forward. “And to do that, I’m going to need to know some things beyond what Father told me. So start talking, if you’d

be so kind.”

Chapter Three

“You know what you’re here to protect, right?” Derek asked.

“Father told me that one of you had a baby,” I replied. “A little girl, if memory serves? A dhampir?”

“Deb’s taking care of her,” Derek said with a nod. “And it wasn’t one of us. Mother was human. She’s dead now; that was a nightmare to cover up. Somewhere along the line, Lothos must’ve gotten wind of it. Seems like everywhere we go, he’s been hounding us. He’s been picking us off one by one, every time we make a stop somewhere, probably so she’ll have no protectors when he comes for her. We’ve been keeping on the road for the most part and resting out in the boondocks, so he’ll have a harder time finding us. We also shut off all our cell phones for the time being and ditched the road. There used to be twenty-five of us; we sent most of them to other clans or to lay low in different areas around the country. Now there are only the few I told you about. I feel like tonight’s the first quiet night we’ve had in about two weeks.”

“Were you able to kill your attackers?” I asked.

“Sometimes yes, sometimes no.” I saw him reach for his pack of cigarillos, then place them back in his pocket with a wave of frustration.

“I don’t mind if you smoke, you know,” I said, betraying a small laugh. “It’s not like we can get lung cancer. And besides, it’s your home.”

“I know,” Derek groaned. “It’s just . . . well, it’s silly, but it’s more habit than anything. I don’t smoke around kids. I can’t bring myself to do it.” He held out his hand as I opened my mouth to speak. “And I know you’re not a ‘kid.’ It doesn’t matter. You look like one, and my habit kicks in, and it discourages my other habit.”

I gave another laugh, and I felt that same ghost of a feeling—quickly suppressed and hidden, erupt in Derek’s mind. I longed to probe further, but for some reason, it had such an air

of privacy about it that it felt as if doing so would be a violation of some sort.

“I’m sorry,” I said, not knowing why I said it. “You were saying that you were able to kill some of the disciples Lothos sent after you?”

“Took out one of them with a crossbow tipped with a phosphorus explosive,” Derek explained. “Got him right in the head. Joe’s a hell of a sniper; saw the bastard approaching from three miles out. Once he got in range, he was toast. Literally.”

“Bet he tasted terrible,” I quipped, and this time Derek laughed. I have to admit that I was relieved at that sound. It was the first time I saw him laugh fully and genuinely since we’d met, and until that point, I’d begun to wonder if he was just a wanker by nature. Unfortunately, it was short-lived, and he soon retreated back into his previous melancholy.

“The other two were . . . more difficult. Stealthier. They managed to take us out before we got to them. One almost got to the baby, but Deb’s a pyrokinetic. She doesn’t do it often, but he sure as hell didn’t see it coming. Cost us a trailer, though. After that, they’ve been coming once every two to three days. Joe and the perimeter guard have been able to take them out, but we knew it was only a matter of time. I suspected they were tracking us somehow; that’s why I ordered all our cell phones and computers shut down, save Marie-Laure’s. She’s our resident hacker.”

“I gather Father is the last one you contacted,” I said, and Derek nodded.

“As for how I knew his number, I’ve been ‘proselytized’ by your clan before. Some weirdo girl who looked more like a ghost than anything else, insisted I have his number. She spoke in riddles like she’d been auguring my future or something.”

That piqued my interest. There was only one of our clan who fit that description. I’d heard others describe her this way. “Did she have long, platinum blond hair?” I asked.

“Yeah,” Derek nodded. “And she was a-”

“-little bit taller than me,” I said, finishing his sentence.

“And she was-”

“-blind.”

Derek stared at me, mouth agape. “So you know her?”

“Sarah is a prophetess among our clan,” I explained, and I saw the image his mind produced. It was Sarah; there was no doubt. The sightless, pale eyes, devoid of crimson, backswept veil, and light blue sash-bound dress were unmistakable. She was only half a foot taller than me, but had been an adult when she was turned, only very petite in stature. Her breast development beneath her dress was plainly apparent while I remained with a chest of a little boy. “She’s one of the oldest of our clan, possibly all of our kind, next to Father. There’s very little she’s said about her past except that she was born in Mesopotamia, and was one of Father’s first generation. It’s said that she traded her eyesight for the ability to see the future. She keeps to herself most of the time, and only comes out when she has something important to say. She’ll seek out the person it involves in order to say it. Otherwise, we often won’t see her for months or even years at a time. She must have seen something in your future where you would need to speak with Father. Be grateful that she did.”

“I didn’t appreciate it at the time,” Derek said, “hell, I was about to crumple her paper up and throw it away, but then I figured, ‘When a woman who looks like a ghost and seems to see better than you, even though she’s blind, tells you to call that number in your darkest hour, and help will be on the way, you’d better give it a second thought.’ So I kept the number around.”

“Sarah is always a bit unsettling when people first meet her,” I assured him. “But at least now I know how you were able to get hold of Father. I thought it odd that a small tribe of Vagabonds would have his number.”

“Now you know why,” Derek said. “I’m hoping her advice was sound.”

“I think it was,” I said.

“What makes you think that?”

“Because you’re still here,” I replied. “That means Lothos hasn’t started sending his thaumaturgists.”

“You’re saying I can’t handle some would-be wizards?” I could feel Derek’s flash of incredulity.

“I don’t know,” I said. “How did you fare against them in his clan?”

“How did you -?”

I believe I played my cards well with that little reveal. I’d dug a bit deeper into his mind than perhaps I should have in order to discover that fact, but it was worth the sight and sensation of Derek’s momentary unbalance. And I would be lying if I said that the look on his face wasn’t just a little amusing. Normally, I would be wary of him, perhaps even hate him, but his mind didn’t have the timbre of Lothos’ kind. Besides, I pried only deeply enough to know that he hated that monster almost as much as our clan did. That was enough for me. Derek’s question died upon his lips with the dawn of understanding. He relaxed and reclined back into his couch from his previous upright position. “I guess nothing gets by you, does it?”

“Oh, there are some things,” I said. “But you weren’t exactly making that part of your life secret. But I have to ask, is there anything about your past that might make you a target for Lothos?”

“Not really,” Derek said. “He sent some troops after me when I left, but they were all grunts. I left their ashes blowing in the wind. It’s the same story with just about every runaway from his clan. Those who survive are still alive because he gets bored and considers you a waste of resources, unless you have something he really wants. I know it’s the baby he wants in this case. Dhampirs are hard to come by for both of your clans, aren’t they?”

“Even harder for Lothos,” I said. “It’s hard enough for our kind to produce a child with humans. Miscarriages are common; even more so if the mother is human. We only have them more often because we think love is a key factor. The few out of Lothos’ clan -the ones we know of- are born by rape.”

“No offense . . .” Again, Derek reached for a cigarillo, but this time kept it out of the box and moved it idly about with his fingers, “. . . but that gives me cause to wonder if you don’t have the same intentions as Lothos? We don’t really have a need for this baby. And she’s more trouble than she’s worth. Why not take her off our hands?”

“Do you want me to do that?” I asked. “It might make things much easier for you. And you won’t have to worry about it.”

“We’ll keep her, thank you,” Derek said with some

reluctance. “Her fate isn’t my call, as much as I’d like it to be.”

“The father’s call, then?” I said.

“That’s . . . private.”

Again, I felt walls go up around Derek’s thoughts. I grumbled on the inside, but decided not to pry any deeper. We had digressed quite a bit from the principal subject, though, and so I returned to it.

“All this fuss over a baby. I’m sorry for your losses.”

“Tell that to their friends, China doll,” Derek said, expressing more of the abrasiveness that had irritated me, despite his not having meant it. The losses of his clan hurt deeply; that was eminently easy to tell, however.

He exhaled and shook his head. “I’m doing it again, aren’t I? Why do I want to blame you?”

“It’s probably the war,” I said with a dismissive wave. “Your people get in the crossfire often enough. I daresay there are a lot of other Vagabond clans who have even more dislike for us. So tell me, what precautions have you taken outside of perimeter guards?”

“Not much more than that,” Derek said. “Our resources are limited. We could probably disband, go our separate ways . . . have someone take the baby, but I doubt that’ll help.”

“That’s probably the worst thing you could do,” I said with a frown. “Especially if you have a mole, like I overheard you say to your friends.”

“Damn, you heard that too?” Derek ran his fingers through his thick hair, and stuffed the cigarillo, now ruined from the motion of his fingers, back into the front pocket of his hoodie.

“I was sent here to help you,” I reminded him. “Everything I know about your situation may improve it, so I hope you will lose the secretiveness.”

This time, only the ghost of another scowl crossed Derek’s handsome features. Though my heart went out to him for the difficulties of his clan, I desired at the same time to peel away at the layers of his psyche and find out the source of his reticence. Perhaps someday I would.

“You’re right. I want to trust you, but you have to understand that in my experience, trust is earned. And what I really want to know is, can you help us?”

“I believe I can,” I said. “I feel that this was the best time for you to ask for it. Lothos, up until now, has been playing with you. And I believe you’re right to be worried about having a mole. Your group is ill-equipped to deal with this.”

“Then what do you suggest?” Derek asked after forcing back a wave of incredulity. His face remained expressionless, waiting, but his thoughts rocked between eagerness and almost-desperation.

“First, I’ll need you to recall your perimeter guard,” I said.

“Excuse me?”

“Recall your perimeter guard.” I spoke more slowly and distinctively so that Derek knew that I was not joking. “Lothos is playing with you. He’s been doing it for awhile now, picking you off one by one. He’s damaging your morale. You’re a tiny flock; he’s got an army. It’s time for the hunter to be made into the hunted.”

“And who will be doing the hunting?” Derek pointed indiscreetly my way.

I nodded at his gesture, suppressing the smug grin that wanted to appear at the edge of my mouth. “That’s phase one.”

“What’s phase two, then?”

“Flush out the mole.”

Derek leaned back in his couch and crossed his arms. “The guys I have on guard duty aren’t going to like this.”

“Tell them I have a plan,” I said.

“If it involves you, I can’t guarantee they’ll do it,” Derek replied. “You’re an outsider, as far as they’re concerned.”

“But they trust you.”

“I’d rather not push them,” Derek said.

“What if I could sway some more to my side?” I asked, an idea coming to mind. Derek was immediately suspicious, and I smiled at his reaction. It always felt inexplicably good when you knew something someone else didn’t.

“What do you mean by ‘sway’?” Derek asked.

I slid off the couch and stretched my legs. “You ought to find out very shortly,” I said, and decided to see if a previous notion I had was true. “Does the name, Cormorant Lyman ring a bell? Nickname of ‘Paws’?”

Derek raised an eyebrow and gestured towards the door,

and I instantly felt the recognition. The image in Derek's mind was a perfect match. I knew I'd recognized him!

"Paws Lyman? You know him?"

"Quite well," I replied. "He was part of my clan at one time. What do the others in your clan think of him?"

"If you know him, then you ought to know he's invaluable to us," Derek replied. "His dogs took out the last couple of goons Lothos sent our way, though they managed to take one of the two out. Paws took it pretty bad. Fortunately, the one he has left is his best one. I just wish his animals would take to us; he's the only one who can control them."

"Does his opinion hold a lot of weight with your people?"

"Some. He's been here for awhile now . . . since before I came, actually. I was surprised he was so deferential to me when I stepped in as leader. I thought he'd be the one in charge."

I shook my head. "He never fancied himself a leader. But if his opinion carries weight, then he can get the others behind me."

"Maybe some," Derek said with a shrug, "but a few are pretty stubborn. Joe and Deb, especially; good luck with them. But do what you feel you need to do. I can only hope it works out."

Emotions roiled from Derek's mind as he stood: a struggle between worry and curiosity. I stopped and turned to face him as he came to my side.

"You need to trust me," I said. I reached up and touched his cheek reassuringly. Remembering that he could pick up my emotions the same as I could his own, I quickly withdrew my hand, somewhat embarrassed over my temerity. I felt no anger from him. In fact, he smiled. I noticed his hand move as if to go to my hand, but he stopped it. Again, there was that rise and subduing of a thought too frustratingly quick for me to catch.

"There's no need to worry, Derek," I said. "You did the right thing calling for help. Do your part, and let me do mine. Trust me, the same way your people trust you."

It was like looking at a ghost.

He was still hovering beside the fire when I returned, reclining in a worn aluminum and vinyl lawn chair. Cormorant “Paws” Lyman was the animal whisperer, famous among our clan in his time. It had been nearly fifty years since I’d last seen him. I’d thought he was dead, or had maybe even defected to Lothos’ side after he vanished. But there he was, the same as he ever had been. The others whom I’d seen accompanying him earlier were thankfully gone; this made my business easier, as there would be no eavesdroppers, or at least no one giving me the stink eye. He was alone, save for a dog that lay beside the chair. It was a German shepherd, and a massive specimen of one: three-fourths the size of a motorcycle. Of course, this was to be expected. Its accompanying scent and the ruby color of its eyes were an undeniably telling sign that it had been turned. A large stainless steel dog bowl lay beside it, a quarter the size of a kiddie pool, from which emanated the unmistakable scent of blood. I was somewhat thirsty, but I knew the blood that sustained the animal would not sustain me. Unlike us, beasts that were turned did not require human blood; any kind of blood would do.

“I was wondering when you’d notice me,” Lyman said as I approached. I knew I had nothing to fear from his dog. Though I did not possess his knack for controlling them and subduing their thirst-induced madness, animals, turned or otherwise, did not mind my scent. Nevertheless, out of courtesy, I moved in the most nonthreatening manner possible.

His dog awoke from its half-slumber, sniffed the air in front of me, and gave a half-hearted bark before whining and then resting again. I knew I had nothing to fear. Like Lyman, I shared an unusual affinity for animals, but it was not a natural condition. I had none of his talent for training them; still, they did not try to run away or attack when I was near. I crouched beside the dog, catching the scent that told me it was female, and then scratched atop her head.

“She’s a beauty,” I commented. “I don’t recall you having this breed before.”

“Got her not too long after I left your dad,” Lyman replied. “Name’s Grace. She’s been pretty good to me ever since.”

“You had others,” I said. “A whole zoo if memory serves.”

“Lothos’ cronies got to most of ‘em over the years,” Lyman replied in a wistful tone. “I had to replenish my stock, but now that I’m running with these bozos, I have to travel light.” He gestured towards the run-down trailer behind him. “So Grace keeps me company.”

He watched closely as I ran my hand over Grace’s thick fur. After being around Lyman all those years ago, animals had started to be less afraid of me: a fact that made most members of my clan more than a little jealous.

“Never ceases to amaze me how animals like you,” he remarked as I stood to meet his weathered smile. His eyes, crimson as all of our kind, set under thick eyebrows, were beady, but as intense as I remembered them as they shifted from Grace to me. “Usually being turned makes them even more ornery to company, but you could probably bite her on the face, and she wouldn’t care. That’s a really rare gift, you know. Seen it in only one other vampire in all my travels.”

“So I’ve been told,” I said. “It’s good to see you’re still alive after all this time. I missed you.”

“I hope that doesn’t mean that you’re going to go telling the Master where I am.”

Lyman’s thoughts were guarded, but his emotions were quite obvious. He was wary of me, and had been so since he and I first locked eyes. I managed to set his mind somewhat at ease when I shook my head.

“My business here isn’t with you,” I said. He knew that I couldn’t promise him that there would be no more interventions from my clan, but my assurances were limited. I believe he understood this, in spite of his grimace. Clearly, this obviously wasn’t the answer he wanted.

“I’m sorry,” I said, feeling truly apologetic. “But my clan does have business here that requires our attention.”

“Oh, I know,” Lyman answered, and sat straighter in his chair. I hadn’t noticed it before, but there was a black wooden pipe in his hand. He took a draft from it, blew out a sultry cloud of sweet-smelling smoke, and then dumped its contents into the dirt at his feet. “It’s about that baby. Been nothing but trouble since she arrived. I should’ve known Derek would start looking for help. Didn’t know they’d send you, though. But I can’t say

that it isn't good to see you again. Crusoe was never quite the same since you left."

My memories went back to the silly toucan he kept as a pet. I often kept him on my shoulder for the evening and would visit the dinner spread in the Lair's sitting room, laughing at how merrily he clicked while I fed him grapes and strawberries. Lyman could have turned Crusoe in order to keep him around forever, but turning birds was well known as a catastrophically bad idea. Most bird species lost control far too quickly, even for Lyman's talents to handle, and our condition mutated within them, driving the animal to seek out more of its kind and turn them. Fortunately, these events were rare, and only a few humans had been hurt by these quickly growing bloodthirsty flocks. The only reason they never overran the planet was because their instincts never covered hiding in the day. Come dawn, sunlight incinerated the massive flocks instantly, accomplishing in one fell swoop what would have been an impossible task for us.

"I do miss the little clown," I said. "He's not around anymore, is he?"

"No, he died about forty years ago," Lyman said. "He was a good old bird, though. Kept me company the whole time I was on the lam."

"On the lam?" My voice monotone with surprise from his comment. Lyman, outside of our battles against Lothos, was one of the gentlest of our kind. "Who would want to hunt you down?"

"Your father."

"Wait, why would he have been pursuing you?" I asked, now more confused than before.

Lyman's eyes widened and he gave a sympathetic frown, matched by a wave of the same emotion. It was a feeling I didn't like, as it was the sympathy one holds for an ignorant child, or someone who was kept out of some important loop that they should have long been a party to.

"You know that your father forbade turning animals, right?" Lyman said.

I nodded.

"They can't be controlled. They go feral for want of blood." Realizing what this entailed, I quickly added, "But you have a

rare talent . . . a talent that helped our clan! And you kept your animals under control. I can't remember a single time when any of them went feral, or attacked anyone!"

"Didn't matter to the Master," Lyman said. Despite his having disassociated himself from our clan, he still used the honorific for Father that most everyone used, save perhaps me and Amelia.

"He ordered my animals destroyed. That was like ordering people to kill my best friends. I couldn't have that, of course. So I left. Of course, your father didn't take kindly to troops going AWOL. Dunno why, but I guess he thought I'd become a danger to others, or other animals even though I never let a single one go feral. His soldiers and thaumaturgists tracked me everywhere I went. They didn't hurt me, but they managed to take out some of my pets. I just wanted to be left alone, but I knew that your dad wouldn't stop unless I surrendered, or made a grand enough show of force. Until that time, I'd avoided setting my animals on anyone except for Lothos' people, but when I finally let them loose on my pursuers that gave him the message."

"You killed them?" I asked, dreading the answer, but Lyman set my mind at ease with a shake of his head.

"Mauled some of them is all. Even then, I practiced restraint, God help me. Then I left them with a message."

His mind formed a picture of a crudely scrawled slip of paper that he pressed into an unconscious man's hand. By the look of the black uniform and cloak, I figured it was one of the thaumaturgists whom he'd overpowered.

"I could have set my pets on your people at any time," it read, "but in case you haven't noticed, I showed restraint, even when your soldiers pursued me and killed my friends. Today, you forced my hand. I refuse to lose another one of them to you. You know me, Master. All I want is to be left alone. Stop pursuing me, or I'll be forced to do something we'll both regret."

"I'm surprised Aiko didn't take any solo actions against you for that," I said, shaken by this revelation, but without a defense. I knew that Father could be heavy-handed when he was forced to be, but I'd never seen him go so far as to pursue

an otherwise peaceful man to achieve his ends. “She doesn’t take well to people making threats against Father.”

“It wasn’t a threat,” Lyman said grimly. “Your dad knows how I am. And he knows what I’m capable of if my friends are threatened. The fact that I didn’t kill the ones sent after me was proof that I have a sense of restraint. Maybe Aiko wanted to come after me, and your dad ordered her not to; maybe she didn’t. If you don’t know, then I don’t know either. But I think that’s why, after I left that note, I never had any problems from your clan again. I just hated that it had to come to that.”

“Even after all that, you still respect him?” I said. I could feel that in his thoughts as he spoke, and I was actually surprised by this, despite Lyman’s laid-back attitude in his retelling of those events.

“You don’t know how I came to your clan,” Lyman said. He shook his head and cast a wry grin my way, making him seem like a wizened old grandfather for a moment. “I don’t know who turned me. I woke up in a storm cellar in the middle of nowhere, with the bodies of an entire family at my feet. I was left a babe in the woods. Learned about sunlight quickly enough, and it took me weeks to come to terms with what I was, as much as I didn’t want to believe it. If your dad hadn’t found me, I don’t know what would’ve happened. Maybe I’d have just stepped into the daylight and ended it; maybe Lothos’ clan would’ve found me and drafted me . . . maybe I would’ve just gone batshit crazy; who knows. The Master gave me a home and a sense of purpose. I’m sure it tore him up inside to have to almost make an enemy out of me.”

“Animals go feral soon after they’re turned,” I reminded him, “and Lothos uses them against us all the time. I guess Father might have been worried that he’d somehow get you to use your talents for him. He’s broken the minds of more than a few of our clan.”

“Yeah, I know,” Lyman said, absently reaching down to pet Grace, who whined happily. She seemed to smile, and I could see her fangs, sharpened canines much more vicious-looking than our own, extended below her furry upper lip. “I hope I didn’t damage your faith in your dad, little lady.”

“I’d be lying if I said it wasn’t disconcerting,” I admitted,

“but Father did have his reasons.”

“No doubt about that,” Lyman said and closed his mind to that subject. He inhaled and exhaled loudly, and I saw his intense gaze shift from another time back to me. “But you didn’t come here just to talk about old times, did you?”

I shook my head. “No. I didn’t. I have a favor to ask of you, actually.”

Lyman made a noncommittal noise, a sort of grumbling hum. “I might be inclined to help, depending on the request.”

“I’ve come here to help with your clan’s situation,” I said, “but as I’ve been told, it may be difficult to gain their trust.”

“Yeah, it will be,” Lyman said, still stroking the very placid Grace. At least he was still listening.

“I was discussing strategy with Derek and came to a conclusion,” I said. “As you fought for our clan before, you’ve probably guessed the purpose for the attacks.”

“They’re toying with us,” Lyman said, “demoralizing us so they can bring in the big guns.”

“Then we’re agreed.” I betrayed a little smile. “Know it won’t be much longer before we start to see thaumaturgists. Lothos has fewer than we do, but their applications are usually damn effective. They’ll do severe damage, perhaps even wipe them out unless we have an effective countermeasure. And all that perimeter guard with conventional weapons will do is give them target practice. So I asked Derek to remove them.”

“You’ve got a Jewel?” He asked, though he and I knew that it was a rhetorical question. I nodded.

“You’re proficient with it?”

“I’d been in training for almost a century even when you left,” I said. “I’m second only to Aiko in skill.”

“Then it’s a wise move. But you can bet your tiny ass that some folks are not going to like it,” Lyman said. “Lothos took out Killer -he was my other dog. I’ve only got Grace here now; we’ve been doing what we can. But if the next attacker’s a thaumaturgist, I’m not going to risk her. Besides, she’s not been specifically trained for combat, though she does have the instincts. She tore one of the bastards apart about a week ago, but that might’ve just been beginner’s luck. ”

“Oh, I wouldn’t ask you to use your pets,” I said. “I just

need you as a fulcrum for a vote of confidence. As far as the rest of this clan is concerned, I'm a newcomer, an outsider. I already know that at least two of them won't like me at all."

"If you're talking about Deb, I wouldn't take her reaction too personally," Lyman said. "She doesn't like anyone, except maybe that baby. She's been taking care of her since Joe arrived with her; she hardly comes out of her trailer unless Derek calls for her."

"So Joe is the father?" I asked, catching the mental image formed by Lyman's memory.

"You didn't know?"

"Derek was unusually . . . guarded about his identity," I said. "Even when I touched on the subject, he shut me out. His mental barriers are unusually strong."

"He comes from Lothos' clan," Lyman said. "I imagine you'd learn to shut others out pretty quickly. I can't even begin to imagine what kinds of sickos he's had to deal with in that nuthouse."

"His defenses were only screens, though," I mused aloud. "I could've broken through them, but it would've been undiplomatic, to say the least."

"Maybe you should give him better training." Lyman was half-joking, but somewhere inside, I figured that this actually wouldn't be a bad idea.

"Perhaps I will," I said and suppressed a chuckle at Lyman's reaction of surprise. "But I digress. What do you think about my proposal?"

"Well, if anyone can help us, I think it's you," Lyman said with very little time for thought. "Even back when I was running with your dad's people, I saw your skill. It really bothered the Master to send you into combat, but you scored a higher body count than most. And even then, you were impressive with the things you could pull with your Jewel. Makes me regret leaving mine behind -not that I was very handy with it. Anyway, I'll do my best to smooth things over with the others. But regardless, I'll bet dollars to donuts you'll have a hell of a time getting some of them on your side."

"No doubt I will," I said as my ears began to pick up a heated conversation in Derek's RV. My gaze drifted in that

direction, as did my thoughts. At this distance, however, it came as a jumble of anger.

“That would be about you,” Lyman said. I turned back towards him to see him gesture in the same direction I had been looking.

“Is it, now?” I smiled. A scent wafted in on the air, which I recognized as belonging to Joe. I hadn’t gotten a good look at him by the ledge, but his smell was unmistakable. I drew upon the power of my Jewel for the first time since I arrived and allowed it to amplify my telepathy by a few degrees just so I could get the timbre of his mind. The anger became more apparent and annoying, like wasps buzzing inside my head, but I felt his thoughts much more clearly than I ever had. I believed it was time to face him.

“Thank you for whatever help you can give,” I said to Lyman and took his massive hand into my own.

“Anything for you,” he said, and brought my fingers to his lips. In his broad hands, they seemed very much the doll-like appearance from Derek’s imagination. A blush came unbidden to my skin, filling me with self-consciousness and a very mild annoyance. Such a reaction was a waste of blood. I would become thirsty more quickly, and have to replenish myself with the packets of near-tasteless blood that Derek kept in his cooler. I took a moment to pat Grace on the head one last time and made my way back to the RV.

